

British government does not prosecute Nazi war criminal

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The British government is refusing to prosecute the well-known Latvian war criminal Konrad Kalejs.

Kalejs is a former officer of a Nazi Latvian killing squad during World War II which is held responsible for the death of up to 30,000 civilians. An American documentary programme entitled *Buried Secrets*, shown on December 3 by the ABC Network, first revealed that he was living in Britain, in the luxury retirement home for Latvian pensioners called Catthorpe Manor in the village of Catthorpe, near Rugby.

The documentary was shown to officials of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, who subsequently informed Warwickshire Police on December 27. The Home Office immediately came under pressure to arrest Kalejs under the 1991 War Crimes Act and to prosecute him in Britain. On New Years Eve there were meetings held between officers of Scotland Yard, Leicestershire Police, the immigration service and Home Office officials to discuss the situation.

Home Secretary Jack Straw opened an investigation about the circumstances of Kalejs' entry into the country, but from the start was unwilling to go any further. "There is no extradition warrant, no arrest warrant and no court order against him, so, yes, that would mean there is no way we could stop him leaving," a Home Office spokesman said on January 2. The next day, Straw made the decision to deport Kalejs. He told BBC Radio 4's PM programme: "The police have pursued these inquiries very assiduously. They have concluded that there is at present no grounds on which they can make an arrest. We have to follow the rule of law—there is insufficient evidence at this stage to effect an arrest, so no arrest can be made."

The stance taken by Straw was described by Mike Whine of the Board of Deputies of British Jews as

"bottling out." Whine added, "The home secretary took the easy option." Straw refused to even examine the evidence against Kalejs, because—like Australia, the US and Canada before—Britain fears an examination of the role of the Allied governments in allowing so many key Nazis to evade prosecution. A prosecution would also raise why it was that a suspected war criminal deported from both the US and Canada could have been let into Britain, possibly as long ago as 1998.

Kalejs was an officer of the notorious Arajs Kommando unit, which worked with the German SS during the war. The unit existed for the purpose of brutal subjugation, terror and mass murder. Kalejs, who was born in Riga in 1913, allegedly joined the security police in German-occupied Latvia in July 1941 and rose to the rank of company commander. He is said to have organised atrocities while working at the Salaspis concentration camp near Riga, where thousands of Jews, communists and Gypsies were killed. An official who led a US Justice Department inquiry into Kalejs told the *Guardian* newspaper, "The evidence we presented in court was documentary evidence that he was in the Arajs Kommando, a mobile killing unit, and we presented testimonies of people who served with him who implicate him in atrocities."

Zelda Chayat is a Jew, whose family was murdered by the unit. She told the press that she had heard a group of officers including Kalejs bragging about killing Jews in the aftermath of two massacres in Latvia in 1941. In the US, Private Rudolf Soms testified that in February 1942 the company led by Kalejs exterminated gypsies in a village near Zabolyte, close to Latvia's eastern border. A month later it destroyed the Latvian town of Sanniki and surrounding villages, killing the civilian population. The leader of the force, Viktors Arajs, was jailed for life in Hamburg in 1979

for war crimes.

After the war, Kalejs went to Australia as a “displaced person”. In 1957 he became an Australian citizen. In 1959 Kalejs moved to the US, where he lived for more than 30 years. During this time he made millions in the real estate business; but then details of his wartime past were revealed. In a 1993 opinion, the 7th US Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago described him as a company commander in a pro-Nazi unit that killed thousands at the Salaspils labour camp. Instead of being prosecuted, however, he was deported from the US in 1994 and went back to Australia. There he faced renewed pressure from Jewish groups and fled to Canada, from where he was deported again for war crimes in 1997.

Back in Australia he had to face an investigation into his past, which was dropped due to “insufficient evidence”. He was not even stripped of his citizenship. Prime Minister Howard explained the decision thus: “We can't take away his citizenship without passing retrospective law, and that would open up a whole, huge debate, and I don't want to do that.” This was not surprising, since hundreds of war criminals made their way to Australia through the International Refugee Organisation set up under the auspices of the Allied powers, often going on to assume prominent positions in their new home.

At the time of the investigation into Kalejs the Simon Wiesenthal Center urged Australia to investigate 64 suspected Latvian war criminals living in Australia. Dr. Zuroff, its director, said: "Under the current circumstances, Australia is an ideal haven for Nazi war criminals, and this will continue to be the case until the Australian government makes a concerted effort to take legal action against Holocaust perpetrators residing all over the country.”

Things have not changed. The Australian government has signalled that Kalejs is free to return.

It is now rumoured that Kalejs will take up residence in Mexico, where he is said to have friends.



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