

Riga, Viktor Arajs, march 16, the Latvian Legion and the Holocaust

Last Tuesday, March 16, some 200 former Waffen-SS members marched through the city of Riga, the capital of Latvia, accompanied by at least 1000 Neo-Nazis and other ordinary Latvians. I never have seen before in live such a parade of people and their units who had been actively involved in the Shoah.



Why could something like this happen in today's world, 2010? In Europe, in a member state of the European Union (EU), which most people consider to be a democratic entity. Obviously Latvia has an extremely anti-Semitic political culture. Honoring soldiers who fought side by side with Nazi Germany and who committed crimes against humanity is proof of the anti-Semitic atmosphere in the Baltics. Rejecting the remembrance of the Holocaust is an essential part of what scholarship calls "secondary anti-Semitism". This event was even worse, because it rejected remembrance of the Holocaust and even praised members of the Latvian Legion which has been an active part in killing Latvian Jews.



I was part of a tiny crowd of about 40 protesters, including courageous 15 year old Punk-antifascists and 83 year old anti-Nazi Latvians. Mainstream Latvia has no 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.“

(...)

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.“

This is an official justification of the Latvian Legion, the Waffen-SS of Latvia. The document is written by Dr.habil.hist. Inesis Feldmanis and Dr.hist. Kārlis Kangeris, both are members of a state commission of historians of Latvia.

Research however has shown the following examples of people who were involved in the Holocaust and later (in 1943)

participated in the Latvian Legion:

1) Alfred Berzins, minister of propaganda in pre-war Latvia, was accused of killing, torturing and deporting some 2000 people. He was "Obersturmbannführer" and awarded by the Germans.

2) Karlis Lobe, was "Standartenführer" in the 19th division of the Latvian Legion and previously Lieutenant Colonel in the 19th police battalion, including his responsibility for several "Reinigungsaktionen" (German word for killing, torturing and deporting of people, mostly Jews and partisans) like in Windau and Goldingen.



3) In mission "Winterzauber" ("wintercharm") in July 1943, after the formation of the Latvian Legion earlier that year, seven Latvian police battalions had been involved in destroying a countryside of some 40km width alongside the Latvian frontier. Several hundreds of villages have been destroyed, several thousand inhabitants killed.[i] This was a crime of the Latvian Legion itself – Finally: the very fact to fight together with other units for Hitler[ii] and the Germans is a crime!

4) Viktor Arajs is the best known Latvian killer and commander during the Shoah. On July 1, 1941, SS-Brigade General Dr. Walter Stahlecker, asked him to establish a Latvian "Hilfssicherheitspolizei" (Auxiliary police group). Arajs was convicted for a life-long prison sentence from "Landgericht Hamburg" in 1979. Arajs was leading a group of Latvian armed forces who killed alongside with the Germans 13.000 Jews from Riga Ghetto on December 8, 1941.[iii] The so called "Arajs-commando" was officially called "Lettische Hilfspolizei bei der Sicherheitspolizei" of the German "Einsatzgruppe A der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD".[iv] Arajs

was responsible for several killing actions, like in Jelgava, Daugavpils, Liepaja and Riga. The commando was known all over Latvia, including their blue auto-busses with the drunken killing men inside.[v] Arajs was trained in SS-training camps in Germany like in Fürstenberg and Berlin-Charlottenburg[vi], in summer 1943 the group – now as a battalion – was included in the Latvian Legion[vii]. In november 1944 he became “Sturmbannführer” in the 15th Waffen-SS-Grenadierdividision”, after having participated in a seminar of the SS in the “SS-Junkerschule” Bad Tölz, Bavaria.



The Latvian government is praising this Latvian Waffen-SS Legion until today on their homepage. What did they learn from history and the Shoah? To praise convicted mass murderers like Viktor Arajs?

Dr. Efraim Zuroff, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Jerusalem office, was for the first time in Riga to see the event of march 16.



He states:

“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 equalisation of Communist and Nazi crimes. And while the march was not organised 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.”

Finally Boris Shpiegel, who organized with the World Congress of Russian Jewry (WCRJ) a conference against anti-Semitism and distortion of history, took action. The Jerusalem Post reports:

“In response to what it is calling “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.”



Shpiegel says:

“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.”

[i] Heinrich Sturm (2001): Die Lettische Legion – ein Politikum. Zum Inhalt des Diskurses über die lettischen SS- und Polizeiverbände, Berliner Interuniversitäre Arbeitsgruppe „Baltische Staaten“, BIAB-Berichte, Nr. 21, pp. 38-39.

[ii] Members of the Latvian Legion had to swear an oath on Hitler himself and against the “Bolshevik enemies” of their „homeland”, the German reads like this: “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).

[iii] Cf. Martin Knop (1995): Viktor Arajs – Kollaboration beim Massenmord, in: Barbara Danckwortt/Thorsten Querg/Claudia

Schöningh (ed.): Historische Rassismusforschung. Ideologen – Täter – Opfer. With an introduction by Wolfgang Wippermann, Hamburg: Argument Verlag, pp. 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, footnote 2.

[iv] Knop 1995: 232.

[v] Knop 1995: 238.

[vi] Knop 1995: 240.

[vii] Knop 1995: 241.