

In Belgium, a "Hive" in memory of Nazi soldiers is debated

More and more voices are calling for the dismantling of a monument to freedom in Zedelgem, near Bruges. Published in 2018, the work pays tribute to Latvian prisoners of war who belonged to the Waffen SS.

By Jean-Pierre Stroobants(Brussels, Correspondent)

Published today at 05:00

Reading time 3 min.

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In Zedelgem, Belgium, bees are believed to represent Latvians who stayed in the British prisoner of war camp at Vloethemveld. RONALD DERSIN/PARIS MATCH BELGIUM

A quiet residential area, a large square, a nature reserve project and what else to describe Zedelgem, a village of 22,000 inhabitants, near Bruges, Belgium? There is this funny monument built by the municipality in memory of former SS, in general indifference, in 2018. Called De Letse Bijenkorf ("the Latvian hive"), the work was discovered two years later by former resistance fighters, Jewish organizations and The Belgians Remember Them, an association celebrating the memory of British airmen from the Second World War.

The "Hive" is, it seems, populated by as many bees – "hard-working and peaceful beings as long as they are not threatened", said the initiators of the project – as Latvians who stayed in the nearby camp of Vloethemveld, at the end of the war. This British prisoner of war camp housed up to 100,000 inmates, including 12,000 citizens of Latvia. But not just any of them: members of the [15th and 19th divisions of the Waffen SS, the "racial and political" army of the Hitler regime](#), created in 1939 by Heinrich Himmler.

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In the eyes of the town hall, long held by the Christian Democratic party CD&V, these men were apparently not soldiers of the Reich (the Waffen SS totaled up to 1 million), but "freedom fighters". Hear from opponents of Bolshevism and Joseph Stalin. Released without trial after a few months of detention, all decided to live in the West, now incarnating as opponents of the communist regime that had taken over their country. And all of them claimed, without much control, that they had been forcibly conscripted by Nazi Germany, which had invaded Latvia in the summer of 1941. None was therefore convicted of war crimes.

A removed plate

Their version of the story was relayed by the aediles of Zedelgem, but widely disputed by many historians, as well as by Jewish organizations. For months, demonstrations and protest actions have been organized around the "Hive", whose dismantling has been demanded. So far, they have only resulted in the removal of a plaque that presented, in three languages, the commune as "above all patriotic", condemning Nazism but wishing to honor "universal freedom".

Not enough to convince, in particular, the [Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem](#), which considers "unbearable" the presence in a European country of a monument seen as an insult to the victims of the Hitler regime and an encouragement to revisionism. Its experts point out that while Latvians were indeed forcibly conscripted into the SS Legion from the winter of 1943, the massacres of Jews in the country began two years earlier.

And that, in any case, there was a way to flee the constituency or to enlist instead in the service of compulsory labor.

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Some 80,000 Latvian Jews perished, 26,000 of whom were taken to arms in the space of three days as early as 1941. Thousands more, including children, died of starvation and exhaustion in the Salaspils camp, established in October 1941 by German police and later run by Latvian volunteers.

The silence of the authorities

Under pressure, the municipal authorities are now trying to convene a panel of international experts to decide on the future of the monument. Questioned by André Flahaut, former PS Minister of Defence, Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne, a Flemish liberal, considered that he could in no way interfere in this case. Even if he has a "right of positive injunction" that would allow him to request an investigation from the prosecutor's office and that the kingdom has, since 1995, a law punishing the approval, justification or denial of genocide.

Regional power is also washing its hands. The party that runs both the Parliament and the Flemish government is the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), some of whose members have previously found it useful to honour former members of the Flemish SS Legion or former collaborators of the Hitler regime.

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Even further to the right of the chessboard is the Vlaams Belang, a xenophobic and separatist party of which Pol Denys is a member. This elected municipal representative of Zedelgem was honored, in 2019, by the Latvian President Egils Levits for having favored the rapprochement between his municipality and the Museum of the Occupation of Riga. And for contributing to the recognition that "Latvian soldiers had worked for the freedom of their country, even if they had fought in a foreign army."

Jean-Pierre Stroobants (Brussels, Correspondent)