

Latvia & World War II

Harry C. Merritt, reply by Gordon F. Sander

September 22, 2022 issue

In response to:

Memory Wars in Latvia from the July 21, 2022 issue

To the Editors:

Gordon F. Sander covers the dramatic changes underway in memorializing World War II in Latvia [“Memory Wars in Latvia,” *NYR*, July 21], highlighting important shifts in popular opinion along with some ambiguities and insecurities that will likely remain even once Soviet monuments are removed. However, I believe that Sander omitted two important points on Latvian “memory wars.” One is the tendency to externalize all responsibility for Latvia’s admittedly brutal and bloodstained World War II experience. Another is that while Latvian officials ostensibly condemn the Soviet and German occupations of Latvia in equal measure, there exist parallel memory cultures that seek to rehabilitate and celebrate elements from one or the other occupation.

Though much shorter than the decades-long Soviet occupation, the German occupation of Latvia left behind a legacy that is just as vexing and emotionally charged. This includes Latvian participation in the Holocaust, in which 70,000 Latvian Jews and thousands of German and Austrian Jews deported to the Riga ghetto were murdered, and the service of more than 100,000 Latvians in Nazi German military formations. In particular, the Waffen-SS Latvian Legion has been a focal point for conflict over historical memory. Though distinct in important ways from the Germanic SS, the Latvian Legion was composed of both volunteers and conscripts from Latvia who fought on Germany’s behalf during its war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. While public marking of May 9 as Victory Day was banned this year, March 16 as Remembrance Day of the Latvian Legionnaires was commemorated as usual both in central Riga and at a memorial site at Lestene, in the western Latvian province of Courland.

Members of parliament from the National Alliance—described by Sander as “conservative” rather than as a radical-right populist party, as the political scientist Daunis Auers labels it—have for many years publicly gathered for Latvian Legionnaire Day, including this year. Rihards Kols, whom Sander identified only as “outspoken” rather than acknowledging his membership in the National Alliance, has also been present for such public commemorations in the past. While I agree that the Russian invasion of Ukraine rekindled public debate around the Victory Park Memorial, National Alliance activists—in particular, the filmmaker and MP Edvīns Šnore—have kept up a steady drumbeat for its demolition over the past few years. In short, this sudden policy shift toward removal of Soviet monuments must be placed within a wider setting.

Latvia’s memory wars have also recently extended outside its borders. In 2018 the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia erected a monument to the Latvian Legion in Zedelgem, Belgium, where thousands of legionnaires had been held as prisoners of war by the British army after World War II. An informational plaque for this monument, called the Latvian Beehive for Freedom, proclaimed it to be about “freedom in all its aspects” yet only addressed the personnel of the Legion and their mission in vague and euphemistic terms. As the Zedelgem POW camp incarcerated at least several dozen Holocaust perpetrators from the notorious Arājs Kommando who later served in the Latvian Legion, the monument attracted critical attention locally and internationally, ultimately leading to the creation of a panel of historical experts to assess the monument’s future. (Full disclosure, I was a member.) In December 2021, the panel unanimously recommended the removal of the monument from the public land on which it was situated. (See our conclusions at www.belgiumwwii.be/de/debatten/the-legacy-of-the-british-pow-camp-on-the-vloethemveld-site.html.)

While Latvian prime minister Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš downplayed the significance of removing Soviet monuments in Latvia this spring, several months earlier his ministers of foreign affairs, defense, and culture all loudly denounced the idea of relocating the Latvian Beehive from Zedelgem, baselessly characterizing the conclusions of the panel as having emerged either from “political correctness” or foreign (implicitly, Russian) disinformation.

Despite his nonchalance at the removal of Soviet monuments in Latvia, Gints Apals also deemed the removal of the Zedelgem monument inappropriate on Latvian television; in an open letter, the director of his home institution, the Occupation Museum, characterized the participation of one of the few Latvian scholars brave enough to join the panel as “sad” and suggested that his academic department open an ethics investigation into him.

When the Latvian establishment speaks in unison in support of the removal of Soviet monuments in Latvia yet simultaneously for the preservation of a monument to Latvian Waffen-SS legionnaires on foreign soil, it suggests that the two occupations are not seen as equally condemnable. However, the demons of the German occupation will continue to haunt Latvia even as attempts to exorcise those of the Soviet occupation accelerate.

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Gordon F. Sander replies:

Harry Merritt’s letter makes a number of interesting points, some of which I agree with. However, he misunderstands my objective in writing the article, which was not to compare and contrast the degree to which the Latvian government condemns the Nazi and Soviet occupations or discuss the extent to which it takes responsibility for Latvia’s participation in the Holocaust. It was to describe the various ways the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected Latvia, especially the détente between the ethnic Latvian and Russian communities. The most immediate and portentous result is the rekindled debate over the future of Victory Park and the other Soviet-era war memorials. It is true that Rihards Kols and others have been pushing to remove the Victory Park memorial for a long time. However, it was Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that led the Saeima to vote to remove it and that enflamed the fragile Latvian commonweal.

I agree with Merritt on the subject of the Latvian Legion and his panel’s decision regarding the Belgian memorial. There are blind spots in Latvia’s historical memory, just as there are in those of other former occupied countries, including the Baltic nations, where the process of reckoning with the Holocaust and their citizens’ complicity in it only really began after the restoration of independence thirty years ago. The Latvian Holocaust was horrendous. I have visited the haunted dunes at Šķēde where thousands of Latvian Jews were massacred by the Einsatzgruppen and their Latvian accomplices, as I describe in my most recent book, *Latvia Rising* (2022).

As a Jewish historian who has lived in Latvia for five years, I can say the country, including its government, is doing better in reckoning with its moral and actual responsibility for the Holocaust. The Latvian Legion and the controversy about the Zedelgem monument is an important story, and I appreciate Merritt’s mention of it. But ultimately it is a sidebar to the story I wanted to tell.