

Workshop Zedelgem, Friday 26 and Saturday 27 November 2021.

The legacy of the British PoW camp on the Vloethemveld site.

On Friday 26 and Saturday 27 November 2021, an international panel of 15 historians with expertise in the history of the Second World War and its heritage met in Zedelgem, Belgium, at the request of the municipality, to provide a recommendation on how to deal with the recent controversy over the monument “The Latvian Beehive”, inaugurated on municipal land in 2018, and the development of the former grounds of a huge PoW camp in which the municipality is a partner. None of the members of the panel has received any form of financial remuneration for their contribution. They have reached their conclusions independently, without interference from the stakeholders in the issues under discussion. The panel is an ad hoc association of experts and in their presentation of the facts and their recommendations listed in this short report represent only themselves, in their capacity as individual researchers and regardless of their institutional affiliation. The recommendations have not been submitted to the municipality of Zedelgem for prior approval.

In 1945 and 1946, the British army set up one of its most important prisoner of war camps in Europe within the municipality of Zedelgem. Remnants of the PoW camp are now part of the Vloethemveld, an ambitious project for the development of a public site of several hundred hectares devoted to the protection of nature and heritage. The municipalities of Zedelgem and Jabbeke, the Flemish landholding company (Vlaamse Landmaatschappij), and the Agency of Nature and Forest (Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos) share the responsibility for the development of the site.

The panel is convinced of the unique potential of the former munitions depot and prisoner of war camp complex as a site of memory of particular significance to the history of Europe and beyond. Tens of thousands of inmates of a dozen of nationalities, who fought under German command, spent weeks or months in Zedelgem. Their trajectories illustrate how the lives of millions of Europeans intertwined in Zedelgem in the wake of the Second World War. Doing justice to this legacy and exposing all its complexities to visitors is a major challenge. The inmates of the PoW camp in Zedelgem were overwhelmingly members of the military formations that lost the war, a criminal war initiated and conducted by Germany including genocide and the mass killing of civilians. Many of the PoWs in these British camps were conscripts, others were volunteers. Many had adhered to Nazi ideology, including some of the non-Germans, and some retained this when in captivity. The prisoner population changed over time and came to include many national groups, some of whom were collected there after the war was over. Some elements of the prisoner population had participated in war crimes and crimes against humanity, but only a tiny proportion of them were ever prosecuted for their crimes. The memory of the camp’s inmates deserves to be recognized, but not honored.

This history of the Zedelgem camp has been largely forgotten, except by one particular group of members of the Latvian SS Legion, who founded their veterans’ association, Daugavas Vanagi, in the camp before being dispersed across the world in what became a Latvian diaspora of those who could never return to their homeland because it had been annexed by the Soviet Union. A part of the Latvian diaspora cultivated the image of the Latvian Legion as a patriotic military unit fighting for national independence against the Soviet Union. The Latvian Legion was composed primarily of conscripts. Unlike all volunteer SS formations, it was not considered as a criminal organization, either by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, or by the United States Displaced Persons Commission. The Legion was created in 1943, once the Holocaust in Latvia and the war of annihilation against civilian populations on the Eastern Front was almost completed and at which point the Wehrmacht and other Axis armed forces were largely in retreat. However, a sizeable part of the recruits of the Legion had

been previously part of Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service of the SS) units and police battalions under the Ordnungspolizei (German Order Police) who committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the killing of tens of thousands Latvian and German Jews in Latvia and civilians in other parts of the occupied Soviet Union.

The meaning of the Latvian Legion is still controversial in Latvia today. The annual commemoration on 16 March has been the scene of confrontations in the streets of Riga since 1991. Government ministers attending the commemoration have been forced to resign. Defining the Legion just as patriotic heroes and martyrs of Soviet annexation is deeply offensive to the descendants of the victims of the crimes committed by its members.

The panel has been asked to provide advice on two distinct issues: on the one hand is the monument “The Latvian Beehive”, inaugurated in September 2018 and co-financed by the municipality of Zedelgem and the Occupation Museum in Riga; on the other hand is the future development of the site of the Vloethemveld in which the municipality of Zedelgem is one of the four stakeholders.

The panel is unanimous that the creation of a monument remembering the Latvian Legion in Zedelgem, on a public square 3 kilometers from the former camp grounds, without involving the other stakeholders of the Vloethemveld project, was inappropriate. A monument of this kind would be controversial in Latvia and can only be a source of confusion and controversy not only in Zedelgem but also internationally. The text of the plaque that accompanied the monument from September 2018 to July 2021 did not do justice to the complex history of the Latvian Legion and was offensive by omission towards the victims of crimes committed by its members, even if most took place before they were formally enrolled the Legion. Its isolated and remote location make it difficult to provide the essential contextualization that any such monument requires. The monument is an ambiguous symbol in the Belgian context. Latvian soldiers who later enrolled the Latvian SS Legion fought alongside Flemish SS formations during the siege of Leningrad. It risks becoming a site of pilgrimage for (inter)national militants and an inspiration for revisionist narratives of the legacy of the SS. The panel understands that this was not the message the municipality wanted to send when creating the monument. Removing the plaque and renaming the square were important first steps, but in the opinion of the panel removing the monument from its current location is the only option to eliminate any of the ambiguities the monument now allows.

Recommendations

“The Latvian Beehive”

The panel recommends the removal of the monument to withdraw it from the public eye. It further recommends a phase of reflection to examine the possibility of a new destination for “The Latvian Beehive”, in respect of its status as a work of art. This reflection should involve all stakeholders and necessary expertise, but extreme care should be taken in coming to any decision.

The panel sees two options:

1. Any new destination must include its positioning in a new context and if there is to be reference to its initial focus then it must provide a full explanation of the complexity of the historical context.
2. Another option could include its redefinition as an aesthetic object if installed in an interior space in a context that gives critical information about its history.

Vloethemveld

Vloethemveld could become an innovative remembrance project of European significance, showing how it is possible to deal with the controversial legacies of the Second World War and the Cold War.

The panel believes that contemporary memorials must do justice to the complexity and ambivalence of Second World War biographies that recent research has highlighted. A great challenge, however, is to implement this in terms of design and to form a multidimensional, yet integrative and balancing narrative which appreciates the different victim experiences under National Socialist and Stalinist rule. Such a memorial site could be an exemplary, innovative project providing a shared approach to the histories and aftermaths of Nazi and Stalinist crimes and their remembrance.

For these purposes, the panel recommends the following actions be taken:

In order to strengthen the transnational potential of the site, the panel recommends the establishment of a research project on the history of the camp complex and its inmates in the context of the Second World War and postwar history. This must include topics like the following:

- the pre- and post-history of the site;
- the role of the camp within the British foreign policy;
- the reconstruction of wartime and postwar individual and collective biographies of inmates;
- everyday life inside the camp, relationships between prisoners, groups of prisoners, personnel and the local community;
- the political instrumentalization of prisoners during the cold war from different sides;
- the emergence of narratives in the post war, cold war and post-cold war period.

Existing sources must be collected and made accessible, and international archival collections which open up new perspectives for research must be identified. For this purpose, the panel recommends the establishment of an international, multidisciplinary advisory board. This body will then assist with the practical development of the memorial site. The panel recommends organizing consultations with existing international memorial sites that deal with controversial histories. Last but not least, the panel stresses the potential of a sustained exchange between the local inhabitants of Zedelgem and the families of former inmates in Latvia, Germany and beyond, in the framework of the Vloethemveld. These could focus on the encounters and shared experiences of war and postwar that link them.

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