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Riga and Remembering

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On March 16, 2010, some 200 former Waffen-SS members marched through the city of Riga, the capital of Latvia, accompanied by at least 1,000 neo-Nazis and other ordinary Latvians. I was part of a tiny crowd of about 40 courageous protesters, including 15-year-old Punk antifascists and 83-year-old anti-Nazi Latvian octogenarians. I never have witnessed such a parade of people. But, in the year 2010, it triggers a how-and-why question—just how and why something like this persists?

In a member state of the European Union (EU), in a democratic entity, Latvia maintains a fascistic and antisemitic culture. Honoring soldiers who fought side by side with the Nazis and their crimes against humanity is proof that little has changed. This event not only denied Holocaust memory but it praised the Latvian Legion—those who took an active part in killing their nation's Jews.



Mainstream Latvia has never had a problem with honoring the Waffen-SS. On the homepage of the Latvian government, one can find the following statement:

The fact that the Latvian Legion fought on the side of the Germans makes it clear that there was collaboration, that there was co-operation with the German occupying powers. The situation emerged largely, however, because of the aggressive and criminal policies of the Soviet Union in the Baltic States in 1940 and 1941 and because of the results and psychological consequences of those policies. Co-operation was also fostered by the fact that Latvians were seeking the restoration of Latvia's independence, which had been lost during the Soviet occupation. Germany was an ally, which was forced upon Latvia. During World War II, no country in the world, even a major power, could freely select its allies on the basis of ideology or morals alone. Otherwise the democratic countries (America, Great Britain) would never have allied themselves with the totalitarian Soviet Union. Immediate interests and their coming together in a specific period of time—that is what determined the formation of coalitions . . .

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This official justification of the Latvian Legion, the Waffen-SS of Latvia, was written by Inesis Feldmanis, Dr.habil.hist, and Kârlis Kangeris, Dr.hist. Both are members of the Latvian state commission of historians. Other examples of those involved in Latvian Legion include:

- Alfred Berzins, minister of propaganda in pre-war Latvia, was accused of killing, torturing, and deporting some 2,000 people. He was called “Obersturmbannführer” and awarded by the Germans.
- Karlis Lobe was the “Standartenführer” in the 19th division of the Latvian Legion and previously a lieutenant colonel in the 19th police battalion, including his responsibility for several “Reinigungsaktionen” (German for the killing, torturing, and deporting of people, mostly Jews and partisans, as in Windau and Goldingen).
- In the mission “Winterzauber” (“winter charm”) in July 1943, after the formation of the Latvian Legion earlier that year, seven Latvian police battalions had been involved in destroying a countryside some 40km wide along the Latvian frontier. Several hundred villages were destroyed, several thousand inhabitants killed.¹ This was a crime of the Latvian Legion itself; finally, the very fact of fighting together with

1. Heinrich Sturm (2001), *Die Lettische Legion—ein Politikum. Zum Inhalt*

- other units for Hitler² and the Germans is a crime!
- Viktor Arajs is the best known Latvian killer and commander during the Shoah. On July 1, 1941, SS-Brigade General Dr. Walter Stahlecker asked Arajs to establish a Latvian “Hilfssicherheitspolizei” (auxiliary police group). Arajs was leading a group of Latvian armed forces who killed, alongside the Germans, 13,000 Jews from the Riga ghetto on December 8, 1941.³ The so-called “Arajs-commando” was officially called “Lettische Hilfspolizei bei der Sicherheitspolizei” of the German “Einsatzgruppe A der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD.”⁴ The commando was known all over Latvia, including their blue autobuses with the drunken killing men inside.⁵ In the summer of 1943 the group—now a battalion—was included in the Latvian Legion.⁶ Arajs was trained in SS training camps in Germany, such as Fürstenberg and Berlin-Charlottenburg.⁷ In November 1944 he became “Sturmbannführer” in the 15th Waffen-SS-Grenadierdivision, after participating in an SS seminar in the “SS-Junkerschule,” Bad Tölz, Bavaria, and was responsible for several killing actions in Jelgava, Daugavpils, Liepaja, and Riga. In 1979, the “Landgericht Hamburg” (the district court of Hamburg) sentenced Arajs to life in prison.

What have the Latvians learned from history and the Shoah?

Apparently not much, when they continue to praise convicted mass murderers like Viktor Arajs. Dr. Efraim Zuroff, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Jerusalem office, traveled to Riga to observe the events of March 16. He reports:

des Diskurses über die lettischen SS- und Polizeiverbände, Berliner Interuniversitäre Arbeitsgruppe “Baltische Staaten,” BIAB-Berichte, Nr. 21: 38-39.

2. Members of the Latvian Legion had to swear an oath on Hitler himself and against the “Bolshevik enemies” of their “homeland.” The German reads: “Ich schwöre bei Gott diesen heiligen Eid, dass ich im Kampf gegen die bolschewistischen Feinde meiner Heimat dem Obersten Befehlshaber der Deutschen Wehrmacht, Adolf Hitler, unbedingten Gehoram leisten und als tapferer Soldat bereit sein will, jederzeit für diesen Eid mein Leben einzusetzen” (Sturm 2001: 45).

3. Cf. Martin Knop (1995), Viktor Arajs—Kollaboration beim Massenmord. In Barbara Danckwortt, Thorsten Querg, and Claudia Schöningh, eds., *Historische Rassismusforschung. Ideologen—Täter—Opfer*. With an introduction by Wolfgang Wippermann (Hamburg: Argument Verlag): 231-245, here 231. Knop deals with sources from the “Zentralen Stelle in Ludwigsburg.” The files concerning Arajs have the number “Aktenzeichen II 207 AR-Z 7/59.” Knop 1995: 231, 2f.

4. Knop 1995: 232.

5. Knop 1995: 238.

6. Knop 1995: 240.

7. Knop 1995: 241.

In reality, Tuesday's ceremony was in certain respects only the tip of a very dangerous iceberg that is attempting to rewrite the history books and create a false symmetry or equalization of Communist and Nazi crimes. And while the march was not organized by the government, it is obvious that there is strong support for its message among Latvian leaders. Thus, for example, yesterday Latvia's foreign minister Maris Riekstins issued an official statement in which he attacked my criticism of the march and attempted to equate the suffering of all the victims of the second world war, as if there was no difference between those supporting Nazism and those opposing it.



To refute these distortions, Boris Shpiegel, a prominent Russian businessman and legislator, founded the World Congress of Russian Jewry (WCRJ) and organized a WCJR conference against antisemitism and the distortion of history. As *The Jerusalem Post* reported:

In response to what it is [being called] “a new historiography” in Eastern Europe that seeks to equate the crimes of Communism and Nazism, the WCRJ, headed and funded by Russian senator and pharmaceuticals tycoon Boris Shpiegel, founded in Riga a new organization called the Anti-Fascist Movement.⁸

8. Haviv Rettig, “Jewish World: Facing the Music?,” *The Jerusalem Post*, May 19, 2010.

Shpiegel (shown below) said this at the conference:

My grandfather was killed fighting the Nazis. My parents were refugees of war. As long as these irreversible processes continue to occur in the world, this will be my calling. This is the work to which the remainder of my life is dedicated, because I am first and foremost a Jew.



For me it was a shocking event to see so many Nazis, SS-men and their friends, including today's youth of a European country like Latvia. Many scholars and activists, particularly in the West, do not take Eastern European antisemitism seriously. Many people even think any kind of anti-Russian government, society, or action is appropriate. It is not. On May 8, 2010, we are celebrating the 65th anniversary of the unconditional surrender of National Socialism. Without the heroic fight of the Red Army, this would not have happened. Bad politics of the Soviet Union, crimes like the occupation of the Baltics, deportations, and political crimes including Soviet anti-Zionism cannot overshadow the fight against Nazi Germany. Current trends in equalizing Hitler and Stalin have been called the "Holocaust Obfuscation Movement" by Brooklyn-born Dovid Katz, professor of Yiddish in Lithuania, who joined me in our anti-fascist protest in Riga. Maybe the honoring of the Waffen-SS is a wake-up for scholars and activists, including those in the United States. Antisemitism exists in several

forms. Anti-Zionist, anti-Israel antisemitism is the most dangerous form today. The Riga experience, however, can tell us that European history has not ended. Nazis are still living and we are now facing the rewriting of textbooks of the Second World War and the Holocaust. This may not happen; it is hoped at least that an international movement will stop the next march of Latvian Waffen-SS members in 2011.

*See page 81 in this issue for Dr. Heni's biography.