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The British and Their Latvian SS Prisoners: Zedelgem 1945–1946

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ABSTRACT

The controversy over the memorial erected by the Belgian municipality of Zedelgem in 2018 to honor the Latvians held as prisoners of the British between 1945 and 1946 has shone a light on the increasing divergence between the Latvian nationalist narrative attached to its 'freedom fighters' and that espoused by the West. The purpose of this article is to examine the background of the Latvians' presence in Belgium in the immediate postwar period, the problems their presence created, how they were treated by their British captors, and how they were ultimately dispersed into civilian life. Far from being the victims of indifference, the Latvians in SS uniforms, as well as their Baltic counterparts, were the beneficiaries of increasing early Cold War animosities and systematically protected by the British from Soviet demands for their repatriation, as this would amount to *de facto* recognition of the Soviet annexation of the Baltic States.

KEYWORDS

Baltic States; SS; Prisoners-of-War; Belgium; Great Britain; postwar period

Introduction

The recent controversy over the memorial for the Latvian 'freedom fighters' held in the British prisoner-of-war camp near Zedelgem, Belgium, between September 1945 and April 1946 is indicative of the disjuncture between Western historiography and the nationalist histories being developed in many Eastern European countries combined with the (revisionist) attempts to recalibrate the judgments made about the defeated in the immediate aftermath of the war. In brief, the local municipal council was persuaded to co-sponsor a memorial specific to the Latvians held in a nearby British camp between September 1945 and April/May 1946. A design competition followed and with financial assistance from the Latvian Museum of Occupation, the winning Bijenkorf (Beehive) monument was unveiled in September 2018 at the newly named Brivibaplein (Freedom Square) with a civic reception and in

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the presence of the Latvian ambassador. The accompanying text on a plaque made great play with the word 'freedom' and highlighted the fate of Latvia under Soviet occupation after 1940 and then the arrival of the Germans in 1941. It also referred to the Latvian men 'recruited' into the German Army to fight against the Soviet Union and their later capture by the British as the war came to an end. While the text could be seen as innocuous, it signally failed to recognize the uncomfortable truth that the majority of these 15,000–16,000 Latvians had been captured wearing SS uniforms as members of the 15th Waffen-Grenadier (1st Latvian) SS Division.

The contentious nature of this memorial was first raised by Wilfred Burie, the President of 'The Belgians Remember Them', a memorial website for Allied airmen who lost their lives in Belgium during the Second World War. Burie was unequivocal in his condemnation, questioning whether 'Belgium, which welcomes international institutions such as the European Community and NATO, [should] be listed as a nation allowing the worship of Nazis?'[1] He went on to describe it as 'an infamy' and 'an insult to all the victims of Nazism'. This theme was picked up by Michel Bouffioux in an extended article in *Paris Match Belgique* in May 2021 where he noted that 'incredible as it may seem, a Belgian municipality has been paying tribute to [the Latvian SS Legionnaires] for more than two years'.[2] Attempts to have the Federal government open an inquiry into the monument were unsuccessful and the objectors drew comparisons with other events in Flanders that had in some way glorified the actions of Belgian collaborators.

While this slow-burning discussion remained purely a Flemish affair, it had few ramifications for the municipal council that had ostensibly failed to see the furor it had created, but this changed when the story was picked up by the world's media and the mayor was contacted for comments, for example, by *The New York Times* and *El Pais*, about Zedelgem honoring former SS men. Only at this point did the council begin to backtrack, removing the contentious memorial plaque in July 2021 and deciding to change the name of the square. In addition, it engaged a commission of international historians to decide on the fate of the memorial itself, and their report, delivered late in 2021, recommended that the memorial itself should be removed, something that was finally carried out on 31 May 2022. While the council hoped that their actions would help to defuse the debate within Belgium, the affair nonetheless highlighted the gulf between the 'Western' version of events and the Latvian narrative attached to its 'freedom fighters'.[3]

[1]Pierre Muller, 'Le Monument de la Liberté à Zedelgem: Une Polémique Historico-Politique', *Bulletin CEGESOMA*, 67 (June 2021), http://www.belgians-remember-them.eu/zedelgem.php [29 April 2022]
[2]Michel Bouffioux, '"Ruche" de Zedelgem. Des SS lettons commémorés en Flandre' *Paris Match Belgique* 20 (2021).
[3]Various Latvian commentators have accused the historians' commission of being both 'clueless' and as 'gaslighting' for Vladimir Putin by defaming the Latvian freedom fighters. Aivars Sinka (Chairman of the Daugavas Vanagi Central Committee), 'An Honourable Monument to Freedom – Why the Zedelgem Beehive Should Stay', 21 December 2021, https://www.latviesi.com/jaunumi/an-honourable-monument-to-freedom-why-the-zedelgem-beehive-should-stay [9 September 2022].

In the Latvian nationalist perspective, evident among exile groups from the end of the war onwards but developed since the country's formal independence in 1991 and given greater impetus since the unsettling Soviet incursions into Ukraine since 2014, the Latvian legionnaires had fought only for the independence of their country against the Soviets and not against the West. They had been conscripted into German SS military formations when the Legion was formed in 1943 and had been exonerated from the blanket postwar condemnation of the SS as a criminal organization by the Nuremberg courts because they were deemed not to have been volunteers.[4]

This interpretation was first voiced by Voldemars Salnais, the former Latvian Minister to Sweden in a report to the U.S. State Department in 1943, where he spoke of the Latvians being betrayed as to the purpose of the Legion's military service, as well as its location and leadership.[5] He also stressed how the lack of volunteers soon led to widespread forcible conscription of eligible males and how they were 'between the devil and the deep blue sea: the Germans mobilize them, the Russians kill and torture them if captured'.[6] This same interpretation has been followed by other authors who stress the patriotic nationalist and anti-Soviet aims of the Latvians and the German coercion involved, but often ignore or downplay the SS connection.[7] This image is only partially sustainable, as elements of the Legion had been made up from existing Latvian formations such as volunteer police battalions and the notorious Arajs Kommando that had been implicated in crimes against Jewish and other civilians, both on Latvian soil and elsewhere, from 1941 onward.[8] Moreover, Valdis Lumans argued that the Lithuanian example

> . . . debunks, or at least partially discredits postwar excuses and justifications for Latvian complicity and collaboration in the German occupation as being unavoidable. Participation in the German armed struggle was more a matter of choice than many postwar Latvian apologists care to admit. The Latvians too could have said no if they had chosen that course.[9]

[4]'Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg', 14 November 1945–1 October 1946, Vol. XXII (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal 1948), p. 516. Record of 30 September 1946.

[5]This interpretation began in a report compiled by Voldemars Salnais, the former Latvian Minister to Sweden, and sent to the US State Department in 1943. It was then published as Alfreds Bilmanis (ed.) *Latvia under German Occupation in 1943* (Washington DC 1943) and reproduced with other documents in Andrew Ezergailis, *Stockholm Documents: The German Occupation of Latvia: What did the Americans know?* (Riga: Historical Institute of Latvia 2002).

[6]Bilmanis, *Latvia*, p. 8.

[7]Jukka Rislakki, *The Case for Latvia: Disinformation Campaigns Against a Small Nation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2006), p. 134 as well as Andrew Ezergailis, *The Latvian Legion: Heroes, Nazis, or Victims?* (Riga: Historical Institute of Latvia, 1997). See also Latvijas Okupacijas muzejs, *Lettland unter sowjetischer und nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft 1940-1991* (Riga, 1998) and Arturs Silgailis, *Latvia Legion* (San Jose CA: Bender 1986). Silgailis had been an officer in the Latvian Legion.

[8]See, Richards Plavnieks. *Nazi Collaborators on Trial during the Cold War: Viktors Arājs and the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

[9]Valdia O. Lumans, *Latvia in World War II* (New York: Fordham University Press 2006), p. 298.

As a result of these critiques, a revised and more nuanced version has suggested that not all the Latvians captured wearing SS uniforms at the end of the war should be condemned as guilty by association.[10]

It has been argued that this nationalist interpretation has been gaining ground, bolstered by the Latvian government's decision in 1998 to affirm 16 March as 'Remembrance Day of the Latvian Soldier'.[11] While this formal recognition was withdrawn in 2000, informal observances continued at the Freedom Monument in Riga on that day and this has created ongoing disquiet both domestically and in the international community.[12] Although not a -national day of remembrance, the gatherings have consistently generated domestic counter-demonstrations and protests from European institutions, citing the unacceptability of commemorating the activities of the SS. Latvia's position within the European Union has necessitated official caution in dealing with an issue that is so potentially divisive. Moreover, there have been recent restatements of the case against the Latvian Legion, for example by Leanid Kazyrytski who has argued that 'the Latvian SS-Legion does in fact possess all the features attributed to a criminal organisation by the Nuremberg Tribunal and that its glorification is a form of glorification of Nazism, which [in turn] poses a threat to compliance with the principles of international law'.[13]

The debates on the culpability of the Latvian Legion for war crimes will doubtless continue, especially on the questions of whether they were volunteers or conscripts and whether all its members were genuinely guilty or guilty only by association.[14] Similarly, the debates raised by the Zedelgem memorial will doubtless continue to have domestic, diplomatic, and international ramifications for the municipality, as well as for regional and national governments.[15] However, the purpose of this article is to inform the background to the debate by examining how and why these 15,000–16,000 Latvians, as well as many other Balts, came to be in Belgium after the war ended and how they were ultimately dispersed. It also seeks to address the claims made by Latvian nationalist commentators of Allied indifference to their fate and accusations of violence carried out against the prisoners while in British captivity.

[10]Edmunds Svencs, 'The Latvian Legion 1943-1945 and its Role in Latvian History' (Leavenworth KS: US Command and General Staff College 2013).

[11]This nomenclature was itself a compromise between the government and the Latvian Nationalists who wanted it named the Remembrance Day of the Latvian Legionnaires, or Legionnaires Day

[12]Leanid Kazyrytski, 'Latvian SS-Legion: Past and Present. Some Issues Regarding the Modern Glorification of Nazism' *Criminal Law Forum* 27 (2016) p. 361. Eva-Clarita Onken, *Revisionismus schon vor de Geschichte: aktuelle Kontroversen in Lettland um die Judenvernichtung und die lettische Kollaboration während der nationalsozialistischen Besatzung* (Köln: Wissenschaft und Politik 1998), pp. 96–8.

[13]Kazyrytski, 'Latvian SS-Legion', p. 361.

[14]For a recent assessment of motivations, see Valdis O. Lumans, 'The Baltic States: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia', in: David Stahel (ed.) *Joining Hitler's Crusade: European Nations and the Invasion of the Soviet Union*, 1941 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018), pp. 243–68.

[15]For a detailed explanation of the domestic debate and its ramifications, see Pieter Lagrou (forthcoming).

I

The Latvians in British captivity in Camp 2227 at Zedelgem are part of a complex narrative on prisoners-of-war that encompasses both the negotiation between the Allies and the Axis as the war came to an end on the one hand, and the increasingly fraught relationship between the Western powers and the Soviet Union on the other. For the British, Commonwealth, and United States governments, the safety and security of their servicemen in German hands was a major domestic issue—made all the more pertinent by their inability to have any real impact on the treatment of their men in Japanese hands.[16] To that end, both London and Washington were keen to ensure that all German soldiers captured by their forces were treated per the terms of the Geneva Convention in the hope that this would continue to be reciprocated by an increasingly desperate regime in Berlin. In some respects, the auguries were not good, as it became clear after the mass breakout from Stalag Luft III that security controls at German prisoner-of-war camps had been taken away from the *Wehrmacht* and handed over to the SS and *Gestapo*.[17] In practice, this meant making appropriate provision for the German forces captured by Eisenhower's 21 Army Group once it broke out from the Normandy beachheads and advanced through northwestern France and into Belgium.

In the initial phases, prisoners were evacuated across the Channel to camps in the United Kingdom and this first alerted the Allies to the fact that not all their captives were Germans, but also included appreciable numbers of other nationalities—some of whom had been in the Red Army but had been 'persuaded' to change sides and incorporated into German formations. The question of the reciprocal return of liberated Allied prisoners of war had first been raised with the Red Army General Staff by the British and American military missions in Moscow in June 1944. Western assumptions had been that the Soviets would also want their citizens, both prisoners of war and forced laborers, to be returned home. Initially, Moscow protested about such stories and accused SHAEF reports of 'defaming' the Soviet people by referring to its citizens being captured in German uniforms, but as the evidence became more compelling and incontrovertible, the Soviets became more concerned about having their errant servicemen returned, insisting that they be segregated from all other nationalities, not subjected to any anti-Soviet propaganda

[16]See, for example, Neville Wylie, *Barbed Wire Diplomacy. Britain, Germany and the Politics of Prisoners of War, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), pp. 122, 183.

[17]David Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich. Germany's Captives 1939-1945* (London: Leo Cooper 1988), p. 149. S. P. Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth. The Real Story of POW Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), pp. 248–9. Wylie, *Barbed Wire*, pp. 176–7.

and treated as civilians because they had been taken to Germany against their will.[18] From the Soviet perspective, this would remove any protections they might have as military prisoners of war and allow Moscow to show it was caring for its displaced citizens while maintaining the fiction that no Soviet citizens had sided with the Germans or taken up arms against the motherland. The concomitant request for a speedy repatriation would also prevent the development of an anti-Soviet movement in the West as had happened in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution.[19]

For its part, the British Foreign Office had already taken a view on Soviet nationals captured wearing German uniforms. A memorandum prepared by its legal department on 24 June 1944 set out the parameters very clearly. It was:

> ... purely a question for the Soviet authorities and does not concern His Majesty's Government. In due course all those with whom the Soviet authorities desire to deal must be handed over to them, and we are not concerned with the fact that they may be shot or otherwise more harshly dealt with than they might be under English law.[20]

This policy was approved by the Cabinet on 17 July, albeit with some dissent, and revisited on 4 September when the decision was confirmed to hand back Soviet citizens held as prisoners, even though it might mean sending some of them to their deaths.

The change in Soviet attitudes fitted well with increasing British worries about the security of their prisoners of war still in German hands. The failure of Operation Market Garden to break the German front along the Rhine in September 1944 made it increasingly likely that the Red Army would liberate most of the Western prisoners held in Germany and there was an increasing fear that Stalin might use them as hostages. This prompted a rapid agreement when Stalin and Churchill met in Moscow in October 1944 to repatriate all each other's citizens liberated by their respective forces, a conference that also included Churchill's infamous percentages deal for spheres of influence in Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe. Despite some dissent from elements within the British government, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden told his counterpart Molotov on 16 October that Britain was ready to send back the first 11,000 Soviet citizens as an act of good faith in the expectation that all British Commonwealth prisoners liberated by the Red Army would also be speedily repatriated by the Soviets. Fears about the fate of British prisoners inside Germany continued to override any concerns about Soviets captured wearing German uniforms. However, from the outset, political considerations made it imperative that ethnic Poles and Balts were to be excluded from this policy, lest their inclusion be interpreted as tacit acceptance of Soviet territorial

[18]Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) Diplomatic Papers, 1944, Europe, Vol.4, p.1241 762.61114/7 Soviet Chargé in Washington to State Department, 13 July 1944. Bob Moore, *Prisoners of War: Europe 1939–1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p.386.
[19]S. M. Plokhy, *Yalta: The Price of Peace*. (New York: Penguin 2010), p. 299. Moore, *Prisoners*, pp. 386–7.
[20]The National Archives, London (TNA) WO32/11137 Memorandum by Patrick Dean (FO), 24 June 1944.

annexations after September 1939. British concerns about their own prisoners were also manifest in the speed with which the process began, with the first two troopships containing captured Soviet citizens departing for Murmansk on 30 October 1944, less than two weeks after the Anglo-Soviet meeting had concluded. In the following months, there were at least six other transports by sea and some additional 'repatriations' that took place through the Middle East.[21]

With U.S. attitudes mirroring those of the British, it was still thought necessary to negotiate a more comprehensive deal with the Soviets and the agreements reached between the 'big three' on the political and economic reorganization of postwar Europe at Yalta also produced a separate 'Agreement Relating to Prisoners of War and Civilians Liberated by Forces Operating Under Soviet Command and Forces Operating under United States of America Command' that was signed on 11 February 1945, the last day of the Conference, and a similar Anglo-Soviet agreement signed on the same day. Its main point was that the respective citizens of the powers would be separated and maintained in camps or points of concentration and then handed over 'without delay'.[22]

These undertakings were already having serious consequences for the large numbers of former Red Army soldiers being taken prisoner by the Allied powers in North-West Europe, but they became even more contentious in the days and weeks after the war in Europe ended when pro-Axis forces such as the Cossacks attempted to flee the retribution of their enemies but were handed over to Soviet forces. Many years later in trying to excuse this policy, Sir John Colville highlighted the imperatives for Churchill, Eden, and the rest of the British Cabinet for what took place in a single sentence:

> A refusal by us to return Russian prisoners or, for that matter, Russian traitors, *would have been matched* [my italics, BM] by a refusal on their part to return British and American prisoners. What, after the long years of captivity, would the British and American public have said to that? [23]

The politicians' fear of the domestic consequences of anything less than a speedy return of Allied prisoners liberated by the Red Army was still palpable and exacerbated in the first months of 1945 by daily questions in the House of Commons and fears that the health of the prisoners, then still in German hands, was deteriorating by the day.[24]

[21] Moore, *Prisoners*, p. 388. Kaarel Piirimäe, *Roosevelt, Churchill and the Baltic Question: Allied Relations during the Second World War* (Basingstoke, Palgrave 2014), p. 146 cites Tolstoy, *Secret Betrayal*, p. 129 on sailors on board *HMT Duchess of Bedford* witnessing a massacre of returned Soviets at Odessa.

[22] Agreement Relating to Prisoners of War and Civilians Liberated by Forces Operating Under Soviet Command and Forces Operating Under United States of America Command, Article 1. See also Arieh Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity. Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press 2005), pp. 274–8.

[23] John Colville, 'The Victims of Yalta: Why Our Hands Were Tied' *The Guardian*, 16 April 1979, p. 7. Colville was Assistant Private Secretary to Churchill, 1940–1 and 1943–5.

[24] Wylie, *Barbed Wire Diplomacy*, p. 252.

Once the war had come to an end, the importance attached by the Allies to getting their prisoners back from the Soviets remained, and there were seven days of negotiations at Halle which agreed on the logistics of reciprocal repatriations and led to an agreement that came into force on 23 May 1945.[25] Later bilateral Soviet agreements were also negotiated with both Belgium and France. This need for specific accords was based on the desire of the signatories to expedite the return of all their prisoners. For the Soviets, this included its soldiers in *Wehrmacht* uniforms, some of whom had been captured by French forces, as well as *Ostarbeiter*, Organisation Todt (OT) workers, and escapees who had joined the French resistance. Similarly, the Provisional French government was keen to get back the many servicemen who had remained as prisoners inside Germany, but also to ensure the safety of the approximately 35,000 'Malgré Nous', men from Alsace and the Moselle region who had been conscripted into the German armed forces after 1940 and who were now reputedly in Soviet camps.[26]

The final German surrender added millions of prisoners to the numbers already held by the Allied powers. This created huge logistical problems for the British and Americans but despite these pressures, the agreement at Halle reinforced British and American insistence that citizens of states annexed by the Soviet Union after September 1939 should not be included in the repatriation programs. The only further diplomatic complication was in dealing with Balts who had opted for German citizenship as *Volksdeutsche* after June 1941, and who, after some internal discussions, were formally designated as Germans and thus excluded from any further protective measures.[27] Having made the decision to shelter the Balts among the prisoners and surrendered enemy personnel (SEP), the question remained as to what was to be done with them in the medium and longer terms. [28]

II

In the late summer of 1945, the British military authorities decided to remove non-German prisoners of war from their zone of occupation and concentrate them elsewhere. The exact rationale is unclear, but it was probably an attempt to distance them as far as possible from Soviet scrutiny and to allay fears created by rumors in the summer of 1945 that the French authorities were

[25]For a detailed assessment of the agreement see, Ulrike Goeken-Haidl,*Der Weg zurück. Die repatriierung sowjetischer Zwangsarbeiter und Kriegsgefangener während und nach dem Zeiten Weltkrieg* (Essen: Klartext 2006), pp. 201–15. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p. 278.
[26]Polian, *Deportiert*, pp. 65–6.
[27]FO371/55974 Circular from PW and DP Division, Control Commission for Germany (British Element), January 1946.
[28]These were enemy forces who surrendered on or after 8 May who were designated by the British as Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEP) and by the Americans as Disarmed Enemy Personnel (DEP) and who were afforded fewer rights than POWs. It was no more than a device created by the Western Powers to limit their responsibilities for feeding and accommodating the masses of enemy soldiers when resources were in such short supply. See Wolff, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, p. 77.

sending their Balt prisoners back to the USSR.[29] This had emerged as a result of contradictory statements from the French government in Paris and those of its representatives in Berlin. From the files, it appears that the confusion rumbled on into the winter months, with the Political Division of the Control Commission for Germany (British Element) CCG(BE) noting in November that:

> The real point is not what the French may or may not think about the Balts who are not in the Baltic States, but what they propose to do in practice about the Balts who are now in Germany. Do they, or do they not, propose to repatriate them against their will? [30]

Such contradictions in policy statements only served to foster fears among the Balts in both the prisoner-of-war camps and the civilian counterparts in Displaced Persons camps that they might still be handed over to the Soviets despite Allied statements to the contrary.

Whatever the underlying reason, in mid-September, large cohorts of prisoners described as Latvians or as Balts were sent to Camp 2227 at Zedelgem, either from cages controlled by the 1st Corps (Westphalia) or 8th Corps (Schleswig-Holstein) in the British Zone of Germany, or from other locations such as Camp 2221 (Heembeek) in Belgium.[31] This camp was one of many enclosures in Belgium and France established by the British and Americans to contain the huge number of prisoners taken as Eisenhower's forces liberated large swathes of North-West Europe.[32] For logistical reasons there had been few initial attempts to differentiate or segregate the captives and these cages often included German and non-German *Wehrmacht*, SS, and police personnel, as well as civilians from Organisation Todt. The first cohorts of prisoners were screened, and then either sent to the United Kingdom as labor, transferred to other jurisdictions, or demobilized. They were replaced by soldiers who had been captured in the last days of the war, or immediately after the surrender – many of them very young men and boys, and a large number over the age of 50, the last conscripts of the Third Reich.[33] Over time, SS men were removed to separate enclosures, but the sheer scale of the captures and the lack of military personnel with appropriate language skills meant that it was impossible to carry out anything more than rudimentary screening. Even in September 1945, there was only one interpreter among the British officers at Camp 2227 and he was almost certainly proficient in German rather than any of the Baltic languages.[34] Indeed, the British establishment within many camps

[29]See TNA FO371/47051 Foreign Office File N9373, 27 July 1945 and TNA FO371/47052 N11846, 3 September 1945.
[30]TNA FO1052/445 CCG(BE) Deputy Director Political Division to Col. R.N. Thicknesse, PW and DP Division, 3 November 1945.
[31]TNA WO171/8327 War Diary Camp 2227, September 1945.
[32]TNA WO229/5 21st Army Group Rear to SHAEF Main G-1 Division, 25 March 1945 gave permissions for protecting power and ICRC visits to this and other British POW camps.
[33]Wolff, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, p. 77. Also included were members of the SS and returnees from the Italian front who had evaded capture but who were subsequently arrested inside the British Zone of Germany.
[34]In this case, Capt. J. G. Simmons (R.A.C). See TNA WO171/10988 Field Return of Officers, June 1946.

was little more than skeletal and consisted of only seven or eight officers and around 120 other ranks, with supplementary guards being provided by newly formed Belgian army units.[35]

The process of corralling the non-German elements of the SS and *Wehrmacht* can also be seen in the concentration of Hungarians and Rumanians at the nearby Camp 2375. The war diaries for camps 2227 and 2375 provide few indications of anything particularly untoward happening in the succeeding 6–8 months, although they are only summaries of events chronicling, for example, arrivals and departures of staff and inmates. One difference between the two camps was that Hungarians were regularly used in working parties outside the camp as part of Operation Barleycorn,[36] and some were transferred to the Belgians for work in the mines. However, there is no indication that the various Baltic nationalities in Camp 2227 were ever used as outside labor.

There is little evidence in the British files about the specific conditions in Camp 2227, but the regular communications between the Latvian Representative (Minister) in London, Charles Zarine (Kārlis Reinholds Zariņš) and the Foreign Office indicate the major issues involved.[37] Soon after the end of the war, Zarine forwarded appeals from Latvians then housed in Germany with a covering letter that summed up their plight:

> I see also from the Latvian text (of a letter he had received) that the refugees are very grateful indeed for the humane treatment they have enjoyed now from the British military authorities, but they are very much perturbed about their immediate future, fearing that they may be delivered to the Soviet Russians, from whom they know what to expect.[38]

His memorandum in late September 1945 restated a series of requests but noted that one had already been met, namely that the Latvians were now separated from German prisoners. There were no complaints about the food being provided, but conditions in Belgium were still regarded as 'hard' and ameliorations such as the provision of paper and pens, as well as access to bibles, religious literature, and Red Cross parcels would go a long way to improving matters.

While these were concerns that the British diplomats and military authorities were prepared to countenance, other matters were more problematic. Zarine repeated a request that had been made while the Latvian Legionaries were still in Germany, namely that they could be allowed to change or dye their *Wehrmacht* or SS uniforms, or at the very least replace the insignia of the 'hated Germans' with Latvian ones.[39] His justification was that said uniforms

[35]TNA FO371/48980 Memorandum: Raising and Recruiting Units the Belgian Units with the Allied Expeditionary Force, 1 December 1944. TNA WO171/10988 War Diary Camp 2227, 7 May 1946 where 54th Coy. Belgian Fusiliers were replaced by 1st Battalion Palestine Regiment.
[36]See TNA WO 205/1042. Operation Barleycorn: use of manpower ex-armed forces, administrative instructions.
[37]Zarine had been Consul-General in London before the Soviet invasion when his government gave him 'extraordinary powers' to safeguard Latvian interests. He remained in post until his death in 1963.
[38]Charles Zarine, Latvian Legation, London to C.F.A. Warner (Foreign Office), 25 May 1945.
[39]TNA FO371/47052 Zarine, Pro Memoria, 26 September 1945.

were old and worn out and that they provoked hostility when the men were outside the camp. His pleas were given the same response as before, namely that the Foreign Office was 'not inclined to recommend that this request be granted'.[40] Likewise, the request for visits from the Latvian representative in Belgium, Dr. Valters, or the Baptist Minister Grikmanis was dismissed as attempts to politicize the prisoners and rejected accordingly. This represented a continuation of the policy elucidated by Christopher Warner of the Foreign Office in the last days of the war:

> The ownership of these Balts is an outstanding issue between the Soviet authorities and ourselves and as soon as they discovered that M.Zarine has been allowed to contact them, we should be accused of facilitating anti-Soviet propaganda among individuals claimed by the Soviet government as Soviet citizens. There is no guarantee that M.Zarine (or his representatives) would not, in fact, talk politics: most probably he would gather fresh stories of Soviet atrocities in Latvia. In any case, the only result of such visits would be to make the Soviet authorities more insistent in their claims for these men to be handed over to them, and more suspicious of our position in the whole matter.[41]

British fears about the possible politicization of the Latvians were matched by their skepticism. The authorities had already been the recipients of earlier appeals along the same lines, including one from the men held in the Börnsen Camp in Germany that expressed their joy and gratitude for their liberation from the Nazi regime and stressed how the Germans had been their traditional enemies but how they had been forced to leave their country by the Soviet-backed 'communistic' regime.[42] This was echoed in a later appeal from Alfreds Valdmanis (then styling himself former Minister of Latvia) directly to Field Marshal Alexander.[43] He claimed categorically that the Latvians were neither SS men nor voluntary German troops and that all carried evidence of their 'unlegal' (sic) mobilization.[44] These somewhat self-serving petitions were all dealt with by the Foreign Office diplomats who continued to monitor the situation but held to the spirit and the letter of what had been decided. Thus, for example, a memorandum from Thomas Brimelow of the Northern Department in October 1945:

> So long as we do nothing which will have to be reversed either because of justified Soviet protests or as a result of the eventual recognition of the Baltic States into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics we ought to do everything possible for the welfare of the Baltic nationals in our zone. We do not want the Balts in our zone to be allowed to become a political entity, but they should be looked after, educated, and trained for useful employment wherever it can be obtained for them.[45]

[40]TNA FO371/47052 Christopher Warner to Lt. Col. Hammer (War Office) 11 October 1945.
[41]TNA FO371/47051 N 3539, C.F.A. Warner memorandum, 28 March 1945.
[42]TNA FO371/47052 'The Petition of the Latvians of the Börnsen Camp to the British administration'.
[43]Valdmanis later made his way to Newfoundland where he became chief economic adviser to the government there but was subsequently undermined by accusations of corruption and of being implicated in the murder of Jews in Latvia.
[44]TNA FO371/47051 Alfreds A Valdmanis to Field Marshal Alexander, 30 August 1945.
[45]FO371/47052 Brimelow to King, October 1945.

The politics surrounding the Latvians (and other Balts) in British hands were also clearly elucidated in a series of memoranda and communications from the Northern Department of the Foreign Office to the Political Division of the British Control Commission for Germany in October 1945. These restated that Balts were not to be regarded as Soviet citizens and thus would only be returned to Soviet hands voluntarily. This also meant that they were not to be regarded as citizens of the 'United Nations' (the alliance that had fought against Nazi Germany) and could, theoretically, be tried for criminal acts in German courts.[46] More favorable treatment for Baltic prisoners-of-war captured in German uniforms was not to be countenanced, as it was 'impossible to distinguish between those who had enlisted voluntarily and those who joined up under duress'.[47] That said, there was some discussion of allowing them access to Red Cross parcels if supplies permitted, but also a desire to prevent them from becoming a 'stateless mass' with common aims and feelings—either in Germany or elsewhere.

To that end, there was to be no question of giving recognition to either the Latvian National Committee or the Latvian Red Cross.[48] One possible solution was to attempt their dispersal into other Western European countries (albeit not as reparations).[49] Moreover, decisions taken elsewhere in the Foreign Office had already determined that in any future discussions about the formal recognition of Soviet control of the Baltic States, 'it has been our intention to make the non-return of Balts in British hands against their will a condition of recognition'.[50] Unbeknownst to the Latvians in Zedelgem, while not prepared to afford them any special consideration, the British authorities were determined to protect them at almost any cost.

Although Camp 2227 was mainly populated by Latvians, there were still many other categories of prisoners held in adjacent camps 2226 and 2229 and the Latvians' worries may have been exacerbated by the fact that camps in Belgium were subject to visits by Soviet military missions, ostensibly to interview any prisoners who claimed Soviet nationality. Such visits supposedly took place under close British supervision, although the linguistic barriers may have limited the effectiveness of any monitoring of the conversations involved. All these visits were noted in the war diaries, as were the transfers into Soviet hands. For example, a visit took place on 10 October 1945, and six days later 175 prisoners were transferred to the 'Russian Military Mission to Belgium', but there was no indication that the Soviets were allowed anywhere near the Latvians.[51] Indeed, it seems that

[46]TNA FO371/47052 Legal Division British Control Commission for Germany to Political Division (CCG) 12 October 1945.
[47]TNA FO371/47052 Thomas Brimelow (FO Northern Division) to King, Political Division CCG, October 1945, paragraph 10.
[48]TNA FO371/47052 Thomas Brimelow (FO Northern Division) to King, Political Division CCG, October 1945, paragraphs 3 and 4.
[49]TNA FO371/47052 Thomas Brimelow (FO Northern Division) to King, Political Division CCG, October 1945, paragraphs 23 and 28.
[50]FO371/47052 Christopher Warner to Sir Orme Sargent, 7 October 1945.
[51]TNA WO171/8327 War Diary Camp 2227, 10 and 16 October 1945.

Zedelgem and other camps nearby were still attempting to sort out the precise status of their inmates. Further visits took place on 28 November and 22 January and a further handover of another 175 prisoners took place on 1 April 1946, but by that time most of the Balts in the camp had already been returned to Germany.[52]

The one notable exception was the case of SS-*Standartenführer* Arvind Kripens, the commander of the 15th Waffen-Grenadier SS Division (1st Latvian) who had surrendered with his unit on 8 May and who ultimately found himself in Zedelgem with many of his former comrades. His case highlights the difficulties that the British authorities had in establishing the military records and trajectories of the millions of prisoners in their camps. Sometime in the autumn of 1945, the Soviet authorities submitted a demand that he be handed over as the commander of an SS unit and 'a furious Nazi'. To that end, a Soviet commission visited Zedelgem on 28 November to arrest him, at which point he attempted to commit suicide and was hospitalized.[53] The subsequent inquiry into these events disclosed that the British military authorities had been unaware that Kripens was a Latvian—and would not have permitted him to be arrested otherwise.[54] However, the Soviets continued to press for him to be handed over, and this became a matter for discussion between the War Office, Foreign Office, and CCG(BE) once he was released from the hospital.

While the Kripens case was ostensibly straightforward insofar as British military intelligence had established his history as a commander within the 15th Latvian SS Division that had fought against Soviet forces on the Eastern Front, there were still unanswered questions as to whether he had been a volunteer or had been automatically incorporated into the *Waffen-SS*. With the Soviets supplying no details of specific crimes, the onus was left on the various British agencies as to how to respond to the continuing Soviet demands that he be handed over. This, in turn, led to a discussion of what 'being a member of the SS' meant and whether this was enough to warrant being labeled a war criminal. This case was cited by David Ceserani in castigating the British for sheltering war criminals after 1945,[55] but the underlying reasons for his retention can be seen in communications between Thomas Brimelow of the Northern Department and the War Office.

> We are anxious that this case be handled with the utmost care, for the Russians have asked for a number of Balts in Germany to be handed over to them, and the Kripens case may be held by the Russians to constitute a precedent. [...] You will see that we are equally concerned to see that justice is meted out to genuine war criminals and also that Balts that we do not consider guilty of war crimes are not handed over to the Russians on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations.[56]

[52]TNA WO171/10988 War Diary Camp 2227, 1 April 1945.
[53]FO1032/2242 War Office to CCG (BE), 12 December 1945.
[54]David Ceserani, *Justice Delayed: How Britain became a refuge for Nazi war criminals* (London: Heinemann 1992), p. 59.
[55]Ceserani, *Justice Delayed*, pp. 46–62.
[56]FO371/55974 Thomas Brimelow (FO) to Lt. Col V.A.R. Isham (WO), 6 February 1946.

> We think that the Russians should now be asked to supply sufficient evidence to satisfy Headquarters BAOR [British Army of the Rhine] that they have a prima facie case against him for committing acts contrary to the laws and usages of war. The Soviet charges against him must tally with what we know of his movements.[57]

From these statements, it appears that the British officials were bending over backward to shelter Kripens, not necessarily because they thought he was entirely innocent, but because handing him over without detailed evidence might presage Soviet demands for all the Balts captured in SS uniforms.[58]

III

One of the specifics of the Latvian nationalist narrative is the mistreatment of the Latvian prisoners by the British during their captivity in Zedelgem. The claims made by the Latvians about British maltreatment need to be carefully evaluated. The accusation that prisoners were used for target practice by their British captors is unsustainable.[59] Men attempting to escape were shot at by the guards and sometimes killed—for example in January 1945—but this was long before the Latvians arrived, and such occurrences were a relative rarity and carefully recorded in camp diaries, with commissions of inquiry being carried out where necessary. Complaints about conditions in the Zedelgem camps have some greater merit. There is no doubt that these were poor and continued to deteriorate in the winter of 1945–6 when the Latvians were in Camp 2227.

In his survey work, Helmut Wolff noted that a critical situation had developed in Belgium that was unheard of in other British camps.[60] While the overcrowding noted by ICRC reports was ameliorated by transfers of prisoners to Belgian control, many men were still in tents as the autumn cold and wet weather took hold. There were chronic shortages of clothes and blankets in many locations and the cuts in food rations for non-working prisoners (the majority) from 2,400 to 2,000 calories per day introduced in the summer began to take effect. The Quarterly Reports of the 105 British General Hospital in Ostend noted increases in admissions of prisoners suffering from malnutrition.[61] Perhaps the most severe conditions were in Camp 2228 (Overijse) where these shortages were compounded by problems with the water supply, which led to an outbreak of dysentery and diarrhea that claimed up to 200 lives between December 1945 and January 1946. However, Wolff

[57]FO371/55974 Brimelow to Isham, 20 February 1946.
[58]FO371/55974 Political Advisor C-in-C Germany (Berlin) William Strang to Foreign Office, 18 January 1946. Kripens had been listed as a regimental commander in the Latvian Legion by Salnais in 1943. Bilmanis, *Latvia*, p. 7.
[59]Mangulis, *Latvia in the Wars of the 20th Century*, p. 156 repeated in https://zedelgempowcamp.be/ [9 September 2022].
[60]Wolff, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, p. 75.
[61]TNA WO222/814 Quarterly Report, Surgical Division and Medical Division, 105 (Br) General Hospital, 1 October–31 December 1945.

was the first to admit that this was an exceptional case and that ameliorative measures were introduced almost immediately to restore the daily rations to 2,400 calories per day and improve the bedding and heating supplied.[62]

In comparison, Camp 2227 ostensibly had fewer problems, but there was one instance in December 1945 of a medical visit to investigate cases of malnourishment.[63] There were two ICRC visits to the camp while the Latvians were there, but their rather anodyne content does not necessarily provide a comprehensive picture of what conditions were like. For example, the report for 15 October spoke of the food being 'regulation in both quality and quantity', but this did not mean that 'peasant prisoners' had enough to eat—presumably a veiled reference to the daily rations of only 2,000 calories.[64] The kitchens were noted for their cleanliness and a bakery provided bread. Most men ate either from bowls or cans. In general, the medical and hygiene arrangements were perceived to be good, but there were 4-500 amputees for whom the British had not provided prosthetics, which meant that some of them were confined to beds.[65] Requests were made for these, as well as artificial eyes and more straw for the mattresses in all the barracks, the latter request being met almost immediately by the camp commander. A second visit in May 1946 was far more damning. Here, the same ICRC delegate noted shortfalls in the food provided, with no quantity or quality controls on the provisions coming into the camp and the supply of bread being affected by rats.[66] Clearly, the administration of the camp had been deficient and beset by constant staffing changes as officers became eligible for postwar demobilization in ever-increasing numbers.[67] However, by this time, all but 1,500 of the Latvians had been evacuated back to Germany and the complaints were lodged primarily by disaffected Germans who had been returned from long-term captivity in the United States and who had been expecting to be returned directly to Germany.

These deficiencies were given greater exposure when German prisoners sent from certain camps in Belgium to the United Kingdom to augment the labor force were reported as undernourished and incapable of work. This was picked up in press reports and prompted questions in the House of Commons from Richard Stokes (Labour MP for Ipswich). In his reply, the Secretary of State for War J.J. (Jack) Lawson outlined the policies of the government and insisted that investigations would be carried out, but former Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden was keen for any doubt to be dispelled:

[62]Wolff, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, pp. 78, 316–8.
[63]TNA WO171/8327 War Diary 21 December 1945 records the visit of Lieut. Col. Payne RAMC to inspect undernourished POWs.
[64]ICRC Report on Camp 2227 by E. A. Aeberhard, 10/17 October 1945.
[65]While a legitimate complaint, the fact that in 1945 the British were struggling to meet the needs of their own wounded and American veterans had protested on Capitol Hill about the quality of their prosthetics meant that Latvians in SS uniforms were unlikely to be a high priority.
[66]ICRC Report on Camp 2227 by E. A. Aeberhard, 15 May 1946.
[67]TNA WO171/8327 and WO171/10988 *passim*.

> Given the very grave charges made by the Hon. Member for Ipswich (Mr. Stokes), if they are not justified I think the world ought to know they are not justified. Much harm is done to the British name if charges are made and the results of the investigation are not known.[68]

Wolff quoted Frederick Bellenger, then Financial Secretary to the War Office, as being 'filled with horror of the reports',[69] but by this stage whatever inquiries were made could only be locking the stable door after the horse had bolted as the camps had nearly all been closed. Nonetheless, the claims continued to surface, with German prisoners hyperbolically comparing their treatment with those of concentration camp victims after a compulsory screening of a film on KZ Bergen-Belsen.[70]

IV

Within weeks of the Latvians' arrival in Zedelgem, the British were working towards a solution to the problem of their many thousands of Baltic prisoners. At the end of December 1945, the British Control Commission for Germany in Berlin contacted the War Office about the 19,000 Balts who had served in the *Wehrmacht* and who continued to be held under guard by the British Line of Command. It was noted that this was a commitment of British manpower that 'we cannot afford' and a charge on the Treasury for facilities in Belgium which was likewise unsustainable. These Balts were deemed as disciplined and cooperative and it was suggested that they should be released from their prisoner of war status and placed in Displaced Persons (DP) camps under the 'general supervision of the CCG(BE)'.[71] On 22 January 1946, the Foreign Office informed the ICRC of their decision, taken in part to alleviate the manpower and establishment costs of the camps in Belgium, but also to further a long-term solution to the continued captivity of Latvians and all the other Balts in British hands who could not be repatriated.

However, in the weeks beforehand, there had been warnings that moving the Balts back to Germany as DPs would anger the Soviets, not least because their concentration in civilian camps and potential liberation into German society would be seen as a political act. Indeed, Marshal Zhukov had made specific mention of the Balts in Control Commission meetings and continued to press for their wholesale repatriation.[72] Thomas Brimelow was also concerned that the ex-POW Balts should not receive the same privileged

[68]Hansard House of Commons (HC) Debates (Deb) 21 May 1946 Vol. 423, c.187; but see also HC Deb 16 July 1946, vol 425 cc1056-7; HC Deb 16 July 1946 vol 425 cc1183-90.
[69]Wolff, *Die deutsche Kriegsgefangene*, p. 76.
[70]Wolff, *Die deutsche Kriegsgefangene*, pp. 693–4.
[71]FO371/55974 Foreign Office to Secretary, International Red Cross Central Agency for Prisoners of War, 22 January 1946. FO1032/2242 Telegram Argus 256, Bercomb (Control Commission Berlin) to Troopers (War Office), 20 December 1945.
[72]FO1032/2242 Telegram Argus 255, Bercomb (Control Commission Berlin) to General Dowler via Troopers (War Office), 20 December 1945.

treatment as (civilian) DPs. Attempting to square the circle, the British administrators in Berlin investigated the possibility of 'nominally classing Balts who had fought against [the] Allies as displaced persons [but] to see that they did not receive privileged treatment in the matter of food, accommodation and Red Cross parcels'.[73]

Despite these serious reservations, it appears that all the Balt POWs held in Zedelgem were soon being moved back to Germany. In principle, they would be sent to DP camps and in some cases were reunited with their families, the exceptions being if they were designated as *Volksdeutsche*, had come to Germany voluntarily before 1 September 1939, or were deemed to have volunteered for the *Wehrmacht*. In such cases, the men concerned would be discharged directly into the German population and not be given DP status.[74] This was made clear by a memorandum sent by the PW and DP Division of the CCG(BE) to the Intelligence Division that this would be done unless the ex-SS men came under an automatic arrest group, in which case the latter was asked for an alternative solution.

A further problem arose with the transfer of DP camps to United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) control as, while the British only excluded those men who had been proved to have fought for the enemy, UNRRA insisted on proof that they had *not* been enemy combatants—a stipulation that would have automatically excluded most of the Latvians in Zedelgem.[75] In the event, the transfers of Latvians from Belgium back to Germany in March and April were to DP camps still under British control and the inmates were then rapidly discharged into German society. For example, Kripens was released in July 1946 and reportedly with his wife in a UNRRA camp at Talava (Oldenburg).[76] The contradictions in this piecemeal solution to the problem of the Balts were soon picked up by other British agencies in Germany. For example, in July 1946 the PW and DP Office at the Schleswig-Holstein regional headquarters noted that there were 500 men with SS Blood Group tattoos in the Grossenbrode DP camp and that their presence there was regarded as having serious political repercussions. It, therefore, asked its masters in Berlin for 'instructions as to their disposal'.[77] Some weeks later, the same theme was picked up by the Political Division of the CCG(BE), who described it as 'scandalous' that Balts who voluntarily joined the SS should be transferred to DP camps.[78]

[73]FO1052/445 CCG(BE) Teleprint Bercomb to Troopers, 16 February 1946.
[74]FO1032/2242 Deputy Military Governor, Zonal Executive Office, Lubbecke to Control Office for Germany and Austria, London, 30 August 1946.
[75]Ceserani, *Justice Delayed*, p.56.
[76]Ceserani, *Justice Delayed*, p.59.
[77]FO1052/445 Lt. Col E. Fogarty, PW and DP (Schleswig Holstein) to PW and DP HQ BAOR, 17 July 1946.
[78]FO1052/445 Deputy Chief Political Division to PW and DP Division, 4 September 1946.

Whatever reservations might have existed within the British administration, pragmatism had won out and the Balts were on their way to being civilianized in the DP camps and then 'lost' into the general population of Germany.[79] However, this process would take time, and problems continued to manifest themselves. There were reports in the spring of 1947 of Balts living in and around Berlin being arrested by the Russians, to the point where some were confined to a camp at Wannsee, ostensibly for their own security.[80] Elsewhere, there was at least one serious disturbance at the Bad Oeynhausen DP camp during a visit by Russian liaison officers involving some 70 inmates, again apparently provoked by rumors of repatriation to the USSR. The Soviet authorities were also not averse to putting pressure on the Western powers. For example, a front-page article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* as late as 30 June 1948 entitled 'A Crime Against Humanity' accused the Allies of preventing the return home of Latvian children held in camps in Germany.[81] There were also lower-level Soviet accusations made about the detention of Baltic DPs or their mistreatment, but British sources noted that 'such allegations are frequently brought by the Soviet Military Mission [. . .] They are generally completely vague and mention no names or dates and cannot, therefore, be investigated'.[82]

By the beginning of 1947, more permanent solutions for the Balts still in British DP camps were now available. While the British labor market had been augmented by some 200,000 Polish ex-servicemen, these had now been fully absorbed, and with the prospect of all the remaining German prisoners of war then employed in the UK being sent home, the Ministry of Labour was thought to be more receptive to allowing the Balts and their families to come to Britain, with the possibility that they might be housed in the camps vacated by the prisoners.[83] Pilot schemes that brought young female Balts to the UK to meet the demand for domestic servants (Operation Baltic Cygnet) had been deemed a success and the women had 'earned excellent opinions in the press in England'.[84] Similar epithets emerged from British officials in Germany such as Major-General Nevil Brownjohn, Deputy Chief of Staff at the Control Commission who noted that:

> The Baltic Displaced Persons are by far the best we have got containing a number of professional and better educated people. They give much less trouble and behave better than any of the other categories.[85]

[79]For a survey of British policy towards the Balts as DPs in Germany see Tillmann Tegeler, 'Esten, Letten und Litauer in der Britischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands. Aus Akten des "Foreign Office"', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* Vol. 53, No.1 (2005), pp. 42-57.
[80]FO1052/445 Zarine to Robert Hankey (FO) 7 May 1947 paraphrasing a letter from Archbishop Grünbergs then resident in Berlin.
[81]Moscow Embassy to Foreign Office, 1 July 1948 cites *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, No.52, 30 June 1948.
[82]FO371/47040 CCG(BE) to Foreign Office, 17 October 1947.
[83]FO1052/445 Memorandum Brigadier A.G.Kennington, Chief PW and DP Division B.A.O.R., 8 January 1947.
[84]FO1052/445 Memorandum Brigadier A.G.Kennington, Chief PW and DP Division B.A.O.R., 8 January 1947.
[85]FO1032/2242 Major-General N.C.D Brownjohn, Deputy Chief of Staff (Policy), CCG(BE) to Control Office for Germany and Austria, 30 November 1946.

These and other statements paved the way for the Balts to be included, and indeed actively encouraged, as part of the drive to bring more European volunteer workers (EVW) into the British labor market in the later 1940s.[86]

V

In conclusion, it seems that, contrary to some of the more extravagant claims being reproduced in current Latvian nationalist historiography, the Latvians in camp 2227 were the beneficiaries of a consistent British policy that refused to countenance their handing over to the USSR lest this was interpreted as a tacit acceptance of Soviet annexations after September 1939. Moreover, the Kripens case indicates that even where the British were aware of the (possibly dubious) activities of the Latvian officers in SS uniforms, they were insistent that the Soviets provide detailed accusations of crimes committed, lest the handing over of a few individuals based on generalized claims led to demands for the return of the entire cohort. The international diplomatic background thus served as a protection, but there were also other factors in play, not least the desire of the British security services to rebuild and enhance their anti-Soviet intelligence networks in the Baltic states. The most high-profile example was that of the Lithuanian General Povilas Plechavičius, whose extradition from the British Zone was consistently blocked. Memoranda attached to recently declassified documents indicate that this was primarily 'in view of his knowledge of our agents (in Lithuania)'.[87]

However, there had also been British Secret Service contacts with the Latvian Central Council representatives in Sweden with similar aims in mind.[88] While there is no evidence that Kripens was sheltered for this purpose, there are other documented cases of Balts who had thrown in their lot with the Germans during the war then being protected and then exploited as sources of intelligence and as postwar agents against the Soviet Union.[89] While the Latvians and their Baltic neighbors continued to be protected by the British, this was never motivated by philanthropy but was just part of the Cold War politics of the era. As Swain and others have pointed out, British insistence on not recognizing the Soviet takeovers was only maintained as a bargaining chip in wider negotiations – to be traded away in exchange for concessions elsewhere. This had been actively discussed by Churchill and Eden in 1942 and

[86]See for example, Emily Gilbert, *Rebuilding post-war Britain: Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian refugees in Britain, 1946-51* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2017) Diana Kay and Robert Miles, *Refugees or migrant workers? European volunteer workers in Britain, 1946-1951* (London/New York, 1992). See also Emily Gilbert, 'Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian displaced persons in Great Britain' (PhD University of Sheffield, 2000)

[87]FO371/55976 File N6089/252/G Marginal note by RMAH, 28 March 1946. Piirimäe, *Roosevelt*, p. 150.

[88]Geoffrey Swain, 'Latvia's Democratic Resistance: a Forgotten Episode of the Second World War', *European History Quarterly*, 39(2) (2009), pp. 241–63, especially pp. 259–60.

[89]Ceserani, *Justice Delayed*, pp.142–4.

again in 1944 although never carried through, and it was only the realization that new autonomies promised in the new Soviet constitution of 1945 were essentially a sham that convinced the Atlee government to maintain the original British policy.[90]

This in turn ensured that the Balts under British administration would not be handed over. Far from being martyrs to the cause of freedom while in British hands, it appears that the Latvians were the unwitting beneficiaries of increasing Cold War animosities that protected them from summary Soviet retribution and ensured they were able to establish themselves into civilian life as exiles in the years after 1946.

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[90]Geoffrey Swain, '"The highest flights of circumlocutory art": Britain, Latvia and Recognizing the Soviet Annexation of 1940', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 43(3) (2012), pp. 345–62, here pp. 358–9. See also Piirimäe, Roosevelt, p. 142 and David Kirby, 'Morality or Expediency? The Baltic Question in British-Soviet Relations, 1941-42', in: V. Stanley Vardys and Romuald J. Misiunas (eds.) *The Baltic States in Peace and War, 1917-1945* (University Park PA: University of Pennsylvania Press 1980), pp. 159–72.