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Russians Fume as Latvians Honor Waffen SS Fighters

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A man holding up a Latvian flag during a Waffen SS procession in Riga. **Ints Kalnins**

RIGA, Latvia — More than 1,000 people paid tribute Wednesday to Latvians who fought on the side of Nazi Germany in Waffen SS detachments during World War II during a ceremony that has strained relations with Moscow.

Flanked by flag-bearers, participants in the annual procession sang patriotic songs and laid flowers at the base of the Freedom Monument in downtown Riga in honor of the Latvian SS soldiers, who are known as Legionnaires.

They were heckled by a small group of mainly ethnic Russians who claim the commemoration glorifies fascism and discredits the Soviet Union's enormous sacrifice in defeating Nazi Germany.

Protesters shouted "disgrace!" and "no to fascism!" while one held a poignant sign made from a pig's head that read "fascist, remember Nuremberg."

A massive police presence separated the two sides, and police officials said the ceremony, which has become a public relations headache for Latvia, passed without incident.

Participants were unfazed by the protest. "I am Latvian, and I want to honor those who fought for the country's freedom," said Inga Branka. She said the Latvians who fought in the war were neither fascists nor communists and that they had struggled to restore their lost independence.

Latvia was forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, then invaded by Nazi Germany in 1941, and taken over again by the Red Army in 1944. The country remained a part of the Soviet Union until 1991, when it achieved independence.

About 250,000 Latvians fought alongside either the Germans or the Soviets — and some 150,000 Latvians died in the fighting.

Nearly 80,000 Jews, or 90 percent of Latvia's pre-war Jewish population, were killed in 1941-42, two years before the formation of the Latvian Waffen SS unit — which some Latvians claim shows the unit could not have played a role in the Holocaust.

But an unknown number of Latvian Waffen SS soldiers were involved in the murder of Jews as auxiliary police — years before they entered the front-line unit.

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