

= 21st Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Skanderbeg =

The 21st Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Skanderbeg (1st Albanian) was a German mountain infantry division of the Waffen @-@ SS , the armed wing of the German Nazi Party that served alongside , but was never formally part of , the Wehrmacht during World War II .

The division was developed around the nucleus of an ethnic Albanian battalion which had briefly seen combat against the Yugoslav Partisans in eastern Bosnia as part of the 13th Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Handschar (1st Croatian) . Composed of Muslim Albanians with mostly German and Yugoslav Volksdeutsche (ethnic German) officers and non @-@ commissioned officers , it was given the title Skanderbeg after medieval Albanian lord George Kastrioti Skanderbeg , who defended the region of Albania against the Ottoman Empire for more than two decades in the 15th century .

Skanderbeg never reached divisional strength , being at most a brigade @-@ sized formation of between 6 @, @ 000 and 6 @, @ 500 troops . In May 1944 , members of the division arrested 281 Jews in Pristina and handed them over to the Germans , who transported them to the Bergen @-@ Belsen concentration camp , where many were killed . The division itself was better known for this action and for murdering , raping , and looting in predominantly Serb areas than for participating in combat operations on behalf of the German war effort . Its only significant military actions took place during a German anti @-@ Partisan offensive in the German occupied territory of Montenegro in June and July 1944 . Following those operations , the unit was deployed as a guard force at the chromium mines in Kosovo , where it was quickly overrun by the Partisans , leading to widespread desertion . Reinforced by German Kriegsmarine personnel and with fewer than 500 Albanians remaining in its ranks , it was disbanded on 1 November 1944 . The remaining members were incorporated into the 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division Prinz Eugen . After the war , divisional commander SS @-@ Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen @-@ SS August Schmidhuber was found guilty of war crimes by a court in Belgrade and executed in 1947 .

= = History = =

= = = Background = = =

On 7 April 1939 , five months prior to the outbreak of World War II , the Kingdom of Italy invaded Albania . The country was overrun in five days , and Italian King Victor Emmanuel III accepted the crown offered by the Parliament of Albania . The Royal Albanian Army was incorporated into the Royal Italian Army and a viceroy was appointed to administer the country as a protectorate . Following the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941 , Italian Albania was expanded to include adjacent parts of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia incorporated mainly from the Yugoslav banovinas (regional subdivisions) of Vardar and Morava . Kosovo was annexed to Albania , and in the beginning , Albanians living there enthusiastically welcomed the Italian occupation . Some Kosovo Albanians even suggested that Albanians were " Aryans of Illyrian heritage " . Although officially under Italian rule , the Albanians in Kosovo were given control of the region and encouraged to open Albanian @-@ language schools , which had been banned by the Yugoslav government . The Italians also gave the inhabitants Albanian citizenship and allowed them to fly the flag of Albania . The Royal Italian Army expelled most of the Serbs and Montenegrins that had settled Kosovo during the interwar period . The Kosovo Albanians despised the Serbs for the oppression they had experienced at their hands during the Balkan Wars , World War I , and under Yugoslav rule . They took advantage of their changed circumstances , attacked their Serb neighbours , and burned the homes of as many as 30 @, @ 000 Serb and Montenegrin settlers .

Albania remained occupied by Italy until its surrender to the Allies in September 1943 . In August of that year , faced with the imminent collapse of the Italian war effort , Nazi Germany deployed the 2nd Panzer Army to the Balkans to take over areas previously occupied by Italy . One of the Italian areas seized by the Germans was Albania , where the XXI Mountain Corps of Generaloberst (

General) Lothar Rendulic 's 2nd Panzer Army had been deployed . A Wehrmacht plenipotentiary general , and a special representative of Heinrich Himmler , SS @-@ Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen @-@ SS und Polizei Josef Fitzthum , were both based in the Albanian capital of Tirana . The Germans took control of all Albanian forces that had been collaborating with the Italians prior to their capitulation , including the Balli Kombëtar , an anti @-@ communist and nationalist militia . The Germans strengthened the Albanian army and gendarmerie , but quickly decided those troops were unreliable . That year , a number of Albanians from Kosovo and the Sandžak region were recruited into the 13th Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Handschar (1st Croatian) , a Waffen @-@ SS division composed largely of Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) and Croats with mostly German officers . For about six months the division included about 1 @, @ 000 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and the Sandžak who made up the 1st Battalion of the 2nd Regiment (1 / 2) , which later became the 1st Battalion of the 28th Regiment (1 / 28) . The division later recruited a further 500 men from the Sandžak .

The formation of an Albanian Waffen @-@ SS division was Fitzthum 's idea , initially opposed by the German Foreign Ministry representative Hermann Neubacher and the head of the SS @-@ Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Main Security Office) SS @-@ Obergruppenführer und General der Polizei (Lieutenant General) Ernst Kaltenbrunner , who influenced Himmler to shelve it . But the Albanian government supported the idea ; in the face of increasing difficulties Himmler soon changed his mind , and in February 1944 the idea received Adolf Hitler 's approval .

= = = Formation = = =

In February 1944 , Hitler approved the creation of an Albanian Waffen @-@ SS division that was to serve only inside Kosovo , and was intended to protect ethnic Albania but remain under German control . It was meant to be one of three Muslim Waffen @-@ SS divisions serving in the Balkans , the other two being the 13th Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Handschar (1st Croatian) and the 23rd Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Kama (2nd Croatian) . Himmler 's goal was to expand Waffen @-@ SS recruiting in the Balkans and form two corps of two divisions each , with one corps to operate in the region of Bosnia in the Independent State of Croatia and the other in Albania . These corps would then be combined with the Volksdeutsche 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division Prinz Eugen and together would form a Balkan Waffen @-@ SS mountain army of five divisions .

In March 1944 , Bedri Pejani , the chairman of the Second League of Prizren , an organization created after the Italian surrender to advance the interests of Kosovo Albanians , proposed to Hitler that a force of 120 @, @ 000 ? 150 @, @ 000 Kosovo Albanian volunteers be raised to fight the Yugoslav and Albanian partisans . Pejani asked the German leadership to give the Albanians equipment and supplies to fight the communist insurgency , and requested the expansion of the borders of the German puppet state of Albania at the expense of the German @-@ occupied Territory of the Military Commander in Serbia and the German occupied territory of Montenegro . These requests were not fulfilled , but in April 1944 Himmler ordered the establishment of a new Albanian volunteer division , which was subsequently named after the medieval Albanian warrior George Kastrioti Skanderbeg . By this point , the Germans and some members of the Albanian puppet government believed that about 50 @, @ 000 men could be recruited from Albanian @-@ held territory to join the SS . The SS had initially envisioned a force of 10 @, @ 000 ? 12 @, @ 000 men for an Albanian SS division . Himmler saw the Muslim Albanians as a potential source of manpower in Germany 's war against the Yugoslav Partisans , who faced significant difficulties in recruiting Kosovo Albanians to join their ranks . The Germans found that Kosovo Albanians were more cooperative than Albanians in Albania itself . This was mainly because they feared a return to Yugoslav rule . Consequently , many of the division 's recruits were Kosovo Albanians . The quality of most of these recruits was poor , and only 6 @, @ 000 were considered suitable to receive training . Those that were accepted were a combination of about 1 @, @ 500 former Royal Yugoslav Army prisoners of war , elements of the failed Albanian army and gendarmerie , volunteers from both pre @-@ war and expanded Albania , and conscripts from families that had more than two sons . The enlistment of Albanian civilians was organized in close cooperation with the Albanian

puppet government .

On 17 April 1944 , the Albanian battalion of the 13th SS Division was transferred via rail directly from combat in Bosnia to Kosovo to form part of the Skanderbeg division . The head of Waffen @-@ SS recruitment , SS @-@ Obergruppenführer Gottlob Berger , reported to Himmler that the Albanians " ... were quite sad about leaving . " On 23 May , Fitzthum reported the failure of Albanian units used in operations against the Partisans , and that he had dissolved four Albanian battalions organized by the Wehrmacht . He described most Albanian army and gendarmerie officers as " totally corrupt , unusable , undisciplined and untrainable . "

= = = Operations = = =

The division was founded as the 21 . Waffen @-@ SS Gebirgsdivision der SS Skanderbeg (albanische Nr.1) on 1 May 1944 as part of the XXI Mountain Corps . Most or all of the division 's officers , non @-@ commissioned officers (NCOs) , and specialists were German , and were mainly provided by the 7th and 13th SS Divisions , which noticeably weakened those formations . The divisional artillery regiment was formed from the 1st Albanian Artillery Regiment . The division was placed under the command of SS @-@ Standartenführer (Colonel) August Schmidhuber , who was promoted to SS @-@ Oberführer (senior colonel) in June . Estimates of the size of the division range from 6 @,@ 000 to 6 @,@ 500 men . Members took a religious oath using the Quran , pledging " jihad against unbelievers . " The division was originally equipped with captured Italian Carro Armato M15 / 42 tanks , which proved to be unreliable . Its garrison was located in the town of Prizren .

Early on , it became clear that most of the division 's Muslim Albanian members seemed to be interested only in settling scores with their Christian Serb adversaries , who became the target of numerous atrocities . In order to put a stop to the crimes , the Germans had to disarm battalions of the division in the towns of Pe? and Prizren and arrest the Albanian officers , with one commanding officer even being sent to prison in Germany . On 14 May 1944 , members of the division raided Jewish homes in Pristina , arrested 281 Jews and handed them over to the Germans , who sent them to the Bergen @-@ Belsen concentration camp , where many were killed . Historian Noel Malcolm describes this event as " the most shameful episode in Kosovo 's wartime history . " The division was later involved in a massacre of Albanian partisans . It was generally better known for murdering , raping , and looting , mainly in ethnic Serb areas , and for arresting Jews , than for participating in combat operations on behalf of the German war effort . In addition to indiscriminately killing Serbs and Montenegrins , the division was responsible for the expulsion of up to 10 @,@ 000 Slavic families from Kosovo as new Albanian settlers arrived from the poor areas of northern Albania . The arrival of these Albanians was encouraged by Italian authorities , and it is estimated that as many as 72 @,@ 000 Albanians were settled or re @-@ settled in Kosovo during the war . Between 28 May and 5 July 1944 , the division apprehended a total of 510 Jews , communists and other anti @-@ fascists and turned them over to the Germans . It also carried out retaliatory hangings of suspected saboteurs .

In June 1944 , Skanderbeg engaged in large @-@ scale field manoeuvres in eastern Montenegro . In Andrijevisa , the division summarily executed more than 400 Orthodox Christian civilians . It participated in operations Endlich (Finally) and Falkenauge (Hawkeye) in June and July , as well as Draufgänger (Daredevil) , during which it was the main force used by the Germans . These operations were focused on the destruction of strong Partisan forces in the ?akovica , Pe? and Mokra Gora areas . According to Neubacher , the division was carelessly committed to fighting in the early stages of its training and performed poorly . Between 18 and 27 August , the division fought the Partisans in and around Debar but failed to capture the city . By the end of August 1944 , the Germans had decided that the division was only of use for basic guarding duties . Some members were charged with guarding chromium mines near Kosovo before the area was overrun by the Partisans . In the ensuing clashes , one of the division 's regiments lost more than 1 @,@ 000 men and many Albanians deserted , some after Serb Partisan attacks on areas northeast of Gusinje . Army Group E claimed the division 's performance showed that it had " absolutely no military value

On 1 September 1944, troops of the division in Tetovo and Gostivar mutinied, killing their German officers and NCOs. By this time, the division numbered fewer than 7,000 men, which was less than one-third of its intended strength. Within two months of its initial deployment, 3,500 men had deserted. Himmler brought in 3,000 ? 4,000 Kriegsmarine (German navy) personnel from Greece to make up the numbers, but this had little effect on the division's fighting ability. By the beginning of October 1944, the division's strength had fallen to about 4,900 men, fewer than 1,500 of whom were fit for combat. Schmidhuber held his men in contempt, and he, his superiors, and Fitzthum explained their failure to create an effective security force by denigrating the Albanian culture and military reputation. Later, less involved members of the Wehrmacht stated that the principal issue regarding the unit's reliability may have been that the Germans did not work closely with the Albanians at the local level. In mid-October, it was engaged in heavy fighting around ?akovica. By this time, desertions had significantly affected the division's strength and its 86 officers and 467 NCOs were left with a force of only 899 men, about half of whom were Albanian. On 24 October, Generaloberst Alexander Löhr, the commander of Army Group E, ordered that all Albanian members of the division be disarmed and released.

On 1 November 1944, the division was disbanded. At the same time, Albanians in Kosovo took up arms against the Partisans when they learned that the region would not be unified with Albania after the war, despite earlier Partisan promises. Atrocities occurred when 30,000 Partisans were sent to Kosovo to quell Albanian resistance in the region. Between 3,000 and 25,000 Kosovo Albanians were killed in the ensuing violence.

== Aftermath ==

The remaining German troops and former naval personnel were reorganized as the regimental Kampfgruppe Skanderbeg under the command of SS @-@ Obersturmbannführer Alfred Graaf. The unit withdrew from the Kosovo region in mid-@-@ November along with the rest of the German troops in the area. Many Serbs and Montenegrins then took revenge against the region's ethnic Albanians, especially collaborators and those who had been members of the division. When Kampfgruppe Skanderbeg reached Ljubovija on the Drina river, it was placed under the command of the 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division Prinz Eugen, which was securing the river crossings in that area. The Kampfgruppe held the towns of Zvornik and Drinja?a during the first half of December 1944 as part of the Ljubovija bridgehead. It withdrew across the Drina and fought its way north, towards Br?ko on the Sava river, where it relieved the Wehrmacht forces holding the town. In late December, the Kampfgruppe's assault gun battery was committed to the Syrmian Front at Vinkovci. The remainder of the Kampfgruppe was deployed to Bijeljina.

In January 1945, the handful of naval personnel that survived were transferred to the 32nd SS Volunteer Grenadier Division 30 Januar, and the remnants of the former division were reorganized as II Battalion of the 14th SS Volunteer Mountain Infantry Regiment of the 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division Prinz Eugen. On 21 January 1945, Schmidhuber was promoted to SS @-@ Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen @-@ SS (brigadier) and placed in command of the 7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division Prinz Eugen. After the war, he was found guilty of war crimes and hanged. In February 1945, the battalion was disbanded altogether and its remaining manpower was assigned to the German police regiment near Zagreb.

The division itself was considered to have been a military failure; not one of its members was ever awarded an Iron Cross while serving in it. Overall, it was better known for committing atrocities than for contributing to the German war effort. Its role in deporting Jews from Kosovo has been questioned by Albanian historian Shaban Sinani, who claims that the division did not participate in any deportations on behalf of the Germans. During the 1998 ? 99 Kosovo War, American journalist Chris Hedges alleged that some Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) leaders were directly descended from members of the division and ideologically influenced by it. Malcolm has challenged this claim.

= = Insignia = =

The division 's identification symbol was the Albanian double @-@ headed eagle . Despite its short existence , a collar patch depicting a goat @-@ crested helmet was manufactured for the division but there is no evidence that it was ever used . Photographs exist of a machined @-@ woven cuff band with the title Skanderbeg , but this was awarded to the 14th SS Volunteer Gebirgsjäger Regiment of the 7th SS Division in autumn 1944 , and not to this division . Members of the cadre staff were photographed wearing an Albanian arm shield depicting a black Albanian double @-@ headed eagle on a red field . Many of the division 's Muslim members wore traditional grey @-@ coloured skull caps instead of the standard SS field cap . Others wore the traditional Albanian highlander hat , the Qeleshe .

= = Order of battle = =

The principal units of the division were :

50th Waffen Gebirgsjäger (Mountain Infantry) Regiment of the SS (1st Albanian) (I , II , III battalions)

51st Waffen Gebirgsjäger Regiment of the SS (2nd Albanian) (I , II , III battalions)

21st SS Reconnaissance Battalion (four companies)

21st SS Freiwilligen (Volunteer) Panzerjäger (Anti @-@ tank) Battalion (three companies)

21st SS Gebirgs (Mountain) Artillery Regiment (four battalions)

21st SS Freiwilligen Pioneer Battalion (three companies)

21st SS Feldersatz (Replacement) Battalion

21st SS Freiwilligen Signals Battalion (three companies)

21st SS Mountain Supply Troop

= = Endnotes = =