

JUSTICE BEHIND PROPAGANDA: SOVIET PROSECUTIONS OF THE MEN OF THE ARAJS KOMMANDO

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Monograph in preparation: Nazi Collaborators on Trial During the Cold War: The Cases Against Viktors Arājs and the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police.

When the Soviets returned to Latvia in 1944, they began two parallel processes to reckon with the crimes committed there by the Nazis and collaborators like the men of the Arajs Kommando: one was public and political, while the other was secret and juridical. The official Soviet story contained serious distortions inspired by political objectives: it effaced the Jewish identity of the victims of the Nazis and obscured the Latvian identity of their collaborators, inflated the number of victims, and added false atrocity claims to the real ones. However, hidden from public view, investigations and prosecutions conducted by Soviet authorities were effective, generated accurate information about the crimes, and punished the appropriate criminals.

Key words: Arajs Kommando, Holocaust, Soviet justice, Soviet propaganda, Cold War.

OVERVIEW

The Soviet Union was the leading post-war prosecutor of the men who served in the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police. Also known as the “Arajs Kommando” after its leader, Viktors Arājs, this volunteer collaborationist unit of about 1,200 paramilitaries was directly responsible for the deaths of no fewer than 26,000 civilians – almost exclusively Jews – in Latvia during the German occupation, to say nothing of the uncounted victims of their anti-partisan operations in German-occupied Belarus. The first attempts of the Soviet Union to reckon with the crimes of the Arajs

Kommando began during World War II when the Red Army returned to Latvia. As it battled its way westward, recapturing Riga in October 1944 and accepting the surrender of all remaining German and Latvian forces allied to the Germans in May 1945, many suspected Nazi collaborators fell into Soviet hands. A total of 356 former members of the Arajs Kommando are known to have ultimately been captured, tried, and convicted by the Soviets between 1944 and 1967.¹

There are two key sets of sources to be examined in connection with Soviet attempts to reckon with the crimes of the Arajs Kommando in the two decades following World War II. The first are the reports generated by the Extraordinary State Commission on Crimes in Latvia, the Soviet Union's official comprehensive assessment of the crimes of the Nazis and their collaborators in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR) from 1941 to 1945. The second is the mass of actual interrogations and verdicts against the captured men of the Kommando. While the political interests of the Soviet Union played a large role *when it came to the question of public consumption*, on the level of the individual perpetrator, Soviet efforts were marked by a desire to know the real truth, albeit by any means necessary and with no regard for liberal-democratic conceptions of due process. The Soviet system was two-tiered: while dispensing harsh but deserved justice to individuals by the lowest rungs of the Soviet state apparatus, the picture projected for the public was determined according to the Communist Party's political needs.

THE EXTRAORDINARY STATE COMMISSION

Immediately upon their re-entry into Latvian territory, the Soviets began assembling evidence about Nazi crimes on the territory of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. This evidence took many forms, including physical and documentary evidence, as well as voluminous interviews with the general populace, the surviving victims of Nazi terror, and German and collaborationist prisoners. The entity dedicated to formally establishing what had

gone on during the occupation was called the Extraordinary State Commission on Crimes in Latvia.² The Commission's findings were very seldom cited during the actual proceedings of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, nor were they substantively used in other Western courts subsequently.³ Thus, whether or not it had been the intention from the start, in fact the published and publically-accessible reports were used almost exclusively for public consumption, both inside and outside the Soviet Union.⁴

The points on which the conclusions of the Extraordinary State Commission are at odds with our current state of historical knowledge can be illuminating. These variances bear the stamp of political interference emanating from the Communist Party leadership and perhaps from ambient ideological presuppositions and expectations at the lower levels as well. Predictably, they reflect the well-known Soviet attitude towards the Holocaust: Jewish victimhood is not denied in the narrative, but neither is it given proportionate consideration or emphasis. However, four additional peculiarities of the Soviet reports are worth pointing out. Firstly, the reports show that the obverse of the effacement of the Jewish identity of the victims was also true: the identity of many of the perpetrators as Latvians was veiled, not to say completely hidden. Secondly, the Latvians were characterized as victims and their specific national tragedy under Nazi misrule was highlighted. Thirdly, the reports needlessly exaggerated horrific crimes by inflating the already staggering numbers of victims. The given number of total victims is typically tripled, not only putting it (and the derivative numbers at individual sites or of individual operations) at odds with Western estimates, but also leading to internal inconsistencies. Fourthly and lastly, some specific Soviet claims regarding Nazi crimes are not supported by the evidence, leading to the conclusion that some allegations were propaganda fabrications. Thus, the official story contained serious misrepresentations of reality.

THE QUESTION OF LATVIAN PARTICIPATION

Some illumination into the question of the Soviet attempt (until the 1960s) to efface the Latvian identity of some of the perpetrators comes from a Russian-language document collection edited by Aleksandr Diukov and Vladimir Simindei, published in 2009. Given permission by the post-Soviet Russian government to peruse otherwise tightly controlled archives, they have assembled a useful collection of documents detailing atrocities committed by Latvian formations, including the Arajs Kommando. This collection exists in English translation as *“Destroy as Much as Possible...”: Latvian Collaborationist Formations on the Territory of Belarus, 1942–1944*.⁵

It is in the “Editor’s Note” that opens the collection that an ingenious explanation for the initial Soviet suppression of the fact of Latvian collaboration with the Nazis is posited:

The atrocities shock [sic.] by their scope. So, how did the Nazis succeed in realization [sic.] of their misanthropic genocide plans? In the Soviet epoque [sic.] *this question was suppressed since a blunt reply could disturb international peace in the country*. The main cause is that collaborationist unions formed by the invaders from among the Soviets [sic.] citizens figured prominently in realization [sic.] of the Nazis’ genocide plans. The Russians, the Byelorussians, the Ukrainians, the Lithuanians, the Estonians and the Letts [i.e. Latvians] took part in such unions [emphasis added].⁶

The odd phrase “a blunt reply could disturb international peace in the country” is probably best interpreted to mean that inter-ethnic comity within the USSR might have been threatened if the ethnic identity of the Nazis’ accomplices was overtly and publically noted. This is the fascinating but also intuitive complement to the universally attested propensity of the Soviets to downplay the ethnicity of the Jewish victims. It also goes well beyond the simple ideological wish to live among a de-nationalized world-brotherhood of workers and peasants, no matter whom the Nazis had wished to either kill or employ.

This illustrates that the first impulse of the Soviet leadership was to control and define the realities of the Nazi occupation in such a way as to *politically benefit* the USSR. Most basically, it functioned to defuse potential ethnic strife. In this calculation, the Soviet leadership may well have acted shrewdly, even presciently, for with hindsight the example of Yugoslavia in the 1990s comes to mind. It was also central to the justification of Stalin's re-establishment of control over territory in the new postwar order that he had first gained through the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany in 1939. And the imperative to officially homogenize the populations of a multi-national bloc and unite everyone under the same banner – the victims of and victors over fascism – must have been powerful.

Of course, this language of brotherhood was extremely cynical. Fresh deportations from Latvia to the Soviet interior resumed with the return of the Red Army and culminated in the massive deportation of more than 42,000 Latvians between 25 and 28 March 1949.⁷ It should also be noted that the desire to keep the ethnicity of the perpetrators out of sight did not prevent the pursuit and punishment of the Latvian perpetrators – only that publically “this question was suppressed,” in the words of the Editor's Note. That is to say that the reality was known to the authorities but not proclaimed to the public because it was politically inconvenient.

THE PRO-LATVIAN PROPAGANDA OF THE SOVIETS

One part of the report specifically concerned the crimes committed by the Nazis and their collaborators in Rīga. It can be read as a late example of Soviet propaganda attempts during the war to convince Latvians that the USSR was not hostile to Latvian national pride and distinctiveness and was actually the true guardian of Latvian culture against the Nazis.⁸ This commission was headed by a Soviet Latvian, Kalnbērziņš, who was also the First Secretary of the Latvian Communist Party, and many of the other high-level commissioners were also Latvians.⁹ In effect, they were the Soviet Union's ambassadors to re-conquered

Latvia – ‘Communism with a Latvian face,’ as it were. In its comprehensive indictment of the German occupation, the report seems consciously designed to sooth local feelings and smooth the permanent re-integration of Latvia into the USSR.

The first charges against the German occupation listed in the report were all things that any vaguely patriotic Latvian could identify with. “The henchmen of Hitler mocked the city of Rīga – the shrine of the Latvian people. They attempted to destroy everything that was bound up with the national traditions of the people.”¹⁰ It was noted that Brīvības Street was renamed after Adolf Hitler, while streets named for the greatest figures in Latvian culture were renamed after other “criminals of the Hitler clique”. It noted that a large part of the cultural center of Latvia, Rīga’s Old Town, was destroyed by the Germans. The closure of schools and universities, and the destruction or removal to Germany of the contents of Latvia’s libraries, archives, conservatories, and museums was particularly deplored in terms of the violence this did to Latvian culture. In other words, the language of the report was so framed as to appeal to the nationally-inclined feelings of the people in the country, which the Soviets recognized.

Another striking feature of the Extraordinary State Commission’s reports comes in the form of what they did not say. The Commission went to extremes to soft-pedal such collaboration as did occur and baldly omitted mention of any active, voluntary, or autonomous Latvian participation in Nazi criminality. It seems almost certain that this was an attempt to propagate the perception that Latvians had stood in solidarity with the rest of the Soviet Union and to promote the internal postwar cohesion of the USSR. This line would give the citizens of the resurrected Latvian SSR a victim narrative of their own and put them, as part of the Soviet Union, on the winning side of history. In exchange, this construction would also require that the inhabitants of the restored Latvian SSR accept the notion that Latvia had, in fact, been liberated rather than re-occupied by the Red Army in 1944 and 1945.

The political objective behind this minimalist view of Latvian complicity extended at least as far as the claim that the men of the Latvian Legion were press-ganged into the formation against their will by SS recruiters:

The German aggressors tried to force the Latvians to fight for the interests of predatory [*räuberischen*] Hitler-imperialism. They carried out a violent mobilization of the so-called ‘Latvian Legion’. Those who refused were sent to a concentration camp and shot. Those invited to the recruitment stations [*Einberufungsstellen*] were compelled to sign a statement attesting to their ‘voluntary’ entry into the Legion.¹¹

Unlike claims that the Legionnaires had deserted in droves to join the ranks of the Red Army, the notion that they were in many cases conscripts is actually in accord with reality. Again, however, this assertion was only intended for public consumption. Actual Legionnaires who were captured by the Red Army experienced a decisively less sympathetic attitude on the part of the Soviets than this official publication suggested. Many were executed as traitors and members of the SS.

Other German-controlled formations such as the Arajs Kommando and the Schutzmannschaft units received fairly scant attention in the published reports of the Commission. Latvian complicity with the “German Fascists” is minimized almost to the point of exclusion.

When admission of the existence of Latvian collaborators was totally unavoidable, the Commission used a bizarre formulation to describe them: “The accomplices and participants in the abuses of the German hangmen were *Latvian-German nationalists* who unmasked themselves completely as henchmen of German fascism [emphasis added].”¹² The identity of the perpetrators as Germans and fascists was emphasized, while their Latvian identity was downplayed to appear merely incidental.

Many of the names, positions, and deeds of the principal German figures involved in the conquest, administration, and

policing of the territory were accurately presented. Listed were, for example: Generals Model and Schörner, serially the commanders of Army Group North; SS General Schröder and High SS- and Police Leader in Latvia Jeckeln; Ostland's Reichskommissar Lohse; Generalkommissar of Latvia Drechsler; Viktors Arājs's direct superior, Dr. Lange; and another half dozen major police officials in charge of ghettos, camps, and prisons. No Latvian names appeared among the principal criminals. Štiglics ["Stieglitz," sic.], Police Prefect in Rīga in charge of the Central Prison, was a Latvian, but his ethnic identity was hidden behind a German-sounding name.¹³ The consistency with which Latvian criminals were excluded from the publically released reports of the Commission, while behind the scenes they were being swiftly captured and punished, can safely be interpreted as the result of a centrally dictated policy.

THE ESTIMATED NUMBER OF VICTIMS

Diukov and Simindei's collection reproduces a very valuable and rare wartime document that offers a glimpse into what the Soviets knew about the Arajs Kommando and its mission even before the war ended. It was generated by SMERSH (SMERT SHpionam, or "Death to Spies," the name for the Soviet Chief Directorate of Counter Intelligence), dated 10 March 1945.

The document shows that the number of Arajs Kommando members as estimated by the Soviets was almost triple the likely actual figure: 1,200 became 3,000. The Jewish identity of the bulk of victims is almost totally elided, surviving only in a single off-hand mention of ghettos. The document also reveals that the number of Nazi victims in Latvia – in Western scholarship by far the largest group being approximately 85,000–90,000 Latvian and foreign Jews deported to Latvia – according to the Soviets was *predetermined* at "more than 300,000 [sic]."¹⁴ The document is dated *two months before the war ended*. In the meantime, "Fortress Kurland" remained in the fight until 8 May, holding considerable tracts of Latvia's westernmost territory and the major port city of Ventspils, among other population centers. True, Rīga

was recaptured as early as October 1944 and eastern Latvia even earlier, but less than six months could not have been sufficient time in which to reach a complete estimate: much of the territory remained unconquered and other areas were still subject to local German counterattacks. Even once the remaining German and Latvian Legion forces surrendered and the Red Army gained full control of all of Latvia's territory, it would still necessarily take time to conduct credible investigations involving thousands of interviews and interrogations, the methodical collection and analysis of captured documents, and the sifting of forensic evidence from the concentration camps and the opened mass graves.

The document shows that this figure of more than 300,000 victims was already known to high-level officials ostensibly charged with actually determining the number of victims of fascism in Latvia *even while their investigations were yet ongoing*. The obvious conclusion is that this number was centrally dictated, and ranking investigators were made aware of the expected tally long before their investigations were complete. *In fact, as will be shown below, the reports upon which the Extraordinary Commission's findings were based prove that the figure of "more than 300,000" was pre-set at least as early as December 1944.*

A separate document, authored by high-level Commission functionaries, made the incorrect claim that 240,000 Jews from almost everywhere else in Europe, including Romania, Hungary, and Norway were brought to the Rīga Ghetto in the middle of December 1941 following the Rumbula massacre.¹⁵ The total number of deaths in the metropolitan area of Rīga alone was set by this official report at more than 170,000 – 44% of the city's total prewar population of 385,000. Apparently in addition to this figure, it was further claimed that 140,000 Soviet prisoners of war were also murdered in Rīga and its vicinity.¹⁶ Why the Soviets decided that the Nazis' crimes required gross exaggeration is difficult to understand. The figure of "more than 300,000" here again appeared, qualified as "civilian persons – children, women, and the elderly and Soviet prisoners of war." Adding together the

Soviet estimate of dead Rīga civilians, which presumably was meant to include Jews, and Red Army POWs who are said to have died in and around Rīga, produces the figure of 310,000 – close to the impossibly precise 313,798 “victims of fascism” in Latvia ultimately given as the official final tally by the Commission. To this must presumably be added, however, the dead from the rest of the country – geographically between a quarter and a third of which, at the time these reports were produced, was still unconquered. The Soviet numbers were predetermined, transparently inflated, and internally inconsistent.

Yet the actual evidence gathered in the course of producing the findings of the Extraordinary Commission is indispensable. For example, medical experts correctly concluded that attempts to conceal mass graves had been episodically undertaken.¹⁷ Another finding was that a large-scale but mostly unsuccessful attempt had been made to exhume and burn the bodies at some sites, as quantities of charred bones were discovered. Also, it was found that the bodies had been placed in the graves “chaotically.” In some graves, the bodies were naked; in others, they were clothed, sometimes in uniforms, sometimes in civilian apparel. Some graves contained victims with their hands bound behind their backs. Autopsies of bodies sampled from among the victims revealed the likely cause of death to be gunshot wounds to the head or thorax. Other bodies indicated deaths possibly caused by starvation or disease. The discrepant levels of the deterioration of the corpses in the various graves led to the conclusion that they had been killed at different times between 1941 and 1944, amounting to “a systematic annihilation of prisoners of war and Soviet citizens in the course of three years”.¹⁸

All of this information is consistent with the historical record as established by subsequent Western legal and academic findings. Low-level investigations then, before they were processed by higher levels and prepared for public consumption, did produce excellent facts and data. As it was passed up the chain, however, the task seems to have had less to do with establishing what really happened under the German occupation and more to do

with reaching the number imposed by those farthest away from the rows of exhumed corpses. The findings would also be embellished.

THE GRATUITOUS SENSATIONALIST CLAIMS

Unwarranted and needlessly sensationalist Soviet misrepresentations also filled the reports on crimes in Latvia: “Ten thousand people” were killed “in the first days of the occupation,” for instance. In addition, children were given poisoned milk to drink; multiple full-blown death camps were operating in the territory and gassings were taking place; prisoners were commonly trampled upon until they defecated, upon which, they were forced to eat their own excrement; ingeniously devised portable gallows travelled the land; everyone recognized the “isolation wagon” called “Black Bertha” that would suddenly appear and gas Soviet patriots; psychotic medical doctors performed their gruesome art by vivisectioning conscious victims while humming the Marseilles; other victims were forced into the boilers of a navy cruiser in Rīga harbor and pressure-cooked alive.¹⁹

The agents of the Extraordinary State Commission, among other reports, prepared a finding on the deaths of 35,000 Soviet children.²⁰ Perhaps its most ghoulish allegation was that the Nazis established an industrial-scale “factory for child blood” at Salaspils that operated to constantly pump a supply of fresh blood plasma to slake the thirst of a ravening vampire Wehrmacht. Executed in a “cannibalistic manner,” this program was reported to have eventually resulted in the death from blood loss of almost every one of the estimated 12,000 ‘donor’ children involved. It was calculated that approximately 3,500 liters of blood were rendered to the German armed forces via this rich vein.²¹ In addition to this grisly effort, 150 children were also supposed to have been killed every day at Salaspils in medical experiments.²²

Further complicating the endeavor of using the Extraordinary Commission’s reports to ground historical knowledge is the fact that these erroneous claims appear together with completely accurate ones. For example: in the midst of some of the false

atrocities propaganda is a finding on the murder of Latvian psychiatric patients – a claim that may *seem* similarly incredible but is documented, follows well-established patterns of Nazi criminality, and is in accord with the ‘logic’ of the ideology of the Third Reich.²³

The reality of the Holocaust in Latvia requires no embellishment. By unnecessarily appending various hideous but untrue outrages to the already horrific bill of actual crimes committed by the Nazis and their collaborators like the men of the Arajs Kommando, Soviet authorities misinformed their public and the international audience for perceived political gain even as, behind the scenes, they sought to bring the perpetrators of real crimes to justice.

ORDINARY ARAJS KOMMANDO MEMBERS IN SOVIET HANDS

The indispensable Rudīte Vīksne has found that of the 356 captured Kommando members, almost all were apprehended between 1944 and 1950.²⁴ After peaking in 1947 with 87 convictions, the number of suspects dwindled to a trickle in the 1950s and 1960s, with individual years seeing one, two, three, or sometimes no arrests at all. In 1967, the Soviet Union captured its final former Kommando member. Thus, substantively, the Soviet Union’s internal (as opposed to public propaganda) picture of the Kommando and its activities was established in the 1940s.

It is here that the present article makes its most controversial intervention. Strong is the temptation, given the proven record of Soviet dissembling and fabrication and the massive edifice of propaganda constructed during and after the war, as described above, to reflexively distrust all Soviet claims. This reflex is healthy for all critical historians to exercise, but even here, it is possible to go too far in one direction.²⁵ Doing so carries the danger of verging on apologetics. Certainly, defense attorneys in the West used the Soviet Union’s record of propaganda to cast a pall over all information of Soviet provenance.²⁶

The depositions examined for the preparation of this article were generated in the 1940s. In other words, they come from the large body of statements that formed the original basis for understanding the Kommando and its activities. They also admittedly belong to a special subset of testimonies that were subsequently selected by Soviet authorities for sharing with Western prosecutors. The fact that these examples were shared with prosecutors abroad rightly raises the question of their value as representative of the larger set. But even if it is true that these files were chosen because they displayed exceptionally good Soviet prosecutorial conduct and acumen, they nevertheless still show that the Soviets were doing real police work and engaging reality fully at the lowest, most fundamental, level.

Just because coercion was likely often involved in the Soviet investigators' collection of their evidence about the Kommando does not ipso facto mean that fabrication was taking place on this level. Examination of this set of depositions reveals three features that suggest that the low-level Soviet investigators really did want to know what happened during the German occupation of Latvia. First, some testimonies contradicted themselves and other testimonies. If the interrogators' mission was to railroad the former Kommando members and coordinate their testimonies to reach pre-set conclusions, this would not have been the case. Second, if the interrogators were putting words in the mouths of their prisoners, it is curious that the testimonies did not resemble the sensationalized accounts that formed the official story, but rather more closely fitted the details and patterns subsequently established by Western jurists and scholars. Third, prisoners were rewarded with reduced sentences in return for cooperation – a totally unnecessary step if the results of the investigation of the crimes of the Arajs Kommando had been determined in advance. It may be objected that leniency was shown to prisoners willing to comport their stories to an official narrative desired by their captors, but again, since the stories neither always matched each other nor ever matched the overstated Party line on the atrociousness of Nazi criminality (although many testimonies were

allowed to stand that reflected the pre-1960s Soviet line minimizing Latvian collaboration), this does not seem to have been the case.

The nature and deeds of the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police gradually came into focus in the course of the interrogations of hundreds of its former members by the Soviet authorities. The various key dates in the unit's history such as its first muster, its brief initial phase of running amok in Rīga, the Biķernieki shootings and their frequency, the cordon duty at Rumbula, the change of headquarters, the training program in Germany, and so on were established, as were the unit's changing armament, attire, and personnel compliment (which, admittedly, was sometimes still inflated even in the internal Soviet documents) as well as the identities of its leaders. Voluminous quantities of information were cross-checked with captured German documentation, examination of the crime scenes, and the testimonies of other captured Kommando members and either discarded or considered corroborated. In the gradual establishment of the main facts and the sifting and refining of inconsistencies, the Soviet process resembled its Western counterparts.

It should be stressed that the interrogations do not contain the type of outlandish claims typically found in the publically circulated materials. Outrageous acts of individual sadism and peculiar depravity do not appear in the statements or confessions of the accused. The absence of such underscores the dual nature of the Soviet inquiry. The very fact that the testimonies obtained by Soviet investigators did not conform to the sensationalized public story strongly suggests that the prisoners were not being told what to say. This holds even in the case of one Kommando member who unabashedly referred to "the Führer" in front of his interrogators. Arturs Ābols almost wistfully recalled a speech given before his detachment was deployed on an anti-partisan mission: Arājs himself exhorted the men "not to let our swords rust," according to Ābols's account.²⁷ But even in this exceptionally unashamed example, no lurid details of implausibly bizarre atrocity were wrested from the prisoner's mouth.

The Soviets were not above rewarding helpful prisoners. The most extreme example is that of Captain Arnolds Laukers, one of the Kommando's top officers. After supplying valuable information not only about himself but also about specific crimes and the identities of other Kommando members, he was offered a reduced sentence. Even though convicted of treason against the Soviet Union, he received a relatively light penalty from his Red Army tribunal: the loss of his rights as a citizen of the USSR, the confiscation of his property, and ten years' labor.²⁸ He did, admittedly, die while serving his sentence. Still, the example suggests that detainees were encouraged to cooperate with the Soviet investigation with the promise of reduced penalties, particularly in return for supplying names and providing evidence against others. If the guilt of all suspects was already presumed, the content of their testimonies scripted, and the verdicts predetermined regardless of the facts, making concessions to some to obtain further evidence against others would have scarcely been necessary.²⁹

In another illustrative case, Roberts Gulbis blatantly lied about how he came to be in the Arajs Kommando: "Formally, the filling up of the ranks of the 'Security Police' had a voluntary foundation; in reality, young people were forced into it through methods of blackmail and deception."³⁰ So set against the Kommando was he, he claimed, that "In October 1943 I fled the Security Police and hid myself in Bulduri with my mother-in-law, Alma Eglīte, but was arrested at the end of October that same year."³¹ While his attempt to portray himself as an opponent of the very paramilitary band in which he served for years comported with the official line regarding the coerced collaboration of Latvians with the Nazis, his questioners probably knew better. Yet he was apparently allowed to get away with these self-exculpating fictions by the investigators in exchange for the excellent information he provided about the Kommando's Blue Bus rampages in Saldus and Jelgava, as well as detailed and accurate descriptions of the routine shootings in Biķernieki and the clearing of the ghetto in Daugavpils. These were useful pieces in the mosaic being

constructed of the Kommando's activities by the testimonies of hundreds of captured Kommando members.³²

Another man from the Arajs Kommando who was swept up by the Soviets late in the war, Ričards Līgotnis, was permitted by his interrogators to claim that his "comrades" fled the German invasion with the Red Army, but that he stayed behind because he did not want to abandon his mother. From there, his was the tale of a totally inert particle: arrested by the German police because he had been misidentified as an aide to a known NKVD officer, his release was supposedly conditional upon total cooperation with the Nazi police organs and participation in the crimes of the Arajs Kommando. This was apparently allowed because he also related a quantity of correct and usable details such as the fact that a segment of the Rīga ghetto's male population capable of work temporarily escaped the otherwise complete annihilation at Rumbula in 1941 and that Arājs was given an Iron Cross and a Major's rank.³³ He also accurately supplied the names of a number of other Kommando members.³⁴

Taken together, the depositions from the 1940s and the conclusions based upon them have stood the test of time. The volumes of testimonies by the men of the Kommando were provided to Western prosecutors decades later, who, together with judges, defense attorneys, and eventually historians, subjected them to exacting scrutiny. As a body, they have been found to paint an accurate and coherent picture of the Arajs Kommando and its crimes.

CONCLUSION

The Soviets pursued the men of the Arajs Kommando vigorously and produced basically accurate individual investigative results in the 1940s that cumulatively established the real history of the unit, by extension illuminating the nature of Latvian collaboration in the Holocaust, and later shared these findings with their Western counterparts. For all of the formal breaches of liberal-democratic due process that the Soviet investigators committed

simply as standard procedure, they made absolutely indispensable contributions to today's knowledge through their individual casework. The testimonies wrung by whatever means from the hundreds of Arajs Kommando men captured by the Soviets in the 1940s – indexed, compared, and distilled in the service of not only determining individual guilt, but also finding more culprits – form a large part of today's fairly detailed knowledge of the unit. This has to be separated from the fact that the interrogators and prosecutors themselves worked on behalf of a hideous totalitarian dungeon-state of their own.

Paradoxically then, although the USSR was responsible for bringing to justice about 95% of the members of the Arajs Kommando who would ever face punishment, on another level it also dramatically distorted the public representation of the historical reality of wartime Latvia. The Soviet Union deliberately failed to accurately communicate the overall truth of the Holocaust in Latvia to the Soviet people and the international audience, substituting its own preferred version. This occurred because at the highest levels, findings were warped by the influence of overarching political objectives and made to accord to a useable narrative, leaving later historians to disentangle reality from imagination. The Soviet exaggeration of the numbers of victims and gratuitous invention of atrocity stories have actively misinformed a world of readers and listeners and hindered the process of creating real, usable knowledge and evidence about actual Nazi crimes. This has done appreciable damage to the effort to establish the facts in courtrooms, history books, and public consciousness alike and must be corrected. But we should be careful not to throw out the good with the bad.

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- ² The complete final report can be found here: Central State Archive of the Russian Federation, Fond 7021, Opis 93. It is also listed among the Nuremberg documents as “USSR-41: Report of the Extraordinary State Commission on Crimes in Latvia.”
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- ⁶ “*Destroy as Much as Possible...*”, pp. 25, 26.
- ⁷ Valters Nollendorfs (2002). *Museum of the Occupation of Latvia: Latvia Under the Rule of the Soviet Union and National Socialist Germany, 1940–1991*. Rīga: Latvijas okupācijas muzejs, p. 106. Also see: Heinrihs Strods, Matthew Kott (2002). The File on Operation ‘Priboi’: A Re-Assessment of the Mass Deportations of 1949. *The Journal of Baltic Studies*, 33 (1).
- ⁸ The Nazis were long aware of the Soviet attempt to outflank them, as it were, to the political right in terms of guaranteeing respect for the Latvian nationality. See, for example: Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv. RH 2/2129, p. 152. “Lagebericht.” 5 December 1945. “The Soviet leadership understands this opportunity and skillfully uses *ultra-nationally camouflaged whisper-propaganda* to exert a heavy influence on public opinion [emphasis added].” In a personal address, Stalin himself said to the Latvians under German occupation the following:

In the ranks of the Red Army battle the heroic and best sons of the Latvian people – the guards of Latvia. [...] Soon the Latvian guards, together with the other divisions of the Red Army will sweep back

into Latvia. They will ask everyone the question: What did you do to free our homeland from the invaders? Prove by fighting against the Germans that you love your homeland. [...] Every fighter in the Red Army can say with pride that he wages a war of liberation, a war for the freedom and independence of his fatherland. J. Stalin.

Bundesarchiv-Berlin. R 90/33, p. 1280. "Pressechef. Tgb. Nr. 202/43."

- ⁹ Like so many other native Communists who returned to their countries with the Red Army and helped re-impose Communist rule, Kalnbērziņš was subsequently purged from leadership in 1959 for his nationalist tendencies.
- ¹⁰ Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutsche Demokratische Republik, Zentraler Untersuchungsvorgang zur Untersuchung von NS- und Kriegsverbrechen 63 Bd. 26, p. 120 (hereafter: BStU ZUV). "Akt über die in der Stadt Riga begangenen Verbrechen und Zerstörungen durch die deutsch-faschistischen Eindringlinge und ihrer Helfershelfer." Rīga, 15 December 1944.
- ¹¹ BStU ZUV 63 Bd. 26, p. 125. "Akt über die in der Stadt Riga begangenen Verbrechen und Zerstörungen durch die deutsch-faschistischen Eindringlinge und ihrer Helfershelfer." Rīga, 15 December 1944.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 122.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 133.
- ¹⁴ "Destroy as Much as Possible...", pp. 342, 343, 347.
- ¹⁵ BStU ZUV 63 Bd. 26, p. 127. "Akt über die in der Stadt Riga begangenen Verbrechen und Zerstörungen durch die deutsch-faschistischen Eindringlinge und ihrer Helfershelfer." Rīga, 15 December 1944.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 131.
- ¹⁷ BStU ZUV 63 Bd. 26, pp. 151, 152. "Bericht der gerichtsmedizinische Expertenkommission zu den von den faschistischen deutschen Eindringlingen im Rayon Riga/Lett. SSR begangenen Verbrechen." Rīga, 12 December 1944.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 149–154.
- ¹⁹ BStU ZUV 63 Bd. 26, pp. 119–134. "Akt über die in der Stadt Riga begangenen Verbrechen und Zerstörungen durch die deutsch-faschistischen Eindringlinge und ihrer Helfershelfer." Rīga, 15 December 1944. A separate commission reported that the children were given poisoned porridge and coffee: BStU ZUV 63 Bd. 26, p. 169. "Akt über die Erschießung von 35 000 sowjetischen Kindern durch deutsch-faschistische Aggressoren auf dem Territorium der Lettischen SSR." Rīga, 5 May 1945.
- ²⁰ Ibid., pp. 164–188.
- ²¹ Ibid., pp. 164, 170–172.
- ²² Ibid., p. 169.

- ²³ Very valuable, detailed, and quantitative investigation of the murder of psychiatric patients across Latvia has been done by Rudīte Viksne. Rudīte Viksne (2003). *The Killing of the Mentally Ill During the German Occupation, 1941–1942*. In: *Holocausta izpētes jautājumi Latvijā*. Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, pp. 324–349 (Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti, 8).
- ²⁴ Viksne. *The Arājs Commando Member as Seen in the KGB Trial Files*, p. 352.
- ²⁵ Andrew Ezergailis once concluded that the Soviet investigations – the results of which were never disclosed to the public, but only tendered piecemeal to prosecutors abroad – were undertaken very seriously. Andrew Ezergailis (2002). *The Holocaust's Soviet Legacies in Latvia*. In: *Lessons and Legacies: The Holocaust and Justice*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp. 268–276. This source represents the last time that Ezergailis would make such a characterization. Later in his career, Ezergailis became increasingly less sanguine about the true value of Soviet representations of the Holocaust in Latvia, including those claims ostensibly rooted in the legal and academic professions. For his comprehensive polemic against the naïve use of Soviet sources, see: Andrew Ezergailis (2005). *Nazi/Soviet Disinformation About the Holocaust in Nazi-Occupied Latvia. 'Daugavas Vanagi – Who Are They?' Revisited*. Rīga: Latvijas 50 gadu okupācijas muzeja fonds. He argues that, in effect, Nazi and Soviet propaganda have historically complemented one another at the expense of the peoples of Eastern Europe, like the Latvians, who were caught between the two totalitarian juggernauts and that many in the West continue to unjustifiably credit them. It is not the mission of this article to dispute this claim (nor does this author wish to), but only to try to show that the findings of Soviet criminal processes at the individual level in the 1940s cannot all be thrown out and that Ezergailis's original position is the more defensible.
- ²⁶ Saīd Ivars Bērziņš, a very successful American Latvian defense attorney:

What happened there was: the Soviets had arranged a show trial for Linnas [an Estonian tried in absentia in 1962 by the Estonian SSR in a process parallel to those in Latvia]. Linnas lived here on Long Island. This was along all the show trials the Soviets staged back in the sixties. Yeah, they had the trial starting at a specific date and one of the reporters from the most prominent law journal [*Sovetskaja Zakonnost'*, or “Soviet Legality”] in Moscow was sent to Tallinn to report on the Linnas trial. But for one reason or another, the reporter arrived there and the trial got postponed. And the reporter had to get back to Moscow before the trial actually started. Well, he got back to Moscow and he wrote up his article. The whole thing with the Linnas conviction – everything in it. And the article by mistake got published be-

fore the trial began. Well, this, I think, is the starkest example of Soviet justice at that time. In other words, it wasn't justice; it was all propaganda.

The article reporting on the trial and sentence was published in December 1961, and the trial itself was held in January 1962. Ivars Bērziņš, Author's interview with Ivars Bērziņš. Babylon, New York, 11 June 2011. Here, the Soviets' appalling legal misconduct in the 1960s is used to more broadly discredit all Soviet judicial activity – a strategy used to excellent effect during Bērziņš's career.

- ²⁷ Staatarchiv Hamburg (hereafter: StaH). 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – NSG - 0044-09. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 25, p. 4401. Arturs Abols. "Vernehmungsprotokoll," Rīga, 16 October 1947, p. 4429.
- ²⁸ StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – NSG - 0044-11. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 35, pp. 6027, 6028. "Urteil im Namen der Union der sozialistischen Sowjetrepubliken." 1946. Also see: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – NSG - 0044-08. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 23, pp. 4187–4194. Arnolds Laukers. "Vernehmungsprotokoll." 12 and 28 March 1946.
- ²⁹ There are numerous examples. See: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – NSG - 0044-09. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 25, p. 4401. Arturs Abols. "Vernehmungsprotokoll," Rīga, 16 October 1947, p. 4429. "I tried to conceal my participation in the escort of Soviet citizens to the shooting because I feared a very harsh penalty."
- ³⁰ StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – NSG - 0044-09. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 25, pp. 4458, 4459. Roberts Gulbis. "Vernehmungsprotokoll," Rīga, 28 October 1944.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 4462.
- ³² StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – NSG - 0044-01. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 1, pp. 132–136. Roberts Gulbis. "Auszug aus Vernehmungsprotokoll." 4 December 1944.
- ³³ StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – NSG - 0044-09. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 27, pp. 4613–4616. Ričards Līgotnis. "Vernehmungsprotokoll." 5 December 1944.
- ³⁴ For another good example of captured Kommando members supplying names, see: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – NSG - 0044-09. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 27, pp. 4629–4631. Miervalds Laviņš. "Vernehmungsprotokoll." Feldarmee, 3 January 1944.

TIESA PROPAGANDAS AIZSEGĀ: “SOVJETU” VEIKTĀS ARĀJA KOMANDAS LOCEKĻU VAJĀŠANAS

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Sagatavošanā monogrāfija: “Nacistu kolaborantu tiesāšana aukstā kara laikā:
apsūdzības pret Viktoru Arāju un latviešu drošības palīgpolīciju”.

Kad 1944. gadā Latvijā atkal atgriezās padomju vara, tās pārstāvji uzsāka divus paralēlus procesus, lai izrēķinātos ar nacistu noziedzniekiem un viņu kolaborantiem, tādiem kā Arāja komandas locekļi. Pirmais no šiem procesiem bija publisks un politisks, otrais – slepens un juridisks. Oficiālais padomju stāsts bija krietni sagrozīts politisku mērķu dēļ: tas noklusēja nacistu upuru ebrejisko identitāti un padarīja neskaidru nacistu kolaborantu latvisko identitāti, daudzkārt pavairoja upuru skaitu un papildināja patiesu zvērību aprakstus ar izdomātiem. Tomēr, lai arī publikai slēpta, padomju varas orgānu veiktā izmeklēšana un apsūdzība bija efektīva, tika savākta precīza informācija par noziegumiem un notiesāti istie noziedznieki.

Atslēgas vārdi: Arāja komanda, holokausts, padomju tiesiskums, padomju propaganda, aukstais karš.

Padomju Savienība bija vadošā valsts, kas pēckara periodā tiesāja latviešu drošības palīgpolīcijā dienējušās personas. Pazīstama arī kā “Arāja komanda”, nosaukta tās komandiera Viktora Arāja vārdā, šī aptuveni 1200 vīru lielā brīvprātīgo kolaborantu vienība bija tiešā veidā atbildīga par vismaz 26 000 civiliedzīvotāju – lielākoties ebreju – nāvi Latvijas teritorijā nacistiskās Vācijas okupācijas laikā. Pirmie Padomju Savienības mēģinājumi sodīt par Arāja komandas veiktajiem noziegumiem sākās Otrā pasaules kara laikā, kad Sarkanā armija atgriezās Latvijā. Padomju vara starp 1944. un 1967. gadu notvēra, tiesāja un notiesāja kopumā 356 bijušos Arāja komandas locekļus.

Pastāv divas galvenās vēsturisko avotu grupas, kas jāpārbauda saistībā ar padomju varas mēģinājumiem sodīt par Arāja komandas noziegumiem divās desmitgadēs pēc Otrā pasaules kara. Pirmais informācijas avots ir Latvijas PSR Ārkārtējās komisijas visaptveroši ziņojumi, Padomju Savienības oficiālais novērtējums par nacistu un viņu līdzgaitnieku noziegumiem Latvijas Padomju Sociālistiskajā Republikā laika posmā no 1941. līdz 1945. gadam. Otrais informācijas avots ir Arāja komandas pratināšanas piezīmju un tiesas spriedumu

kopums. Salīdzinot šīs divas avotu grupas, dokumenti atklāj, ka, kamēr sabiedrībā tika izplatīta stipri maldīga informācija par vācu okupācijas gadiem, pašu vainīgo personu tiesāšana tika veikta prasmīgi un ar uzvaru uz patiesības noskaidrošanu.

Aspekti, kuros Ārkārtējās komisijas secinājumi ir pretrunā ar mūsu pašreizējo vēstures izpratni, var sniegt dažādas atklāsmes. Šo atšķirību pamatā ir Komunistiskās partijas vadības politiskā iejaukšanās un, iespējams, visuresošie aizspriedumi un sagaidāmais iznākums zemākā partijas līmenī. Kā jau paredzams, tie atspoguļo labi zināmo padomju attieksmi pret holokaustu: ebrejiem nodarītais notikumu atēlojumā netiek noliegts, bet tajā pašā laikā noziegumiem netiek piešķirts atbilstošs uzsvars vai uzmanība. Tomēr ir vērts pieminēt četras papildus īpatnības padomju ziņojumos. Pirmkārt, ziņojumi liecina, ka ebreju upuru identitāte netika īpaši izcelta, savukārt daudzu apsūdzēto piederība latviešiem tika maskēta, lai neteiktu pilnībā apslēpta. Otrkārt, latvieši tika atspoguļoti kā upuri, izceļot to nacionālo traģēdiju nacistu varas apstākļos. Treškārt, ziņojumi nevajadzīgi pārspīlēja šausminošos noziegumus, palielinot jau tā iespaidīgo upuru skaitu. Norādītais kopējais upuru skaits parasti tika trīskārt palielināts, līdz ar to kopējie dati (un arī no tiem izrietošā statistika par atsevišķām noziegumu vietām vai individuālām operācijām) bija ne tikai pretrunā Rietumvalstu aprēķiniem, bet arī izraisīja iekšējās uzskaites nesakritības. Visbeidzot, ceturtkārt, vairāki konkrēti padomju apgalvojumi par nacistu noziegumiem ir bez pierādījumiem, kas ļauj secināt, ka daži apgalvojumi tika izdomāti propagandas nolūkos. Tādējādi oficiālā varas nostāja ietvēra nopietnus sagrozījumus patiesai situācijas atspoguļošanai.

Tas, ka piespiešana bija padomju izmeklētāju, visticamāk, plaši izmantota metode pierādījumu vākšanai par Arāja komandu, pats par sevi nenozīmē, ka pierādījumu viltošana tika veikta šajā līmenī. Liecību pārbaude atklāja trīs pazīmes, ka zemākā līmeņa padomju izmeklētāji patiesi vēlējās uzzināt, kas notika Latvijā vācu okupācijas laikā. Pirmkārt, dažas liecības bija gan iekšēji pretrunīgas, gan pretrunā citām liecībām. Ja izmeklētāju uzdevums bija nomelnot bijušos Arāja komandas locekļus un saskaņot viņu liecības, lai nonāktu pie iepriekš noteiktiem secinājumiem, šādas pretrunas liecībās netiktu fiksētas. Otrkārt, ja izmeklētāji ieslodzītajiem liecības nodiktēja, tad ir nesaprotami, kāpēc tajās neparādās šaušalīgie apraksti, kas veido varas

oficiālo viedokli, bet gan tās vairāk līdzinās informācijai un stilam, ko turpmāk pieņēma Rietumvalstu juristi un vēsturnieki. Treškārt, ieslodzītajiem tika piešķirti samazināti ieslodzījuma termiņi apmaiņā pret sadarbību – pilnīgi nevajadzīgs solis, ja izmeklēšanas rezultāti par Arāja komandas noziegumiem bija jau iepriekš noteikti.

Kaut arī Padomju Savienības politiskās intereses spēlēja lielu lomu, kad tās nonāca pie jautājuma par atspoguļošanu sabiedrībai, tomēr atsevišķu noziegumu īstenotāju līmenī padomju centienos varēja manīt vēlmi izzināt patiesību – lai gan pilnā mērā nepieciešamības dēļ un neņemot vērā liberāli demokrātisko izpratni par taisnīgu izmeklēšanas procesu.

Ar šo netiek pateikts, ka padomju tiesu sistēma ievēroja liberāli demokrātiskos tiesiskuma principus vai ka zemākā līmeņa izmeklētāju secinājumus visos gadījumos var droši uzskatīt par pareiziem. Latvijas ieslodzītie lielākoties bija pakļauti iebiedēšanai un spīdzināšanai un netika uzskatīti par nevainīgiem, līdz noziegumi netika pierādīti. Turklāt Latvijas iedzīvotāji kopumā tika kolektīvi sodīti par dažu atsevišķu indivīdu izdarītajiem noziegumiem. Šajā rakstā aplūkota attieksme tikai pret Arāja komandas locekļiem līdz sešdesmitajiem gadiem, un to nedrīkst vispārināt attiecībā arī uz citiem gadījumiem.