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Liberal government called on to release still-secret documents on Nazi war criminals living in Canada

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Published Sep 27, 2023 • Last updated 1 day ago • 3 minute read



David Matas, honorary counsel for B'nai Brith, said the Jewish advocacy organization had "run up against a brick wall," over the government's decision to continue withholding records about alleged Nazi war criminals who settled in Canada. PHOTO BY SEAN KILPATRICK /THE CANADIAN PRESS

A Jewish advocacy group is calling on the Liberal government to release a still-secret 40-year-old report and other documents containing details about alleged Nazi war criminals living in Canada.

The federal government has withheld a second part of a 1986 government commission report about Nazis who settled in Canada. In addition, it has heavily censored another 1986 report examining how Nazis were able to get into Canada. More than 600 pages of that document, obtained by this newspaper and other organizations through the Access to Information law, have been censored.

David Matas, the honorary counsel for B'nai Brith, said the Jewish advocacy organization was also pushing for the release of RCMP and Department of Justice files on alleged Nazi war criminals in Canada. "We've run up against a brick wall," he said of the government's decision to continue withholding the records.

Immigration Minister Marc Miller said Wednesday that the government could take another look at whether the records should be released. "Canada has a really dark history with Nazis in Canada," Miller said as he headed into the weekly Liberal caucus meeting.

“There was a point in our history where it was easier to get in as a Nazi than it was as a Jewish person. I think that’s a history we have to reconcile.”

Matas said Canada’s track record in dealing with alleged Nazi criminals was poor. In a February submission to the House of Commons committee on Access to Information, B’nai Brith pointed out that the Canadian government’s approach to Nazi war criminals had been marked with “intentional harbouring of known Nazi war criminals” as well as “deliberate inaction.”



Yaroslav Hunka, right, waits for the arrival of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the House of Commons in Ottawa last Friday. PHOTO BY PATRICK DOYLE /The Canadian Press

The Canadian government is continuing to deal with an ongoing controversy after MPs in the House of Commons last Friday honoured a Canadian-Ukrainian man who had served in a Nazi SS division. Yaroslav Hunka of North Bay, Ont., received two standing ovations from MPs during a visit to Canada by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The honours for Hunka sparked anger on social media and prompted the resignation of House of Commons speaker Anthony Rota, who had arranged for the SS soldier to be fêted.

Hunka volunteered to fight for the 14th Waffen-SS Division Galicia, a Nazi military unit that recruited Ukrainians. Poland and Jewish groups have denounced the division for its role in killing civilians and its involvement in massacres during the Second World War. The division was also used by the Nazis to crush a national uprising in Slovakia, again prompting allegations of war crimes.

Witold Dzielski, Poland's ambassador to Canada, has called for Canada to formally apologize for honouring Hunka.

It is suspected that large numbers of SS soldiers and other Nazi collaborators from eastern Europe settled in Canada after the war.

Matas said the documents still being withheld by the federal government were believed to contain the names of alleged Nazi war criminals admitted into Canada.

Many of the records being sought are linked to the 1986 war crimes commission led by Justice Jules Deschenes.

After the Second World War, the International Military Tribunal declared the SS to be a criminal organization. That included units of the Waffen SS such as the Galicia division. Despite that international finding, Deschenes concluded that membership in the division did not itself constitute a war crime.

Some nationalist Ukrainian-Canadians see the 14th Waffen Division as heroes for their battles against Russian forces who were, along with Canada, the United States and Britain, part of a coalition to defeat Nazi Germany. Monuments honouring the Ukrainian SS troops have been erected in Oakville, Ont., and Edmonton. B'nai Brith Canada and the Canadian Polish Congress have jointly called for the removal of those monuments.

Deschenes's commission has been criticized by some Jews for failing to delve too deeply into the war criminal issue.

In 2005, the release of new documents from the British government archives outlined warnings about the members of SS Galicia and efforts to dump them in Canada.

"The Division was an SS division and technically all of its officers and senior NCOs are liable for trial as war criminals," one report for the British government noted.

In another report from 1948, British government official Beryl Hughes talked about efforts to send SS members to Canada. "What little we know of their war record is bad," wrote Hughes, who was handling the issue for Britain's Home Office. "We're still hoping to get rid of the less desirable Ukrainian PoWs either to Germany or Canada."

With files from The Canadian Press

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