

Analysis of the Simon Wiesenthal Institute list of alleged war criminals

The Simon Wiesenthal Institute in Los Angeles recently submitted a list of 17 persons it accuses of war crimes to the British government. The Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, judged that evidence against the persons named in the list was insufficient. The Board of Deputies of British Jews has concurred with this view (the Board's executive vice chairman, Eric Moonman has been reported as referring to "the lack of quality evidence": *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 March 1987).

The majority of the media, however, regard the individuals concerned as confirmed war criminals, so eg -

Day to Day, BBC1, 4 March 1987, headlined its item on this issue: *Should they be punished or should they be forgiven and forgotten?*

The Sun, 26 February 1987, wrote: *315,000 killed by 17 Nazis in our midst;*

The London Daily News, 26 February 1987, wrote: *Don't give haven to Hitler's henchmen!*

These headlines demonstrate that the people on the list have already undergone trial and conviction by the media, before any judicial tribunal of any description has as much as examined the evidence against them.

Let us carry out an analysis of the 17 accused by birth, profession and by what is known of them both in the exile communities and in their countries of birth.

Of the 17 accused, six are linked to deeds carried out on Lithuanian territory. Two individuals, both with the surname Krivickas, are now dead. A third person, with the Lithuanian surname Juotas, is unknown in the Lithuanian community in this country. The remaining three have non-Lithuanian surnames and are similarly not known to the Lithuanian community here. As for Mr Antanas Gecas, the 71 year old Lithuanian named under the protection of parliamentary privilege by Mr Greville Janner MP, it is known that he finished the 2nd World War as a member of the British armed forces and his name does not appear in the current Wiesenthal Institute list.

The largest ethnic group on the list is that composed of 11 Latvians. Two of these, both officers (a colonel and a major) in the 2nd World War, are now dead and did not in any case take part in acts against civilians. A third officer (a captain or first lieutenant) who served with the police, is not known to the Latvian community in Great Britain; he is presumably, therefore, dead or has emigrated.

Of the remaining eight, five were civilians during the war and spent the entire war working in civilian occupations (one was an economist in charge of the Department of Finance, one was a diplomat, one a school inspector and journalist, one a civil servant, and another a journalist) and could not possibly, therefore, have taken part in actions against civilians. Neither is there any evidence that they were Nazi sympathisers or anti-semitically inclined.

The remaining three Latvians accused were conscripted, in contravention of international law, into the armed forces, where they served in the 15th division of the Latvian Legion (see note). One of them was called up immediately after the conclusion of his dentistry studies and was detailed to the 15th division as its dentist. He was subsequently promoted to lieutenant; the other two were non-commissioned officers. Their unit - the 15th division - spent the entire war on front line duty. Towards the end of the war, it was stationed in Pomerania and took no part in actions against civilians.

These eight Latvians have one thing in common: they have all been, or still are, in prominent positions in the emigré Latvian community in Great Britain. This is no coincidence: it is precisely because of the leading rôles they have played here that they now find themselves on the list of alleged war criminals.

It was in the 1960s that a KGB front organisation in Riga, the capital of Latvia, "The Latvian Committee for Cultural Relations with Countrymen Abroad", published several propaganda booklets about Latvian refugees in the West with the aim of maligning and discrediting the leaders of the exile Latvian communities and organisations. Three of these same publications are mentioned as documentation in the Wiesenthal Institute list. They are:

Cilvēki bez sirdsapziņas People without a Conscience

Polītiskie bēgļi bez maskām. Political Refugees Unmasked

Kas ir Daugavas Vanagi? Who are the Daugavas Vanagi?

All three titles were published in Latvian but the last also in English translation. They were sent out from Riga to newspapers, organisations and prominent persons in the West.

They were also sent to the Yad Vashem Centre for Holocaust Studies in Jerusalem. There, twenty years later, they were unearthed in 1986 by Ephraim Zuroff, the director of the Jerusalem branch of the Simon Wiesenthal Institute. Using them as his source, it was he who then drew up the list of names now submitted to Western governments in the name of the Simon Wiesenthal Institute in Los Angeles.

Where Mr Zuroff considered the allegations made by these Soviet publications were vague or insufficient, he added epithets himself, such as: "persecuter of civilians", "Nazi propagandist", "SS stormtrooper", "SS war correspondent", "author of anti-Semitic articles", "Gestapo informer" and so on.

The booklets on which Mr Zuroff based the list now in the hands of the British government were prepared on the initiative and under the supervision of a high ranking KGB officer, Imants Lešinskis. Lešinskis was a member of the KGB from 1958 until 1978, when he defected while based in New York as a member of the Soviet delegation to the United Nations. He died in Washington DC on 23 December 1985. Before his death, Imants

Lešinskis testified on oath to the US District Court in Chicago, Illinois, on 9 April 1982 that he had been responsible for production of the above named publications and that they had been written "expressly with the purpose and intention to slander leaders of Latvian organisations in the West" and "the so called documents produced there - to the best of my knowledge- they are falsifications" (Deposition of I Lešinskis, p 27; enclosed herewith).

In his testimony, Lešinskis states that the KGB charged him "to describe them [the leaders of exile organisations etcl as war criminals; that was one lie. Second, to describe the leadership of the emigré organisations as acting under the orders of Western intelligence services." (Lešinskis, op cit, p 54).

Under examination in the Chicago court, Lešinskis revealed the KGB's purpose in seeking to discredit the leaders of the exile organisations. On the judge's question:

When you say 'to describe these emigrés as war criminals' what kind of war criminals?

Lešinskis replied:

"As persons who have committed grave crimes, war crimes and crimes against humanity during World War 2 while being members of the Latvian police, Latvian SD, members of the Latvian SS legion or members of the self defence force in Latvia in the first period of German occupation."

Question: "Were you told why you should accuse these people of being Nazi war criminals?"

Answer: "It was done in order to discredit them in the eyes of the Latvian community abroad, to discredit them also before the Latvian people in Latvia, and as a third objective I was to discredit them in the eyes of public opinion of Western countries, I mean, native opinion,"

Question: "What was the objective of discrediting these emigrés in the eyes of Latvians living in Latvia?"

Answer: "Latvian nationalism is still alive and the activities of Latvian political emigrés abroad is considered a danger to the Soviet occupation régime in Latvia,"

Question: "What was the objective of discrediting emigrés as Nazi war criminals in the eyes of Latvians living abroad?"

Answer: "The objective was to divide the community by discrediting the leaders. It was expected that they would not have any more mass following (sic) "

Question: "And what was the objective of discrediting emigrés as Nazi war criminals in the eyes of Western public opinion?"

Answer: "Latvian organisations in the West are trying to establish contacts with their respective governments to appeal for withdrawal of [the] Soviet occupation army and civilians from Latvia, and it was imperative to discredit them in the eyes of Western public opinion," (Lešinskis, pp 21-22).

By uncritically making use of the material from KGB publications, the Wiesenthal Institute is today, some 20 years later, continuing the work of the KGB in its propaganda war against Latvian organisations in exile. Yet, at the same time, there is not a single Jewish school in the USSR, not a single Jewish theatre, nor newspaper and the right of Jews to emigrate to the West is severely circumscribed. During the period of Latvia's independence (1918 -1940), by contrast, the Jewish minority in Latvia, which, in 1939, numbered 86,422 (or 4.4% of the population) enjoyed privileged minority status. The Latvian state funded 100 Jewish secondary schools and 22 grammar schools and the proportion of Jewish students at the University of Latvia (6.8%) was second only to the Latvians in size. During the entire period of independence, there were no pogroms and no anti-semitism.

Resumé

1. The Wiesenthal Institute's list of 17 alleged Baltic war criminals is based on uncorroborated Soviet sources, viz propaganda booklets published by the KGB.
2. As these publications were written with the purpose of furthering the political aims of the Soviet occupation régime, the accusations made in them are fabricated, exaggerated and unfounded.
3. The list, prepared from 20 year old sources, contains the names of persons some of whom are now dead and some of whom have subsequently changed their countries of residence.
4. A whole four years before the list was drawn up, the man mainly responsible for the preparation of the source material, the former KGB officer, Imants Lešinskis, destroyed its credibility and designated the allegations made in it as falsifications, thereby depriving the Wiesenthal Institute's list of any legal foundation.
5. It is with such an ill prepared and unfounded list that the British government and parliament has been burdened, causing a completely unnecessary waste of taxpayers' money. These unfounded allegations against Baltic exiles in this country have caused anxiety and bitterness in the Baltic community. It has caused the prime minister to become involved; her opinion of the Baltic community in this country can be found in the attached copy letter.
6. It would be most deplorable if the Wiesenthal Institute were to trouble Western governments with further such irresponsibly compiled lists of supposed war criminals; according to press sources, a further 3,000 names are supposed to be in the pipeline.

Note A propos the Latvian Legion, a memorandum dated 15 September 1950 from the US Displaced Persons Commission Headquarters in Frankfurt am Main states: "*The Baltic Waffen SS units (Baltic Legion) are to be considered as separate and distinct in purpose, ideology, activities and qualifications for membership from the German SS, and therefore the Commission holds them not to be a movement hostile to the Government of the US under section 13 of the Displaced Persons Act as amended.*"

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