

The Swedish-Latvian Relief Committee, German-Baltic and Swedish Intelligence and Impact on the Reception of War Criminals in Sweden

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A large number of Baltic refugees came to Sweden during the last months of the Second World War.¹ In the middle of July 1945 21 300 Estonian, 3 400 Latvian and 300 Lithuanian refugees were in Sweden. Another 6 500 Swedish-speaking Estonians had been evacuated in different waves during the war.² A small number of these refugees, 146 members of the Latvian and Estonian regiments that had fought alongside the German forces during the war and arrived to Sweden in military uniforms, together with about 3 000 Germans and other nationalities in German uniforms were in early spring 1946 handed over to the Soviet Union according to the cease-fire agreements.³ A number of suspected collaborators and war criminals were also declared as undesired in Sweden and chose to leave the country for Latin America or the Caribbean.⁴

Most of the refugees arrived in small boats that on a more or less commercial basis were trafficking the war-ridden sea, with peaks in August-October 1944 (Estonia and Latvia except Kurzeme) and February-May 1945 (Kurzeme). Some of them, probably about 1100-1500, came with boats that were financed by the Swedish Defence Command for intelligence tasks. Crews appointed by the Estonian or Swedish-Latvian relief committees, who both for a while consequently became parts of Swedish defence efforts, largely manned these boats. They paid a price for this, as both boats and drivers were lost, but on the other hand they could quite liberally chose who could and who could not come aboard on the trip to safety.⁵ This was a freedom that could be used for political purposes.⁶

It is no secret that the Nazi-German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 had caused sighs of relief among Swedish military dignitaries. The Soviet occupied Baltic states could, as Swedish military doctrine upheld, have been used by the Soviets for an attack against Sweden, but it was highly improbable that a German attack would come from that direction. The Swedish intelligence had good relations with the Wehrmacht part of German intelligence, Abwehr, and in autumn 1941 Swedish intelligence officer Helmut Ternberg was even invited as a guest to the German-Finnish side of the Leningrad frontline.⁷

However, in autumn 1944, and especially after the Soviet-Finnish peace treaty in September, Sweden was in dire need of intelligence from the Baltic area. Refugees were on a routine basis interrogated after arrival, and young men were recruited as drivers to the sponsored boats.⁸ It is highly probable that in the process the original Swedish net of agents in the Baltic states (which is believed to have been crushed during the German occupation) was largely replaced by Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians who had been working for the Germans. The Swedish Defence Command has largely burnt the archives that could have given a precise account of this, but from what we know of the intelligence traffic that between 1947-1957 was pursued for intelligence reasons by British, American and Swedish authorities we can establish that both convinced nazis and ardent democrats were among the Baltic volunteers.⁹

The Political Quarrels of the Swedish-Latvian Relief Committee

Allegations about the nazi past of Baltic refugees have been quite common in Sweden.¹⁰ More to the point, these kinds of complaints have also been waged against Baltic refugee organisations.¹¹ The Swedish-Latvian Relief Committee is a case in point, as it was alleged from the outset that it had deliberately been transporting high echelons of the Latvian nazi hierarchy away from the double threat of Soviet forces and German-organised forced evacuation. At the same time, patriotically inclined refugees, as well as Jews and communists had been denied place in the boats.¹² The coalition of Ulmanis-loyal, German-friendly and democratically inclined exile Latvians in the Committee had begun to crack already in autumn 1944 and in April 1945 the split came open. The democratic centre-left coalition around Feliks Cielens and social democrat Bruno Kalnins was fiercely attacked by an ulmanist right-wing-nazi fraction around the paper *Latvju Vards* and professors Balodis, Straubergs and Warsbergs. Leonids Silins, the secretary of the organisation who seems to have been the person responsible for the adventurous boat tours sided with the Cielens side but was at least temporarily marginalized. A reverend Slokenbergs was sent out to the refugee camps (where only priests could enter) to make propaganda for the rightist fraction, but was stopped by Swedish authorities after complaints from the Cielens group represented by former chief of Riga Criminal Police Alexander Ozolins.¹³ According to police estimates about 200 persons actively sided with the rightist group.¹⁴ Among them were for instance Arturs Kroders, former editor of SD puppet paper *Tevija* and Rudolfs Turks, a Arajs Command (SD) soldier from Riga.¹⁵

The Treatment of War Criminals and other Criminals

As a reaction to the war events and the stream of refugees from the Baltic area in autumn 1944, the Swedish Government 13 October 1944 asked the Director of the Swedish Security Police Georg Thulin to make arrangements for a thorough interrogation of the refugees. Thulin issued a national order 19 October to all police districts about what information should be sought. In essence, it read as follows:

- 1) Who is or was a member of nazi or communist organisations;
- 2) Who had been helping the occupying powers, and who had especially been helping them with intelligence information, ruthless expropriations or participating in or facilitating actions of terror;
- 3) Who had been taking advantage of acts by the occupying power or the difficult situation of refugees;
- 4) And who were ordinary criminals?

Altogether, these interrogations led to the taking into custody of 60 persons. The authorities took into account the difficulties in determining the level of treason in the complicated cases of the Baltic states, but nonetheless came to the conclusion that members of the SS in its many manifestations should be subject to special treatment. In December 1945 only seven people remained in custody.¹⁶ However, it had also become clear that the organisational and political difficulties made the interrogation operations harder to organise. In February 1945 it was noted by the head of security police that the routine to appoint policemen as contact persons was less well suited among the Baltic refugees as many policemen were actually suspected as collaborators and war criminals. It was also noted that translators had to be picked with greater diligence, for reasons that we will see below.

Alfreds Vadzemnieks

Alfreds Vadzemnieks arrived to the Swedish island Gotland 20 September 1944. The Security Police was alerted to this fact by a letter ten days later from the Swedish Military Counter Intelligence that labelled him as a “Latvian patriot, who has been in the service of Gestapo”. As he travelled with Alexander Ozolins, who it was hoped could bring information on a recently arrived suspected Soviet agent it is probable that the information came from the Relief Committee transporters – probably directly from Leonids Silins. It is also probable that it in fact was the Committee that had undertaken the transport of both Ozolins and Vadzemnieks.¹⁷ However, as that Vadzemnieks was reported on by altogether 18 other refugees as an ardent SD man, murderer and nazi, things became more complicated. An investigation was started, where it became clear that Vadzemnieks had held a high position by the SD in Ventspils/Windau. Although denying that he had actually led the department, he concurred that he as the most senior Latvian in charge had had some liberty to decide over the work of subordinates. For the rest he referred to the Relief Committee.

As it turned out, the most damaging witness in his case was a fisherman Rudolf Ozols, who claimed that he while being in jail for membership in a Fishermen’s cooperative during the Soviet occupation, actually had seen Vadzemnieks forcing Latvian men to enter a truck that would take them to their execution. Shortly afterwards, the Swedish refugee camp guards got hold of a letter sent from imprisoned Vadzemnieks to Leonids Silins at the office of the Relief Committee 26 November 1944, where he pleaded:

I am not asking for a return favour from you, Mr Silins, because I on that occasion saved you from custody with everything that that could have brought, but I ask you, if this is not too much trouble for you and if it is possible, that you for the sake of justice would take action in Stockholm so that the investigation against me can be brought to an end as soon as possible and so that I soon enough can return to my family.

It did not become clear when and where Silins had been saved by Vadzemnieks, and the letter did not suggest any specific way of action.¹⁸ However, since Ozolins had acted as translator when Ozols first was interrogated, this was not necessary. When Ozols was questioned for the second time 11 December, he had no memories of any wrongdoings by Vadzemnieks, but on the contrary could mention a person who could testify that he as claimed had joined the SD only for patriotic reasons. This version had been corroborated by Ozolins a couple of days before, claiming both that Vadzemnieks had been ordered by “the patriots” to join the SD in the first place, and had helped Silins to escape from custody. Ozolins also suggested that it should be investigated if not those who had made allegations against Vadzemnieks were communists.¹⁹

Vadzemnieks was also mentioned in an anonymous letter that reached the Security Police 30 January 1945, bringing allegations against a number of different Latvians. Lieutenant Alexander Vabulis, who under the name Andersen had come to Sweden in April 1944, had written this letter. Vabulis also emphasised that Silins with threats could force Latvian refugees to change their testimonies. However, also this investigation led to nothing. Vabulis returned to Soviet-occupied Latvia in the summer 1945, and could start a career within the harbour administration. The Security Police held him to be a Soviet agent.

Vadzemnieks was questioned once more in March 1954, as preparation for his request to become a Swedish citizen. Although the interrogators at the end of the protocol said that they doubted his story, he had no problems receiving his citizenship one year later. This meant that when the Soviet-edited magazine *Dzimtenes Balss* in 1961 repeated the allegations against both Vadzemnieks and the Relief Committee, citing among others Ozols (who also had

returned), there was no possibility that the allegations could lead to any substantive action. More than that, at this point the Security Police was convinced that the Vabulis part of the campaign had been a Soviet-initiated plot, which now only was continued in the Latvian-language Soviet press. Security Police chief Georg Thulin added with a pencil on the report: “The claim that he has been helping the occupation authorities very likely must be doubted.”²⁰

Karlis Lobe

Lobe ended the war as a commanding officer of the Latvian Waffen-SS forces, and was taken as a prisoner by the British. In 1949, however, economic assistance to displaced persons was about to cease and again the Latvian Relief Committee took action. His foster son, living in Sweden together with the Relief Committee promised to take the economic responsibility for Lobe and his wife, who then got a visa to arrive to Sweden late in the autumn 1950. Lobe worked at the railway for a couple of years until he in 1954 got an assignment at the Swedish War Archive, where he worked until retirement.²¹ The Swedish authorities seem to have had no indications about Lobe’s past – there was for instance no security police file on him before the 1960s. However, Lobe took an active part in the political life on the extreme right wing of the exile organisations, and was for instance in 1958 the host of Vilis Janums, World leader of the SS fraternity organisation Daugavas Vanagi.²² He held an important position in the Latvian Central Council, which also was close to the former SS circles.²³

This may not surprise, since Lobe is one of the most well known of the Latvian war criminals. In contrast to Vadzemnieks, he is mentioned in Andrew Ezergailis’ remarkable work *The Holocaust in Latvia 1941-1944*, where he is held to have been responsible for the gathering of Jewish men for execution in the Ventspils/Windau district between July and September 1941.²⁴ In other sources he is also pointed out as the leader of the 280th Latvian “Police Regiment”, which is alleged to have committed atrocities in Byelorussia in 1943. These allegations were first brought to the knowledge of the Swedish authorities in early 1963, when the West German Embassy brought a message from the General Prosecutor in Hannover to the Foreigner’s Commission:

In einem von der Staatsanwaltschaft Hannover anhängigen Ermittlungsverfahren wegen Mordes und beihilfe zum Morde an der jüdischen Bevölkerung in Libau und anderen Orten in Lettland während des zweiten Weltkrieges ist die Ermittlung des Aufenthaltsortes und der Anschrift des Obengenannten [Lobe] erforderlich.

The Commission immediately sent the message to the Foreign Office, pointing out that the Embassy confidentially had let it be clear that the suspicions were seriously meant. The Foreign Office sent the letter to the Justice Department, which at the time was processing a request for citizenship. The Stockholm court on request from Hannover also had questioned Lobe. When the request was taken up by the Swedish government a couple of months later, 27 July 1963, information about the German investigation was included, adding, “so far, no request for deportation has been made”.²⁵ Nonetheless, the Government’s protocol does not contain any indications that this in anyway was viewed as something that could be considered as a problem when citizenship the same day was granted.²⁶ Again, this meant that when in 1969 information about Lobe’s doings was issued to the Swedish government both by the Soviets and by Simon Wiesenthal, this was all in vain. As a Swedish citizen, Lobe could not be deported and because of the 25 year Swedish statute of limitation he could also not be brought before a Swedish court. The letters however provoked some publicity, and Lobe took himself contact with the press to explain his case. Two papers, liberal *Kvällsposten* and communist *Ny Dag* were sued by Lobe with the backing of the Latvian National Fund.

Kvällsposten chose to pay a remedy before the case came up in the court, but *Ny Dag* decided to fight in court and won what in effect became the only war crimes trial so far held in Sweden. In 1971 Lobe was for the second time heard on request of the Hannover court, but also this time he refused to go to Hannover.

Conclusion

First, it seems necessary to look deeper into the role of the exile organisations both in upholding relations with the warring parties, as long as they existed, as well as to administer the relations between refugees and the authorities of the hosting country.

Secondly, I have so far found no conclusive explanation of the relative Swedish inaction against war criminals, but it seems that part of the answer lies in the fact that Soviet agents at least were suspected to have been the first to hand out such allegations. This made the allegations suspect in the eyes of both the police and other authorities. To repeat, I do not think that this is the only factor, but it seems that it is important to look into the interplay between Soviet and pro-nazi agents in Sweden during the last years of the war.

Notes

¹ This paper draws on research made within the research programme “Swenaz”, running 2002-2005, which is funded by the Swedish government and aims at furthering the understanding of Sweden’s position during and after the German nazi era. One of the cornerstones of the programme is the drastically increased access to previously classified material that has occurred (not only in Sweden) during the last decade.

² Lars Olsson, *På tröskeln till folkhemmet*, Malmö 1995, 26, Table 2.

³ This episode is thoroughly researched, see Per Olov Enqvist, *Legionärerna*, Stockholm 1968; Curt Ekholm, *Balt- och tyskutlämningen 1945-46, Omständigheter kring interneringen i läger i Sverige och utlämningen till Sovjetunionen av f d tyska krigsdeltagare*, Uppsala 1995; Valentins Sliamikelis, *With the Baltic Flag through Three Occupations*, Riga 2002.

⁴ Among these were the Estonian SD-men Evald Mikson and Harry Männils, who both left for Venezuela but of whom Mikson got stranded in Iceland, and Latvian SD-man Rudolfs Turks, who early in 1946 fled through Denmark to Germany, where apparently he succeeded in avoiding justice. There were many more who left Sweden within the first few years. It goes without saying that only a portion of these were criminals.

⁵ The Sandler Commission, appointed to audit the Swedish refugee policy during the war, in a secret fourth band of its report investigated allegations that Jews had special difficulties in getting access to the Swedish-financed boats. The Commission concluded that no conclusive evidence could be found, but that on the other hand its knowledge of this traffic largely remained inconclusive. The Baltic refugee and intelligence traffic has lately been studied by Lars Ericson, see his ‘Exodus och underrättelseinhämtning, Det svenska försvaret och Baltikum, hösten 1943-våren 1945’, in *Värstomar 1944 – krigsslutet skönjes* (Bo Huldtt & Klaus-Richard Böhme ed.), Stockholm 1995.

⁶ Altogether it seems that the Baltic committees transported about 3 000 refugees. What is not clear is the extent of Defence Command involvement in these trips. There is however agreement that the Defence Command had almost no control of who the boats transported. See Ericson, 117-118.

⁷ Ericson, 90.

⁸ Ericson, 106-107.

⁹ Peter Kadhammar, *De sammansvurna*, Stockholm 1999.

¹⁰ On the xenophobic reactions toward Baltic refugees among workers in Norrköping during and after the war, see Björn Horgby, *Dom där, Främlingsfientligheten och arbetarkulturen i Norrköping 1890-1960*, esp 79-153.

¹¹ See for instance Janerik Larsson, *Spionen som politiker*, Uddevalla 1969, 68-74, on the Estonian National Fund.

¹² See the Sandler Commission Band IV, 24-25, National Archives.

¹³ Stockholms Polis Kriminalavdelningen 6:e roteln 10:11/6a Report 15 May 1945.

¹⁴ Stockholms Polis Kriminalavdelningen 6:e roteln HA 801/46 Report 23 January 1947, 9.

¹⁵ Stockholms Polis Kriminalavdelningen 6:e roteln HA 801/46 Report 23 January 1947, 34, 55.

¹⁶ Sandler Commission Band IV, 8-11, National Archives.

¹⁷ Security Police P 4582, Letter from Fst/In 30/9 1944.

¹⁸ Silins was, though, arrested in 1943 by the SD, and mysteriously released.

¹⁹ All documents in Security Police P 4582.

²⁰ All documents in Security Police P 4582.

²¹ The State’s Foreigner’s Commission. C-dossier Karlis Lobe. National Archives.

²² The State’s Foreigner’s Commission. C-dossier Vilis Janums. National Archives.

²³ Security Police P 7643, Report from “KS”.

²⁴ Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia 1941-1944*, Riga/Washington 1996, 298-302. There is however no evidence that Lobe was present during the executions. Rudite Viksne has recently suggested that Lobe left Ventspils already in August; Rudite Viksne, ‘Ebruju iznicinasana Ventspili 1941 gada’, in *The issues of the Holocaust research in Latvia, Report of an international seminar 29 novemver 2001*, Riga and the Holocaust studies in Latvia 2001-2002, Riga 2003, 67-100.

²⁵ Niedersächsische Landesarchiv 721 Hannover 61/83 Bd 4:VIII p 65-66. Internal correspondence 27 June 1963 makes it clear that the German prosecutors don’t consider their evidence strong enough for a deportation case, but also that they want to hold the case open. There is no indication neither that the German prosecutors knew that Lobe was just about to become a Swedish citizen, nor that the Swedes made any effort to inform them about that.

²⁶ Justice Department Vol A2BB:75 Listor 25/7 63; E2BA M6, National Archives.