



A monument to the SS

Zedelgem/Belgium pays tribute to the Latvian legion

Forgetfulness and revisionism are emerging trends not only in the Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine, but also in Western Europe. The municipality of Zedelgem in West Flanders is particularly notable in this area. There, three years ago, it was decided to erect a monument to the glory of the Latvian SS volunteers who had been detained there as prisoners of war in an allied camp.

According to the municipality of Zedelgem, the idea of this monument was also supported by Latvian public authorities who were present at the inauguration. It is therefore a joint project between the municipality of Zedelgem and the Latvian Museum of the Occupation. It was explained at the time to those in charge of the commune that it was a question of honouring in the Latvian Legion Freedom Fighters against Bolshevism, which, in a European spirit, was «well worth a monument». The «Latvian hive» was inaugurated on 23 September 2018, some 3 km from the former detention camp.

It represents a bronze hive, placed on a column of stainless steel, and covered with hundreds of golden bees. The hive is the Nation, such would be the symbolic, the bees its inhabitants: industrious and peaceful as long as they are not threatened. The buzzing of the bees evokes the life of the hive. This is what the Latvian artist Kristaps Gulbis wanted to represent: “freedom in all its aspects”, an eloquent thing for all Europeans with a visual aspect that is unique to Latvia.

The monument and the explanatory plaques ignore the SS symbols, while the prisoners of war of the Latvian legion here interned were all members of the Waffen-SS. Many of them came from auxiliary police battalions that were involved in the massacres of Jews. During the Holocaust, three-quarters of the Latvian Jews were exterminated. The legion, founded in 1943, consisted of the 15th and 19th SS divisions of Grenadiers (1st and 2nd Latvian divisions). This Latvian legion had about 146,000 Latvians who fought in its ranks.

This monument honors and thus rehabilitates de facto collaborators of the Waffen-SS, condemned by the court of Nürnberg as a criminal organization, at the same time where every 16 March is held in Riga a parade in their honour, where the SS veterans are acclaimed. Groups of Latvian neo-Nazis proudly display the symbols of the 15th SS Division take part in these parades. Anti-fascist organizations, Jewish organizations, representatives of the Russian community regularly protest against these parades, officials of the VVN/Bda and the FIR have since been the target of reprisals by the Latvian authorities.

At the end of 2020, the first social media reviews appeared in Belgium, which led to a public debate involving veterans' organizations, "Ami – entends-tu", "The Belgians Remember Them", the "Groupe Mémoire", the Jewish community. In June 2021, Members of Parliament openly expressed their opposition to the monument. Media outlets, especially francophone ones, did not miss the call.

The FIR requires that this monument be removed: first, it honours a military group that deserves no honour. Second, the monument, from an aesthetic and iconographic point of view, is in itself a trivialization of the SS and its members. The only thing that would be acceptable in this place would be a chart recalling the crimes committed by the SS volunteers.

The commune of Zedelgem opposes it on the pretext of «fake news» spread by French-speaking media. It has the support of Flemish nationalists, who do not have a political majority. In this way, it hopes to rehabilitate the Flemish SS units. The Latvian authorities agree that the Wiesenthal Institute is a "holocaust business" and that opponents of the monument are under Russian influence. At the end of the "summer break", the controversy will not fail to swell.