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Russia-Canada war of words turns hostile amid Nazi accusations



2015: Germany charges Hubert Z., 94-year-old former Nazi SS officer with murders at Auschwitz

2015: Vladimir Katriuk, 93 years old, took part in massacre of Khatyn village on March 22, 1943. Still lives in Ormstown, Quebec, Canada, never faced justice

By: Lee Berthiaume
Ottawa Citizen

A 93-year-old Quebec beekeeper accused of being a Nazi war criminal has become the latest salvo in an increasingly hostile war of words between the Canadian and Russian governments.

The two countries have been slinging insults and accusations at each other on Twitter and other social media since Russia annexed Crimea and began providing military support to separatist forces in Ukraine last year.

References to the Nazis have figured prominently in that battle since Prime Minister Stephen Harper became the first leader to liken Russia's annexation of Crimea last year with Hitler's move to grab parts of the current Czech Republic in the lead-up to the Second World War.

Russia in turn has claimed that neo-Nazis and other right-wing extremists dominate Ukraine's political scene as it has sought to undermine international support for Ukraine's new

government. As a result, it has insinuated that Canada is turning a blind eye to fascism in Ukraine — and now at home.

The latest salvo came Monday when the Russian Embassy tweeted a 2012 photo of Vladimir Katriuk, writing: “It’s 2015 and Vladimir #Katriuk still hasn’t been brought to justice.” A similar email was sent to journalists and others who have had past contact with the embassy. Katriuk, who was born in Ukraine and currently raises bees on a farm south of Montreal, has been accused of helping massacre an entire village in what is now Belarus while serving with the Nazis in 1943.

After fleeing to Canada with his wife using false names in 1951, a Federal Court judge ruled in 1999 that Katriuk obtained his Canadian citizenship fraudulently. But the Conservative government said it did not have enough evidence to prove he’d committed war crimes, and decided not to revoke his citizenship in 2007.

In April 2012, after a Jewish human rights group presented what it said was new information directly implicating him in the Khatyn massacre, cabinet ministers Jason Kenney and Rob Nicholson reportedly told Holocaust survivors that the government would revisit Katriuk’s case.

Asked for an update this week, Justice Minister Peter MacKay’s office said in a statement: “Investigations into Second World War allegations will continue as long as viable routes of investigation remain open.” But the statement did not mention any new review, and instead referred to past court and government decisions.

Katriuk has repeatedly denied the allegations against him.

Avi Benlolo is president of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre, which organized the meeting with Kenney and Nicholson three years ago. His organization has been pushing the government to take action against Katriuk and other suspected Nazi war criminals currently living free in Canada.

“I think that the Canadian government has dropped the ball on this,” Benlolo said. “We saw ministers and spoke to ministers quite directly about this in 2012. We provided them with a report. We brought in Holocaust survivors. And it was very difficult for the survivors to come and speak to them about it.”

Benlolo said he was particularly disappointed the new information presented to Kenney and Nicholson doesn’t appear to have been acted upon. He believes the government is simply waiting for Katriuk and other suspected Nazi war criminals to die of old age.

But Benlolo was also critical of what he saw as the Russian embassy’s attempt to politicize Katriuk’s case as part of a broader propaganda war with Canada over Ukraine.

“I don’t think leveraging this for political means or gains is the right approach,” Benlolo said. “And that’s what I believe (Russia’s) been trying to do. And I find it very distasteful. It just doesn’t smell right.”

The Russian Embassy also tweeted a picture this week of International Trade Minister Ed Fast and Conservative MPs Ted Opitz and Bernard Trottier meeting Ukrainian-Canadians in Toronto. The photo is altered to highlight a portrait of controversial Ukrainian figure Stepan Bandera in the background.

Many Ukrainians consider Bandera a hero for having fought for an independent Ukraine during the Second World War. But Russians say he was a Nazi collaborator as his push for an independent Ukraine included making a pact with Hitler, whom he believed more likely to accept a free Ukraine than the Soviet Union.

“Glorification of #Nazi Collaborators (Stepan #Bandera) is inappropriate and shameful,” the Russian Embassy tweet says below the picture of Fast, Opitz and Trottier.

Russia has also criticized Canada for opposing a Russian-sponsored UN resolution condemning the glorification of Nazism in November. Canada, the U.S. and Ukraine were the only three countries to vote against the resolution, which passed with 115 votes in favour and 55 abstentions.

Foreign Affairs spokesman Francois Lasalle dismissed Russia’s allegations in an email on Thursday, writing: “The idea that Canada has ever been ‘soft’ on Nazism is preposterous. These latest Russian allegations deserve no further response.”

Roland Paris, founding director of the University of Ottawa’s Centre for International Policy Studies, says the Nazi comparison show just how far relations between Canada and Russia have sunk over the past year.

“It’s a very powerful analogy and accusation to level,” Paris said. “The relationship with Russia is now openly hostile.”