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THESIS

**OTTO SKORZENY AND THE REAL CONDUCT OF
UNTERNEHMEN EICHE AND UNTERNEHMEN
PANZERFAUST**

by

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December 2017

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**OTTO SKORZENY AND THE REAL CONDUCT OF UNTERNEHMEN EICHE
AND UNTERNEHMEN PANZERFAUST**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Otto Skorzeny, an Austrian *SS*-member during World War II, is still today famous for his conduct of German special operations. His legacy continues to influence military theorists and historians because of the success of those operations. Among Skorzeny's most recognizable missions, it was the spectacular liberation of Mussolini in 1943 that also launched his career in the conduct of German special operations.

To answer the question about Skorzeny's real role in German special operations, this thesis surveys *Unternehmen Eiche*, the German rescue operation for Mussolini and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, which targeted the Hungarian Regent Horthy to resign. Therefore, primary and secondary sources and memoirs of witnesses, who were part of these operations, are compared to Skorzeny's memoirs, which were often used as primary sources in literature about German special operations during World War II. The results show that although Skorzeny had in both operations a primary supporting and significant strategic impact on several levels, discrepancies exist within the historical accounts. Furthermore, the impact of German propaganda and Otto Skorzeny's autobiographical books have bolstered his fame even to the present day. Thus, if academia refer primarily to Skorzeny's memoirs, they may draw an unrealistic picture of his role in the development of German WWII special operations. Moreover, other Skorzeny-conducted operations should be studied more in depth to further develop the thesis' findings.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NS	<i>Nationalsozialismus, nationalsozialistisch</i> National Socialism, National-Socialist
NSDAP	<i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i> literally: National-Socialist German Workers' Party
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
POW	prisoner of war
RFSS	<i>Reichsführer SS</i> Reich Leader-SS
RSHA	<i>Reichssicherheitshauptamt</i> literally: Reich Main Security Office
SA	<i>Sturmabteilung</i> literally: Storm Detachment
SD	<i>Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS</i> literally: Security Service of the Reich Leader-SS
SOF	Special Operation Forces
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i> literally: Protection Squadron
U.S.	United States of America
WWII	Second World War
z.b.V.	<i>zur besonderen Verwendung</i> literally: for special purpose

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. OVERVIEW

During World War II and thereafter until today, enthusiasts of the chronicles of war have referred to Otto Skorzeny as “the most dangerous man in Europe.”¹ The Austrian *SS-Obersturmbannführer* successfully led several high-value-target special operations for Germany at the war’s height. He stepped into the WWII limelight to become one of the most renowned German officers from this period. After the Allied defeat of the Axis powers in 1945, he embarked on his second career, more notable still, to use his knowledge and fame in a shadow world of the Cold War. He established a reputation for European right-wing activities as a political refugee, he may have collaborated with the Israeli Mossad, and overall he crafted a personal legend and legacy. He was charged at the Dachau Military Tribunal in August 1945, but was not found guilty, and escaped as a fugitive to Spain, where he was secured by the nationalist Franco regime to become possibly imprisoned for a time because of his name on the Israeli list of German war criminals. There he finally died in 1975, and his remains are interred in the family plot in the green splendor of Vienna Doebling, the elegant 19th district.

Unternehmen Eiche, the rescue of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini at Gran Sasso in 1943, was Otto Skorzeny’s primary special operation, which made him famous and highly decorated.² This operation was crucial for Germany, because its success kept part of Italy on her side and therefore, prolonged the war in Southern Europe and kept Allied Forces from reaching Germany quickly. Comparable to *Unternehmen Eiche*, the successful *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*—supposedly Skorzeny-led operation—in Budapest in 1944 targeted the Hungarian Regent Admiral Miklós Horthy.³ The Hungarian negotiation with the advancing Soviet Red Army would have cut off German divisions still fighting in the Balkans and in the process of withdrawal as well as those units in the East resisting

¹ Charles Whiting, *Skorzeny, The Most Dangerous Man in Europe* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2010).

² Operation Oak.

³ Operation Panzerfaust.

the Soviet advance. The success of *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* and the replacement of the Hungarian regent allowed the war in Southeastern Europe to continue with ultimately catastrophic results, not least for Hungary, in the final phase of the war. But it did allow the successful retreat of nearly a million German soldiers.

National Socialist propaganda and Otto Skorzeny used these two special operations to create a biographical legend, which is still alive and taught today in the history of special operations, not so much as an expression of Nazi ideas as of military excellence more or less disconnected from biography, politics and society of the time. This fact notwithstanding, the time is ripe for a reinterpretation of this story in the interests of the historical record. Moreover, there is also a need to join excellence in professional military education with the highest standards of historical scholarship, especially as that of the German-speaking world has an impact on an English language readership. Skorzeny may have used the situational opportunity presented by Nazi propaganda at the climax of the war to become famous, but, along with many other figures of the world's biggest war, he also created his own story after the war.⁴ Understanding these historical discrepancies between fact and fiction, what was his real role in the origin, planning, execution, and aftermath of German high-value-target special operations in World War II?

B. CONTEXT

For those devoted to the study of special operations and its application in practice in a violent world of irregular conflict, the Austrian Otto Skorzeny is akin to Guderian or Rommel for mobile warfare in the annals of war. Especially in English-speaking countries, where German and Austrian military figures enjoy more fame than at home today, his military reputation and fame is enormous. The first time he was recognized during World War II was after Nazi propaganda used the successful rescue operation of Mussolini in September 1943 to demonstrate the Third Reich's military resilience and sustained power in the face of major strategic setbacks in alliance cohesion as Allied

⁴ Otto Skorzeny, *My Commando Operations: The Memoirs of Hitler's Most Daring Commando*, transl. David Johnson (Atglen, PA: Schiffer 1995).

offensives against the Axis unfolded in Southern and Eastern Europe. This operation in the Apennine Mountains was a launching pad not only for the Fiesler Storch aircraft that rescued the Duce, but for Otto Skorzeny and his global recognition and credit. Before this operation, he was an unknown person even in Germany, a common soldier, like many other Germans and Austrian men at the time in the ranks of the SS.

Special operations conducted by Otto Skorzeny always seemed to be successful and were employed by German propaganda, but were likewise well reported by Allied Forces and their home press. Every individual operation became a stepping-stone for Otto Skorzeny's military fame. This growing global reputation started in September 1943 with *Unternehmen Eiche* and continued with *Unternehmen Rösselsprung*,⁵ which targeted the Yugoslav communist guerrillas fighting against Nazi rule in occupied Yugoslavia and their leader, Josip Broz Tito. In October 1944, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* was conducted in Budapest to keep Hungary on the Axis side of the war and had a deep impact on German political and military strategy. Most renowned in the United States were, and still are, *Unternehmen Greif*⁶ in December 1944, when Skorzeny's men conducted a false-flag operation during so called Battle of the Bulge or the *Ardennenoffensive* and the planned Nazi underground resistance movement in post war Germany—the *Werwolf SS*.⁷

Also, the rumored *Unternehmen Weitsprung*⁸ to kill Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill during the Teheran Conference in 1943 built Skorzeny's popularity. All these operations are still connected to the man named Skorzeny and supposedly illustrate his cleverness, tactical knowledge, and courage.⁹

⁵ Operation Knight's Leap.

⁶ Operation Griffin.

⁷ Charles Foley, *Commando Extraordinary: Otto Skorzeny* (New York: Putnam, 1955); Glenn B. Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando* (New York: Military Heritage, 1988).

⁸ Operation Long Jump.

⁹ Whiting, *Skorzeny*; Gordon Williamson, *German Special Forces of World War II* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2012).

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Especially in the English language literature, but in Germany and Austria as well, contemporary authors still rely mostly on Skorzeny's autobiographical works and personal accounts about special operations during World War II. Even today, he is a household name in the successful conduct of special operations. His influence has been pervasive. For example, his idea of a German resistance movement called *Werwolf* after the German defeat has even been said to have influenced terroristic organizations like Al Qaida and the Islamic State and their irregular tactics.¹⁰

While *Unternehmen Eiche* was crucial for Germany's war strategy and for Skorzeny's career, this operation is also the first high-value target special operation in modern times and is used as the perfect case study to teach soldiers and military leaders how to conduct a successful operation.¹¹ Skorzeny is described as the one who received the order to rescue Mussolini personally from Adolf Hitler, planned the whole operation, conducted reconnaissance on his own, and led his men with the support of German paratroopers to operational success with large strategic gains. Awards and honors in the aftermath supposedly confirmed his lead responsibility.¹² On the other hand, there is some increasing doubt since the 1980s in the United States about his involvement in this operation that follow the doubts that first arose in Germany and Europe much earlier in those skeptical of his fame at the time. Paratroopers claimed the honor for conducting *Unternehmen Eiche* soon after. But criticism of Skorzeny was suppressed and therefore, he was officially still the operational hero.¹³

¹⁰ James Carlini, "Otto Skorzeny: The Nazi who Influenced ISIS," *International Policy Digest*, July 18, 2016: <https://intpolicydigest.org/2016/07/18/otto-skorzeny-the-nazi-who-influenced-isis/> (accessed December 4, 2017).

¹¹ William H. McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations," Master's thesis 1993, Naval Postgraduate School: <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/14838>.

¹² McRaven, *Special Operations*, 251–309; Greg Annussek, *Hitler's Raid to Save Mussolini: The Most Infamous Commando Operation of World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005); Foley, *Commando Extraordinary*; Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*; Whiting, *The Most Dangerous Man*; Williamson, *German Special Forces*.

¹³ Vincenzo Di Michele, *The Last Secret of Mussolini* (Rimini: Il Cerchio, 2015); Roger Edwards, *German Airborne Troops* (New York: Doubleday, 1974); Romano Mussolini, *My father, il Duce* (Carlsbad, CA: Kales Press, 2006); Kurt Student, *Generaloberst Student und seine Fallschirmjäger*, ed. Hermann Götzel (Friedberg: Podzun-Pallas-Verlag, 1980).

Similar doubts can be raised about *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*. Although this operation is less documented and analyzed, its impact on German warfighting was important. Authors who describe this special operation are again influenced by Otto Skorzeny's own accounts. Repeatedly, planning and successful execution are described as being ordered by Skorzeny. Reportedly tasked by Adolf Hitler, he went in civilian clothes to Budapest and took the Hungarian regent's son hostage, attacking the palace and pressuring the Regent Horthy to resign as head of state.¹⁴

As already described in reference to *Unternehmen Eiche*, most U.S. military historians and writers honoring Otto Skorzeny base their work on his autobiography, personal accounts, and his awards and honors in the aftermath of these operations. Again, his military genius on a tactical special operations level is highlighted by articles and book chapters for studying (military) students.¹⁵

There is a difference between U.S. authors and German and European writers, the latter two who are more critical about the role that Skorzeny played in the conduct of these special operations. These German authors argue diplomatic negotiations had a bigger impact on the ongoing *Wehrmacht* operation to occupy Hungary, which seemed to be more effective in influencing Horthy's decision to resign and let Ferenc Szálasi become dictator of a pro-Nazi governed Hungary.¹⁶ These critiques do not deny that Skorzeny was there and did take action that contributed to the outcome.

After reviewing current authors who write about these two Skorzeny-led operations, I want to focus on a third concern about Skorzeny's legacy, which also is used by different authors in various ways. World War II and its military operations have primary sources available in a size that fill archives of the ex-combatant nations. Official documents, official reports, and memoirs of people at that time describe events,

¹⁴ Johann Hindert, "German Views of Irregular Warfare," Master's thesis 2015, Naval Postgraduate School: <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/45873>; Hans Georg Lehmann, "Unternehmen Panzerfaust, Der Putsch der SS in Budapest am 15. Oktober 1944," *Ungarn-Jahrbuch, Zeitschrift für die Kunde Ungarns und verwandte Gebiete*, 5 (1973): 215–231.

¹⁵ Hindert, "German Views."

¹⁶ Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, 227.

relationships, and connections.¹⁷ A distinction should thus be made between the record of the war as visible in such documents and the autobiographical iteration of conflict and fighting that quickly emerged in the war's wake and for which a major market existed well beyond Germany, to say nothing of the interests of the defeated to shine a positive light on what often had been criminal behavior or an enterprise that had ended in catastrophic defeat.

It is remarkable to write in 2017 that Otto Skorzeny's autobiography has been used and cited by nearly every author writing about him.¹⁸ But there are just a few writers who doubt Skorzeny's descriptions and crosscheck his accounts.¹⁹ Memoirs, interviews, and film clips of those participants or otherwise involved persons in Skorzeny's special operations are rarely used and cited. Again, there is a difference between U.S. authors and German and European writers, because the memoirs and interviews of, for instance, the paratrooper General Kurt Student, Harald Mors, Benito Mussolini's son, or Miklós Horthy are only used by the latter two. Even available official documents and reports, which contradict and challenge Skorzeny's accounts about Budapest, are only cited in a single German article.²⁰ Interestingly, Düsterberg writes about a special type of postwar literature, which follows on the one hand the descriptive narrative of National Socialist propaganda and on the other hand satisfied the German veteran needs of a German crimeless free fought war.²¹ Therefore, mostly former-high-ranking senior officers as authors used a mixture of autobiographical contents and fictional adventurous narrative.²²

¹⁷ Heinz Bliss (ed.), "Das Fallschirmjäger-Lehr-Regiment" (Witzenhausen: FeldmannDruck, 1999); Martin Moll (ed.), "Führer-Erlasse" 1939–1945 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997); Nicholas Horthy, *A Life for Hungary, Memoirs* (Bronx, NY: Ishi Press International, 2011); Mussolini, *My Father*; Radl, *Aide*, 1981; Rudolf Rahn, *Ruheloses Leben: Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen eines deutschen Diplomaten* (Düsseldorf: Diederichs Verlag, 1949); Student, *Generaloberst Student*.

¹⁸ Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*; Foley, *Commando Extraordinary*; Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*; Whiting, *The Most Dangerous Man*; Hindert, *German views*; McRaven, *Special Operations*.

¹⁹ Rolf Düsterberg, *Soldat und Kriegserlebnis: Deutsche militärische Erinnerungskultur (1945-1961) zum Zweiten Weltkrieg; Motive, Begriffe, Wertungen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000); Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*.

²⁰ Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*.

²¹ Düsterberg, *Soldat und Kriegserlebnis*, 51, 54–72.

²² Düsterberg, *Soldat und Kriegserlebnis*, 62–67.

Otto Skorzeny's books are seen in this type of postwar literature and follow these lines of satisfying German postwar veteran readers.

D. APPROACH

In order to better understand the circumstances surrounding these two special operations, the thesis will start by providing the strategic environment during the conduct of these two German missions. It will focus on the German, Italian, and Hungarian perspectives individually to explain what led to changes inside the countries and during the war, which influenced Germany to plan and conduct special operations during these phases of World War II.

With the purpose to answer the question of what Otto Skorzeny's real role in German World War II special operations was, a chapter of this thesis will focus on critiques about Skorzeny's narrative of his involvement in German special operations. This thesis will rely on the critical comparison of primary sources. This literature will be mostly German, but the thesis will also use Skorzeny's interview as a prisoner of war after his capture by American soldiers in 1945. Autobiographies, biographies of German and foreign military and government personnel involved in special operations, and official German government and military documents will be crucial to this undertaking when levied against a more or less uncritical English-language literature, which suffers from a lack of detail and especially lack of context. The validation of literature in its description of Skorzeny's role will be based on a comparison of Skorzeny's autobiography *My Commando Operations* to other sources. This research aspires to identify those parts of the narrative that are contested by more than one other participant. Official documents will be rare for this thesis but as far as they are available through the German *Bundesarchiv*,²³ they will be used for answering the research question.

Secondary sources like regimental history, books about Skorzeny himself, and articles about German special operations will help to reconstruct these German special operations and Skorzeny's role, if primary sources will not provide the needed information for this thesis.

²³ Federal Archive of Germany .

The limitation of this literature is based on its availability. Many official German documents are still unavailable because of their classification, which was determined during or after the war by Allied forces or governments, or because they were burned during the defeat of Germany. Also witnesses or members of the conducted operations are no longer available, since it is already 70 years since the war's end. Their accounts are mostly lost, if they were not written down and/or published in the time immediately after the war.

On the following pages, this thesis will concentrate on two German special operations, which were both successful, had a major impact on the ongoing war, and contributed to and augmented Otto Skorzeny's fame. The first case will be *Unternehmen Eiche* in 1943, the rescue operation of Italy's dictator Mussolini, and the beginning of Skorzeny's fame. This special operation is still today used as a model case study to teach young officers how to conduct successful operations and illustrated how closely connected Skorzeny's name is to this operation. The second case, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* in 1944, was again a high-value target special operation because the Hungarian Regent Horthy had to be caught to keep Hungary on the Axis side of the war to fight against the Soviet Union. This thesis will use these two examples to describe the missions and ascertain Skorzeny's actual role in special operations.

By concentrating on just two German special operations, this may create an incomplete picture and characterization of Skorzeny than if the thesis reviewed all of Skorzeny's special operations. Further academic work may describe his role in the other operations. This ongoing work would provide a better characterization, but two successfully conducted German special operations and analysis of Otto Skorzeny's involvement can at least suggest a more realistic and less legend-based account of his role in those operations.

In this thesis, both operations will be divided into different phases: origin, planning, execution, and aftermath. By using this scheme, the reader will easily be able to trace Skorzeny's impact and influence in order to form a more accurate picture of his participation and the operations as a whole. Distinguishing both special operations is the most logical way to achieve these goals.

After the analysis of the two historical case studies, a following chapter concentrates on Skorzeny's strategic value. It will describe how Skorzeny achieved strategic impact for Germany on its domestic population, internal SS volunteer recruiting, WWII politics and military, and on Germany's adversaries and their warfighting.

Furthermore, according to the findings in the Critical Analysis chapter, a chapter will provide accurate accounts of how *Unternehmen Eiche* and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* were conducted. Primary sources concerning the conduct of these operations will be compared and cross-referenced with Skorzeny's personally-produced narrative in order to gain a clearer and more realistic account.

The conclusion will summarize the findings of his involvement and similarities in both cases and will show the real role Skorzeny played in the different phases of German special operations, which will further enhance the readers understanding of Otto Skorzeny's real contributions to the conduct of special operations. The summary also has to differentiate between the different phases of special operations because the findings lead to various contributions and end states during these different phases. When compared, discrepancies paint a more accurate picture of Otto Skorzeny's real contributions.

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II. STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

A. GENERAL

Both special operations took part in a crucial environment of Germany's warfighting situation in which the Reich and its Axis allies suffered ever more under the blows of the allied offensive. Skorzeny claims *Unternehmen Eiche* and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* as his independently planned and executed missions,²⁴ which saved Germany's military from defeat prior to May 8, 1945. The following sections of this thesis will describe the political and military environment of the successfully conducted German special operations, while Chapter IV will focus on the strategic value and the result of Skorzeny's missions.

B. UNTERNEHMEN EICHE

Since 1943, the Italian popular support for the Italian military fighting on the German side against Allied Forces was decreasing in the face of the Allied offensive, first in North Africa, and then in Sicily. The defeat in Tunisia in May 1943 and the Allied bombing raids against Italian cities forced the Italian population and elites to oppose Germany and Axis strategic goals.²⁵ During Operation Husky, Allied Forces started their invasions on smaller islands ahead of Sicily on June 11, 1943 and attacked Sicily on July 10, 1943.²⁶ Allied amphibious operations and airborne operations supported the landing on Sicily, while German and Italian troops withdrew up until August 17, 1943.²⁷ As a result of the Allied landing on Sicily, the Grand Council of Fascism revolted against Il Duce and abolished the power of Mussolini, which they transferred mostly to the Italian

²⁴ Otto Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny* (Hamburg: Hansa Verlag Josef Toth, 1950), 136–137, 236, 242; Otto Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen, Krieg ohne Fronten* (Wiesbaden: Limes-Verlag, 1977), 145, 234–235, 241–242, 293–295; Otto Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando, The Daring Missions of Otto Skorzeny and the Nazi Special Forces* (New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016), 42, 66–67, 136, 140–141.

²⁵ Philip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini: Italy, the Italians, and the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91–92.

²⁶ Greg Annussek, *Hitler's Raid to Save Mussolini, The Most Infamous Commando Operation of World War II* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2005), 3.

²⁷ Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 104–109.

King, Victor Emmanuel III. The king informed Mussolini about his decision to form a new government under the head of Pietro Badoglio, who was the former Chief of Italian High Command.²⁸ The Italian paramilitary police, the Carabinieri, imprisoned Mussolini.²⁹ King Emmanuel III did not want to continue the war with Germany against the Allied Forces, and therefore, Pietro Badoglio contacted the Allied Forces to negotiate a ceasefire and to surrender.³⁰

The leadership of the German military feared that the Italian surrender would facilitate the Allied attack to the North, which would threaten the German homeland.³¹ The Italian ceasefire at the beginning of September 1943 manifested this German fear, and German troops began forcibly to demilitarize Italian units.³²

In this political and military environment, Germany launched *Unternehmen Eiche* on September 12, 1943.

C. UNTERNEHMEN PANZERFAUST

For Hungary, as for Germany, the final destruction of the 6th Army at Stalingrad in early 1943, and the following battles, altered perceptions and opinions about the war and the probability of victory.³³ The Hungarian Regent, Miklòs Horthy, was looking for opportunities to end the war. Since August 1943, the Hungarian government had been in contact with Allied Forces in attempt to become aligned with them.³⁴ German intelligence noticed Hungary's negotiations, but until Italy's attempt to surrender, nothing happened.³⁵ Since the end of 1943, the German military planned the *Unternehmen*

²⁸ Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*, 3–7; Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 30, 104.

²⁹ Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*, 7; Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 30.

³⁰ Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*, 7–8; Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 107–109.

³¹ Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*, 8; Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 46–51.

³² Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 119–121.

³³ Deborah S. Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II, Caught in the Cauldron* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 232–233.

³⁴ Horthy, *A Life for Hungary*, 203–211; Thomas Sakmyster, *Miklòs Horthy, Ungarn 1918–1944* (Wien: Steinbauer, 2006), 307–315.

³⁵ Sakmyster, *Miklòs Horthy*, 315, 319–320.

Margarethe,³⁶ which aimed to occupy Hungary and avoid a situation similar to what happened in Italy.³⁷ In Spring 1943, the German military completed mission planning, and Adolf Hitler authorized *Unternehmen Margarethe* to be launched on March 19, 1944.³⁸ Eight German Divisions occupied Hungary, and Germany led a new installed government under Prime Minister Döme Sztójay.³⁹ At this point, a large part of the Hungarian population already supported communist movements and conducted irregular warfare against the German authorities.⁴⁰

In August 1944, the Red Army reached Romania, which surrendered, switched sides, and declared war on Germany.⁴¹ The Hungarian Regent Horthy recognized the disadvantage of the Axis' situation and tried to negotiate his country's surrender with the Soviets.⁴² Deserting and dissenting Hungarian soldiers had already been fighting in large numbers on side of the Red Army, while German and regular Hungarian troops prepared defense positions to stop the Soviet attacks.⁴³

D. CONCLUSION

During crucial phases in the war, the German military conducted *Unternehmen Eiche* and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* in a sensitive strategic environment of the collapse of the Axis flanks in the South and the East, a mortal danger to German domination of the continent. Up until these special operations, German troops and Axis powers had been fighting the Allies and the Red Army. A major loss of Germany's allies' support would have had severe consequences: loss of those countries' manpower, support services, and

³⁶ Helmuth Greinert, Percy Ernst Schramm (eds.), *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmachtführungsstab), 1940–1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard&Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1961), 103–107, 189–249.

³⁷ Thomas Sakmyster, *Miklós Horthy*, 319–320.

³⁸ Greinert, Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch*, 189–249.

³⁹ Greinert, Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch*, 189–249.

⁴⁰ Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, 201–204.

⁴¹ Thomas Sakmyster, *Miklós Horthy*, 350–351.

⁴² Horthy, *A Life for Hungary*, 203–211; Thomas Sakmyster, *Miklós Horthy*, 350–351; Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, 314–316.

⁴³ Cornelius, *Hungary in World War II*, 316–317.

bureaucratic cooperation that provided internal security for the German forces. All of these factors would have resulted in significant loss of German forces, if they were cut off or exposed by an Axis ally surrender.

III. CRITIQUES

The record of German soldiers in World War II is a rich and complex one and forms part of world history in an astonishing way. Books, films, and the propaganda of the time are omnipresent in the public mind. Noteworthy, however, amid the renaissance of writing about war and soldiers in Germany itself, has been the singular trend in historiography to examine the postwar careers of notable German soldiers and particularly their currying of fame and notoriety in the immediate post war years.⁴⁴ In this connection, the story of the Austrian SS-leader, Otto Skorzeny, stands out as ripe for the kind of reinterpretation that has lately characterized a rich scholarship on those wartime personalities who stood out in the headlines in wartime and thereafter.

This analysis of the biography and operational deeds of Skorzeny in fact and legend as well as his conduct of special operations will be divided into three parts. The first part concentrates on general analysis about Skorzeny's involvement and credibility in the two special missions this thesis concentrates: the Mussolini Gran Sasso event in 1943 and the seizure of the Hungarian Head of State Horthy in 1944.

The second part will focus on *Unternehmen Eiche* and criticism about Skorzeny during this special operation to rescue the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini at Gran Sasso. The third Skorzeny critique will be about *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, which targeted the Hungarian Regent Admiral Miklós Horthy in Budapest. All three case studies will allow the reader to develop a clear view of Otto Skorzeny's real role in those two famous cases renowned in legend and its value for conducting these special operations as an analysis of the past as it has implications for the present and those who must act in the face of danger.

⁴⁴ Jens Westemeier, *Joachim Peiper: A Biography of Himmler's SS Commander* (Atglen: Schiffer Publishing, 2007); Bernd Wegner, *From Peace to War: Germany, Soviet Russia, and the World, 1939–1941. The Period of German-Soviet Partnership* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1997).

A. GENERAL

This section provides general criticism about Skorzeny's involvement and conduct of the two special operations on which this thesis focuses on. The following critiques have value for both case studies, but may be also used for further research on Skorzeny's special operation because of some overall criticism about Skorzeny's ability to conduct special operations. This question has merit for the author, as a special operations veteran and scholar, but also for scholarship in a general sense associated with the story of the *Wehrmacht* and the *SS* in the 20th century and even beyond. This section will suggest, that there are reasonable doubts, which will lead to the assumption that Otto Skorzeny might not have conducted the two special missions *Unternehmen Eiche* and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* precisely in the way he described it in the decades after the war to all who would eagerly listen to this startling figure. I suggest at the outset that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, beset as it was by *SS*-men oriented to the West, and less friendly *SS* men oriented to Moscow, who did not trust Skorzeny overall. Most important, and a fact that becomes lost in the celebration of military feats of the armed *SS*, when compared to the military competency of NATO officers in the 21st century, Skorzeny did not have much military knowledge about tactical or operational use of military units. Indeed, he belonged to the *SS Sicherheitsdienst* and not the small number of *Waffen-SS* figures who had enjoyed some degree of military training and education at higher echelons of command, if at all, and such men were very few indeed. The *SD*⁴⁵ was yet again the party intelligence organization that had morphed one of the security policy entities in the Third Reich and occupied Europe, which as an organization did not train and facilitate its officer corps with command of tactical echelons for combat operations. Reinhard Heydrich himself was a failed naval officer, cashiered for ethics infractions, who was prone to gather educated men around him in the *SD*, but these tended to be lawyers and racial ethnologists as opposed to trained company or field grade officers. The

⁴⁵ Michael Wildt (ed.), *Nachrichtendienst, politische Elite und Mordeinheit. Der Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2016); Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2013); Robert Lewis Koehl, *SS: A History 1919–45* (Stroud: The History Press, 2012).

SD was an internal security organization intended for espionage, totalitarian control, and, once conquest began, for the realization by secret police and state terror means the control of subject populations.

After World War II, American soldiers captured Otto Skorzeny and interrogated him at Dachau which became a U.S. barracks, a prison, and the site of war crimes trials.⁴⁶ Later on, once Skorzeny escaped to Franco's Spain, the newly formed CIA, which grew out of the OSS, observed him and documented their observations.⁴⁷ These CIA documents will show, that the U.S. was well informed about Skorzeny, not just after World War II, but also before.⁴⁸ Skorzeny is described as "not particularly gifted with administrative or executive talents,"⁴⁹ he is recognized as being overvalued by his own importance,⁵⁰ the CIA knew that he was seen as an "upstart"⁵¹ by German (staff-)officers and comrades, that Otto Skorzeny was not as intelligent as he stated himself⁵² and that he is "child-like in many ways"⁵³ according to a CIA source. All these descriptions do not fit into the picture of Otto Skorzeny originally drawn by Nationalist Socialist-propaganda

⁴⁶ Otto Skorzeny, POW Interrogation at Dachau, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bhMsYIBe54> (accessed December 4, 2017).

⁴⁷ CIA, *Observation Documents about Otto Skorzeny*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/search/site/skorzeny> (accessed December 4, 2017).

⁴⁸ CIA, *Report about Otto Skorzeny, August 2, 1956*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%202_0113.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017).

⁴⁹ CIA, *Report about Otto Skorzeny, September 23, 1954*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%202_0097.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017).

⁵⁰ CIA, *Report about Otto Skorzeny, April 6, 1951*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%201_0082.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017).

⁵¹ CIA, *Report about Otto Skorzeny, April 11, 1951*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%201_0084.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017).

CIA, *Report about Otto Skorzeny, March 2, 1951*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%201_0074.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017); CIA, *Report about Otto Skorzeny, August 20, 1954*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%202_0094.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017).

⁵³ CIA, *Report about Otto Skorzeny, February 16, 1951*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%201_0072.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017).

or later by himself to his credulous public. Because of this fact, unlike other SS men who might have been useful in the incipient Cold War and the requirement to fight the Soviets, the CIA was never interested in working with Skorzeny.⁵⁴ He still never had skills, which would be useful, although he was part of the most recognized special operations during World War II.

Originally a member of the illegal Vienna-SS,⁵⁵ known for its terror activities in the illegal period of the NSDAP, SA, and SS after 1933 and prior to 1938, once the *Anschluss*⁵⁶ took hold, Otto Skorzeny's military career began in 1939 when he tried to join the *Luftwaffe*.⁵⁷ He then got transferred to the *Waffen-SS*, because he was not qualified to become a pilot. During his military career, he received no or only minor tactical and operational military education in the classical sense of those who customarily lead troops in combat at higher echelons of command.⁵⁸ Therefore, he was never capable of understanding and directing troops in a traditional military sense and was even by his further Chief of Staff, Wilhelm Walther never seen by those who were the graduates of such training and education as being an "officer."⁵⁹ Skorzeny himself described his training as that of a *Technischer Offizier*⁶⁰ in his books and his basic training at the *Waffen-SS*.⁶¹ But, there is no further classical education or training mentioned for command at the tactical or operational level as enjoyed by certain *Waffen-SS* officers in

⁵⁴ CIA, *Report about Otto Skorzeny, January 25, 1961*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%202_0140.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017); CIA, *Report about Otto Skorzeny, February 21, 1951*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%201_0073.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017).

⁵⁵ Christiane Rothländer, *Die Anfänge der Wiener SS* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2012).

⁵⁶ Annexion of Austria into the German Reich on March 12, 1938.

⁵⁷ German Air Force.

⁵⁸ ZDF (Second German Television, German public-service television), "Idole der Nazis–Otto Skorzeny, SS-Agent für Hitler," Video, 51:26. September 1, 2013, Interview with Karl Gabriel, member of the *Waffen-SS, SS-Division Totenkopf*, 17:42min, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thjBERONNOQ> (accessed December 4, 2017).

⁵⁹ ZDF, *Idole der Nazis–Otto Skorzeny, SS-Agent für Hitler*, Interview with Wilhelm Walther, *Oberstleutnant der Wehrmacht* (Lieutenant Colonel of the Wehrmacht), *Skorzenys Stabs-Chef* (Skorzeny's Chief of Staff), 16:05min.

⁶⁰ Technical expert/engineering officer (author).

⁶¹ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 39; Otto Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 19–21; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 7.

their small numbers, who were indeed party to traditional army professional military education,⁶² which might have developed or increased his tactical, operational, and strategic capacity in his military biography. Minor trainings on mostly technical issues characterized his time as battalion commander of *z.b.V. Friedenthal*.⁶³ Thus, conducting military operations without much understanding of tactics, especially if it is about special operations with specialized units, having special equipment and operating on difficult circumstances, is nearly impossible. This missing military, tactical, operational knowledge also was not developed over time as *Unternehmen Greif*⁶⁴ from December 16 to December 28, 1944 showed and is perceived by historians.⁶⁵ Also, his daughter Waltraut Riess described her father Otto Skorzeny as being mostly interested in technical issues, as would befit an engineering student, and being a “Haudegen und Draufgänger”⁶⁶ but not being an intellectual in the classical sense of the educated German officer.⁶⁷ Therefore, again, also his studies during the war might be mostly directed into technological development and not into the use of special tactical operational art to fight against Germany’s adversaries.⁶⁸

Into this also comes Skorzeny’s military position until he became commander of the battalion *z.b.V. Friedenthal*. He was a *Technischer Offizier* that is to say, combat service support, in several armed SS-Divisions,⁶⁹ so that even until 1943, he never garnered experience for tactical leadership of soldiers in combat. It is also interesting that, although the divisions in which he served were involved in campaigns in France and

⁶² Bernd Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten: Die Waffen-SS, 1933–1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010), 161–203.

⁶³ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 135–136; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 87; Skorzeny, *Hitler’s Commando*, 27.

⁶⁴ Battle of the Bulge, Operation Griffin.

⁶⁵ ZDF, *Idole der Nazis—Otto Skorzeny, SS-Agent für Hitler*, Interview with Michael Schadewitz, historian and author of *Geheimunternehmen Greif*, 19:21min.

⁶⁶ old soldier/warhorse and go-getter (author).

⁶⁷ ZDF, *Idole der Nazis—Otto Skorzeny, SS-Agent für Hitler*, Interview with Waltraut Riess, daughter of Otto Skorzeny, 4:45min and 6:05min.

⁶⁸ ZDF, *Idole der Nazis—Otto Skorzeny, SS-Agent für Hitler*, Interview with Karl Gabriel, member of the *Waffen-SS, SS-Division Totenkopf*, 18:15min.

⁶⁹ SS-Division *Verfügungstruppe* (later *Das Reich*).

Russia, he never was especially recognized as being heroic, outstanding, or courageous in these actions.⁷⁰ This fact is also a reason why Otto Skorzeny was not decorated and honored until 1943.

The transfer of Otto Skorzeny in 1943 from the *Waffen-SS* to *z.b.V. Friedenthal* is only understandable if the reason for this special unit is clear. This battalion was created for the special purpose of conducting *Unternehmen Zeppelin*,⁷¹ which targeted the Soviet Union.⁷² This operation was conducted by *Amt VI des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*⁷³ and its aim was to gather information about the Soviet population and economy, to sabotage crucial infrastructure, conduct assassinations, and to lead revolts against the Soviets.⁷⁴ One should also note that the command entities that guided war in the east and managed German and Axis policy in the conquered eastern territories constituted a “whole of government” in Nazi Germany that beggars the mind of a contemporary observer with its crossed purposes and overlapping lines of command and control. Skorzeny’s role is part of this highly conflicted instrument of power which beggars the mind of someone familiar with security sector organization in the 21st century.

One might even compare this *SS/RSHA* campaign somewhat with the personalities and tactics of what today is called hybrid war. But the take-away here is manifestly this undertaking was but poorly coordinated with traditional military channels of command and was not a military operation in its classical sense, but still a strategic special operation. But, already at the beginning of this operation the responsible *SS-Sturmbannführer*, Dr. Heinz Gräfe, mentioned that this operation may only cause minor

⁷⁰ ZDF, *Idole der Nazis—Otto Skorzeny, SS-Agent für Hitler*, Interview with Karl Gabriel, member of the *Waffen-SS, SS-Division Totenkopf*, 10:35min; Robert Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini, Gran Sasso 1943* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 12–13.

⁷¹ Klaus-Michael Mallmann, “Der Krieg im Dunkeln. Das Unternehmen „Zeppelin“ 1942–1945,” in *Nachrichtendienst, politische Elite und Mordeinheit. Der Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS*, ed. Michael Wildt, 324–346 (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003); Thorsten J. Querg, “Spionage und Terror: Das Amt VI des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes 1939–1945” (Dr phil diss., Berlin, 1997).

⁷² Mallmann, “Der Krieg im Dunkeln,” 337.

⁷³ The former *Sicherheitsdienst (SD)-Auslandsnachrichtendienst* was the foreign intelligence agency of the SS until it transferred in 1939 into *Amt VI des RSHA*, which is the Department VI of the Reich’s Security Headquarters (SS).

⁷⁴ Mallmann, “Der Krieg im Dunkeln,” 326.

nuisance, because of the minor reliability of agents, who were found at prisoner of war camps.⁷⁵ Himmler wanted to use this situation for his own purpose to make the *SS* more important and bolster his influence, because of the lack of *Wehrmacht* capabilities to conduct this operation.⁷⁶ By the beginning of 1943, the results of *Unternehmen Zeppelin* were getting worse, so that the whole concept had to be rethought.⁷⁷ The need for men, who were able to operate with radios and operate behind enemy lines was highlighted, and thus the special battalion *z.b.V. Friedenthal* was created.⁷⁸ This explains why *SS-Sturmbannführer* Otto Skorzeny got the position of the commanding officer. It was not, because he was recognized as a man with great ideas and a heroic military background, but because of his technical studies before the war, his position of an engineering officer, and his membership to the *SS*. Skorzeny described his position of being solely commanded by the *Reichsführung SS* and *RSHA*,⁷⁹ but this is not true. According to the personnel synthesis, which was created by the headquarters of *z.b.V. Friedenthal*, the new *Gruppe VI S*, the members of this group were members of the *RSHA*, the *Waffen-SS*, the *Wehrmacht*, and volunteering *Hilfswillige*,⁸⁰ which the *SD* commanded.⁸¹ The purpose of this special unit was to conduct special intelligence operations parallel to regular military (*Wehrmacht/Waffen-SS*) operations with the main effort of using high technological, specialized equipment as long-range radios and special weapons for their agency work. According to Skorzeny's narrative, that members of the *SD* had to wear the *SD*-rhombus or police branch color insignia on their uniform, but he did not, because he was member

⁷⁵ Mallmann, "Der Krieg im Dunkeln," 326.

⁷⁶ Mallmann, "Der Krieg im Dunkeln," 327.

⁷⁷ Mallmann, "Der Krieg im Dunkeln," 335–336.

⁷⁸ Mallmann, "Der Krieg im Dunkeln," 336–337; Robert Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 6-7.

⁷⁹ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 133.

⁸⁰ Persons in their number from occupied Eastern territories.

⁸¹ Mallmann, "Der Krieg im Dunkeln," p. 337; OSS, *Document about Otto Skorzeny*, German Section, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%201_0017.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017).

of the *Waffen-SS*⁸² and can be also explained by the aforementioned, peculiar personnel structure of *z.b.V. Friedenthal*. But this did not alter the leading command function of the *SD* like Skorzeny wanted to claim.

For all of Skorzeny's special missions, the wartime media's propaganda played a fateful role in the creation of his personal myth at the time and thereafter. Through German media, Otto Skorzeny not only became famous in Germany, but also in the United States of America, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and all other of Germany's enemy countries. This fact endured well after the guns fell silent in 1945, granted the remarkable manner that wartime propaganda proved able to outlive its origins. But at that point German media was not just a single voice because next to the political influenced civil media, like the *NSDAP* newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* or the documentary-like news program *Deutsche Wochenschau*, all military branches had their own news magazines as well as films and radio to inform their own troops and the German population about their battles, victories, and heroes. Most fateful, however, such propaganda of German arms also had the overwhelming strategic goal to increase recruitment of volunteers to serve in especially the *SS*-branch, which until 1942, had been based on such volunteers and not conscription, granted the reputation of the *SS* as the party elite—a thing in theory that always crashed with reality that too few persons really existed to fulfill this racial fantasy. The whole German propaganda machine was orchestrated by *Reichspropagandaminister*⁸³ Joseph Goebbels, who controlled German media and directed it based on Adolf Hitler and his political goals.

Although the *SS* had become a star of the German media in the early 1930s from its obscure origins, interestingly articles which claimed members of the *SS* as elite and idol increased in 1943.⁸⁴ The increase of articles about the *SS* in Nazi media was not just because of *Unternehmen Eiche* in 1943, but also because of the epic battle of Charkov in

⁸² Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 135–136. The distinction between *SD*-insignia on *SS*-uniform and *Waffen-SS* insignia on *SS-uniform* was a source of contention especially among the *Waffen-SS* figures who wanted no association with that they considered to be secret police and other unappetizing persons at odds with their concept of military honor, the war crimes of the *Waffen-SS* notwithstanding.

⁸³ The Reich's minister of propaganda (author).

⁸⁴ Jochen Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS: Geburt einer Legende, Himmlers Krieger in der NS-Propaganda* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2017), 584–585.

March 1943 and Adolf Hitler's desire to present this victory in German media in the wake of the Stalingrad defeat and the slow German shift to the defensive on the eastern front.⁸⁵ In addition to this increase of media presence, the SS had since the autumn of 1942 suffered from a lack of volunteers and started to present itself in media more than before and commenced a media campaign.⁸⁶ The prolonged war and the German and Axis people should never forget the glories of the *Waffen-SS* as being the army of National Socialism.⁸⁷ To overcome this lack of volunteers and encourage recruitment of young men into this military branch, such members of the SS as Otto Skorzeny, Kurt Meyer, and Theodor Eicke became the embodiment of the soldierly ideal in the SS at arms and the media gave special attention to them.⁸⁸ But not only SS internal goals gave a special opportunity to Otto Skorzeny for being represented in NS media. Parallel to Himmler's need for volunteers, the *Waffen-SS* was a political model of NS ideology and its concept of a racially superior warrior society composed of heroes.⁸⁹ Otto Skorzeny fit perfectly into the role of an ideal Nazi man and new model soldier, who still believed into Germany's ability to win the war and stood for NS-ideology, since he became a member of the NSDAP in the early 1930's in the so called Ostmark,⁹⁰ i.e. Austria and specifically Vienna, where as much as Munich was the birthplace of national socialism.

Also, the general trend in the high command for more military decoration and promotion was increasing since the end of 1942 as the military transitioned away from the estate-based army of former times to what was in fact a Nazi people's army with the

⁸⁵ Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 295.

⁸⁶ Bernd Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, 276; René Rohrkamp, "Die Rekrutierungspraxis der Waffen-SS im Frieden und Krieg," in *Die Waffen-SS, Neue Forschungen*, ed. Jan Erik Schulte, Peter Lieg, Bernd Wegner (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2014), 53–58.

⁸⁷ "Armee des Nationalsozialismus"—Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, 308; Sven Keller, "Elite am Ende, Die Waffen-SS in der letzten Phase des Krieges 1945," in *Die Waffen-SS, Neue Forschungen*, ed. Jan Erik Schulte, Peter Lieg, Bernd Wegner (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2014), 357–361.

⁸⁸ Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 326.

⁸⁹ Jean-Luc Leleu, "Jenseits der Grenzen: Militärische, politische und ideologische Gründe für die Expansion der Waffen SS," in *Die Waffen-SS, Neue Forschungen*, ed. Jan Erik Schulte, Peter Lieg, Bernd Wegner (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2014), 31–34.

⁹⁰ Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 12.

heroification of men and women of simple social background like Hitler himself.⁹¹ Additionally, the year 1943, i.e., when Goebbels proclaimed a total war effort after the Stalingrad defeat and the Allied called for Germany's "unconditional surrender," was a particular challenge for German political leaders and NS-propaganda, because of the defeat by Soviet troops on the eastern front and the coup against Mussolini in Italy. Granted Nazi ideology, which relied on martyrdom and heroic deeds as the core of its idea, the German population needed heroes, who still believed in Adolf Hitler and ultimate German victory.⁹² Joseph Goebbels himself wanted to press the *Waffen-SS* for more propaganda since 1942 and since 1943 to present a more realistic picture of *Waffen-SS* soldiers.⁹³ Interestingly, Lehnhardt states in his article about *Waffen-SS* in NS-propaganda, that the image of the *SS*, developed and produced by the *SS* and *NS*-media did not just influence the citizens of the Third Reich, but, fatefully enough, this heroic image of the *Waffen-SS* has endured for decades in current mainly Western media.⁹⁴ This generalization, which has major implications for Skorzeny's biography and military reputation, will be supported by focusing on *Unternehmen Eiche*.

To summarize the findings of this general critique, it has been shown that the CIA did not take Otto Skorzeny seriously and that he was not an officer with military leadership skills, and rather was obsessed by technological development. The battalion *z.b.V. Friedenthal* was more an intelligence agency than a kind of Special Operation Forces and was led by the *SD*. The NS- and SS-propaganda had a need for heroes presented to the population and to the German opponents latest since beginning of 1943 and the fall of Stalingrad, which gave Otto Skorzeny advantage of being recognized in media in the way he was and still is (within English-speaking countries).

⁹¹ Leleu, "Jenseits der Grenzen," 31–32.

⁹² Keller, "Elite am Ende," 355–356.

⁹³ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 385–386.

⁹⁴ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 391.

B. UNTERNEHMEN EICHE

Critique of *Unternehmen Eiche* will completely focus on this single case, although issues, which were already described by the first section “General” will be also used for this case, because of its interconnection with this special operation to rescue Benito Mussolini. Unavailability of documents concerning this operation limits the expanse of this section. As of yet, no reliable official sources have been discovered. Therefore, this thesis will rely on primary, personal sources like *Hauptsturmführer*⁹⁵ Otto Skorzeny’s narrative and the description of his adjutant *Obersturmführer* Karl Radl, an *SD* administrator, in comparison to biographies of Mussolini, the autobiography of General Kurt Student, and the narratives from Major Harald Mors, *Hauptmann* Heinrich Gerlach, and *Unteroffizier* Harry Mertin.

The findings of this section will argue that Otto Skorzeny did not conduct *Unternehmen Eiche* exactly the way he described the operation in his books.⁹⁶ The unit under Skorzeny’s command was not capable of planning an operation with gliders in rough terrain like Gran Sasso because of their lack of experience and knowledge. Furthermore, members of *z.b.V. Friedenthal* were not trained and equipped for being an assault element, while Skorzeny had no leading function over the involved *Fallschirmjäger-Lehr*-Regiment or other units. Skorzeny and his men were even not prepared for their participation in the operation as photos show and NS-propaganda used Skorzeny for its purpose to show German military strength and German ideals to the population and German adversaries, while a differentiating reporting about Gran Sasso was denied by Joseph Goebbels.

Interestingly, the CIA had early knowledge, in the postwar period, about the real conduct of *Unternehmen Eiche* and the created narrative of Otto Skorzeny.⁹⁷ This thesis

⁹⁵ Skorzeny’s rank at the time of the Gran Sasso Raid.

⁹⁶ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 213–264; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 95–151. And: Skorzeny, *Hitler’s Commando*, 34–88.

⁹⁷ CIA, *Information report about Otto Skorzeny, July 20, 1951*, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/SKORZENY%2C%20OTTO%20%20%20VOL.%202_0013.pdf (accessed December 4, 2017).

will provide more evidence than just a sole CIA document, which will be shown by the following.

At the beginning, it has to be stated, that Skorzeny and his men were surely involved into the search and locating of Mussolini. Kurt Student's narrative is plausible. According to it, Student needed support to locate Mussolini after he received the task from Adolf Hitler to liberate and bring Mussolini to Germany.⁹⁸ That would completely fit into the intelligence role of Skorzeny's *z.b.V. Friedenthal* and therefore it is also obvious that Adolf Hitler chose Skorzeny to support Student's task.⁹⁹ Even Karl Radl's narrative supports this, when he mentioned that Skorzeny and Mors were both under Student's command, but not in command of one over the other.¹⁰⁰

Before the media put Otto Skorzeny in the limelight, until 1943 the German *Fallschirmjäger*¹⁰¹ were famous for conducting special missions. Since 1937 German paratroopers were trained in their special skills and created as a unit, which was used for special missions like the assault on Eben Emael, the Battle of Rotterdam, the occupation of Narvik, the assault on the Corinth Canal, and even *Unternehmen Merkur*, the costly airborne invasion of Crete. For all these most successful operations these German paratrooper units trained hard and had a great cohesion within its units, battalions, regiments, and even divisions. In contrast, Skorzeny's battalion *z.b.V. Friedenthal* was a young unit and created with the purpose of operating in small groups behind enemy lines in the Eastern war theater, to conduct reconnaissance, minor sabotage, and assassinations. Within less than 6 months it is doubtful that Skorzeny created out of this group of men from all branches and services a cohesive assault unit, experienced and skilled in the use of infantry tactics and able to conduct special/commando operations.¹⁰² Martin van Creveld describes intensively how important cohesion for military success during World War II was, but none of his argument about cohesion within military units could be find

⁹⁸ Student, *Generaloberst Student*, 410.

⁹⁹ Student, *Generaloberst Student*, 413; Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Karl Radl, *Kommando "Eiche," Die Befreiung Mussolinis durch Otto Skorzeny 1943* (Selent: Verlag Deutsche Militärzeitschrift, 2016), 33, 93–95.

¹⁰¹ Paratroopers (author).

¹⁰² Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 6–7.

at that stage within *z.b.V. Friedenthal*.¹⁰³ Alone the assault with *Lastensegler*¹⁰⁴ on a terrain as difficult as Gran Sasso required a lot of experience, which was not available amongst Skorzeny's crew. Therefore, Skorzeny, who was not tactical trained and experienced, and his men were (highly unlikely able to plan or conduct independently an operation like *Unternehmen Eiche*.

The Gran Sasso Raid itself is very well documented because of the *Wehrmacht* photographer Toni Schneider, who took pictures during the assault. These photos are available by the German *Bundesarchiv* and can be viewed online.¹⁰⁵ The interesting part about these pictures and Skorzeny's and Radl's narrative is about the uniforms and combat equipment. Although Radl and Skorzeny describe that they got paratroop uniforms and equipment¹⁰⁶ like the FG-42¹⁰⁷ none of the pictures at Gran Sasso shows them. All men of Skorzeny's group are clearly identified by wearing only *Luftwaffe* tropical uniforms, standard *Wehrmacht* helmets, and the German standard rifle K-98.¹⁰⁸ All members of the *Fallschirmjäger-Lehr-Regiment* are wearing the regular paratroop combat uniform and helmet.¹⁰⁹ These details show that Skorzeny's and Radl's narrative cannot be exactly true, because if Skorzeny was planning and preparing the conduct of the Mussolini' liberation, his men would be prepared with their combat gear and airborne helmets. "Skorzeny claims that he smashed the radio [of the Italian guardsmen] with the butt of his sub-machine gun, but photographs from Gran Sasso indicate that he was

¹⁰³ Martin L. Van Creveld, *Kampfkraft: Militärische Organisation und Leistung 1939–1945* (Graz: Ares Verlag, 2005).

¹⁰⁴ Gliders (author).

¹⁰⁵ Tony Schneider, *Photographs of Unternehmen Eiche* (Freiburg: Bundesarchiv, 1943), <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:Search&limit=500&offset=0&profile=default&search=unternehmen+eiche&searchToken=50m07j271bya008mtk5v2j4lt> (accessed December 4, 2017).

¹⁰⁶ Radl, *Kommando "Eiche,"* 33, 35, 111.

¹⁰⁷ Radl, *Kommando "Eiche,"* 65.

¹⁰⁸ Tony Schneider, *Photographs of Unternehmen Eiche*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_101I-567-1503C-36,_Gran_Sasso,_Fallschirmjäger_und_Waffen-SS.jpg (accessed December 4, 2017); Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 460.

¹⁰⁹ Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 31.

armed only with a Walther PPK pistol.”¹¹⁰ Thus, Skorzeny’s narrative may be false and leads to this determination because of the surely unpreparedness of Skorzeny’s men that they did not expected to be part of *Unternehmen Eiche*.

Karl Radl and Otto Skorzeny describe in their narratives about finding Mussolini, how they were cooperating with other German troops.¹¹¹ But it is never stated that these units became attached to Skorzeny. They were cooperating and supporting Skorzeny’s mission in a way that he and his troops informed the supported units with intelligence on Mussolini’s location. Those commanding officers supported by Skorzeny’s intelligence, used this information to lead their units and conduct the operation. These supporting and supported relationships cast doubt on Skorzeny’s and Radl’s descriptions about their contributions and roles in *Unternehmen Eiche* and the freeing of Mussolini. Although the *Fallschirmjäger-Lehr-Regiment* was never attached to Skorzeny and always under Harald Mors’ command,¹¹² Skorzeny claims full responsibility for planning a mission with these *Fallschirmjäger* but never cites, when they became his subordinates.¹¹³ Skorzeny’s *z.b.V. Friedenthal* was operating according to its purpose in small groups. These groups cooperated and were supported by regular German units to fulfill their mission.¹¹⁴ Mors and Skorzeny were both attached to Kurt Student. Student tasked Skorzeny to find Mussolini, so Skorzeny did have a substantial role, and tasked Mors to liberate Mussolini.

¹¹⁰ Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 40; Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 248; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 148; Skorzeny, *Hitler’s Commando*, 73.

¹¹¹ Radl, *Kommando “Eiche,”* 50–69.

¹¹² Óscar González López, *Fallschirmjäger at the Gran Sasso, The Liberation of Mussolini by the German parachutist on the 12th September 1943* (San Cristobal: AF Editions, 2006), 12.

¹¹³ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 145, 234–235, 241–242; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 136–137; Skorzeny, *Hitler’s Commando*, 42, 66–67.

¹¹⁴ Radl, *Kommando “Eiche,”* 50–69.

This narrative, which comes close to Student's,¹¹⁵ Mors',¹¹⁶ Gerlach's¹¹⁷ and Mertin's¹¹⁸ description of the Gran Sasso Raid.

Tactically speaking, if Skorzeny would have been in lead of the assault company at Gran Sasso, he would not have been within the assault *Gruppe* capturing Mussolini, but supervising and leading his whole company, like the real commanding officer Freiherr von Berlepsch did.¹¹⁹ There are also doubts, that Skorzeny influenced his glider pilots to change their position and Student's explanation of misunderstanding, which is also described by Mors, are more plausible.¹²⁰

Being one of the first men inside the hotel leads to another false narrative from Skorzeny. "In his postwar interrogation about the raid, Skorzeny claimed that SS-Oberscharführer Walther Gläsner and Sfaeller assisted in securing the room, but in his memoirs he claims it was Holzer. In his account, Holzer said the other SS man was Neitzel."¹²¹

All mentioned aspects offer evidence, that Skorzeny's narrative and his conduct of *Unternehmen Eiche* may be exaggerated. But, NS-propaganda made him to the recognizable commando and therefore, this section will also focus on the presentation of *Unternehmen Eiche*. The propaganda about Skorzeny was not preplanned, but fitted perfectly into the narrative, which was needed at the time.¹²² The existing German military capability to conduct these types of operations and the still existing bravery

¹¹⁵ Student, *Generaloberst Student*, 408–435.

¹¹⁶ Harald Mors, "Sommer 1943: Der "Kampf um Rom" und die "Befreiung Mussolinis," in *Das Fallschirmjäger-Lehr-Regiment*, ed. Heinz Bliss (Witzenhausen: Feldmann Druck, 1999), 64–124.

¹¹⁷ Heinrich Gerlach, "Im Sturzflug über den Abgrund," in: *Das Fallschirmjäger-Lehr-Regiment*, ed. Heinz Bliss (Witzenhausen: Feldmann Druck, 1999), 125–138.

¹¹⁸ "Kassler Zeitzeuge erinnert sich: Mussolini mit Fieseler Storch befreit," HNA, June 24, 2013, <https://www.hna.de/kassel/mussolini-fieseler-storch-befreit-zweiter-weltkrieg-2921510.html> (access December 4, 2017).

¹¹⁹ Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 45–50.

¹²⁰ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 247–248; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 143–144; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 71–72; compare to: Student, *Generaloberst Student*, 423–425; Mors, "Befreiung Mussolinis," 64–124; López, *Fallschirmjäger*, 15.

¹²¹ Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 50; compare to: Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 249; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 146; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 74.

¹²² Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 457.

should be shown to German citizens and Germany's opponents.¹²³ Also, the SS-member, Otto Skorzeny was depicted and still perceived as the ideal German soldier, who fights although circumstances may be difficult.¹²⁴ Goebbels himself stated in his diary, that he wanted to eradicate varying narratives about Mussolini's liberation, a decision that continues to influence how many perceive Otto Skorzeny's role during *Unternehmen Eiche*.¹²⁵

These details reveal that Skorzeny was unable to plan and conduct a mission with special paratrooper equipment like gliders at Gran Sasso because of his lack of experience and knowledge about these issues. Furthermore, his men were also incapable of conducting this mission alone. Skorzeny never commanded an engaged unit in Italy except *z.b.V. Friedenthal*, but cooperated and supported with those, which were tasked. Nevertheless, he was there at Gran Sasso and did play a role in the bloodless rescue of Mussolini and therefore, Skorzeny was used strategically by NS-propaganda to demonstrate German military strength and to inspire the German peoples' belief in their nation's victory.

C. UNTERNEHMEN PANZERFAUST

Many military historians classify *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* as two separate operations with which Skorzeny was involved. One mission was the capture of Niklas Horthy Jr., the Hungarian regent's son and the "real" *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, which is the occupation of the Hungarian regent's palace in Budapest. Although *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* is just about the Miklós Horthy palace, this thesis will focus on both missions, because of Skorzeny's involvement.

This thesis will rely on primary sources like *Hauptsturmführer*,¹²⁶ Otto Skorzeny's narrative, and use biographies and the autobiography of Miklós Horthy, Rudolf Rahn, the narratives from regimental history of the *SS_Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon*

¹²³ Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 458–460.

¹²⁴ Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 456, 459.

¹²⁵ Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 461; also see for different publication, narratives, and their defeat by J. Goebbels: Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 460–461; Student, *Generaloberst Student*, 408–435.

¹²⁶ Skorzeny's rank at the time of the Gran Sasso Raid.

600 and a letter from the *Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer in Ungarn* Otto Winkelmann to *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler to provide comparative analysis of the recorded accounts.

The findings of this section will argue that Skorzeny was not involved in the capture of Horthy's son and played a supporting role in occupying Horthy's palace, while the Hungarian regent had already resigned.

Skorzeny describes the beginning of *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* with being tasked by Adolf Hitler for the conduct of this operation.¹²⁷ Interestingly, the *Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer in Ungarn*, Otto Winkelmann, did receive the same task, because he reports to his commander *Reichsführer SS* Heinrich Himmler on October 25, 1944.¹²⁸ Thus, Skorzeny could not be the only person who knew about this special mission.

In the beginning of October, Winkelmann's policemen captured the Hungarian regent's son, Niklas Horthy, while Skorzeny's men were provided security for the *SS* police operation.¹²⁹ If Skorzeny's men were really needed and got tasked by Winkelmann, like he describes, is in doubt because Winkelmann did not mention this claimed request for support, and in Skorzeny's narrative, he and his men were in civilian clothes and did not have any other weapons other than their pistols that they used in a small firefight. Additionally, Skorzeny's men were not at the place where the capture of Horthy Jr. happened.¹³⁰ Skorzeny's narrative describes solely the situation in front of the house, where Horthy Jr. was captured, while Winkelmann only mentioned Skorzeny at the airport, where Skorzeny tasked a Hungarian unit to lie on the ground, while Horthy Jr. was put into an aircraft and small arms fire had begun.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 290; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 230–231; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 231–233.

¹²⁸ Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, 221.

¹²⁹ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 290; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 238–239; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 137–138; Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, 224–225.

¹³⁰ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 290–291; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 239; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 138.

¹³¹ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 290–291; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 239; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 138; Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, 224–225.

The second part and the real *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, Skorzeny claims that he alone planned and conducted the operation independently.¹³² But Winkelmann gave a different report to Himmler, and he would have been judged for lying to the *Reichsführer SS*.

The *SS-Obergruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, who Skorzeny mentions disparagingly¹³³ was the commanding officer in Budapest at that time and came recently from Warsaw, where he commanded the defeat of a revolt.¹³⁴ Winkelmann stated that *SS-Obergruppenführer* von dem Bach-Zelewski the commanding officer was and that *SS-Standartenführer* Zehender was in leading function for the troops. It is questionable, that Skorzeny being a *SS-Sturmbannführer* took over command and led the troops. This would have been surely reported to Himmler.

It might more plausible that Skorzeny's unit *SS-Jäger-Bataillon 502*, an infantry unit, had to support the whole operation. That explains why he was not mentioned by Winkelmann. The *SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 600* was the assault company, which penetrated the palace through tunnels, while Skorzeny and his men occupied armored vehicles that encircled the palace.¹³⁵ Infantry was needed to secure the pedestrian doors and entry and escape routes to and from the palace and surely to secure the palace itself after it was occupied. Following Winkelmann, Skorzeny's unit performed the same functions as in *Unternehmen Eiche*; it supported an operation.

It is also false that Horthy fled because of Skorzeny's troops and did not give any orders for defending the palace, which contradicts Skorzeny's autobiographical claims.¹³⁶ Horthy himself gave the order that there should no fight over the palace,¹³⁷ which may be

¹³² Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 291–297; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 242–243; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 141.

¹³³ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 291–292; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 236–237; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 137.

¹³⁴ Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, 226.

¹³⁵ Rolf Michaelis, *SS-Fallschirmjäger Bataillon 500/600* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2008), 67.

¹³⁶ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 296–297.

¹³⁷ Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, 227; Horthy, *A Life for Hungary*, 233; Sakmyster, *Miklós Horthy*, 368.

influenced through the German military presence around the *Burgberg*. It was also not Skorzeny's men who pressed Horthy to resign, but *SS-Brigadeführer* and representative of the German Reich in Hungary, Edmund Vessenmayer, and the diplomat Rudolf Rahn negotiated with Horthy to resign.¹³⁸ Thus, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* and the palace raid may have influenced Horthy's resignation, but they were not the main impetus.

To summarize the findings of *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, Skorzeny did not play a major role in capturing Horthy Jr. and was only a supporting commander for the palace occupation mission in Budapest. *SS-Obergruppenführer* von dem Bach-Zelewski and *SS-Standartenführer* Zehender held overall responsibility, while Skorzeny's men only had to secure the palace, where the Hungarian guards were ordered not to fight.

D. CONCLUSION

To conclude the findings of this chapter, the critique on Skorzeny's involvement in *Unternehmen Eiche* and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* has shown that Skorzeny did not plan and conduct these German special operations independently, as he claims with his narrative.¹³⁹

The purpose of *z.b.V. Friedenthal* was not to conduct battalion-sized special operations. However, after *Unternehmen Eiche* the unit began to develop into *SS-Jagdverbände* and gain tactical experience for further conduction of special operations.¹⁴⁰ In the beginning, German paratroopers provided tactical experience and executed these types of missions. Nevertheless, Skorzeny and his men provided intelligence and therefore, located Mussolini, which set the conditions for the launch of *Unternehmen Eiche*.¹⁴¹ In this phase of German special operations, and partly also during *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, Skorzeny's unit supported tactically-tasked units to conduct

¹³⁸ Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, 227; Horthy, *A Life for Hungary*, 230–233; Sakmyster, *Miklós Horthy*, 366–368.

¹³⁹ Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 136–137, 236, 242; Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 145, 234–235, 241–242, 293–295; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 42, 66–67, 136, 140–141.

¹⁴⁰ Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 6–7.

¹⁴¹ Mors, "Befreiung Mussolinis," 84; Student, *Generaloberst Student*, 413–414.

the mission. NS-propaganda played a major role in the creation of Skorzeny's fame concerning the conduct of German special operations. German propaganda at that time had a need for men like Skorzeny and therefore, he served a political and military purpose, while differing operation reports were ignored and denied by Joseph Goebbels.¹⁴² These factors bolstered Skorzeny's fame during and after World War II.

However, Otto Skorzeny still had a strategic impact on World War II, despite the inconsistencies in his memory of his own role in the two operations on which this thesis focuses. Furthermore, other actions influenced his rise to fame.

¹⁴² Student, *Generaloberst Student*, 430–431; Mors, “Befreiung Mussolinis,” 103–106; Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 458, 461.

IV. SKORZENY'S STRATEGIC VALUE

German special operations are historically connected with Otto Skorzeny, who attained global recognition during and after World War II, even up until now.¹⁴³ This thesis identifies Skorzeny's strategic and tactical contributions and presents current discussion about his legacy and missions. His personality and the special operations that are connected to him all have aided to his strategic impact.

This chapter will argue that Otto Skorzeny and the German special operations, which are connected to his name had a strategic impact for Germany during World War II on four levels. Firstly, by using Skorzeny as the main leader of German special operations, he fit into the overall propaganda agenda to influence the German population to support the war and the German NS-government. Skorzeny's role contributed to initially successful German domestic information operations that mainly targeted their own populations. Secondly, the SS was using Skorzeny and his missions for recruiting volunteers and improving and sustaining military morale. This was evident based on the fact that SS-soldiers continued to fight with low rates of surrender, even when clearly at a tactical and operational disadvantage. Thirdly, Germany presented itself as strong and coerced its allies fighting on the German side, while providing German troops a "secure" environment for its battles. Lastly, it influenced Allied headquarters' decisions for tactical and operational use of their forces, which had strategic impacts for German warfighting.

A. GERMAN POPULATION

After spring of 1943 when the Soviet Red Army had won the battle of Stalingrad and the 6th Army was neutralized and captured, the German population's support for the NS-regime was decreasing.¹⁴⁴ Allied bombers already bombed the German homeland,

¹⁴³ Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 461.

¹⁴⁴ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 207, 212, 345.

and air defense was only partially available and could not deter Allied bomber raids.¹⁴⁵ At that point, many Germans in larger cities had already lost their homes and loved ones because of the war. Now, a whole army on the Eastern Front was completely eliminated and domestic popular support for the war dropped significantly.¹⁴⁶ The German people became increasingly disenchanted with the war and less convinced that all German adversaries had to be defeated.¹⁴⁷

The German government needed to reinvigorate the German population's commitment, and the Otto Skorzeny narrative helped to serve this purpose. With the reports on Skorzeny and his special missions, *NS*-propaganda aimed to foster an atmosphere of strength, which attempted to demonstrate German warfighting's ability to withstand the Allied pressure.¹⁴⁸ It focused on a man, who still believed in the German fighting capacity to win. Psychologically, Skorzeny affected the German population's hearts and minds, and aroused them to have hope for the future and trust the German government and military leadership, despite instances of defeat.¹⁴⁹ Skorzeny functions as one piece of the propaganda campaign puzzle. The *NS*-propaganda campaign inspired and maintained German popular support for German political and military goals through manipulation of information and even staging events.¹⁵⁰ Media reports provided heroes *SS*-members like Skorzeny, Eicke, and Meyer and highlighted their and other military successes. These efforts translated into successful influence of the German population.¹⁵¹ This concept of propaganda was effective, and at the beginning of 1943, Joseph Goebbels proclaimed the "Total War," and people cheered about this prospect.¹⁵² Popular support for the German government was crucial while the Allied Forces were attacking and

¹⁴⁵ Lehnhardt, *Die Waffen-SS*, 215, 474.

¹⁴⁶ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 207, 212, 345.

¹⁴⁷ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 345, 432, 446.

¹⁴⁸ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 459–460.

¹⁴⁹ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 457.

¹⁵⁰ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 458.

¹⁵¹ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 326, 544.

¹⁵² Joseph Goebbels, "Der totale Krieg February 18, 1943." YouTube video, 3:06. July 26, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhAbZZ3liUI>. (accessed December 4, 2017).

defeating German military on nearly all fronts und pushing towards the German homeland. For the NS-regime Otto Skorzeny had a strategic impact on popular support for keeping the war ongoing and govern as they did.

B. SS-VOLUNTEERING/WARFIGHTING

An increasing challenge for the Waffen-SS, the *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler experienced difficulty recruiting volunteers until the end of 1942.¹⁵³ The intensity of the war and the heavy losses of SS-members was decreasing the size of its divisions.¹⁵⁴ The SS started to create volunteer-programs to gather enough young men for fighting the war on Germany's side. These advertisements and volunteer recruitment programs were spread all over Europe to create foreign SS-Divisions with "Nordic" looking men fighting for the NS-idea.¹⁵⁵ NS-propaganda supported this volunteer-program by reporting about successful special operations, which seem to be not feasible, but were conducted by German SS-members.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, these SS-men seem to prove the superiority of their units.¹⁵⁷

Moreover, Allied forces were attacking successfully and forcing the German military to retreat on all fronts, and Skorzeny and his missions provided the archetypical valiant German soldier, who never gives up and fights as long as he can.¹⁵⁸ Propaganda reported and used this ethos to influence other soldiers to keep up their morale and push Allied attacks back while defending doggedly German positions.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, Skorzeny's valiant archetype had a strategic impact on the battleground and on German morale.

¹⁵³ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 418–419; Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, 273–277.

¹⁵⁴ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 59; Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, 282–283.

¹⁵⁵ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 289–292; Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, 291–294

¹⁵⁶ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 457–460.

¹⁵⁷ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 108, 113, 319, 335; Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, 54–56.

¹⁵⁸ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 319; Wegner, *Hitlers Politische Soldaten*, 41–44.

¹⁵⁹ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 319.

C. GERMAN POLITICAL AND MILITARY INFLUENCE

This thesis has already painted the *Unternehmen Eiche* and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust strategic environment*. Because German propaganda connected Skorzeny's name to these special missions and their claimed successes, he and these end states had a strategic impact on the political and military environment. Both case studies focus on a crucial period for Germany and its military.

Politically, Skorzeny's special operations served to demonstrate to Germany's allies and regents that the *Führer* Adolph Hitler would go to all lengths necessary to provide military support and conduct rescue and liberation operations, as in the case of Mussolini's rescue. Conversely, in the operation concerning Horthy and his son, this demonstrated that Germany would take the necessary steps to depose any traitors.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, Skorzeny's political strategic value laid in the capability to influence German allies to stay on their side and fight for Germany and thus deter any defection from the alliance.¹⁶¹

The strategic value of Skorzeny for the German military laid in developing a "secure" environment.¹⁶² The German military did not have to fight in a hostile country because (Northern) Italy and Hungary remained German allies. If Italy and Hungary would have changed their side to the Allied forces, Germany's divisions would have been cut off in a then hostile environment, and troops which were fighting with Germany together would have become enemies overnight.¹⁶³ Suddenly the whole tactical, operational, strategic environment for the German military would have changed. By influencing politically (Northern) Italy and Hungary to continue to fight alongside Germany, these governments provided troops, military support, and internal state security for German units.¹⁶⁴ Italy's Fascist Salo Republic fought on Germany's side nearly until

¹⁶⁰ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 458.

¹⁶¹ Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 458.

¹⁶² Whiting, *The Most Dangerous Man*, 25, 46; Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*, 30, 65–66; Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*, 19.

¹⁶³ Whiting, *The Most Dangerous Man*, 25, 46; Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*, 30, 65–66; Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*, 19.

¹⁶⁴ In the case of Italy, for almost two more years.

the end of the war, and Budapest defended itself with German units for nearly six more months and therefore, blocked Red Army troops and provided cover for the withdrawal of German troops.¹⁶⁵

D. INFLUENCING GERMAN ADVERSARIES

Skorzeny at the center of NS propaganda influenced Germany's adversaries in two significant ways. First, it had a psychological impact on the Allies. The recognition of Skorzeny and his special operations proved the existence of German military capability to successfully conduct these types of missions, despite Allied Forces closing in on German forces from all fronts.¹⁶⁶

Second, these missions' psychological influence had tangible impacts on Allied forces. Especially during and after the *Ardennenoffensive*,¹⁶⁷ where Skorzeny conducted a false-flag operation named *Unternehmen Greif* against the United States and during which Skorzeny's men claimed that they assassinated General Eisenhower in order to provoke anxiety in the Allied Headquarters in Paris and tie up U.S. forces with the search for Skorzeny and his men. These psychological operations had positive effects; American troops who protected General Eisenhower became increasingly on edge, and American troops as a whole became agitated when numerous American Prisoners of War were claimed to be Germans or German agents.¹⁶⁸ Therefore, over time Skorzeny's fame and the German capability to conduct special operations like *Unternehmen Eiche* and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* stressed Allied headquarters, which resulted in decisions for stationing troops or using troops in a way, which otherwise would not have happened.¹⁶⁹ Also the conduct of Skorzeny's special operations influenced foundation and

¹⁶⁵ Whiting, *The Most Dangerous Man*, 25, 46, 142–143; Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*, 30, 65–66; Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*, 19, 237–239.

¹⁶⁶ Whiting, *The Most Dangerous Man*, 25, 46; Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*, 30, 65–66; Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*, 19, 237–239; Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 461.

¹⁶⁷ Battle of the Bulge.

¹⁶⁸ Michael Schadewitz, *Zwischen Ritterkreuz und Galgen: Skorzenys Geheimunternehmen Greif in Hitlers Ardennenoffensive 1944/45* (Aachen: Helios, 2007).

¹⁶⁹ Annussek, *Hitler's Raid*, 237–239; Lehnhardt, "Die Inszenierung," 143, 511; Schadewitz, *Geheimunternehmen Greif*.

development of the *Werwolf* organization, which was created in 1944 to fight as a German resistance force even in Allied occupied territory.¹⁷⁰ Although the *Werwolf* operation was exaggerated,¹⁷¹ this fear led the Allies to commit more forces to rear area security than usual.¹⁷²

E. CONCLUSION

The strategic value of Skorzeny for Germany's political and military influence are extant, although this thesis stated in its Chapter "Critiques" that he had a more minor involvement in the special operations *Unternehmen Eiche* and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* than he stated in his memoirs.

Through Skorzeny's presence in German propaganda, the strategic influence of his archetype translated to popular support for the war and the NS-regime, the support for recruitment of SS-volunteers, the strategic influential character on Germany's allies and therefore, for Germany's military, and lastly on Germany's adversaries, who were influenced psychologically with tangible impacts. All strategic influence by Skorzeny's special operations had strategic value for the German leadership, politically and militarily.

¹⁷⁰ Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*, 109–111, 117.

¹⁷¹ Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*, 111; Rodney Kennedy-Minott, *The Fortress that Never Was: The Myth of Hitler's Bavarian Stronghold* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

¹⁷² Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler's Commando*, 111.

V. THE REAL CONDUCT

According to the thesis' description of the strategic environment and the critiques about Skorzeny's involvement into the German special operations *Unternehmen Eiche* and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*, this chapter will draw the lines of operation during the German missions. The two case studies will not be described in great detail but these sections will provide a focus on the "real" conduct and the relationship about Skorzeny and his involvement, his commanding position, and the influence and responsibility he had in for these German special operations.¹⁷³

A. CONDUCTING UNTERNEHMEN EICHE

According to the findings of the critical analysis, this section will draw the operation in two segments. The first part will describe the finding of Mussolini and Skorzeny's responsibilities, while the second part will describe the actual tactical liberation of Mussolini at Gran Sasso.

General Student was most likely the tasked officer for liberating Mussolini because of his available paratroopers who had been preparing for the defense of Rome and their experience and capability to conduct such special operations. General Student alone could not locate Mussolini, which led Student to formally request intelligence support. This resulted in Skorzeny and parts of his *z.b.V. Friedenthal* attaching to General Student's command.

Skorzeny's mission was to locate Mussolini, and he worked closely together with *SS-Sturmbannführer* Kappler, who assisted the German embassy in Rome and had contacts to the Italian police and *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Dollmann, who was the liaison officer of the *Reichsicherheitshauptamt (RSHA)* in Rome, who had contacts to the Italian elites. Initially, the German intelligence picture was incomplete, and the Germans

¹⁷³ According to: Student, *Generaloberst Student*, 408–435; Mors, "Befreiung Mussolinis," 64–106; Heinrich Gerlach, "Im Sturzflug," 125–137; López, *Fallschirmjäger*; Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*; Lehmann, *Unternehmen Panzerfaust*; Horthy, *A Life for Hungary*, 213–241; Sakmyster, *Miklós Horthy*, 315–369; Michaelis, *SS-Fallschirmjäger*, 67.

did not know, that Mussolini was imprisoned close to General Kesselring's headquarters and was brought on July 28, 1943 to the island of Ponza, where he stayed until August 7, 1943. On August 8, 1943, Mussolini was brought to the island of La Maddalena, and Skorzeny became informed about this location. After he sent one of his men to the island to confirm Mussolini's imprisonment on the island, Skorzeny himself went to the island and verified the findings. General Student received Skorzeny's confirmation and planned a rescue operation under support of the German Navy. But the Italians had anticipated a German rescue operation and flew Mussolini to an airbase Northwest of Rome on August 28, 1943 and by car on September 1, 1943 to the *Hotel Imperatore* at Gran Sasso to impede the rescue attempt. Before the planned German liberation of Mussolini on La Maddalena was launched by Student, Skorzeny went to the island and heard policemen speaking about Mussolini's relocation.

At that point, German intelligence again lost contact with Mussolini and thus his location. Kappler found a trace within a recorded phone call of the chief of police, which Kappler passed to Student and Skorzeny. Now, three independently and non-coordinated reconnaissance missions were launched. Student sent Lieutenant Leo Krutoff to the *Hotel Imperatore* under the cover of searching for a possible convalescent site for German troops. Kappler sent his deputy *SS-Obersturmführer*, Erich Priebe, and Skorzeny himself with his deputy Radl went on a *Heinkel-III* bomber to take aerial photographs. All aerial reconnaissance missions indicated that Mussolini was imprisoned at the hotel on Gran Sasso.

Ideally, *Unternehmen Eiche* would have directly followed the confirmation of Mussolini's location, but Italian politics prevented the German mission. On September 8, 1943, Allied radios broadcasted the Italian surrender, and Kesselring being the commanding general in Italy directed all available German troops to disarm Italian troops and defeat the Italian resistance. Student's *Fallschirmjäger* and even Skorzeny's men came under Kesselring's order and became part of the Italian overthrow by German troops. On September 11, 1943, Rome was secured and under German control. General Student and his men started to plan for the liberation of Mussolini.

General Student ordered an airborne assault with 12 gliders *DFS-230* under Major Harald Mors' command. Major Harald Mors being the regimental commander planned the operation and gave *Oberleutnant* Georg Freiherr von Berlepsch the task of the assault company landing on Gran Sasso to free Mussolini. Mors himself and the rest of his regiment would secure the base station of Gran Sasso. At that point Skorzeny's task was done and he would not have any further involvement into the mission.

On September 12, 1943, General Student launched *Unternehmen Eiche*. Before it started,¹⁷⁴ Skorzeny asked General Student to participate in the operation, to which Student agreed and confirmed 17 men to join Skorzeny, while von Berlepsch and Mors were informed that Skorzeny would have no competence and his men would support von Berlepsch's company to conduct the mission. Furthermore, Skorzeny brought the Italian Brigadier General Fernando Soleti to the airport and hoped the participating General would prevent the Italian Gran Sasso guards from shooting.

The gliders were hitched and took off ahead of Gran Sasso in an original formation of three glider rows in a time difference of two minutes. They soon broke apart because the leading row took a circling flying maneuver to climb up in height above Gran Sasso while the following two rows stood in direct direction towards Gran Sasso. This maneuver led to Skorzeny's leading flying position.

When the gliders landed around the *Hotel Imperatore* on Gran Sasso, Skorzeny took his men and ran towards the hotel while the *Fallschirmjäger* followed their orders and took position around the hotel securing the possible battlefield until von Berlepsch's glider landed, and he led his company. Von Berlepsch made sure his company had taken its positions and went with some of his men towards the hotel, where Skorzeny already had found Mussolini inside. *Oberleutnant* von Berlepsch reported Major Mors mission accomplished and Mors came up to the *Hotel Imperatore*.

General Student had ordered to exfiltrate Mussolini either on land or by air. Therefore, he had provided two two-seated *FI-156 Fieseler Storch*, which should take Mussolini and Skorzeny to the airport. But one *FI-156* damaged its undercarriage before

¹⁷⁴ This must be September 11, 1943, because Harald Mors knew about it.

it could be used for the exfiltration. Student's personal pilot *Hauptmann* Heinrich Gerlach flew the other *FI-156* and arrived on Gran Sasso and wanted to fly with Mussolini alone to the next airport, but Skorzeny convinced the pilot to exfiltrate with Mussolini on the two-seated light aircraft.

Furthermore, Skorzeny accompanied Mussolini until his arrival in Germany.

B. CONDUCTING UNTERNEHMEN PANZERFAUST

After *Unternehmen Margarethe* and the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, German intelligence picked up on the Hungarian Regent's attempt to contact the Soviet Red Army to negotiate a Hungarian surrender or ceasefire. Adolf Hitler most likely tasked the *Reichsführer SS* Heinrich Himmler to plan and conduct *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* to either press the Hungarian Regent Miklós Horthy to remain a German ally or to resign. Through the chain of command, the Hungarian *Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer* Otto Winkelmann got tasked with this mission and *SS-Obergruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski became the commanding senior officer for this operation, probably because of his experience in defeating the Warsaw uprising in August 1944, and his position of being the head of the German *Bandenbekämpfung*¹⁷⁵ in the Soviet Union. Therefore, the decision to conduct this operation in Budapest would have been in September or early October 1944. Otto Skorzeny must have been informed about the preplanned operation around the same time. His task was most likely to support Winkelmann and von dem Bach-Zelewski in the conduct of this operation because of his lower rank than all other involved military officials and his *SS-Jäger-Bataillon 502*, which did not have enough strength to conduct the operation all alone.

The *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* itself was a mission focused on the attack the Budapest castle hill where Horthy's palace was located and focused on Horthy's capture and imprisonment. Winkelmann and his *SS* policemen trapped the Hungarian Regent's son Niklas Horthy on October 15, 1944, in order to negotiate with members of the Yugoslavian resistance under Tito, while Skorzeny and his men supported the operation.

¹⁷⁵ German warfare against partisans (author).

Skorzeny's task was likely solely to secure Horthy Jr.'s capture and the way to the airport while Winkelmann's men brought Horthy Jr. to an airplane to transport him to Germany.

The German representative Veesenmayer negotiated at 12:00 am with the Hungarian Regent Horthy to either stay on Germany's side during the war or to resign, while Horthy proclaimed a ceasefire via radio. Winkelmann's SS-occupied the radio station and Winkelmann launched *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* to press Horthy to resign.

SS-Obergruppenführer von dem Bach-Zelewski, being militarily responsible for conducting this operation, gave the command to *SS-Standartenführer* Zehender to lead. Under Zehender's command the *22. SS-Freiwilligen-Kavallerie-Division* with attached *Tiger* tanks, the *SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 600*, and Skorzeny's *SS-Jäger-Bataillon 502*. The *SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 600* had to penetrate the *Burgberg* of Horthy's palace through a tunnel, while all other involved German forces were the blocking forces around the castle hill.

Overnight, Veesenmayer and the German diplomat Rudolf Rahn negotiated with Horthy until he agreed to resign and left his palace with Veesenmayer nearly 30 minutes before 06:00 am in the morning of October 16, 1944. Before Horthy left, he ordered his guarding troops not to defend the *Burgberg* to ensure no Hungarian and German deaths. Zehender's troops were not informed about Horthy's resignation and therefore, Skorzeny's men, who were the only involved infantry, stormed the palace at 6:00 am and had minor fights with Hungarian units, who did not receive Horthy's orders.

Simultaneously, as Skorzeny's men stormed the mostly undefended palace, the men of *SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 600* arrived. Together, they occupied and secured the palace.

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VI. CONCLUSION

The intention of this thesis was to describe Otto Skorzeny's real role in the origin, planning, execution, and aftermath of German high-value-target special operations in World War II. Therefore, I concentrated on two case studies, which provided the strategic impact for Germany's war in the south with *Unternehmen Eiche* 1943 in Italy and in the southeast with *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* 1944 in Hungary.

Unternehmen Eiche was to liberate Mussolini and *Unternehmen Panzerfaust* aimed Horthy to resign. Otto Skorzeny presents himself during both operations as being personally tasked by Adolf Hitler and having planned and conducted these operations. Skorzeny claims he had the commanding power over all involved military units and had been responsible overall.¹⁷⁶

The comparison with other witnesses of these case studies showed that Otto Skorzeny was involved into both special operations but with command-responsibility than he claims in his books. In both cases, Skorzeny and his men were attached to a larger military unit and were only partially tasked with independent planning and conducting of missions. Mostly, Skorzeny's task was to provide intelligence and information. The use of infantry and special forces' tactics was not the initial purpose of Skorzeny's units because their task was more agent-like although they likely improved their military skills over time and by participating in special operations. Further academic work should investigate other special operations in which Skorzeny was involved.

Furthermore, the critiques about Skorzeny's narrative have shown that academics and historians should be critical and careful when referencing his work. Otto Skorzeny published his books in the postwar period starting in France and later in Germany. His books did not meet academic standards and were not written as official historical accounts about German special operations during World War II, but rather were written to appear to popular readership and earn money. His narrative must be understood in the

¹⁷⁶ Skorzeny, *Meine Kommandounternehmen*, 145, 234–235, 241–242; Skorzeny, *Geheimkommando Skorzeny*, 136–137; Skorzeny, *Hitler's Commando*, 42, 66–67.

environment of postwar Germany, where the government and people needed stories about the war and the brave, hard, unpolitical, and honorable German soldier, who fought a justified war. War crimes never happen in these stories and the member of the *Waffen-SS* is depicted as a regular soldier of the *Wehrmacht*. Current academic work denies this narrative. Therefore, the reader must understand Skorzeny's books as a mixture of autobiographic and fictional adventure. Nevertheless, there is always some truth in these stories, and Skorzeny created fiction around personal experience, opinion, and the truth in the stories core. Students have to be aware about these tensions and may use Skorzeny's narrative after compared it with current academic works on the topic.

Additionally, the thesis showed the huge influence of National Socialist propaganda on Skorzeny's fame. The National Socialist propaganda as part of the regime had a specific interest in creating heroes like Skorzeny. Even the *SS* itself needed the reporting about men like Skorzeny to overcome its decreasing number of volunteers. Skorzeny's fame results in the production of national socialist propaganda, which reported about the special missions although the real conduct was known. The result of this construct is a recognizable strategic value of Skorzeny himself, which provided as a part of German propaganda popular support for the National Socialist government, overcome of decreasing *SS* members, stabilizing militarily dangerous situations, and fear and biases on the side of the Allied Forces with influences on their decisions.

Further academic work should concentrate on other Skorzeny-conducted special missions to support or discuss the findings of this thesis. Also, German postwar literature or movies provide an interesting research base to help understanding the intentions the authors had and therefore, provide a better use of these products for academia.

APPENDIX. MILITARY RANKS

<u>SS-Rank</u>	<u>Wehrmacht</u>	<u>US-Army</u>
SS-Oberstgruppenführer	Generaloberst	Colonel-General
SS-Obergruppenführer	General	General
SS-Gruppenführer	Generalleutnant	Lieutenant-General
SS-Brigadeführer	Generalmajor	Major-General
SS-Oberführer	-	Brigadier-General
SS-Standartenführer	Oberst	Colonel
SS-Obersturmbannführer	Oberstleutnant	Lieutenant-Colonel
SS-Sturmbannführer	Major	Major
SS-Hauptsturmführer	Hauptmann	Captain
SS-Obersturmführer	Oberleutnant	1st Lieutenant
SS-Untersturmführer	Leutnant	2nd Lieutenant

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