

Toldzgun, New Year's Eve 1942: Finnish Pioneers execute "civilian spies" and prisoners of war

In 1947, the former SS-volunteer [Rottenführer] Paavo Merelä of the Pioneer Platoon, 3rd Company, Finnish SS-Volunteer Battalion was called in for questioning by the Finnish Security Police (ValPo). During the interview, Merelä reported that in December 1942 the Finnish SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl-Erik Ladau had ordered the shooting of seven villagers from Toldzgun [Merelä actually refers throughout to "Tolskum"] and a further five Soviet soldiers who had deserted across the front lines. The execution order was carried out by a squad of Finnish Pioneers, in which Merelä himself was a member. According to Merelä's statement, Ladau was the field commander in Toldzgun, a village between Nalchik and Vladikavkaz (formerly Ordzhonikidze) in what is now North Ossetia.¹

The events in Toldzgun are also reported in the diary entries of another member of the Pioneer Platoon, SS-volunteer Jaakko Hintikka. He commented that on 21.-22.12.1942 the village of Toldzgun had been destroyed in the fighting, as "...the war had smashed the buildings and driven the people into the forests, where they lived in hiding until they dared re-enter the surroundings of their homes". In the last days of 1942, Soviet forces counter-attacked vigorously, and one evening the Finns had taken a prisoner of war just ahead of their positions: "Oh, what a miserable creature he was. He certainly cried when he was so well treated", wrote Hintikka in his diary.²

On New Year's Eve 1942, Hintikka added to the diary entry he had made earlier the same day:

"The old year certainly did not end as [peacefully as] I imagined. Some small changes occurred in the very last hours. This was a cruel (*raaka*) end to the year, which I'll certainly remember also without notes. We uncovered five civilian spies and they were finished off. At sunset, they were brought to a hill and shot. There were also a couple of other prisoners. This was a brutal business, as they begged for mercy. But the submachine gun did not recognise anything of that sort. The youngest was 17 years old and the second 20 years; the others older men with beards. The last one to be shot was the youngest. He covered the others first with earth and after that it was his turn. He was certainly a lad with strong nerves, as he saluted before he met his death".³

Hintikka's report confirms Merelä's assertion of the execution of civilians and POWs in Toldzgun, and he states that the killings took place on 31.12.1942. Pekka Ruusukallio's 2007 biography of Karl-Erik Ladau contains no references whatsoever to the events in Toldzgun. In an interview with Ruusukallio, Ladau acknowledged that he had served as the commander of a Finnish Replacement Company in the area of Chikola (Tšikola) and Digora in December 1942, but he said nothing of nearby Toldzgun.⁴ Nevertheless,

Ladau's Finnish military service record card mentions Toldzgun (some ten kilometres west from Chikola) in the list of places where he was in action.⁵

One might have thought that the battles fought in the Chikola – Toldzgun – Digora region around the turn of 1942-1943 would have stayed long in the memory, particularly for Ladau as the acting commanding officer of a Finnish SS-volunteer battalion, for they represented a kind of culmination or high-water mark of the Nazi German Eastern Offensive. In Northern Ossetia, the Red Army managed to win a decisive victory that instigated the withdrawal of German forces – including the Finnish SS-volunteer Battalion. By year's end, the greater part of SS-Division Wiking had already been sent to assist Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus's 6th Army, which was surrounded and trapped outside Stalingrad by the Soviets' Operation Uranus. The Finns had been left to hold up the Red Army attack and to secure the safe withdrawal of the main force of SS-Division Wiking. There is no mention of the Toldzgun executions in the writings of Unto Boman (later Unto Parvilahti), Jukka Tyrkkö, and Mauno Jokipii. Historian André Swanström raised the subject based on the transcript of the 1947 interrogation of SS-volunteer Paavo Merelä.⁶

In October 2019, at the request of the Finnish National Archives, an interview team led by I.V. Boyevaya, Vice-Dean of the History Faculty at the North Ossetian State University in Vladikavkaz, carried out an enquiry into the events in the village of Toldzgun at the end of December 1942. The commission to the History Faculty was formally passed down by the State University's Vice-Rector for External Affairs and Development, Dr. Alan Uadati. The study was based on archive research and an interview with Hadziret Sandirovich Hamitsayev (b. 1924). Prior to undertaking the study, the journalist L.S. Dsoblayeva had written a piece on the subject in *Iraf*, the main newspaper in the Irafsky Raion (administrative district) of North Ossetia. The article appealed for anyone recalling the German occupation in the early 1940s to contact the NOSU team. Hadziret Sandirovich Hamitsayev's father, brother, and uncle were among those executed in Toldzgun. Hamitsayev himself was on military service at the time, according to a certificate from the Military Commissar of the Irafsky and Digorsky districts, and he did not witness the incident. He reported that local police officers in Toldzgun arrested the Hamitsayevs and two other villagers and handed them over to the Germans (i.e. to the Finns, wearing German uniforms).⁷

Before their imminent departure from the village, members of the Pioneer Platoon from the 3rd Company, Finnish SS-Volunteer Battalion were ordered, late in the evening of 31.12.1942, to execute (by submachine gun) five villagers whom Hintikka describes in his diary as "civilian spies". According to death certificates taken from the Irafsky district registers on 13.11.2019 and a list of persons drawn up for a planned memorial/statue proposed in 1989 by the then chairman of the Toldzgun Rural Council H. F. Tagayev, the victims were:

1. Dumbul Ivanovich Gabeyev (b. 1916). Member of the Communist Party and secretary of the party committee in the "Toldza" farm collective.

2. Gubu Buznevich Hortiyev (b. 1902). Member of the Communist Party, farm collective member, brigade leader in the Plevodstvo Brigade (*brigada* – a division within a Soviet collective farm).
3. Danil Orazmagovich Hamitsayev (b. 1890). Communist, active member in the local farm collective.
4. Sandir Orazmagovich Hamitsayev (b. 1888). Took an active part in the post-revolutionary Russian Civil War in the early days of the Soviet Republic.
5. Vladimir (“Plan”) Sandirovich Hamitsayev (b. 1926). Member of the Komsomol (Young Communist League) in the “Toldza” farm collective.

The list of persons also notes that in addition to the named villagers, the German-Fascist troops shot two unknown Red Army members. According to information gleaned at interview, their names were Sergeant Yevgeny Durnev and Private Anatoly Malichenko. The details of the dead individuals match with the description in Jaakko Hintikka’s diary entry. Vladimir “Plan” Hamitsayev was the 17-year-old boy referred to, while Sandir Hamitsayev was presumably his father and Danil Hamitsayev his uncle.⁸

Merelä referred in the 1947 ValPo interrogation to seven villagers and to a further five Red Army deserters. It nevertheless appears that these were one and the same incident, unless of course five other POWs were shot in the village of Toldzgun in addition to the seven persons mentioned above. Hintikka’s account is the most reliable Finnish source, since he has written down his description of the executions in his diary immediately after the action took place. Merelä spoke of the incident only nearly five years after the fact, and at the time of his being questioned he was not enjoying full civil rights (owing to a prior conviction: Finnish penal law previously carried a collateral “loss of civil rights and capacities” element in addition to fines or possible incarceration for offences). As with many veterans, Merelä had been a heavy drinker during the war, and after the war he was traumatised and an alcoholic. On 12.6.1945, he was found guilty of aggravated robbery by the Helsinki District Court, and he was sentenced to four months’ imprisonment. The offence in question involved Merelä, who was drunk at the time, stealing a bottle of spirits and 588 Finnish markka in cash from another man, similarly intoxicated, whom he encountered in a Helsinki park. While still in uniform in 1944, Merelä had twice been detained and confined to barracks for drunkenness.⁹

Merelä is the only source for the involvement of Capt. Karl-Erik Ladau in the executions. Since the Finnish battalion was preparing for withdrawal the very next day, the decision was taken quickly. There were no trials or hearings for those alleged to have been acting on behalf of the enemy. Consequently, we are also unable to judge what sort of acts against the occupying forces the executed villagers and POWs may have been guilty of. One puzzling aspect that stands out particularly is that earlier Finnish memoirs and research papers have been conspicuously silent on the executions in Toldzgun, even though one might assume the

incident to have been widely known among the SS-volunteers, given that the Chikola, Toldzgun, and Digora areas were under the responsibility of the Finnish SS-Volunteer Battalion.

The field commanders of the Finnish SS-Volunteer Battalion nevertheless did have responsibility, based on their position and rank, for giving the order to perform the execution on 31.12.1942 and for seeing it was carried out. Without Hintikka's original diary entry and the transcript of the ValPo interview of Merelä, later generations would probably never have heard about the incident. One of the reasons behind the incomplete picture of Finnish involvement in events such as that in Toldzgun is that Finnish research has thus far been signally lacking in investigations carried out in situ, and equally in the hearing of victims of war. International research in this vein is, by comparison, quite extensive and "mainstream". Another thing that has received little exposure is the post-war research carried out by Soviet instances on war crimes committed by SS-forces. As a consequence, the material stored in the archives of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and former socialist bloc countries will undoubtedly come to revise the picture Finnish researchers and historians have of Finnish SS-volunteers' actions as part of the Nazi German Operation Barbarossa and the associated aspirations to create an ethnically-cleansed New Europe. The targeted enquiry carried out by the National Archives and the North Ossetian State University indicated that local research can help in a significant way to clarify and consolidate the overall picture we have of what happened and who was responsible.

¹ ValPo Archives, Military Organisations, Vol. 46, SS-Men, Ladau, Karl-Erik (Capt.), No. 303, 14.2.1947. The National Archives.

² The Archive of the SS-Investigation, Diary of Jaakko Hintikka 28.-31.12.1942. The National Archives.

³ Ibid. 31.12.1942.

⁴ Ruusukallio 2007, 74.

⁵ Military Service Records: Ladau, Karl-Erik. List of battles and campaigns. The National Archives.

⁶ Parvilahti 1959, 207-213; Tyrkkö 1960, 273-285; Jokipii 1968, 586-590; Swanström 2018, 165-166.

⁷ A written affidavit from A. Tilik, Military Commissar for the Irafsky and Digorsky districts, stating the individual in question had been on military service elsewhere from 22.8.1942–20.9.1943. Interview with Hadziret Hamitsayev in Toldzgun, 2.10.2019. After the war, Hamitsayev had collected material on the events in 1942 and had given a number of interviews.

⁸ The Archive of the SS-Investigation. North Ossetia Enquiry, NOSU Vice-Rector Alan Uadati's report on interviews carried out on 2.10.2019 and other research. Death certificates from Irafsky district registers. The National Archives.

⁹ Helsinki District Court proceedings, 10.0s 308/1945. The National Archives.