

An honourable monument to freedom – why the Zedelgem Beehive should stay

An open letter to the Zedelgem Municipality by the “Daugavas Vanagi” organisation, on the 76th anniversary of its founding in the Zedelgem prisoner-of-war camp in December 1945.

The Daugavas Vanagi organisation was founded in Prisoner-of-War Camp 2227 in Zedelgem, with British support, in December 1945. The aim was to represent and provide mutual support to Latvian soldiers and war invalids and their families. I have the honour to be the current chairman of this organisation which, though few of the Legionnaires from Zedelgem are still with us, continues to perform as a charity, recognised in several jurisdictions around the world.

A closed group of experts has made a recommendation to the Municipality of Zedelgem, that the Latvian ‘Beehive for Freedom’ should be removed as being inappropriate. The given reason is that some of the men in that camp may have been involved in war crimes.

The only Latvian from the camp convicted of war crimes in the West that we know of, Viktors Arājs, hid in the camp under a false name and was denounced to British camp guards by his fellow Latvians. There are between 50-70 other men who may have been involved in some way. We, the Latvians, are researching this as a priority. Compared to the 11,727 Latvians in the camp, this is a tiny minority.



Picture 1: The Beehive monument at Zedelgem

This monument is not inappropriate. Far from it. It is hugely appropriate, simply for what it stands for to Latvians ripped from their homes, brutalised, murdered and traumatised by what happened to them and by what they saw and did in war. They found a temporary sanctuary in Zedelgem; a brief resting place to gather their wits and get their breath before starting again. Some soared to great heights. And in the West, these survivors could be free Latvians again. Not so those unfortunates who lived through the half-century of suppression that followed World War II back in our occupied homeland, which had been independent until the dark and dishonourable days of Stalin and Hitler.

Every town deserves a monument to freedom. This particular monument, with its inscription depicting the journey of our diaspora to the corners of the globe and the eventual return home – I embody that journey – is an appropriate and honourable one. It is a fine and inspiring symbol of the link forged between Latvians and the people of Zedelgem by the traumatic and bloody events of the Second World War.

The need for dialogue

What has characterised public discussion of the Beehive so far is the one-sided nature of the discourse. This is deeply regrettable, and I seek to redress the balance in this open letter.

In a recent UK newspaper article, the president of Israel Isaac Herzog wrote of a crisis facing democracies, that “*Extremists shout louder than moderates and fake news travels faster than truth*”.

He stressed the need to restore faith in the benefits of dialogue. It is in this hope of dialogue, and to represent the voices that have not been heard so far, that I write this response.

I am particularly disappointed that the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, which was the partner of the Zedelgem Municipality and raised half the cost of the monument from private donations, was not invited to participate in the expert panel that made its recommendations. The Museum is not only a state-accredited museum, with the duty of impartially documenting the three occupations of Latvia from 1940 to the 1990s – Soviet, Nazi and Soviet re-occupation – but a visit to the museum is part of the diplomatic protocol of Latvia and the museum is visited by many foreign leaders and diplomats on official visits. Only China and Russia have refused to accept the invitation.

Reflexive Control

I am grateful to the United Kingdom's former Secretary of State for Defence Liam Fox, who explained the KGB tactic of 'reflexive control' in a recent article. 'Reflexive control' is a discipline that has been built out of the Soviet concept of "maskirovka", or military deception: "*conveying to a partner or an opponent specially-prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action*". In a modern social interaction this might be called 'gaslighting' – and the approach underpins current Russian hybrid warfare initiatives.

A good recent example of 'reflexive control' is the announcement by President Vladimir Putin on the 9th of December this year that "*genocide*" was taking place in Eastern Ukraine – intended to set the tone for a potential invasion of the Ukraine by Russia. What makes this a staggeringly cynical piece of disinformation, of course, is that the Russian Federation is the successor-state of the Soviet Union which, in the 1930s, did indeed commit genocide in Ukraine. There are countless other examples of this tactic in Russian/Soviet history, whether it is Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov's claim in 1939 that Soviet planes were not bombing Helsinki, but airlifting bread to starving workers, or the cynical "Katyn case" where German soldiers were put on trial at Nuremburg for a major war crime that the whole world already knew had been carried out by the Soviets.

The largely manufactured indignation against the Beehive monument fits well into the 'reflexive control' doctrine. You would think that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Russian Federation would have more important things on its plate than a small monument in a provincial town in Belgium, but it has devoted two press briefings on the subject since the monument was unveiled in 2018. These briefings were followed by letters and articles by groups of people with links to the Russian MFA, followed by campaigns delivered through extremist websites, a series of articles full of historical inaccuracies in various publications and, finally through the panel of experts in November 2021, the smearing with the taint of 'war crimes' of almost 12,000 entirely innocent veterans of the terror and horror of the Eastern Front, drafted against their will to fight for Hitler against an enemy they considered worse. The Western Allies were their salvation. Zedelgem was bitterly cold and conditions were poor – there were 700 invalids among the Latvian inmates and almost 100 Latvians died there – but it was a place of safety and sanctuary.

In my view, the 'Beehive panel' has made recommendations that are regrettable and poorly thought-through. At each step, the Russian Federation's foreign ministry has provided their version of history – their publicity, their agenda – along with the necessary support to allow the dialogue to be controlled to ensure this 'reflexive control'.

I think what is consistent and deeply regrettable in both this situation and previous Soviet attempts to smear their 'enemies' and achieve their political aims are the following:

- 1) The falsification of history to distract from their own crimes;
- 2) The misuse of the Holocaust theme, thus disrespecting both victims and survivors;
- 3) The portrayal of their enemies and victims as savages, and therefore deserving of being invaded and enslaved.

Hence there is a need for a detailed examination of the history of the Latvian Legion and the camp as part of the debate around the Beehive memorial, and my letter stands as a contribution to that.

Latvia as part of the “Bloodlands”

Latvia was part of the killing field between Berlin and Moscow, that is so well described by Timothy Snyder in his book “Bloodlands”. It became part of the bloodlands after the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 (also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact). The pact allowed Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to jointly invade Poland, celebrating their success with a joint victory parade in Brest on the 22nd of September, 1939, murdering some 200,000 Poles, and coordinating suppression through the now-notorious NKVD-Gestapo conferences.



Figure 2: Bloodlands



Figure 3: Soviet and German officials having a friendly conversation in the newly-captured Polish city of Brest.

The Hitler-Stalin pact also gave the Soviets a free hand to invade and occupy Finland, the Baltic States and Bessarabia (now Moldova) in 1939 and 1940. Part of the deal was a commercial pact, the German-Soviet Commercial Agreement, that provided the Nazis with raw materials. So, it is fair to say that the Soviet Union, as a close ally of Hitler, provided the oil and the steel for the tanks that invaded Belgium on 10th May, 1940. Just a few weeks later, in June 1940, the Soviets invaded Latvia and the other Baltic States, with political cover provided by the Nazis.

The dismantlement of the Latvian state, mass murder, torture, deportations to the Gulag, and wholesale oppression were the mark of the Year of Soviet Terror from 1940-1941. The Soviets illegally conscripted the soldiers of the Latvian army into the Red Army, shooting 280 Latvian officers in Katyn-type executions, while sending another 560 to the Gulags, of which less than one in six, 90 men, returned to their families. In the early summer of 1941, the Soviets went on a murderous spree, deporting 14,000 Latvians in one night (destination Siberia) and, as they retreated, shooting political prisoners as they left.

The terror did not end, of course, when the Germans invaded in July 1941.

The German occupation, which followed, brought further horrors: the Holocaust by Bullets, carried out in Latvia between July 1941 and March 1942. According to Andrew Ezergailis, the foremost historian of the Holocaust in Latvia, almost 90,000 Jews were murdered in this period. Some Latvians also participated in the killing, in particular the notorious Arājs commando unit, some 300-1000 men, which was responsible for 26,000 deaths. It makes no difference that this was done under German orders: Latvians did this. The Nazis also introduced forced conscription, built concentration camps, imprisoned, tortured and shot POWs and Latvian opponents to their regime.

As the Soviets returned in 1944, they, again, illegally conscripted Latvia’s young men. Estimates range between 50-100,000 with a very high casualty rate. This too was a war crime. The Red Army did not leave Latvia until the mid-1990s.

The history of the Latvian Legion

After the catastrophic military failure of Stalingrad, the Germans had an urgent need for manpower. The decision to form the Latvian Legion was made in early 1943. The Nazi authorities announced the conscription of all Latvian men of fighting age (born between 1906 and 1928), which was a war crime expressly forbidden by the Hague convention. Conscription took place, starting in Spring of 1943 – over a year after the end of the mass killings of Jews in Latvia. The last wave of conscription, almost all of them teenagers, was in Autumn 1944.

They were swept up and sent to Pomerania, in what is now Poland. Of up to 40,000 men and boys sent there, perhaps half survived and got through to the West. Of those that did, the majority – 11,727 men – found a temporary home in Zedelgem after the carnage, death and trauma of the Eastern Front.

Though it is true that some Latvian young men volunteered in 1941 and 1942 to fight the Red Army, they were motivated to do so by atrocities against loved ones.

Although they took up arms under

German command against the Soviets, with all that involved, they only amounted to some 15-20% of fighting men. These recruits signed up for six or 12-month contracts, which were ignored once the time was up. By the time they were transferred into the Legion 12 to 18 months later, they were no longer volunteers.

The Latvian Legionnaires were under the command of, but not part of the SS. The SS still maintained its racial criteria: non-Germanic units were not considered to be part of it. The difference was semantic, but important: 'SS Divisions' were Germanic, while 'Divisions of the SS' were non-Germanic but with German SS men giving the orders.

One of the two Divisions of the Latvian Legion (the 19th) remained in the 'Courland Pocket' in western Latvia, while the other (the 15th) was sent to Pomerania, supposedly for training. These men ended up being ordered to the front and thrown into the battle against the combat-hardened very well-equipped Red Army in Poland and Eastern Germany, while our men lacked weapons, equipment, training and supplies, exposed to brutal blizzard conditions and vastly out-numbered. I have read the reports, and the battlefields were scenes of utter carnage. Even regimental priests and medical orderlies picked up Panzerfausts and took their places in the trenches. It was that vicious. There was no quarter given, or expected. The Soviets massacred the Latvians they cornered.

Eventually, thanks to cool heads and inspirational command – by Latvian officers such as Colonel Vilis Janums – they negotiated their Dash to Freedom to the West away from a Red Army intent on slaughtering them. Through skilful manoeuvre and by disobeying German orders, some of these soldiers managed to escape the Nazis and surrender to the Western Allies in April and May 1945 at Schwerin in Mecklenburg, Germany, and further south, on the Elbe at Gutergluck.



Picture 4: Latvian Legionnaires in Zedelgem

War Criminals

Convicted war criminal Gottlob Berger, known as the father of the Waffen-SS, was responsible for the creation of the 'foreign' Waffen-SS units, which in Latvia involved forced conscription under threat of a death sentence. He is best known for the cynical quote "*Für jeden Fremdvölkischen, der fällt, weint keine deutsche Mutter*" (For every foreign-born soldier who dies, no German mother weeps).



Picture 5: Adolf Ax

The leadership of the Latvian Divisions was not Latvian. Senior positions were restricted to German party members. These criminals were not interned in Zedelgem and most returned to their homes after the war, living in peace and plenty. They fulfilled to the letter their instructions to place non-Germans in the front line, which led to a horrendous casualty count. Ironically the most notorious of these SS leaders was a Belgian: Adolf Ax, born in Moeskroen and educated in Brussels, who was a member of the SS from virtually the beginning. Ax's enthusiasm for putting Latvians rather than Germans in the line of fire was responsible for the loss of thousands of Latvian lives. He was decorated with the Knight's Cross for his bravery by the Nazis. This medal is stained with Latvian blood.

In battle, the Legionnaires were victims of Soviet war crimes again and again. Those captured by the Red Army, if not murdered on the spot, were sent to Siberia for many years. There are dozens of accounts of the murder of wounded Latvian soldiers and prisoners of war by the Red Army. For example, after the battle of Mozuļa Manor in July 1944, Soviet tanks burst into a field dressing station and simply crushed the Latvians found there under their tracks. The next day after the massacre, aerial reconnaissance identified the bodies of more than 300 men laid out together. Hundreds of Latvian soldiers and RAD (*Reichsarbeitsdienst Labour Force*) students were massacred in organised killing actions by the Soviets in what is now Poland.

After the war, while living in the West, the Legionnaires and especially any who were prominent in exile Latvian organisations were subject to misinformation spread about them by the Soviet Union, willingly spread by their tools and agents in the West. The aim of this was to achieve 'guilt by association' for war crimes carried out by the Nazis in 1941-42, even though the Legion was not formed until 1943 and the bulk of the Zedelgem Legionnaires were conscripted in 1944. This old Khrushchev trick has now been repeated in articles in various publications about Zedelgem, only this time on behalf of Mr. Putin.

The attitude of the Legionnaires to war criminals is best illustrated by their attitude to the bloodstained Viktors Arājs. The despicable crimes of Viktors Arājs have been used to sully the reputation of Latvia and Latvians ever since. Arājs ended the war in Denmark and later hid in the Zedelgem camp under a false name: "Ābele". I am pleased to say that he was identified to the British authorities by Latvian Legionnaires not once, but twice, in two different British-run POW camps, including in Camp 2227 at Zedelgem. That's what most of the Latvians in Zedelgem were like. Arājs was taken away by the British but escaped and evaded justice until 1975.

It's currently estimated that maybe 50-70 of the 11,727 internees in Zedelgem may have been part of the Arājs gang, amounting to maybe **half of one per cent** of the internees. I regret that any members of Arājs's gang may have been among the Legionnaires in Zedelgem, and Latvian



Picture 6: Viktors Arājs in British custody after being identified by Latvian Legionnaires. Picture from British Military Archives.

association with the Nazis and the Holocaust revolts me to the very core of my being. These men, whatever they did (and it isn't clear at this stage how many might have question marks against them, or for what reason) in no way define either the Legion or the inmates of the camp as a whole. I wonder what percentage of Soviet POWs held in camps in Belgium had participated in the illegal invasions of Poland, Finland or the Baltic States or were implicated in NKVD crimes against humanity? One must ask if the Latvians are being held to a different standard here, and why? We must ensure equal treatment at this distance, and guard against hypocrisy.

Monuments

One only has to read the regular press briefings of the Russian foreign ministry over the last few years to realise that they are seemingly obsessed with monuments. Each briefing they give covers some monument



Picture 7: Monument in Riga to the "Liberators" of Soviet Latvia- erected in 1985

somewhere. The people of Latvia, however, have no choice but to be more tolerant and less obsessed.

When Latvia finally regained its independence in August 1991, the Russian/Soviet occupying forces would not leave. They stayed until August 31st, 1994. Russia threatened an economic blockade and refused to leave until the Latvian government had promised that all Soviet monuments would be allowed to stand. There is no better example of the ongoing dead hand of totalitarianism which cannot bear to admit its own crimes. For this reason, there are over 300 Soviet monuments remaining in Latvia, in addition to those in war cemeteries. Each of them glorifies the Soviet occupation and does its best to distract from Soviet terror and Soviet war crimes.



Picture 8: Legionnaire Laimonis Ceriņš at the opening of the Beehive

The Beehive monument, on the other hand, stands only for freedom from tyranny and the wish to return home. These have been universal themes for all conscripted soldiers throughout time but here, within living memory, is a monument to freedom and liberty, to salvation, to a new dawn, to the continuation of the Latvian nation after so much of our blood was spilled by German or Soviet hands. The town of Zedelgem was our gateway to a future life – for the grandchildren and children of the men behind the wire there, so they could live again. I speak for those descendants and the few men left alive today – like Laimonis Ceriņš, a long-serving and much-loved honorary chairman of Daugavas Vanagi, who signed the charter in the huts at Zedelgem and was there again on Belgian soil at the unveiling of the Beehive. There are also those no longer with us, like Imants Balodis, who was conscripted aged 16, found

sanctuary at Zedelgem and lived a fruitful and productive life until his death on 8th December 2021.

They, and now we, kept the Latvian nation together in exile as it was scattered to the corners of the globe. Still the Soviets wouldn't give up trying to blacken our name with their disinformation, lies and distortions. Here they are again. Please do not let the distraction tactics and gaslighting of modern Russia distract us from what this monument means to we Latvians. Zedelgem meant hope for Latvians: survival, a fresh start, a new beginning. It meant freedom from the totalitarianism, brutality and deportation suffered by so many of our fellow Latvians at home, from whom we were separated during the Soviet times.

Now is a time for inclusion, for understanding and for looking forward, not back: standing together against fake news and lies. Let Latvian and Belgian alike join together in friendship and gratitude for what Zedelgem meant to us, and let us not allow the possible stains of a tiny minority of the total camp population overshadow what this monument means. Arajs's actions were disgusting and abhorrent. I have no hesitation in condemning him and his gang and wishing they were NOT Latvian – but they were.



Picture 9: Memorial to the Malgré-nous in Mulhouse

All these themes have been just as important to other illegally-conscripted soldiers in the Second World War, such as the “*Malgré-nous*”, the 130,000 illegally-conscripted French young men from Alsace and Moselle. Like the Latvians, the *Malgré-nous* had to wear German uniforms, suffered a high casualty rate and, if captured by the Soviets, spent as long as ten years in Soviet concentration camps. In 2010, the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, declared that “*the Malgré-nous were not traitors*” but were “*victims of Nazism...victims of a true war crime*”. Sarkozy went on to say: “*the tragic destiny of these men is a part of our national history, of our collective memory, and their pain deserves understanding and respect*”.

This respect is shown by monuments in France and in Russia. In Mulhouse and Sarreguemines, there are monuments to the *Malgré-nous*. In Schirmeck, not far from Strasbourg, is the Alsace-Moselle Memorial, a museum dedicated in part to telling the story of the illegally-conscripted. In Russia, in the forest of Rada, a memorial to the *Malgré-nous* can also be found ([link to film here](#)). This monument is located by the Tambov concentration camp, where so many *Malgré-nous* POWs were killed through Soviet cruelty and maltreatment.



Picture 10: Memorial to the Malgré-nous in Sarreguemines



Picture 11: Inscription in Mulhouse

There is no reason to treat the Zedelgem monument any differently to the one in Alsace. Neither should the illegally-conscripted Latvian Legionnaires be treated any differently to the illegally-conscripted French soldiers.

Latvia and Belgium

Latvia and Belgium are allies. As allies and in the face of Russia's threat to Europe and to NATO, we should not allow our thinking to be both constrained and guided by Russia's 'reflexive control' doctrine.

To reflect the strong partnership of our countries, and our shared experience of invasion and occupation by monstrous regimes as a result of the Hitler-Stalin pact, the monument should stay, as an honourable symbol of the consequences of dishonourable times. It stands against tyranny, including that of the Nazis.

What does Zedelgem actually represent to these Latvian men and to Latvia in 2022?

This is a significant place for Latvians. It is the place where Latvian men and boys took an oath to form an organisation to take care of their sick, to stay in touch, to keep the Latvian nation and its culture alive during the long decades of exile: to sing its songs, to sing of our love for freedom and liberty – denied for us for so long afterwards by the Soviet occupation. It was a journey around the world for Latvians, some still coming home now, that began in Zedelgem. Zedelgem was the place where we could be Latvians once again after the horrors of totalitarianism: Nazi Germany, Soviet Union; Hitler or Stalin; brothers in evil. And there were many other nations that found a temporary home in Belgium after the war, such as Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Estonians. It is a shared history that needs to be commemorated.

Zedelgem is an important memorial to Latvian soldiers, almost every one of whom was blameless of any crime other than of having been in battle, most against their will. They were wrenched from their homes and separated from their families for the rest of their lives because they couldn't return to their homeland because of the post-war politics. They risked execution by fanatical Nazis fighting a losing battle against a bitter enemy, with these Latvian men pushed into the front line to take the bullets instead of them – which they did in terrifying numbers.

Maybe there were between 50 to 70 Latvians in Zedelgem with involvement in war crimes, ordered of course by Germans. Clearly, more research is needed into what this tiny percentage of the almost 12,000 Latvian prisoners at Zedelgem did, and I will go through the records and research more to establish the facts as we know them and to set the historical record straight.

The Soviet Union and now Russia chose to make a particular enemy of the Latvian Legion. This was not because of a supposed association with war crimes, but simply because the soldiers managed to escape and gave the lie to the Soviet version of history by choosing to continue the fight for an independent Latvia while in exile.

What the Soviets and the Nazis did to Latvians in Pomerania is horrendous, and the men and boys who passed through Zedelgem are symbols of human survival against desperate odds in desperate times. There is still much we don't know about this period, but they are victims as much as their counterparts in Belgium, France and the other occupied countries.

The Beehive monument should stay as a tribute to their suffering, and the suffering of all those caught up in this unspeakable conflict.

Aivars Sinka

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