

INTERNATIONAL GAFFE

Ukrainian Nazi applauded in Canada betrays historical ignorance

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The video of an SS veteran being applauded by Zelensky, Trudeau and the entire Canadian House of Commons, appears something like a Russian propaganda ploy. It certainly would not pass the scrutiny of fact checkers. Instead, the scene really took

place and registers the grotesque mistake made by the President of the Chamber, Anthony Rota, MP of the Liberals (the same party as the Prime Minister). Moreover, the episode demonstrates how much ignorance and superficiality exists, at all levels, of the tragic history of the "bloodlands:" the territories which were occupied by both the Soviets and the Nazis during the Second World War. Subsequently, Anthony Rota has resigned, but the political and diplomatic consequences remain, especially with Poland.

During the visit of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to Canada, the day after his speech at the UN General Assembly, the President of the House of Commons pointed to an elderly gentleman present in the public gallery: "a Ukrainian war veteran, World War II Canadian, who fought for Ukrainian independence against the Russians", he said. He introduced him as: "a Ukrainian and Canadian hero". The entire House then gave him a standing ovation. The 98-year-old man, visibly moved, thanked everyone for so much love which he had never received until then from the highest authorities of the State that had hosted him since 1951. The inconvenient truth is that that veteran, Jaroslav Hunka, actually fought against the Soviets, but on the side of the Nazis. The Wiesenthal Center immediately commented on the Speaker of the House of Commons' oversight: "the horrific fact that Hunka served in the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS, a Nazi military unit whose crimes against humanity during the Holocaust are well documented."

Russia also immediately joined the protest. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called for a formal condemnation of Nazism by the Canadian Parliament and suggested that Hunka be put on trial. Despite his advanced age, the crimes of Nazism do not fall under the statute of limitations, as demonstrated by the Priebke trial in Italy. In the meantime, Moscow couldn't be more grateful for this sudden windfall. Officially, Russia has always portrayed the Ukrainian government as "neo-Nazi", despite Zelensky being Jewish. And Putin, according to his speech to the nation on February 24, 2022, launched the invasion (officially a "special military operation") to "denazify" the neighbouring country.

In fact, The Canadians' disgrace is an unexpected success for the Russian propaganda machine. In addition, Russia's bitter enemy is also requesting extradition: Poland. Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek said his government was considering an extradition request for Hunka because the division in which he served is accused by Polish sources of serious crimes, including the Huta Pieniacka massacre (between 500 and 1200 deaths depending on estimates, out of a population of 2 thousand people). It is not yet entirely clear, however, whether the Ukrainian units that took part in the massacre were actually part of that division.

Anthony Rota apologised to the Jewish community, but not to the Russians or Poles. Prime Minister Trudeau assured everyone that he was not aware of anything. Rota took full responsibility for the accident and resigned on September 26.

Yet, one wonders, how could such a serious mistake happen take place. Without doubt, Ignorance about Eastern European history is part of the explanation. The story of soldier Hunka is part of a chapter of the Second World War unknown to most. He was born in 1925 in eastern Poland, in the village of Urman. In 1939, when he was 14 years old, his entire region was annexed by the Soviets. The Ukrainians, including Hunka's family, were advantaged compared to the Poles deported en masse during the two years of harsh occupation. Nonetheless, everyone suffered under Stalin's occupation: state atheism, collectivisation of lands, nationalisation of all private activities.

In 1941 the same region was invaded by the Germans. More massacres took place, against other targets: communists, people's commissars, Jews, all those considered collaborators of the Soviets. Above all, the Jews were exterminated on mass by the Einsatzgruppen, special forces following the Nazi military police. The Battle of Stalingrad, lost in early 1943, ended all German hopes of decisively winning the war against the USSR. The occupiers changed their attitude and promised the Russians a Russia free from Bolshevism and national independence to the non-Russian peoples subjected by

Moscow (including the Ukrainians). It was precisely in 1943 that Jaroslav Hunka, as soon as he came of age, decided to enlist in the Waffen SS, in the 14th division, also known as the First Division of Galicia (the western Ukrainian region), attracted by the promise of a fight for independence from Moscow.

The unit in which Hunka served participated in all the final phases of the conflict: a fighting retreat that, from Lviv, pushed it to Graz, Austria. With the surrender of Germany, the division was disarmed by British forces, his men were transferred to the Rimini prison camp. The luckiest were freed in 1947 and transferred to Spain, France and especially the United Kingdom.

Among the latter there was also Jaroslav Hunka, who soon married an English woman and moved to Toronto with his new family. He made a new life for himself, graduated, became an aeronautical technician, inspector for Havilland (the same company that produced the Mosquito bombers and reconnaissance planes in wartime). He never denied his past. Indeed, he continued to recount his war memories ("the best period of my life") in a Ukrainian-language blog, dedicated above all to Waffen SS veterans.

If this information was so publicly available, then why was this political mistake made? Because it is always difficult to understand that on the Eastern Front two totalitarianisms faced each other, mirror-image and opposite, both responsible for tens of millions of deaths, one presenting itself as the liberator from the tyranny of the other. Under those circumstances it is unlikely that a veteran would have fought for freedom. If Rota had hosted a Ukrainian Red Army veteran, a compatriot and contemporary of his Waffen SS enemy, he would have raised the same moral problem. Because the Soviet regime was also guilty of mass crimes in Ukraine, during the same war, including the mass deportation of the Crimean Tatars. The important thing is not to choose the totalitarianism which, momentarily, appears more friendly to us. What is important, if anything, is to give a voice to the victims of both regimes. And the victims in Ukraine were and still are the silent majority.