

Fatal resistance from German Kriegsmarine soldiers in Norway commemorated

By Dr. Bjørn Tore Rosendahl, Haakon Vinje and Simen Zernichow

Kristiansand Churchyard in Norway is the final resting place of Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger, servicemen in the German Kriegsmarine. They were executed on 20 February 1945 for collaborating with the Norwegian Resistance. On 20 February this year, the people of Norway remember their sacrifice and honour their memory.

More than 80 years after the end of the Second World War, there are still stories about people resisting the Nazi regime that both surprise many and make strong impressions on most people today. The story about Peter Ewinger and Karl Neipl in Kristiansand, Norway, is one such.

Nazi Germany invaded Denmark and Norway in Operation Weserübung 9 April 1940. The fighting in Norway ended two months later. The Allies had withdrawn their forces in Norway, and the Norwegian Government and King Haakon VII fled to Great Britain. From London the Norwegian Government in exile established close cooperation with British authorities to help the Allies winning the war. The large merchant fleet stood out as Norway's most important contribution. The Norwegians in exile and the British also cooperated in organizing resistance in Norway against the German occupation.

Only minor resistance took place against the Nazi regime the first year of the occupation. But when both civil and military resistance in Norway increased, it was countered heavily, most of all through the secret police, the Gestapo. They were present in most major cities in Norway, kept the people under surveillance and aiming to crush all kinds of resistance, both against the Nazification of Norway and the military occupation.

This was also the case in Kristiansand, the fifth largest city in Norway at that time. In January 1942, the German security police (SIPO) and the Gestapo established themselves in the monumental building in peace time used as an archive, with the name *Arkivet*. The wide and brutal use of torture against the prisoners taken into interrogation made *Arkivet* infamous throughout Norway.

Kristiansand is located near the southern tip of Norway, and this made its port of great strategic value. Ship convoys along the coast of Norway or to Denmark, were organized from here. All convoys to Denmark and Germany were given escorts in the port. Hence, Norwegian agents operating for the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) were sent to Kristiansand to gather information about German maritime transport going out of the port. Both the Allies and the Axis nations put a lot of effort during the war to sink as many civilian ships as possible that were carrying goods that might be of value in the war effort. By transmitting detailed and accurate information about convoys leaving Kristiansand, this could then help the British make informed decisions when planning and executing attacks by air or sea.

The German Kriegsmarine was aware of the danger and the need for secrecy regarding their convoys. The Norwegian SIS agent, Oluf Reed-Olsen, established a network of people gathering information about German maritime transport. Sven Jakob Nordahl-Hansen became a central member of this group. His job as a night watchman at the port allowed him intimate knowledge of what ships went in and out of the port. But he did not have enough information about the convoys – when and where they sailed. He needed help from someone inside.

Through his job at the port, Nordahl-Hansen became well acquainted with many of the German servicemen stationed there. Two of these were Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger. They were like Nordahl-Hansen, in their early twenties. *Gefreiter* Karl Neipl was Austrian, born in Wien. *Maschinegefreiter* Peter Ewinger was German and came from Niederzier in Nordrhein-Westfalen. They must have got very close to Nordahl-Hansen, because they revealed both their opposition to and disgust for the Nazi regime and their plan to escape to Britain in one of the small, fast motorboats that they had access to in the harbor. This was the summer of 1944, when most people understood that the Allies would win the war in the end.

Nordahl-Hansen convinced Neipl and Ewinger that instead of fleeing, they should help him gather information about German activities in the port and the convoys that went out from Kristiansand. They delivered at noon, each time before convoys were planned to go, instructions from the port offices to ships in the port. The two Kriegsmarine soldiers were therefore taught how to open sealed documents without being discovered. They started to feed Nordahl-Hansen and the SIS group a wide range of accurate information such as number of ships, name of ships, size, cargo, port of destination, and details about the convoy escorts. This was transmitted to Britain from secret radio stations in forest areas on the outskirts of Kristiansand.

It made a great impact. Apparently, 183 000 tons of shipping was sunk because of the messages that were sent from these radio stations.

The many sinkings of ships going out from Kristiansand probably made the German authorities suspicious. During the autumn of 1944, the Gestapo managed to dismantle the SIS network. Some agents managed to flee to Sweden, like its leader, Oluf Reed-Olsen. But 20-30 of his local accomplices were exposed and arrested. Nordahl-Hansen also tried to flee to Sweden, but he was arrested in Oslo and brought to Arkivet, the Gestapo headquarters in Kristiansand. Here, he underwent heavy torture.

Since Nordahl-Hansen had been working at the port, the Gestapo deduced that he had been cooperating with German servicemen there. Hence, 12 soldiers were arrested, including Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger. They were also subjected to excessive torture by the Gestapo interrogators at Arkivet. A Norwegian prisoner in a nearby room heard the sound of shattered glass, then screams and shouting. It was Karl Neipl who had jumped out of the window and fell two floors down on the stone slabs on the ground. He broke both his legs in his fall and consequently failed to escape.

Some weeks afterwards, 23 December 1944, there was a German court-martial held in Kristiansand. Among the 12 arrested Germans, six were acquitted. Two were sentenced to *Zuchthaus* in Rendsburg. Luckily, they did not have to spend much time there until the war ended. Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger however were seen as key to the success of the SIS group and received multiple death sentences. 20 February 1945 Neipl and Ewinger were executed at the island Odderøya, only a few hundred meters from where they had been stationed in Kristiansand.

Sven Jakob Nordahl-Hansen was quite sure that he would be sentenced to death as well. But his trial was delayed until May. In the meantime, he was sent to the largest German prison camp in Norway, *Grini Polizeihäftlingslager*. Nordahl-Hansen's trial never came to court, since the war ended at about the same time as it was planned to be held. 8 May 1945 he could go home as a free man, in a free country.

The ultimate sacrifice from Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger made a great impression on Nordahl-Hansen. He also felt some guilt for being the one who had persuaded Neipl and Ewinger to join the extremely dangerous intelligence work, and that they did not receive help to escape after being discovered. This

motivated Nordahl-Hansen to preserve the memory of Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger for the rest of his life.

German war graves in Norway and the commemoration of Neipl and Ewinger

During the occupation of Norway from 1940 to 1945, there were at most 380 000 German soldiers stationed in Norway. 11 500 of them lost their lives and are buried there. The Wehrmacht constructed 17 special military cemeteries for soldiers who had died in sufficiently honourable circumstances, and these were used also for propaganda purposes.

In addition to these special military cemeteries, there were also German war graves in a large number of ordinary churchyards across Norway. These were used for burying soldiers who for various reasons were not deemed worthy enough for burial in the special military cemeteries. This included soldiers who had committed suicide or who had been sentenced to death and executed by the Wehrmacht.

In some churchyards there were also different plots of war graves: the circumstances of the individual soldier's death would determine where he was buried. The circumstances of his death would also determine the type of burial service.

After the end of World War II, the presence of German war graves was controversial. For many people in Norway, they were physical reminders of the occupation and of a dark period in their history. In addition, there were practical challenges in managing a large number of war graves in many different places.

In agreement with German authorities and in partnership with the Volksbund, the German war graves were therefore moved to five separate German war cemeteries in Oslo (Alfaset), Bergen (Solheim), Narvik, Rognan (Botn) and Trondheim (Havstein). The concentration of German war graves was completed in 1960. The day-to-day maintenance of the German war graves in Norway is provided for and carried out by Norwegian authorities, at no cost to the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge or to the German Government. The Norwegian War Graves Service and the Volksbund enjoy a close and long-standing partnership.

When the war graves were moved after the war, no distinctions were made as to the circumstances of the individual soldiers' deaths. The graves of Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger were also due to be moved to the new Alfaset German War Cemetery in Oslo. But this was not to be.

The story of Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger's contributions to the Norwegian Resistance had become part of Kristiansand's history. On the initiative of Sven Jakob Nordahl-Hansen, the former member of the Norwegian Resistance who had cooperated with Neipl and Ewinger, the City of Kristiansand petitioned the Norwegian Government and insisted that their graves should remain in Kristiansand. This way they could keep honouring their memory and their contribution to the Norwegian Resistance. The Norwegian War Graves Service discussed this with the Volksbund, and it was accepted that their graves could remain.

To this day, Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger are resting in Kristiansand Churchyard. They are two of three German war graves in Norway that were not moved to separate German war cemeteries after World War II. A new commemorative marker was installed by their graves in 1995, on the 50th anniversary of their deaths. In 2024 and 2025, their graves were renovated. Their story is also documented and commemorated in the Norwegian Digital Prisoner Archive 1940-45: www.Fanger.no.

On 20 February this year, a special commemorative ceremony is taking place by their graves, followed by a seminar in which their story is told, organised by the ARKIVET Peace and Human Rights Centre and

with contributions and attendance by the German Defence Attaché in Oslo, Bundeswehr representatives, the Royal Norwegian Navy and the Norwegian War Graves Service. The British defense attaché will also attend the event.

The story of Karl Neipl and Peter Ewinger is one of personal convictions and sacrifice. The people of Kristiansand and Norway will not forget them.

Dr. Bjørn Tore Rosendahl is a researcher and leader of the Centre for the History of Seafarers at War at ARKIVET Peace and Human Rights Centre. He holds a PhD in history from the University of Agder.

Haakon Vinje is Head of the Norwegian War Graves Service, a part of the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Equality. He holds a master's degree in comparative politics from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

Simen Zernichow is the leader of "Norwegian Digital Prisoner Archive 1940-45", which is a collaborative undertaking between ARKIVET Peace and Human Rights Centre and The Falstad Centre.