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MONUMENT

Cold War flares up in Zedelgem

The controversy surrounding the Zedelgem monument to SS soldiers from Latvia escalates. The West Flemish municipality wants to get rid of it, ministers get involved, historians are threatened.

Marc Reynebeau

Saturday, December 18, 2021 at 3:25 a.m.

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<p>De Bijenkorf in Zedelgem werd mee gefinancierd door het Letse Museum van de Bezetting. Michel Vanneuville </p>

The Bijenkorf in Zedelgem was co-financed by the Latvian Museum of the Occupation. © Michel Vanneuville

A decision has not yet been made, Andris Razans, ambassador of Latvia in Belgium, was told on Tuesday in a video conversation with the municipality of Zedelgem. It was about the Latvian Bijenkorf, a work of art from 2018 that pays tribute in the municipality to Latvian soldiers who were imprisoned in a British prisoner of war camp in Zedelgem after the Second World War. At the end of 2020, international protests arose against that image. Because those Latvians had served in SS uniform on the eastern front, and some of them had previously been involved in the persecution of the Jews in their own country.

The municipality, with professor Pieter Lagrou (ULB) as mediator, asked an international panel of fifteen specialized historians for advice. That came at the end of November: the panel indeed found the tribute inappropriate and hurtful. It advised the municipality to remove the statue and worked out various options for this. On Tuesday, the ambassador was informed that no

choice had yet been made from those options. "We want to take a
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'Removing the Beehive will be interpreted as a very grave insult and humiliation against the Latvian people'

Artis Pabriks

Defense Minister Latvia

Earlier she gave the Brivibaplein, where the statue is and whose name refers to the Latvians, already its old name Perdenbilk back. And she removed a plaque that gave the image a right-wing nationalist interpretation. This vision is in keeping with the specificity of Baltic history, although it is also controversial in Latvia. She does not see the SS as collaborators with Nazism, but as freedom-loving patriots – against the Soviet Union. Latvia, like Estonia and Lithuania, was part of this until 1991.

Al still had one hurdle to overcome: the Latvian Museum of the Occupation. This not only provided the political inspiration for the image, it also paid for it through crowdfunding. And it does not agree with the advice of the panel

(https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211205_98030606)(DS 6 Dec) (https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211205_98030606)

. It even sees "certain parallels" between the advice and the former persecution by the Soviets of those soldiers.

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<p>Artis Pabriks. getty</p>

Artis Pabriks. © getty

'The panel did not take Latvia's vision into account at all', grumbles Solvita Vība, director of the museum. 'Certainly not according to the view of some interest groups,' explains Didzis Berzins, lecturer at the University of Latvia and member of the panel. He thus implicitly refers to the very active union of veterans that still honors the SS every year in a march through the capital Riga. But Vība does not deviate: what Berzins stated in a radio conversation about the advice, she finds 'not only ambiguous and untrue, but also insulting'. She does not even recognize Berzins as a historian, because he teaches in the social sciences faculty, all his Nazi propaganda and the social memory of the Holocaust are specialisms there.

The hand of Moscow

Thus the debate quickly shifted from historiography to politics and ideology. At the end of last week, the Latvian government also intervened. Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkevics and Minister of Defense Artis Pabriks each protested by letter to their Belgian colleagues Sophie Wilmès (MR) and Ludivine Dedonder (PS). According to them, the discussion around the Bienenkoffstiek? never attended over that on the perspective to regard to the Bienenkoffstiek? Shows only understanding and lack of respect for the world of past. Removing the Beehive, Pabriks said, "will be interpreted as a very grave insult and humiliation against the Latvian people." He even

sees the hand of Moscow in it: revanchist Russia that wants to sow divisions within the EU and NATO with issues like these. In a communiqué, Culture Minister Nauris Puntulis said this "is an example of misunderstood political correctness, comparable to many attempts to rewrite history in the half-century before 1991'. The Soviet trauma runs deep.

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On Thursday, Ambassador Razans went to explain the Latvian view of the matter at the Foreign Affairs in Brussels. But Minister Wilmès keeps the boat off: this is a municipal competence.

But in Latvia, the escalation continues. National honor is at stake, emotions are running high, with historical argument giving way to recriminations and threats. Berziņš is the main target of this. As a member of the panel of experts, he would be an agent of that international offensive to damage Latvian nationalism. In terms of political correctness and cancel culture: it was also added within the university that the bill will follow.

Berziņš: 'I think it's better that I keep myself out of publicity for now.'

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