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Simon Blount

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Hitler's Willing Soldiers: Austrian Mountain Troops at Narvik 1940

SIMON BLOUNT*

University of Notre Dame, School of Law, Sydney, Australia

Email: simon.blount@statechambers.net

ABSTRACT

The Austrian post-war narrative of service in the Wehrmacht was that Austrian troops were either unwilling participants in German aggression or were motivated by a sense of anti-Bolshevism. This article, drawing on a number of German language accounts of the Narvik land campaign, suggests that Austrian officers and soldiers absorbed into the Wehrmacht were enthusiastic, efficient and dependable members of the German armed forces. The article concludes that, at least for the early German campaigns in Poland and the West, the Austrian post-war rationalisation of participation in German military aggression was false.

Introduction

Allied accounts of the battle of Narvik refer to the enemy as 'German'. But the elements of the *Wehrmacht* opposing the Norwegian, British, French, and Polish forces were Austrians of the 139 Mountain Jäger Regiment of 3 Mountain Division. The role of Austrians serving in the *Wehrmacht* in the course of the Second World War remains unsettled. After the war, Austrian former members of the *Wehrmacht* presented themselves as unwilling participants in German military aggression.¹ Alternatively, even if they had been willing participants, they characterised their service as a martyr-like

*Dr Simon Blount is a Barrister of the Supreme Court of New South Wales and an Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Notre Dame, School of Law Sydney. My thanks to two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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¹Thomas R Grischany, 'Mental Aspects of Austrian Wehrmacht Service' in Günter Bischof Fritz Plasser and Barbara Stelz-Marx (eds) *New Perspectives on Austrians and World War II*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 45-61.

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sacrifice in the anti-Communist cause for the “preservation of western cultural inheritance” against the “onslaught” from the East.²

There were two competing, but related, narratives of Austrians as ‘*opfer*’ following the Second World War, deriving from the dual meaning of *opfer* as ‘victim’ and ‘sacrifice’.³ When, on 27 April 1945, the provisional government led by Karl Renner proclaimed the establishment of the Second Republic of Austria, it relied on the Moscow Declaration of 30 October 1943, in which the Allies sought to encourage Austrian resistance by exploiting an imagined ‘anti-Prussian’ sentiment and identifying Austria as the first free country to fall a victim to Hitlerite aggression, to assert that Austria was Nazi Germany’s first victim and that Nazism was a German tyranny against which Austrian patriots fought and died.⁴ The resulting myth of Austria as a victim was the principal political tool with which the Second Republic distanced itself from the National Socialist project.⁵ The victim myth was effective in constructing a new democratic political identity by securing a rapprochement between the mainstream parties of the right and left, solving the immediate problem of reparations to victims,

²Matthew Paul Berg, ‘Challenging Political Culture in Postwar Austria: Veterans’ Associations, Identity and the Problem of Contemporary History’ *Central European History* 30, 4 (1997), pp. 513-544.

³Peter Pirker ‘The Victim Myth Revisited: The politics of history in Austria up until the Waldheim Affair’ in Günter Bischof, Marc Landry, Christian Karner (eds) *Myths in Austrian History: Construction and Deconstruction*, (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2020), pp. 153-174.

⁴Michael Schweitzer, ‘Die Folgen des Zweiten Weltkrieges,’ *Archive des Völkerrechts* 23, 1/2 (1985): pp. 132–133; Peter Berger, “Myths in Recent Austrian History” in Günter Bischof, Marc Landry, Christian Karner (eds) *Myths in Austrian History: Construction and Deconstruction National Mythologies*, (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press 2020), pp. 43-67. Heidemarie Uhl ‘Das erste Opfer: Der österreichische Opfermythos und seine Transformationen in der Zweiten Republik’ *ÖZP*, 30 (2001), pp. 19-34; Sonja Niederacher, ‘The Myth of Austria as Nazi Victim, the Emigrants and the Discipline of Exile Studies,’ in Judith Beniston and Robert Vilain (eds) *Hitler’s First Victim? Memory and Representation in Post-War Austria*, special issue, *Austrian Studies* 11 (2003): 14–32 pp. 18-19; Ernst Hanisch, ‘Von der Opfererzählung zum schnellen Moralisieren. Interpretationen des Nationalsozialismus in Österreich’ *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 31, 2 (April–June 2005), pp. 255-265.

⁵Jakob Engel and Ruth Wodak, ‘Calculated Ambivalence and Holocaust Denial in Austria,’ in Ruth Wodak and John E. Richardson (eds) *Analysing Fascist Discourse: European Fascism in Talk and Text*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 73; Anthony Bushell, *Polemical Austria: The Rhetorics of National Identity: From Empire to Second Republic*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 20; Katrin Hammerstein, *Gemeinsame Vergangenheit-getrennte Erinnerung?*, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2017), pp. 58-59.

and serving as the basis of a coherent foreign policy in dealing with the Allied occupying powers and the emerging West Germany.⁶

The competing narrative of veterans of the resistance and of the *Wehrmacht* was that they were not 'victims' but had made heroic 'sacrifices' for the benefit of Austria.⁷ The true extent of Austrian resistance during the war is doubtful. With the exception of Communists, ethnic Slovenes and a few outstandingly brave individuals who resisted out of religious faith, the idea of resistance was mainly a post-war phenomenon, one American report commenting that claims of resistance were 'largely fictitious' and that it was 'increasingly difficult to determine the small number of true underground fighters among the swarms of fakes and opportunists now appearing in that pose'.⁸

However, compulsory service in the *Wehrmacht* had been very real. Approximately 1.2 million Austrian men had been inducted into the German armed forces, of whom approximately 250,000 did not survive.⁹ Evidence suggests that those who did survive remained mainly loyal to the German cause until the end of the war.¹⁰ A comparison of desertion rates between Austrian and ethnic German members of the *Wehrmacht* – from Alsace Lorraine, Luxembourg and Poland – indicates that the higher rates of desertion by ethnic Germans were not shared by Austrians and, whereas German military commanders considered ethnic German troops as unreliable, this concern did not extend to Austrian troops.¹¹ The grimmest statistic supporting the fidelity of Austrian servicemen to Greater Germany is that the absolute number of Austrian military casualties came close to that of Great Britain and was more than half that of

⁶Simon Blount, 'The Victim Myth: The Reinvention of Austria in the Post-War years'. *Austrian Studies* 55, 3 (2022), pp. 61-75; Matthias Pape, 'Die völkerrechtlichen und historischen Argumente bei der Abgrenzung Österreichs von Deutschland nach 1945' *Der Staat* 37 2 (1998), pp. 287–313.

⁷A discussion of the contradiction inherent in resistance associations which represented those who fought against the Nazi regime, and Wehrmacht associations which represented those who fought for it, both claiming to have made the true sacrifice, is beyond the scope of this paper. But see Pirker 'The Victim Myth Revisited' pp.167-169.

⁸Oliver Rathkolb, *Gesellschaft und Politik am Beginn der Zweiten Republik: Vertrauliche Berichte der US-Militäradministration aus Österreich in englischer Originalfassung*, (Vienna: Böhlau, 1985), p.187 citing report of Edward B. Howard, 15 October 1945, National Archives, RG 59, 740.0019 Control (Austria)/10-101545.

⁹Peter Thaler, 'National History-National Imagery: The Role of History in Postwar Austrian Nation Building' *Central European History* 32, 3 (1999), pp. 277-309.

¹⁰Grischany, 'Mental aspects', p. 57.

¹¹Thaler, 'National History', pp. 304-305.

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the United States, even though Britain and the United States had populations many times greater than Austria.¹²

The narrative of veterans of the *Wehrmacht* having sacrificed themselves in defence of Austria was expressed in a culture of remembrance in which the battle of Narvik was celebrated as a feat of Austrian arms. This was not without controversy. In 1960 a gathering of ex-members of 139 Mountain Jäger Regiment was addressed by Anton Holzinger, a former Jäger officer who had served in Norway and had since become an Oberst in the newly reconstituted *Bundesheer*. Critics questioned why the invasion of a peaceful country in support of Hitler should be celebrated at all and why, in his remarks, Holzinger, a serving member of the armed forces of a constitutionally neutral country, should have regretted that the regiment did not play a larger part in the earlier invasion of Poland.¹³

The narrative of heroic military sacrifice in defence of Austria articulated by ex-members of the *Wehrmacht* had become domestically convenient following the end of the Allied occupation.¹⁴ The narrative smoothed the reintegration of a large number of ex-*Wehrmacht* soldiers into the body politic.¹⁵ But it was problematic because it was at odds with the Second Republic's founding narrative that Germany was the sole aggressor and it may even have contained within it the seeds of an "afterlife of National Socialism in Austria Democracy."¹⁶ The recent resurgence of the Austrian Freedom Party as a lightning rod for Austrians disaffected from mainstream European institutions may be a consequence of the party instrumentalizing the victim myth of military sacrifice by imagining contemporary Austria as resisting an unprecedented 'invasion' of non-Western refugees and immigrants pressing into Europe.¹⁷

This article analyses the land campaign at Narvik from the point of view of the Austrian troops of 3 Mountain Division, relying on German language sources. The earliest account, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division 1939-1945* published in 1958, was written by Paul Klatt,

¹²Thaler, 'National History', p. 306.

¹³Walter Hacker, 'Sollen Österreicher Hitler's Sieg über Norwegen feiern' and 'Es geht um das Ansehen Österreichs' in Walter Hacker (ed) *Warnung an Österreich: Neonazismus Die Vergangenheit bedroht die Zukunft*, (Wien: Europa Verlag, 1966), pp. 85-92.

¹⁴Pirker, 'The Victim Myth Revisited', p. 167.

¹⁵David Art *Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 43, p. 108 & p. 109; Hammerstein *Gemeinsame Vergangenheit*, p. 64.

¹⁶Pirker, 'The Victim Myth Revisited', p. 169.

¹⁷Günther Lanier, "Populist Fascism in Austria," *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, 11 (2000), pp. 888-890. Pirker, 'The Victim Myth Revisited', p. 153.

a former *Generalleutnant* and the last commander of 3 Mountain Division.¹⁸ Klatt surrendered the division in the last days of the war near Prague and was not released from Soviet captivity until 1955. Karl Ruef's *Odyssee einer Gebirgsdivision: Die 3 Gebirgsdivision im Einsatz* was published in 1976.¹⁹ Ruef served as a Major in 6 Mountain Division in Norway and Finland and went on to serve in the reconstituted *Bundesheer* of the Second Republic. He published a number of books on the subject of Austrian mountain troops during the Second World War. Klatt and Ruef were both highly decorated officers who had no interest in accentuating anything negative in their own conduct, or the conduct of the *Jäger*s with whom they fought. The histories they published furthered the culture of remembrance – to honour the fallen, vindicate the returned, and gloss over participation in war crimes.²⁰

Walter A Schwarz's *Generalmajor a D Alois Windisch: Ein Soldatenleben*, an account of one of the key regimental commanders at Narvik, is in the same tradition.²¹ Schwarz was a Warrant Officer in the Austrian *Bundesheer* and in 2006 was given the title of Professor for his work as a military historian shortly before his retirement. Schwarz is mainly interested in the award of military decorations for bravery. Although there were protests in the immediate post-war years against the display of 'Hitlerorden', even with the swastika removed, on the basis that an award for bravery could not be divorced from the hand that awarded it, this does not appear to be the accepted view today. Schwarz's description of Windisch's command of I and III battalions of the 139 Regiment is detailed but there is no doubt that he too is not interested in the negative aspects of service in the *Wehrmacht*.²² It may be for this reason that this book has been found by the Austrian Ministry of Defence not to meet academic standards.²³

¹⁸Paul Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division 1939-1945*, (Bad Neuheim: Verlag Hans-Henning Podzun, 1958).

¹⁹Karl Ruef, *Odyssee einer Gebirgsdivision: Die 3 Gebirgsdivision im Einsatz*, (Graz Leopold: Stocker Verlag, 1976).

²⁰Roland Kaltenecker a "master of the art of omission" has also written a number of accounts of Austrian Alpine troops which are not drawn on in this article. An example of an attempt to recount the realities of the wartime service of I Gebirgsdivision is Frank Hermann Meyer's *Blutiges Edelweiss: Die I. Gebirgs-Division im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2008).

²¹Walter A Schwarz, *Generalmajor a D Alois Windisch: Ein Soldatenleben (1892-1958)*, (Vienna: Österreichische Gesellschaft für Ordenskunde, 1996).

²²Anton Fellner 'Die Höllenhunde sind noch viel zu nahe' in Walter Hacker (ed) *Warnung an Österreich: Neonazismus Die Vergangenheit bedroht die Zukunft*, (Wien: Europa Verlag, 1966), pp. 73-75.

²³See http://www.Bundesheer.at/download_archiv/pdfs/hgm_shop_rohbericht.pdf Accessed 29 January 2023.

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Nevertheless, the advantage of these sources is that they are technically detailed and, even though Klatt was German, they give an Austrian account of the land campaign at Narvik that until now has not been available to English speakers. The account is at odds with the post-war narratives of Austrian military unwillingness and anti-Bolshevism. The courage, resilience and determination of the *Jäger*s at Narvik is instead consistent with a conclusion that Austrian officers and soldiers absorbed into the *Wehrmacht*, at least at the beginning of the Second World War, were enthusiastic, efficient and dependable members of the German armed forces. Further, at the time of the invasion of Narvik the German war aim was plainly strategic, not ideological. Although Austrian troops later invaded the Soviet Union over its extreme northern border with Norway as part of Operation *Barbarossa*, this did not occur until a year after the Narvik campaign had ended.

The Third Mountain Division & Operation Weserübung

Following the Anschluss the absorption of the Austrian *Bundesheer* by the *Wehrmacht* had gone relatively smoothly.²⁴ Although about 400 Austrian officers had not been accepted for service with the *Wehrmacht*, and many officers who had been dismissed under the former *Standestaat* regime for their Nazi sympathies had returned, the great majority of *Bundesheer* officers accepted for duty in the *Wehrmacht* went willingly, attracted by prospects of better pay, social status and opportunities for promotion in a much larger army.²⁵ For enlisted soldiers too, there was the appeal of adventure and travel beyond Austria to the greater Reich and beyond.²⁶

The new Austrian *Wehrmacht* units were mainly created out of existing *Bundesheer* formations.²⁷ The *Wehrmacht* let Austrian units remain loyal to their own military traditions, as long as they were efficient and accepted the Prussian military system.²⁸ The 139 Mountain *Jäger* Regiment was a part of 3 Mountain Division formed in Graz out of 4 and 7 Divisions of the defunct *Bundesheer*. The Division's principal fighting units comprised the 138 Mountain *Jäger* Regiment garrisoned in Styria, the 139 Mountain *Jäger* Regiment garrisoned in Carinthia, and the 112 Mountain Artillery Regiment, the twelfth Reconnaissance Battalion and the forty eighth *Panzerjäger* Battalion, all made up of men drawn from the forests and mountains of southern Austria. 3 Mountain Division was under the overall command of a laconic German and

²⁴Grischany, 'Mental Aspects', p. 46.

²⁵Richard Germann, 'Austrian Soldiers and Generals in World War II' in Günter Bischof, Fritz Plasser and Barbara Stelz-Marx *New Perspectives on Austrians and World War II*, (New York: Routledge, 2009) pp. 29-44.

²⁶Grischany, 'Mental Aspects', p. 47.

²⁷Germann, 'Austrian Soldiers', p. 30.

²⁸Grischany, 'Mental Aspects', p. 49.

convinced National Socialist, *Generalmajor* Eduard Dietl. However, Dietl's immediate subordinates were Austrian.

The commander of the 139 Regiment, *Oberst* Alois Windisch, exemplified the background and qualities of serving non-political *Bundesheer* officers inducted into the *Wehrmacht*. Windisch had served as a battalion adjutant and later company commander on the Italian Front in the First World War. Wounded three times, he had been awarded Austria-Hungary's highest decoration for valour. Following the war, he was promoted to Colonel of the General Staff, teaching tactics to senior officers at the Military Academy in Wiener Neustadt. After the annexation, the *Wehrmacht* regarded him as unreliable and did not appoint him to the General Staff. However, on the outbreak of war he was given field command of 139 Regiment. Windisch was keenly intelligent and known for his clear thinking and precise, logical orders. He was a disciplinarian but ensured the proper treatment of his troops. Like many former *Bundesheer* officers, he never felt truly at home in the *Wehrmacht*. An example of his ambivalence was that he addressed his German subordinates with the formal 'you' (Sie) but his Austrian subordinates with the informal 'thou' (Du).²⁹

Following action in the Polish campaign, 3 Mountain Division was tasked to take part in Operation *Weserübung*, the invasion of Denmark and Norway. This was the first combined operation of the *Wehrmacht*, *Kriegsmarine* and *Luftwaffe* in which the *Kriegsmarine* was to transport *Wehrmacht* troops directly into battle, running the risk of enormous loss in the event of a battle at sea, but the benefit of complete surprise if the ships made landfall.³⁰ 3 Mountain Division, comprising 139 Regiment, reinforced by I Battery of 112 Artillery Regiment and 12 Reconnaissance Battalion, was to seize and occupy the ice-free port of Narvik and secure the strategically important export route to Germany for iron ore mined in Sweden. The proposed operation was audacious.

Never before had a similar operation plan been worked out by High Command, General Staff Officers and the Navy dealing with the transport of land forces by warships over 2000 kilometres of seas dominated by a superior enemy fleet. Before them, landing and fighting approximately 150 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle on wintery cliffs completely unknown to us and not previously been reconnoitred.³¹

On 6 April 1940, 2,000 men of the reinforced 139 Regiment boarded ten modern destroyers of the 1st Flotilla at Bremerhaven in northern Germany. Units of 138

²⁹Schwarz, *Ein Soldatenleben*, pp. 85 - 86.

³⁰Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 49.

³¹ Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 48. Translation by the author.

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Regiment bound for Trondheim 900 kilometres to the south of Narvik, boarded ships of the 2nd Flotilla, consisting of the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* and another four destroyers. The two flotillas rendezvoused with the battle cruisers *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* and sailed north. The weather was atrocious, the destroyers rolled in arcs of up to 50 degrees and the artillery of 112 Regiment was washed overboard, as were ten men, most of them *Jägers*, who could not be rescued.³² Other *Jägers* were badly injured, breaking arms and legs and suffering gashes from being thrown about the ships. Most *Jägers*, many of whom had never even seen the ocean before, were violently seasick, some lacking the strength to make their way to the heads but throwing up where they sat. In the early morning of 9 April, after a voyage of two days in violent seas and long hours of dangerous daylight the 1st Flotilla reached the entrance to the *Ofofjord*, the waterway leading east to Narvik, in weather of alternating heavy sleet and snowstorms.

The destroyer *Giese* had been unable to keep up, so *Kommodore Bonte* in command of 1st Flotilla split the destroyers into three squadrons, each of three ships. The first squadron was to deal with land fortifications at the entrance to the *Ofofjord* and deny use of the fjord to enemy shipping.³³ *Gebirg* Companies 1 and 6 were tasked with taking the coastal batteries at Ramnes to the north and Havnes to the south of the *Ofofjord* by *coup de main*. Still seasick after the North Sea crossing, the *Jägers* landed from small boats and marched in full battle readiness through the snow. However, the batteries did not exist because they had never been constructed.³⁴ Although the *Jägers* were spared inevitable casualties taking the non-existent batteries, they now had no means of denying the *Ofofjord* to British warships, which would have disastrous consequences.

The second squadron carrying III Battalion of the 139 Regiment under the direct command of Windisch, seized and occupied the Norwegian military supply base at Elvegardsmoen, just outside of Bjerkvik on the Herjangsfjord, 10 kilometres to the north of Narvik.³⁵ Because Major General Fleischer, commanding the Norwegian forces in the north, had ordered the battalion garrisoning Elvegardsmoen under Major Spjeldnes south to reinforce Narvik's defences and the relieving Norwegian troops had been delayed by heavy snow, Windisch's *Jägers* met no resistance.

³²Geirr H Haarr, *The German Invasion of Norway*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009), p. 33. Although Klatt states that at least one man was rescued: Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 51.

³³Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 323.

³⁴Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 330.

³⁵Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 323.

The last squadron, carrying Dietl and his staff, made for Narvik itself. The Norwegian coastal defence ships, *Eidsvold* and *Norge* refused to surrender and Bonte, at the ruthless insistence of Dietl, torpedoed and blew up the *Eidsvold* even though she had not fired a shot, before sinking the *Norge* and disembarking the *Jägers* to occupy Narvik.³⁶ Colonel Sundlo had been warned of a possible German movement against the town and had the advantage of defending mountainous terrain with narrow passes and few roads with local knowledge of the conditions.³⁷ He also had the support of the additional Norwegian troops heading south from Elvegardsmoen under Major Spjeldnes.³⁸ But Sundlo was sympathetic to the Norwegian traitor Vidkun Quisling and had made only minimal preparations to defend the town.³⁹ The *Jägers* caught the Norwegians in confusion and disarmed many of them as they belatedly made their way to defensive positions. Sundlo then caved into Dietl and surrendered the town.⁴⁰ On hearing of the surrender, Fleischer relieved Sundlo and appointed Major Omdal in his place. Ignoring the surrender terms, Omdal and Spjeldnes then marched 200 men out of Narvik into a snowstorm, 'saluting the German officer of the guard' and were quickly lost to sight.⁴¹

The land invasion had gone to plan.⁴² The only loss to the invaders was the German merchant ship *Bockenheim*, one of 11 merchant ships lying in Narvik harbour at the time. On seeing the approaching destroyers, the *Bockenheim's* captain had assumed they were British and ordered her to be set on fire and scuttled. However, the sea operation went awry, leaving the *Jägers* horribly exposed. Only two destroyers could be refuelled at a time because only one of the three tankers planned for the operation, the *Wellem*, was at hand. This meant that days were needed to refuel the entire Flotilla, time which it did not have.⁴³ At 4.30am on the morning after the invasion, the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla of the Royal Navy comprising five destroyers under Commodore Warburton-Lee attacked during a severe snowstorm, achieving surprise because the German picket ship, *Roeder* had withdrawn from her position to refuel and had not been relieved.⁴⁴ Warburton-Lee's flotilla sank two German destroyers and heavily damaged the *Roeder* for no loss. Warburton-Lee's luck ran out when the three German destroyers of the Herangsfjord group, responsible for landing Windisch and I Battalion at Elvegardsmoen, re-emerged into the Ofotfjord and combined with

³⁶Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 325.

³⁷Ruef, *Odyssee* p. 77.

³⁸ibid.

³⁹Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 321.

⁴⁰Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 52.

⁴¹Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 330.

⁴²Schwarz, *Ein Soldatenleben*, p. 114.

⁴³Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 334; Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, pp. 53-54

⁴⁴Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 339.

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two more German destroyers to give battle. Two British destroyers, including Warburton-Lee's flagship, were lost and a third, *HMS Hotspur*, was badly damaged by a torpedo. *Hotspur* and the remaining British destroyers withdrew, destroying a German supply ship carrying anti-aircraft guns, artillery, and other heavy weapons intended for 139 Regiment as they went.⁴⁵

The German flotilla, now under the command of *Fregattenkapitän* Bey following the loss of Bonte along with his flagship *Heidekamp*, was badly damaged, and virtually immobilised because of a shortage of fuel, and further weakened when two of its remaining destroyers ran aground while manoeuvring in Narvik harbour. On 13 April a second Royal Navy Battle Group comprising the battleship *HMS Warspite* and nine destroyers, with aircraft from *HMS Furious* under Vice Admiral William Whitworth, attacked and sank a further three German destroyers for only minor loss. The remaining German ships were scuttled when their fuel and ammunition ran out. At least one German language source states that the Royal Navy machine gunned *Kriegsmarine* sailors in the water.⁴⁶

The Position of 139 Regiment

The loss of the entire German flotilla was a disaster for the *Kriegsmarine* and left the 2000 men of 139 Regiment isolated in severe weather conditions with their nearest support some 900 kilometres to the south in Trondheim. The absence of gun emplacements at Ramnes and Havness allowed ships of the Allied navies to come and go in the Ofot- Herjangs- Rombaks- and Beis- fiords at will, and none of the German supply ships arrived. The planned seizure of the airstrip at Bardufoss north of Bjerkvik for re-supply never happened and it remained in Norwegian hands.⁴⁷ Without resupply, the regiment was short of artillery, heavy mortars and radio sets. As well, despite being mountain troops, they had inadequate clothing and ski equipment for the conditions.⁴⁸ Dietl summed up the position:

Up there in the mountains there are no houses, no fuel, no hospitals, no power, no warmth, no roads, no communications with the South. If I hold, we will suffer heavy losses, if I don't hold, the German people will suffer a shock.⁴⁹

The position appeared so hopeless that on 15 April the Narvik front was temporarily placed under the direct command of the German High Command. Three days later Adolf Hitler, foreshadowing his later handling of Generals caught in desperate

⁴⁵Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 348.

⁴⁶Schwarz, *Ein Soldatenleben*, p. 121.

⁴⁷Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 53.

⁴⁸Ruef, *Odyssee*, p. 85.

⁴⁹Cited in, Ruef, *Odyssee*, p. 80. Translation by the author.

positions in Russia, promoted Dietl to *Generalleutnant* and informed him that he would receive no reinforcements. Nevertheless, showing somewhat more flexibility than he would later in the war, Hitler also gave permission for Dietl to withdraw his men into internment in Sweden rather than suffer a significant defeat.⁵⁰ In preparation for this eventuality, the regiment began to demolish the Narvik harbour facilities and the iron ore export infrastructure.⁵¹

However, the *Jägers* also enjoyed unexpected advantages. Firstly, following the destruction of the German flotilla, the Allies failed to land ground forces immediately and retake Narvik. The British in particular suffered from divided command. The Royal Navy had urged immediate action, but the army balked at the inevitable civilian casualties that would result from a naval bombardment of the town preceding its recapture. Consequently, the regiment had time to secure Narvik's defences. Secondly, the regiment was now supplemented by an improvised unit made up of some 2,900 surviving *Kriegsmarine* sailors who had lost their ships. These men were armed and equipped from the military supply depot captured at Elvegardsmoen and were put to use securing the harbour and the strategically important west-east iron ore railway.⁵² They also brought the bulk of the supplies from Elvegardsmoen south along the coast road to Narvik under constant threat of naval bombardment by allied ships.⁵³ Thirdly, the regiment managed to salvage 20mm machine guns and 3.7cm anti-aircraft guns and radio equipment from some of the lost destroyers. Dietl also organised the transport by air of the 7.5 cm guns and ammunition of II Battery of I 12 Regiment to a makeshift landing site within the perimeter established by Windisch three kilometres north of Elvegardsmoen. Two of the guns were sent south and mounted onto railway cars running along the iron ore railway, while the remaining two remained with Windisch and were sited in Bjerkvik.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the guns were delivered at heavy cost. All of the *Ju-52* transport planes were lost, either because they had crashed on landing, or because they were unable to take off and sank through the melting spring ice into the sea.⁵⁵ Fourthly, during the course of the campaign, Dietl had the advantage of increasing air support as the German position in Trondheim improved and the *Luftwaffe* was able to divert more resources to the battle of Narvik. One of the consequences of improved command of the air was that Dietl could bring in heavy equipment by flying boat. He was also able to receive about 900 more men, many arriving by parachute, bringing the total number of effectives to around 5,600 men.

⁵⁰The order is extracted in Klatt *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 58.

⁵¹Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 195.

⁵²Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 192.

⁵³Schwarz, *Ein Soldatenleben*, p. 122.

⁵⁴Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, pp. 195-196. Klatt states just two guns were landed: Klatt *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division* p. 57.

⁵⁵Schwarz, *Ein Soldatenleben*, p. 122; Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 54.

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Although relatively few, the quality of the parachute troops was high, consisting of men of I Battalion of the Parachute *Jäger* Regiment as well as men of the 137 Mountain *Jäger* Regiment of 2 Mountain Division and men of the 138 Regiment. Astoundingly, many of the *Jägers* of 137 and 138 Regiments jumped after only 10 days of parachute training.⁵⁶ Finally, 139 Regiment took advantage of its proximity to the Swedish frontier to bring in 290 specialists posing as health care workers, and to send its wounded into the safety of internment.

Tactically, 139 Regiment was engaged north and south of the Rombaksfjord and along the west-east line of the iron ore railway. To the north, I and III Battalions, and sailors led by *Fregattenkapitän* Kothe of the *Hermann*, under the overall command of Windisch fought in and around Bjerkvik falling back south-eastward as they came under increasing Norwegian pressure from the north. South of the Rombaksfjord, II Battalion under Major Haussells occupied the town of Narvik, as well as Ankenes south of the Beisfjord, falling back eastwards.⁵⁷ The occupation of Narvik was hard. 139 Regiment used the civilians as a shield against bombardment from the Royal Navy and denied civilian evacuation under threat of reprisals against the mayor and other prominent persons. By the end of April there were still 5000 civilians in the town living under increasingly difficult conditions.⁵⁸ Along the iron ore railway the balance of the *Kriegsmarine* units remedied the failure of the line's electrification by bringing an old steam locomotive into action, providing a quick means of transporting men and supplies along the entire west-east defensive line, and providing a mobile artillery platform against allied shipping on the Rombaksfjord.⁵⁹

The Land Campaign

The day after the destruction of the German destroyer force, the Royal Navy set up a base of operations at the port of Harstad, northwest of Narvik. The British landed 24 Guards Brigade consisting of the Scots and Irish Guards and the South Wales Borderers, strongly reinforced by artillery, anti-aircraft guns and signals and engineer companies, as well as five 'independent companies' specializing in irregular warfare. On 27 April, three battalions of French Mountain *Chasseurs* arrived, and two battalions of the French Foreign Legion arrived on 6 May. On 9 May four battalions of Polish infantry also landed at Harstad. The total number of Norwegian and allied troops was approximately 24,000 men.

But the number of allied troops arrayed against the *Jägers* does not tell the whole story. The Norwegians were still inexperienced, and the British troops, consisting of

⁵⁶Schwarz, *Ein Soldatenleben*, p. 133.

⁵⁷Haarr, *Invasion of Norway* p. 194.

⁵⁸Haarr, *Invasion of Norway* p. 229.

⁵⁹Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 59.

‘men with bare knees blowing bagpipes rather than soldiers equipped to fight in snow’, appeared somewhat amateurish.⁶⁰ The French *Chasseurs* were poorly equipped and trained, and the foreign legionnaires, raised in North Africa, had no experience of winter warfare.⁶¹ The Polish troops had no understanding of the mountains, but at least had experienced officers who had fought German forces in Poland.⁶²

The Norwegians in particular were initially no match for the professionalism of the *Jägers*. On the night of 16 April, the *Jägers* had surprised and defeated the Norwegian troops under Major Omdal who had escaped from Narvik along the iron ore railroad and were blocking the route to Sweden at the partially destroyed Norddal Bridge near Bjoernfell.⁶³ The Norwegians were also badly beaten at Gratangsbotn to the north of Bjerkvik. On 24 April, I and II Battalions of the Norwegian 15 Infantry Regiment, with an independent unit comprised of Norwegians, Sami and Kvens from the north of Norway in reserve, had attacked south in heavy snow in the direction of Elvegardsmoen. The attack failed because of the bad weather and strong resistance from 139 Regiment’s I Battalion, but Windisch came to the conclusion that his position was too exposed and ordered a withdrawal. The withdrawal of the *Jägers* from the village of Gratangsbotn went unnoticed in the bad weather and the inexperienced Norwegians were surprised to find it clear of the enemy. Exhausted after a forced march, the Norwegians rested in the farmhouses and barns without posting sufficient perimeter security. Major Stautner, in command of I Battalion did not miss the opportunity and, in an action for which he would later be awarded the Knights Cross, immediately counter attacked with 165 *Jägers*. In house-to-house fighting, 34 Norwegians were killed, 64 wounded and 130 taken prisoner. Norwegian officer losses were especially heavy with three out of five company commanders among those killed. The *Jägers* suffered only six killed, 16 wounded and three missing.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the inexperience of the Norwegians did not last long. Fleischer later wrote, ‘our units suffered much, but they became tough and ... learned how to take care of themselves. They became units that could be used in war’.⁶⁵ The Norwegians were well equipped to fight in the snow, and the *Jägers* themselves came to consider that the Norwegian ‘peace soldiers’ had adapted to the war in a very short time and had become a dangerous opponent, probably becoming more effective than any of the other allied forces.⁶⁶

⁶⁰Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 202.

⁶¹Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 237-238.

⁶²Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 238.

⁶³Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, pp. 239-240; Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 55.

⁶⁴Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 59.

⁶⁵Cited in Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 241.

⁶⁶Haarr, *Invasion of Norway*, p. 222.

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Following Norddal Bridge and Gratangsbøtn, the land campaign turned against the *Jägers* as allied seapower continued to play a decisive role. The *Kriegsmarine* sailors on the iron ore railway line running along the south shore of the Rombaksfjord came under constant naval gunfire. A Polish destroyer, *Grom*, became adept at machine gunning and shelling the rail line, until she herself was bombed and sunk with heavy loss of life by a Heinkel III. North of the Rombaksfjord intense shelling by the Royal Navy from the Herjangsfjord forced Windisch to abandon his command post at Elvegardsmoen and withdraw south to the Hartvig sea, and in early May, two Norwegian brigades, reinforced by French Alpine Chasseurs again pushed south against Windisch's northern perimeter, forcing him to continue falling back.⁶⁷

On 12-13 May, the Allies launched an amphibious attack on Bjerkvik in conditions of snow, rain and storm. The preceding naval bombardment had killed 18 civilians, and largely destroyed the town, as well as destroying a supply depot containing 2,000 rations.⁶⁸ French Foreign Legionnaires supported by five light tanks took Bjerkvik and the Elvegardsmoen depot before advancing northeast as well as south towards Narvik along the east shore of the Herjangsfjord. The poorly armed sailors defending Bjerkvik, untrained and unprepared for the ferocity of the assault, did not resist and pulled back, abandoning their heavy equipment and were then unfit to fight for the remainder of the campaign.⁶⁹ Windisch's force was now in acute danger of encirclement from the north and west, forcing him to leave his defensive positions on the Hartvig sea heights and fall back southeast in the direction of Dietl's command post at Bjoernfell near the Swedish frontier. But to achieve this, Windisch had to first hold the Allied advance long enough to secure the Gramberg bridge over the Vasdalen river, which was in full spring flood to the rear of the retreating *Jägers*.

The *Jägers* falling back from Bjerkvik experienced the worst of the weather conditions. One soldier described the Sisyphean labour of shovelling snow to keep the road from Elvegardsmoen to Narvik open in a snowstorm, while barely managing to stand upright in the howling wind with icy snow whipping into the face, all for no purpose, as a few meters behind him the cleared road again became impassable.⁷⁰ On retreat, Windisch's *Jägers* continued to suffer in awful conditions of fog, rain and cuttingly cold winds. They fought and slept in the melting snow and were constantly wet and exhausted, '... we carry packs weapons and ammunition over long stretches of melting snow often stuck up to our haunches in the watery slush.'⁷¹

⁶⁷Klatt *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, pp. 59-60.

⁶⁸Klatt *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 61.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ruef, *Odyssee*, p. 85.

⁷¹Diary entry cited in Ruef, *Odyssee*, p. 93.

Where there was no snow, the *Jägers'* rubber soled boots disintegrated on the stony desert-like ground. It was impossible to dig foxholes in the rocks and there were no explosives available to construct bunkers. There were insufficient tents to protect the *Jägers* from the wet and cold, and there was no fuel for heating or field kitchen ovens to prepare hot food and drinks.⁷² It was too cold to sleep.⁷³ For every man wounded, one was sick due to the appalling conditions.⁷⁴ Worst of all, *Jägers* may well have died from wounds that they should have survived because of the intense cold.

The personal and professional qualities that Windisch had shown 25 years before on the Italian front were again displayed in the retreat of the northern perimeter of Narvik. He lived and slept no better than any of his *Jägers* and received the same rations. Under conditions of bitter cold, hunger, and lack of supplies, Windisch saved from annihilation the retreating I and III battalions of 139 Regiment and the *Kriegsmarine* sailors under his command. He succeeded in pulling the last of his men over the Vasdalen before blowing the bridge, at the cost of leaving behind much of his medium to heavy equipment, including the two guns of 112 Artillery Regiment. He then constructed a defensive line that could be held against the advancing allied forces and proceeded to defend every hill, every hollow and every defile, without essential equipment, such as heavy mortars and radio sets.⁷⁵ At one point, in the course of repeated assaults on Height 620 by French and Norwegian troops the *Jägers* ran out of mortar ammunition, ammunition for the machine guns and hand grenades. Nevertheless, Windisch had preserved the *Jäger's* efficiency as a fighting force and re-established a viable defence line. For this action, he was awarded the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross, becoming one of only two men to hold both Austria-Hungary's and Nazi Germany's highest awards for valour.

Despite the *Jäger's* resolve, allied sea power and troop numbers at Narvik began to tell. On 27 and 28 May, eight allied warships commenced shelling the town before troops of the French foreign legion, half of them German, and one Norwegian battalion supported by light tanks crossed south over the Rombaksfjord.⁷⁶ Although the Allies suffered heavy casualties, the immediate defence of Narvik was no longer tenable. Major Haussells' II Battalion abandoned the town and pulled eastwards along the northern shore of the Beisfjord. At the same time, two battalions of the Highland Brigade attacked Ankenes on the southern shore of the Beisfjord, defended by 7 and 8 Mountain Companies reinforced by elements of 2 Mountain Company of the 137 Mountain *Jäger* Regiment that had landed by parachute. The Ankenes *Jägers* withdrew

⁷² Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 60.

⁷³ Ruef, *Odysee* p. 106.

⁷⁴ Ruef, *Odysee* p. 122.

⁷⁵ Schwarz, *Ein Soldatenleben*, p. 132, 133; Ruef, *Odysee*, pp. 94, 95.

⁷⁶ Schwarz, *Ein Soldatenleben*, p. 133.

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under conditions of relentless close quarter fighting for the hilltops of the stony peninsular, and at Hill 295 defended the position until their ammunition ran out. Eventually, they succeeded in crossing to the northern shore of the Beisfjord under machine gun fire to link up with the rest of II Battalion, but only at the cost of heavy casualties.⁷⁷ In abandoning Narvik and Ankenes, II Battalion became exposed to the same energy sapping conditions in the open that had been endured by I and III Battalions on the northern perimeter since the beginning of the land campaign. But the civilian inhabitants of Narvik suffered more when, on 30 May, the Luftwaffe bombed the town.

The End of the Campaign

Well before the loss of Narvik, 2 Mountain Division under *Generalmajor* Valentin Feurstein, reinforced by 138 Regiment from 3 Mountain Division, had committed to relieving 139 Regiment by an overland march from the south. The realistic prospects of breaking through to Narvik in time to prevent an Allied victory there were slight. But the attempt, known as operation *Büffel*, at least diverted British troops to a defence of the southern approaches to Narvik and secured airbases enabling the Luftwaffe to give the 139 Regiment more sustained support in the closing stages of the campaign.

Dietl now committed the last of his almost non-existent reserves, consisting of a weak company of I Battalion of the Parachute *Jäger* Regiment that had parachuted in just four days earlier, as well as a pioneer battalion, to defend against Allied attacks from the easternmost point of the Beisfjord, less than 20 kilometres west of Bjoernfell.⁷⁸ It was only a matter of time before the *Jägers*, now uniformly falling back, must either surrender, or cross the Swedish border and suffer internment. But events in France had already intervened. London, faced with the possible annihilation of British troops at Dunkirk, decided to evacuate Norway and had ordered the attack on Narvik to both disguise the retreat and allow the destruction of the harbour facilities. On 8 June, *Jäger* reconnaissance reported that allied troops had pulled out of Narvik and 139 Regiment reoccupied the town amid the debris of the Luftwaffe bombing, abandoned Allied equipment and the destruction of the harbour.⁷⁹ On the northern perimeter Norwegian troops, angry at being abandoned by their allies, fell back in an orderly retreat, and ceased hostilities on 9 June. The troops on both sides were stunned at the turn of events. The *Jägers* were the victors of Narvik, but if the battle had continued for another 24 to 48 hours, they probably would have had to surrender.

⁷⁷Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 64.

⁷⁸Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, pp. 63-64.

⁷⁹Klatt, *Die 3 Gebirgs-Division*, p. 65.

Conclusion

The German amphibious operation at Narvik was a poorly planned disaster, carried out without proper maps or reconnaissance.⁸⁰ The *Kriegsmarine* never made good its losses in destroyers and never again attempted an amphibious operation on the scale of Narvik. The Narvik campaign would have failed entirely but for the fighting qualities of the *Jägers* and the unforeseen speed with which France fell. After the campaign, the *Jägers* enjoyed considerable prestige as elite troops within the *Wehrmacht*.⁸¹

The deeds of the 3 Mountain Division in and around the Norwegian seaport of Narvik during its occupation and defence in the spring of 1940 were celebrated enthusiastically by press and publications all over greater Germany, which emphasised that these units consisted almost exclusively of *Ostmärker*, [and] disproved the claims of the enemy propaganda that the Austrians only fought under coercion and ... demolish[ed] ... the legend of the inefficient Austrian soldier of World War I. ... the common down-to-earth *ostmärkische* soldier was portrayed as tough, committed and efficient.⁸²

The invasion of Narvik was not the first time Austrians had gone to war in support of German aims in the north. Soldiers from Styria had fought against Denmark in the first war of German Unification.⁸³ At Narvik, the courage, resilience and determination demonstrated by the *Jägers* of 139 Regiment was entirely contrary to the post-war narrative of unwilling Austrian participation in German military aggression. Some of the *Jägers* jumped into battle with only 10 days parachute training, and all endured appalling weather conditions without proper supply, fought until their ammunition ran out, and had the pride to remain an effective fighting force in the face of apparently inevitable defeat. Nor was the principal motivation anti-Bolshevik. The Narvik campaign was about strategic considerations – the control of the iron ore export route from Sweden – not racial or ideological prejudices. The *Jägers* certainly behaved callously toward the civilian population of Narvik, holding them hostage against bombardment by the Royal Navy, but no more callously than the Royal Navy itself, which obliterated Bjerkvik in support of the French landing. In war, no island power can afford a navy, and no continental power can tolerate an army, that is anything less than ruthlessly efficient.

A year after the Allies evacuated Narvik, 3 Mountain Division participated in the invasion of the Soviet Union over its extreme northern border with Norway at Kirkenes in a failed attempt to take Murmansk. From late 1942, the Division then

⁸⁰Ruef, *Odyssee*, pp. 11 – 13.

⁸¹Germann, 'Austrian Soldiers', p. 33.

⁸²Grischany, 'Mental Aspects', pp. 47, 48.

⁸³Ruef, *Odyssee*, pp. 16-17.

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fought in Russia, mainly on the southern front where it merged into the vast machinery of the *Wehrmacht* engaged in the war of annihilation against the Red Army, the Soviet peoples and Jews. In this charnel house and on the long retreat through Eastern Europe, the *Jägers* may well have begun to question their willingness to keep fighting, and to seek to justify the continuation of the slaughter as 'anti-Bolshevik'. But in the Narvik campaign, that was not yet the case.