

## DEFEAT

On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1945, Anton Dorfmeister, provincial councillor and leader of the Styrian Homeland Association (ŠDZ) in the Celje district, was severely wounded in a partisan ambush on the Maribor–Celje road. He died the following day in the Celje hospital because of his injuries. His funeral, held on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1945, was one of the last large-scale Nazi manifestations in occupied Celje. The entire Styrian Nazi leadership gathered at the event, including dr. Siegfried Uiberreither, head of the civil administration for Lower Styria, and Franz Steindl, regional leader of the ŠDZ, who himself fell in battle against the Red Army less than two months later. Dorfmeister and Steindl not only headed the local occupation administration and political apparatus, but were also the main architects, enforcers, and embodiments of the violent denationalization process, whose goal was the destruction of Slovenian culture and identity (ethnocide), the complete Germanization of the region and its inhabitants, and the formal annexation of Lower Styria to the Third Reich. Although the Nazi administrative and governing apparatus in Celje continued to function relatively unhindered until the end of the war, their deaths symbolize both the failure of the Nazi denationalization policy and the imminent German defeat and end of the four-year occupation.

The Styrian Homeland Association (ŠDZ) was the central instrument for the denationalization and Germanization of Slovenes. Rooted in Nazi ideology, it intruded into the most intimate spheres of an individual's life, attempting to forcibly impose a new system of values and incorporate them into the German national community. Following thorough racial and political evaluations, most of the Lower Styrian population was admitted into the organization in May 1941 and consequently granted revocable German citizenship. With its numerous offices, the ŠDZ directed and supervised all aspects of life and work – from education, upbringing, sports, and culture to the economy, supply chains, and mass events. It even formed its own armed units. Adult male members of the ŠDZ were particularly incorporated into the Wehrmannschaft, an auxiliary military-security formation that was also used in combat operations against partisans. In this way, the Germans forced Slovenes in occupied Lower Styria into a fratricidal conflict.

On the occupied territory, in violation of international wartime law, the German authorities imposed various laws, decrees, and regulations for an indefinite period, treating the local Slovenian population in a manner akin to German citizens. This included mandatory service in the Reich Labour Service and forced conscription into the German armed forces. Due to intense propaganda and the threat of severe punishment, the mobilization campaign was initially very successful. However, from 1944 onwards, a growing number of conscripts began to desert and join the partisan resistance. In the broader Celje region, approximately 5.000 men were mobilized into the German army; nearly 700 of them lost their lives while serving.

*"The political mood undoubtedly declined after April 1941. This was since enthusiasm, by its very nature, is not a permanent state – and many people had overly idealistic expectations of the Reich. The wartime restrictions in many areas of life naturally contributed to this as well. Overall, however, the decline in morale was caused by the imposition of a new way of life, which forced people to abandon many of their cherished customs and bad habits. It is difficult to quantify public sentiment. Still, to offer some kind of numerical picture, one might say that 1% of the Lower Styrian population is ready and determined to follow the Reich through thick and thin to the very end; perhaps 9% are unconditionally reliable, but not willing to bear the ultimate consequences. On the opposing side, the ratio is likely similar – perhaps 1% are fully committed to going all the way with the enemy under any circumstances, and another 9% would shrink from the final consequences. The remaining 80% constitute a broad mass whose support we must win."*

*(Franz Steindl, Regional Leader of the Styrian Homeland Association, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1942)*

*"Lower Styrians!*

*You are not Slovenes!*

*You are loyal Styrians to your homeland!*

*You are members of the German national community!*

*You must become full-fledged Germans!*

*Break the last barrier!*

*Learn and use the German language!"*

*(Franz Steindl, Regional Leader of the Styrian Homeland Association, in a call to the population of Lower Styria, September 1942)*