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The hidden past of Swiss who had fought in the Wehrmacht

It is estimated that around 3.5 million members of the German army and the SS were imprisoned in Russia, following Hitler's ill-fated attempt to invade the Soviet Union. Around two million of them returned home, the last in 1956. Among them were a number of Swiss who had fought alongside the Nazis.

More than 2,000 Swiss fought alongside the Nazis, but it is not known how many of them were prisoners. German nationality was paramount for enlisting in the Wehrmacht and most of these Swiss had dual nationality. Some also joined the defence units of the SS, the elite corps of the Nazi party, in particular the 6th mountain division.

They were young, between the ages of 17 and 25 years old, mostly from the cantons of Bern and Zurich, and they were from all sections of society.

Not all the Swiss were Nazi sympathisers, some wanted to fight the Bolsheviks, others were searching for work or adventure. Some were simply fleeing broken relationships.

What they did was illegal in Switzerland although many stipulated that they would only join up if they did not have to fight against Switzerland.

Switzerland came down hard on the Swiss who had joined the Wehrmacht or the SS. In 1943 the government decreed that all Swiss citizens with dual citizenship who had cooperated with the Third Reich should be deprived of their Swiss nationality. This was applied to 29 cases by the end of 1945.

If Swiss ex Wehrmacht soldiers returned to Switzerland, they had to face military justice, with sentences depending on the person's private and military reputation as well as his motives for joining a foreign army.

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Tarnished wartime records

The surrender of Nazi Germany ended six years of horror for Europe, and was a huge relief for neutral Switzerland. The country had spent the war trying to avoid antagonising the Nazis, and had lived in constant fear of invasion.

In the 1990s, uncomfortable revelations surfaced about Swiss banks handling assets looted by the Nazis and refusing to release details of dormant accounts held by Holocaust victims.

The scandals prompted the government to set up an independent commission of experts, led by Swiss historian Jean-François Bergier, to investigate Switzerland's wartime past.

The final report, published in 2002, shattered many myths about the country's wartime history. Bergier's commission found that government and industry had cooperated with the Nazis, and that Switzerland had turned away thousands of Jewish refugees at its borders.

The report also destroyed the idea that Switzerland's defences had saved it from Nazi invasion, and highlighted the uneasy relationship the Swiss had had with Germany.

In the five-year probe into Switzerland's wartime past presented in 2002, the Independent Commission of Experts (ICE) condemned government policy towards the Nazis and the treatment of refugees.

Border guards turned away at least 24,000 refugees during the Second World War, most of them Jews. Yet Switzerland did provide sanctuary to some 300,000 people during the war years. swissinfo

Die gute Unterhaltung besteht nicht darin, dass man selbst etwas Gescheites sagt, sondern dass man etwas Dummes anhören kann.

Wilhelm Busch

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