

THE TIMES

VE Day anniversary: Calls to dump bust of Rolf Johannesson, the Reich admiral who ordered deaths

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Admiral Rolf Johannesson is recognised as one of the founders of the postwar German navy Share

Seventeen days before the end of the Second World War, Admiral Rolf Johannesson signed the death warrants of five men who had hatched a plot to seize control of the North Sea island of Heligoland and hand it to the British.

Now, as [Germany](#) prepares to mark the end of the conflict in Europe on May 8, pressure is mounting on its navy to remove a bust of him from its officer training college at Murwik and scrap the Rolf Johannesson prize for cadets.

Johannesson was one of the founders of the postwar navy and is credited with calling for an open treatment of its Nazi past. He died in 1989. Critics say that he was not open about his role in the deaths of the men who tried to save Heligoland when the war was clearly lost.

The Nazis had turned the island, a 0.7 square mile red rock with high cliffs 43 miles north of the mainland, into a fortress bristling with anti-aircraft guns and riddled with bunkers and tunnels. It had a submarine base and four thousand men, whose commander had refused British demands to surrender.

A group of plotters set up transmitters to tell British forces of plans to overpower senior officers during lunch and force the garrison to surrender by training artillery guns on the barracks.

The group had, however, been infiltrated by informants. On the morning of April 18 the Gestapo arrested 20 people. A British deadline to raise the white flag by midday that day passed and almost a thousand RAF bombers attacked the island in a raid that killed 128 people. The five ringleaders — Lance Corporal Kurt Pester, Ensign Karl Fnouka, Ensign Martin Wachtel, Georg Braun, a roofer, and Erich Friedrichs, a restaurateur — were taken to mainland Germany and sentenced to death on April 21 for conspiracy to commit mutiny. The sentence, signed by Johannesson, was carried out that day.

Pester's son, Heinz, has asked the defence ministry to stop honouring an admiral who adhered to "blind naval terror justice". Researchers at the German parliament have concluded that his bust should stay in place to reflect that the modern armed forces were built by a "contaminated generation".

This argument lets the navy off the hook, *Die Zeit* commented. "The resistance fighters broke laws to do what is right; Admiral Johannesson did wrong to satisfy the law," it wrote. "How can a man who, instead of confronting this burden, merely preached courage and honesty and failed to live up to his own standards qualify as a role model?"

Hans-Jürgen Kaack, a historian and retired naval officer, said: "The Johannesson bust stands in the great hall where 'role models' usually stand. Johannesson is no role model. He doesn't belong there. There shouldn't be a 'Johannesson prize' any more. He behaved formally correctly at the time but if he had asked his conscience it may have told him, 'You must not confirm these convictions!' I accuse Johannesson of remaining silent about his behaviour in 1945. I call that a moral deficit."

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