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Jewish groups condemn Latvian parade to honour Nazis, warn it could be used for Russian propaganda

The march to honour Latvia's SS Legion has been a controversial annual event, but pandemic health restrictions forced the cancellation of the celebration for the past two years. Latvian TV reported it was back on this year with several hundred people participating in the parade in Riga on Wednesday.

David Pugliese • Ottawa Citizen

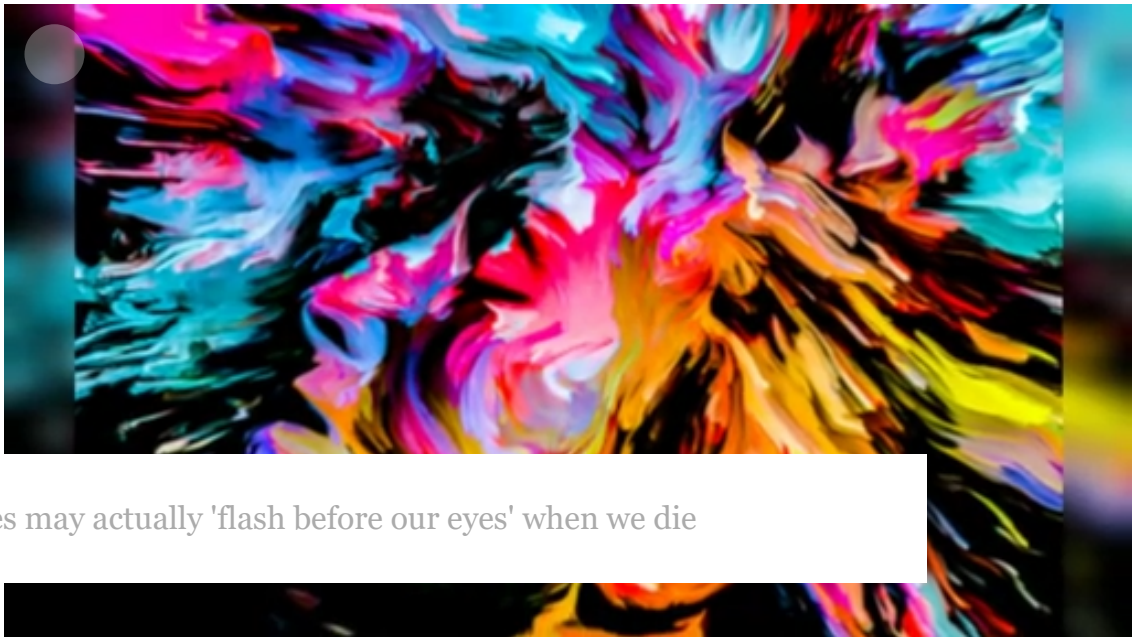
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A veteran of the Latvian Legion, a force that was commanded by the German Nazi Waffen-SS during the Second World War, places flowers at the Monument of Freedom in Riga, Latvia on March 16, 2019. Some see the parade as glorifying Nazism because the Legion, founded in 1943, was commanded by Germany's Waffen-SS, the armed wing of the Nazi party's Schutzstaffel SS. PHOTO BY ILMARS ZNOTINS /AFP/Getty Images

Jewish groups are condemning a parade in Latvia to celebrate members of Adolf Hitler's SS, warning that the continued glorification of Nazis is not only wrong, but could also be used for Russian propaganda.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



Our lives may actually 'flash before our eyes' when we die

The march to honour Latvia's SS Legion has been a controversial annual event, but pandemic health restrictions forced the cancellation of the celebration for the past two years. Latvian TV reported it was back on this year with several hundred people participating in the parade in Riga on Wednesday.

For decades, Jewish groups have condemned the celebration and what they say is Latvia's continued glorification of those who supported Hitler or took part in the Holocaust. There were also concerns

the parade would give Russian leader Vladimir Putin yet another example to drive home his propaganda message that NATO nations and Ukraine are home to Nazis. Putin has already claimed his military needed to invade Ukraine to “de-Nazify” that country.

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Marvin Rotrand, a national director with B’nai Brith Canada, said Latvia continued to ignore calls for the parade to be shut down. “They are honouring a SS unit whose members were involved in atrocities,” Rotrand said. “This year, in particular, there is an amazing lack of understanding of the damage a march like this does to the unity of NATO and the nations standing for democracy.”

Over the years, eastern European nations have erected monuments to nationalistic leaders who fought the Soviet Union during the Second World War, but many of those same leaders were Nazi collaborators and some were active participants in the Holocaust. The Nazis also created SS units drawn from men in Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine and Estonia.

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This photo from the Second World War shows Latvian SS members.

Holocaust scholars and Jewish groups note the easiest way for eastern European governments to undercut Putin's claims that they support Nazism would be to put a halt to such celebrations and to remove monuments to collaborators.

But Latvian officials have doubled down on praise for the SS and argue the members of the legion are heroes who fought the Russians and had nothing to do with the Holocaust.

In 2019, Latvian Defence Minister Artis Pabriks called the SS members "the pride of the Latvian people and of the state." Pabriks also called out those who condemned the parade, adding, "It is our duty to honour these Latvian patriots from the depths of our soul."

Canadian government and military officials refused to condemn Pabriks' statements.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

condemn the parade to commemorate the Latvian SS Brigade held in Latvia on March 16th.

This year, Global Affairs Canada took a less strident approach. It did not mention Nazis, nor specifically denounce the parade. “Canada has consistently supported Latvia’s freedom and independence, and condemns those who would co-opt those sentiments to promote hatred, extremism, and division,” department spokesperson James Emmanuel Wanki noted in an email Thursday. “To our understanding, these events are neither sanctioned nor attended by the Latvian government.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The Canadian Forces has around 540 troops in Latvia as part of a NATO mission. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recently concluded a visit to Latvia and announced a further extension of the mission. His office noted “Canada and Latvia’s relationship is rooted in our shared values.”

The Latvian SS Legion consisted of hard-core Nazi collaborators who had taken part in the Holocaust as well as conscripts. Among the Legion’s officers was Viktors Arājs, the anti-Semite who liked to

as well as conscripts. Among the legion's officers was Viktor Aja, the anti-Semite who liked to refer himself as "Arajs, the Latvian Jew-killer."

Arajs once regaled guests at a dinner party in Riga with his views on the best method to kill Jewish babies, according to the book *The Holocaust in Latvia*. Arajs told his dinner party participants he

would throw the children into the air and then shoot them. That way he avoided ricochets that might happen if he murdered the babies on the ground.

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Latvian TV reported the government had increased the police presence at this year's parade and there were no incidents. Government officials denied a request to allow a counter-protest by those opposed to Nazi glorification.

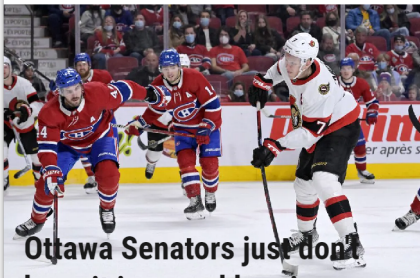
The Latvian government and its supporters allege those denouncing the parade have been duped by "Russian disinformation." The right-wing Macdonald Laurier Institute in Ottawa, which has received funding from the Latvian defence ministry, has also claimed some news articles outlining Latvians' participation in the Holocaust and support for Hitler "essentially parroted the Kremlin's tailored narratives."

But Jewish groups have raised concerns such statements are aimed at whitewashing the Holocaust.

Dovid Katz, editor of *Defending History*, a journal devoted to Holocaust studies and fighting Nazi glorification, said it was "utterly sad" the parade was back on in Riga. "That they would this year again be gifted the historic centre of the capital is a folly rife with poor judgment and even poorer ethics in an act of de-facto state facilitation of a pathetic worship of Hitlerism," he said.



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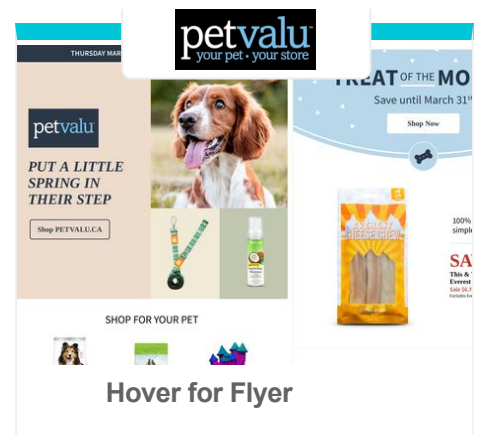
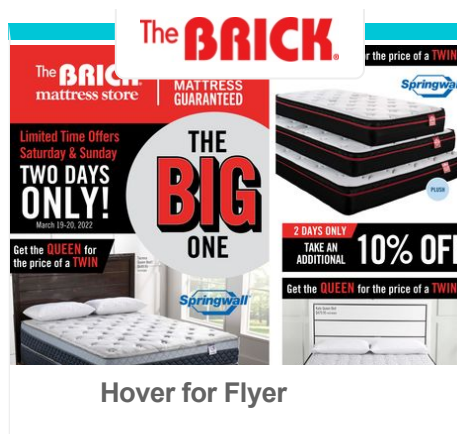
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