

## EU countries clash over Waffen-SS memorial



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June 2, 2022

### Latvia is outraged by a Belgian municipality's move to dismantle the monument

A Belgian municipality earlier this week dismantled a monument to Latvian Waffen-SS legionnaires, despite the Latvian authorities' outrage over the decision, the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia said on Wednesday.

The monument, which took the form of a traditional Latvian beehive, was installed in September 2018 in Zedelgem, in a joint effort by the local authorities and the museum in Riga. The sculpture commemorated the 12,000 legionnaires who fought for Adolf Hitler against the Red Army during the Second World War.

While Latvia insists they were forced to collaborate with the Germans, many believe the legionnaires did so voluntarily. Some were held at a British prisoner of war camp not far from Zedelgem in the mid-1940s.

In late 2021, following the advice of a groups of historians who found 'The Latvian Beehive for Freedom' to be far too controversial, the municipal authorities said the history behind the sculpture had turned out to be more complex than they thought, so they announced the beginning of a *"reflection process,"* and on May 31, followed the experts' recommendation to remove the sculpture.

Despite Zedelgem Mayor Annick Vermeulen's reassurances that the municipal authorities wanted to deal with the situation *"very carefully,"* the row over the monument led to serious tensions between Latvia and Belgium.

On Wednesday, the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia issued a statement saying the monument was removed despite a letter of protest sent by the museum's chairperson to Zedelgem's mayor. In the letter, Dzintara Bungas called *"for a review of the decision to dismantle the monument following the Russian propaganda's notion of glorifying Nazis and Holocaust criminals."*

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On May 30, the Latvian ambassador, Andris Razans, submitted a diplomatic note to the Belgian Foreign Ministry in protest over the removal.

*"Latvia finds unacceptable the decision announced just now by the Municipality of Zedelgem to remove the monument without coordinating such action with the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia,"* the Foreign Ministry said

The differing views of history have been a source of constant tension between Latvia and Russia. Moscow condemns the annual Remembrance Day of the Latvian Legionnaires, viewing it as glorification of Nazism. Latvia's government considers the period between 1940 (when it became part of the USSR) and 1991 (when the Soviet Union collapsed) the era of 'Russian occupation' – which Russia vehemently denies.

Currently, Latvia's parliament is aiming to pass a law that would require the demolition of all sites and objects "*glorifying the Soviet and Nazi Regime*" within the country.

<https://ift.tt/wu4fIU2> 02, 2022 at 10:08PM

from RT – Daily news

