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# Risks and Results of Citizens' Commitments: The Kačerovski Case in Riga (1958–1963)

Eric Le Bourhis & Irina Tcherneva

In August 1960, the Supreme Court of Soviet Latvia condemned Soviet engineer Magnus Eduardovič Kačerovski (1907–1960) to death, for having participated in mass crimes as the architect-in-chief of a concentration camp near Riga in 1941–43. While the majority of architects and engineers of Nazi concentration camps escaped accountability after 1945,<sup>1</sup> Kačerovski did not, and this was partly due to the mobilization of some of his fellow citizens.

In October 1941, the commander of the Security Service in Nazi occupied Latvia had requisitioned the company that employed Kačerovski to design and supervise the construction of a concentration camp for civilians in Salaspils. During the time of Kačerovski's supervision and until summer 1944, the inmates interned in the camp numbered most often about 2,000 at a time: deported Jews from the Reich, political and common law prisoners, families rounded up during anti-partisan operations, deserters of the Waffen-SS, a few POWs, and Vlasov Army soldiers serving sentences.<sup>2</sup> After 1945, Kačerovski was cleared by Soviet security services: his war activities were known but he was not secretly tried and condemned for treason, as thousands of Soviet citizens were.<sup>3</sup> In 1957, being in charge of the renovation

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1. Investigations were often abandoned and defendants acquitted, as during the Bergedorf trial in 1948, the Vienna trial in 1972, or the Münster trial in 2018.

2. Franziska Jahn, "Salaspils," in *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager. Band 9: Arbeitserziehungslager, Ghettos, Jugendschutzlager, Polizeihäftlager, Sonderlager, Zigeunerlager, Zwangsarbeiterlager*, eds. Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel (München: C.H. Beck, 2009), 548–58. According to recent scholarship, about 15,000 people were interned for various periods of time in the camp and 4,000 died there.

3. Tanja Pentner, "Local Collaborators on Trial. Soviet war crimes trials under Stalin (1943–1953)," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 49, no. 2–3 (2008), 341–64; Vanessa Voisin, *L'URSS contre ses traîtres. L'épuration soviétique*

of the Lutheran cathedral in Riga, he was denounced by a former Salaspils inmate. In 1958, the Latvian KGB, in charge of political crimes (including Nazi crimes) committed on Latvian soil, launched an investigation. It was led by a local officer, Captain Vladimir Izvestny (1929–2012). In March 1959 the KGB arrested Kačerovski. A first trial at the Supreme court in Riga (23–25 July 1959) condemned him for crimes against the State (under the law of 25 December 1958) to ten years of forced labor. He was deported to the Dubravlag (Mordovia). This verdict reveals a harsh interpretation of the renewed legal and investigative frame for such trials after 1955, which were supposedly focused on prominent perpetrators.<sup>4</sup>

In autumn 1959, the case was reported by the press. In reaction to this mediatization, thousands of Soviet citizens engaged in discussions and wrote "outraged" letters to various authorities. They provoked judicial and political turmoil in Riga that supported the reopening of the case 'due to new elements' related to the violence he allegedly inflicted on the prisoners. After a new open trial (25 July to 3 August 1960), the accused was condemned, by the same court and under the same law, to death by shooting.

This chapter explores the letters, their origins and their consequences. It contributes to an emerging historiographical tendency which enlightens the engagement of society in the course of seeking justice for the crimes of the World War II.<sup>5</sup> In the Soviet case, the commitment of citizens' groups to any cause is often viewed as problematic. Soviet history is

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(1941-1955) (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015).

4. Cf. the chapter by David Alan Rich in this volume.

5. On the role of witnesses, cf. Gabriel N. Finder and Alexander Prusin, *Justice behind the Iron Curtain: Nazis on trial in communist Poland*, (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Wolfgang Schneider, "From the Ghetto to the Gulag, From the Ghetto to Israel: Soviet Collaboration Trials Against the Shargorod Ghetto's Jewish Council," *Journal of Modern European History* 17, no. 1 (2019), 83–97.

On the implications of media, cf. Sylvie Lindeperg and Annette Wieworka, eds., *Le Moment Eichmann* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2016); Guillaume Mouralis and Marie-Bénédicte Vincent, eds., *The Nuremberg Trials: New Perspectives on the Professions* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2017).

marked by a long-running debate on the destruction of social relations and the relevance of the Habermas notion of ‘public space.’ However, the scholarship carried out since 2000 makes it possible to distinguish several types of Soviet public spheres: official and plebiscitary; semi-controlled; and opposed to the authorities. Researchers have shown the connections between these types, examining ‘intra-organizational’ public spheres or ‘mid-level public spheres’ inside institutions.<sup>6</sup> We will draw on the following inputs from these studies: a shift of attention to geographical spaces where individuals interact daily; an emphasis on the practices within which various groups are under construction and the diversity of membership(s) for each citizen; the plural and fragmented nature of semi-public spheres; and the compartmentalization of the circulation of information among them. Moreover, the unprecedented development of means of communication and of media in the 1950s and 1960s fostered both the building of audiences and a porosity between the private and public spheres that are also visible around the Kačerovski affair.<sup>7</sup> This chapter examines several vectors of creating ‘mid-level’ and ‘semi-controlled public spheres’ around the trial, highlighting the practices of collective and individual exchange and appropriation of information.

Far from being spontaneous, these letters emerged in reaction to calls published in the press. They were framed by habits of writing complaints to authorities or editorial boards,

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6. Gabor T. Rittersporn, Malte Rolf and Jan C. Behrends, eds., *Public Spheres in Soviet-type Societies* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003); Michel Christian and Sandrine Kott, “Introduction. Sphère publique et sphère privée dans les sociétés socialistes. La mise à l’épreuve d’une dichotomie,” *Histoire@politique* 7, no. 1 (January-April 2009), [histoire-politique.fr/index.php?numero=07](http://histoire-politique.fr/index.php?numero=07) (last consulted in May 2020); Larissa Zakharova, “Soviet Public Spheres,” 2017, <https://www.politika.io/en/notice/soviet-public-spheres> (last consulted in May 2020).

7. Marc Élie and Isabelle Ohayon, “L’expérience soviétique à son apogée. Culture et société des années Brežnev,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 54, no. 1–2 (2013); Dina Fainberg and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

practices which had a long history in the Russian world, were transformed under Stalin and renewed after his death. The perspective of this chapter draws on the abundant historiography on the writing practices of Soviet citizens, which generally approaches letters as a means of collecting information for the benefit of State knowledge or as a stimulus for an adjustment of distinct State policies.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this chapter restores the social context of letter-writing, their authors' profiles, their fate, use, and collecting and analyses—all these elements in connection with an examination of their content. After the first input given by the Russian-language newspaper of the Latvian Communist Party (LCP), *Soviet Latvia (Sovetskaia Latvija)*, letters and information circulated among ordinary citizens, journalists, and officials. More than 400 of the letters, but not all of them, sent to various addressees, were incorporated into the KGB investigation file.<sup>9</sup>

Letters were not a mere controlled byproduct of propaganda or State policies, or the ongoing purge of the Latvian communist leaders.<sup>10</sup> They are relevant sources to study the tools of criminal justice in the Soviet Union, even though that justice was quite far removed from Western standards. Thus, we define the 'publicization' of the case not only as media exposure but as interaction between State and citizen, and within society. To achieve this, we articulate the analysis of the letters themselves with various sources—LCP and prosecution

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8. For a broad presentation of an abundant scholarship on letter writing, see: Alain Blum and Emilia Koustova, "Negotiating Lives, Redefining Repressive Policies: Managing the Legacies of Stalinist Deportations," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 19, no. 3 (2018), 537–71.

9. *Latvijas valsts arhīvs* (Latvian State archive, hereafter LVA), 1986-1-42918.

10. As suggested by the first comprehensive study on the history of the camp, which disqualified these letters as not acute and manipulated. Kārlis Kangeris, Uldis Neiburgs, and Rudīte Vīksne, *Aiz šiem vārtiem vaid zeme: Salaspils nometne, 1941–1944* (Rīga: Lauku Avīze, 2016).

records, the personal papers of one of the leaders of a group of former prisoners,<sup>11</sup> tenancy registers in Riga,<sup>12</sup> as well as published materials from 1959 on.

After a prologue on the mediatization of the case in the press, the first section of this chapter will profile the letters' authors and their social environment to address the dynamics of writing. The second part addresses the range of citizen requests and interpretations of data on war crimes and justice policies, to think about the terms in which the case went public. In the last section, the usage of the letters for various purposes will illustrate the ways the police, media and political actors attempted to channel this popular involvement.

### ***Prologue: the media impulse***

The first trial (July 1959) was public but not covered in the press. Most of the letters about the case were written immediately after the publication of four articles in the Russian-language newspaper *Soviet Latvia* (issues of 27 and 30 September, 1 and 2 October 1959) entitled, "It happened in Salaspils" [Eto bylo v Salaspilse]. They were written as a series by journalist Jurij Dmitriev. Unfortunately, we have no information on the creation of these papers. The feuilleton was a romanticized spy story built around the investigation, presenting the encounter between Kačerovski and survivor Stanislav Rozanov, who indeed had denounced him to the KGB in 1957, the point of view of the investigator Izvestny, and a well-documented description of the alleged crimes. The articles called implicitly for new testimony, warned against the revival of pro-Nazi forces in Western countries, and alerted the

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11. *Latvijas nacionālā bibliotēka* (Latvian national library, hereafter LNB), RXA 355.

12. Kept at State Archives for Personnel Records (*Personāla dokumentu valsts arhīvs*, henceforth PDVA), Riga. The registers of 24 buildings in Riga where petitioners used to live in 1959, are accessible in the records of six neighborhoods, four from the city center (collections 3051, 3253, 3254, and 3681) and two from the suburbs: Sarkandaugava (2909) and Ķengarags (3251).

people to ‘remain cautious.’<sup>13</sup> This text could not have been written and published without close collaboration with the KGB and testified to a desire to raise popular support to reopen the case. The series highlighted the variety of victims, insisting on Jewishness of the deportees, but characterized them all as leftist political prisoners, creating confusion with the Stalag prisoners nearby and silencing many other categories of victims.

The first article in the series lifted its detective genre from an article published previously in the Russian press about the public trial of collaborators in a small Russian town (Igor Golosovskij, ‘It happened in Liudinovo,’ *Sovetskaja Rossija*, 17 March 1957). Another Dmitriev’s installment dressed up a consequent anti-Soviet portrait of Kačerovski as an inventor of torture methods. It focused on the acts of violence he allegedly committed against inmates, accusations which were later put at the center of the second trial. The last installment offered other motives for indignation: he was an accomplice of Latvia’s purged leaders, and the corrupted head of the Latvian Heritage restoration workshops. The colleagues who were called to defend him during the trial would also be ‘fascists.’ These allegations were partially based on real concerns within the KGB.

Targeted by the purge, the Latvian-language newspapers did not publish such a text. After at least one complaint about this lack of information in Latvian,<sup>14</sup> the press of several small Latvian towns published translated and adapted versions of Dmitriev’s texts.<sup>15</sup> In parallel, *Soviet Latvia* published a review of the letters received by its editorial board and a few excerpts.<sup>16</sup> This last article was republished in the Latvian-language provincial press.<sup>17</sup>

Before the end of November 1959, information on the case was offered to larger audiences

13. Czechoslovak resistance fighter Julius Fučík’s slogan meaning “against former traitors who live ‘among us’”.

14. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 4:275.

15. For instance, in Gulbene (*Sarkanais Stars*) from 13 October.

16. “My ne soglasny” [We don’t agree], *Soviet Latvia*, 25 October 1959.

17. in *Sarkanais Stars* (5 November 1959).

with articles in newspapers distributed throughout the country, such as *Komsomolskaja Pravda*.<sup>18</sup> From September to December 1959 at least, after these publications successively, letters landed on the desks of newspaper editorial offices, judicial, political and police authorities of the USSR and Soviet Latvia. In late December, a large collection of them was analyzed by the KGB and added to the investigation file.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Pathways from media to citizens: social context of reception and letter writing***

Not only do letters allow historians to study the expressed legitimacy to write and to point at the social circumstances in which they were written: they also help recognize the channels through which information on the case was disseminated in the society and of the reception of the affair within social groups. We question here two frameworks of collective writing (at workplaces and in neighborhoods) and their articulation with personal commitment.

### ***Professional frameworks—catalysts of writing***

More than half of the letters kept by the KGB were signed by work collectives in factories and companies, most of which were located in Riga. They originated from routinized practices of collective writing following the public reading of press articles. At large factories, collective writing was organized in several workshops in parallel. More than ten letters were composed at the giant of electromechanical factory, ‘REZ’, and addressed to the Soviet Prosecutor General Roman Rudenko or to *Soviet Latvia*. Most of such letters are typewritten (exclusively in Russian) and present similar structure. After a brief justification (typically “having read the article by Dmitriev during a meeting”), they characterize Kačerovski with

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18. Lidiia Lesnaia, “Ne zabudem geroizm, ne prostim predatel’sstva,” 22 November 1959.

19. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:2–9.



words taken from the press: renegade, torturer, sadist, etc. They qualify the first sentence of ten years as “mild” and request the death penalty. Lastly, they bear as many signatures as possibly could fit, bringing to the fore legitimacy credentials: party member, unionist, agitator, manager, veteran, widow of a former inmate, survivor,<sup>20</sup> etc. These give hints at the identities of those who initiated the writing.

The review of letters published on 25 October by *Soviet Latvia* as well as a KGB report from December that incorporated them into the investigative file, outline collective letters among the collection as ‘authentic voices’ from the Soviet society.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, a short comment written recently by historians in their history of the camp highlighted this collective dimension as a reason to distinguish the letters from other sources “organized” by the KGB.<sup>22</sup>

The writing at workplaces was undoubtedly framed by the party, communist youth (Komsomol), and trade union representatives. It resulted from the channeling of discussions within work collectives and the desire to instrumentalize popular support, although we could not identify its precise origins or purpose in the LCP archives. However, letters were one element among various patterns of ‘engagement’,<sup>23</sup> personal and collective, that were indicative of the perception of the case and the formation of discussion groups. This situation testifies at the same time of the renewed will to draw public attention on perpetrators trials (that had faded away in the late 1940s) and of a reinvigorated public attention.

The social framing of the writing through the workplace functioned more as an incentive than a manipulation. Letters suggest a range of modalities for the disclosure of

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20. Those of survivors Gennady C. and Voldemārs Z. in one of the many collective letters sent from REZ in the first week of October 1959, LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:309.

21. Ibid., vol. 7:2–9, Captain Izvestny, Inspection record (8 pages), 28 December 1959.

22. Kangeris, Neiburgs, and Vīksne, *Aiz šiem vārtiem vaid zeme...*, 39–40.

23. Inspired by the notion of ‘engagement’ forged by Laurent Thevenot, Larissa Zakharova employed a case analysis of epistolary exchange made public on the pages of the press. Larissa Zakharova, “Des engagements d’une écrivaine en URSS. Le cas de Natal’ja Četunova,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 60, no. 2–3 (2019), 597–618.

information: from a “five-minute discussion with workers” at the meat factory in Valmiera (63 signatures), to an affirmative active interest: “We [30] workers at the Riga disinfection station must say that every day we waited impatiently for (...) the result of the investigation and the verdict.”<sup>24</sup> Jānis Ā., president of the trade union at a paper mill in Riga, wrote a personal letter to the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union because, as an organizer of discussions on the topic, he was impressed by the workers’ reaction.<sup>25</sup>

Historians have acknowledged the necessity of overcoming the opposition between individual and collective writing in the Soviet society. The question is not about how authentic the writing was but how both dimensions of writing – the individual and the collective – intertwined. The collective framework acted as a magnet that attracted the attention of individuals. We observe that in some factories, collective letters were preceded by individual ones, or were written in parallel.<sup>26</sup> Some authors had heard about the case at work and wrote a letter at home in the evening. In many collective letters written in factories, offices, kolkhozes (collective farms), or even schools, individual commitment also appears through emotional reactions or the description of family losses of the person in charge of the writing. At a school in Madona, the pupil in charge of a collective letter wrote about the arrest of his father by the Nazis, the psychological disorders of his sister since then, and the vain efforts of his mother to find out what had happened to her husband until her own recent death of a disease.<sup>27</sup> Often, individuals utilized collective settings to express themselves. Several collective letters were written in the first person, suggesting an impulse which was fortified by the adding of signatures.<sup>28</sup>

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24. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:120, to *Soviet Latvia*, undated, and vol. 8:150–51, to *Pravda*, 8 October 1959.

25. *Ibid.*, vol. 8:221, 3 October 1959.

26. For instance, five letters sent from the factory ‘Avtoelektropribor’. *Ibid.*, vol. 9:128–29, 148–52.

27. *Ibid.*, vol. 7:158, Letter to the Supreme Court of Latvia, undated.

28. For instance, *ibid.*, vol. 7:227, Letter signed by 30 people and sent to *Soviet Latvia*, undated.

At a knitting factory, a women's collective sent a letter to the editors of *Soviet Latvia*. The letter bears traces of a negotiation within the group. Besides a short text in Russian, both first signatories wrote in Latvian "we protest against the verdict of the tribunal as we have been to this camp." The back of the sheet holds some words, handwritten in Russian by the first of these women—in a later interrogation she presented herself as a seamstress, born in 1928 in Kārsava (Latvia), not affiliated with the communist party. But these words are unfinished and then struck through: "~~Me, Marija Sh., as I had the opport...~~".<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the negotiation was also linguistic. Since the late 1940s, Russian speakers made up half of the population of Riga, and collective life in its factories was held mainly in Russian. In this context and in letters addressed to All-Union representatives or Russian-language newspapers, comments and signatures in Latvian could be a sign of this individual interest. In the collection, only four collective letters are fully in Latvian. They are handwritten: two were written in Riga in October by small groups of colleagues that included former inmates; the two others were written in November by schools' employees and teachers in Latvian provincial communities (Atašiene and Ērgļi).<sup>30</sup>

#### *Personal motives to write*

In their comments on the letters, the editorial board of *Soviet Latvia* and KGB captain Izvestny highlighted the representativeness of petitioners: "from all over Latvia" and "all layers of Soviet society." They outlined an extremely simplified socio-professional categorization of the authors—workers, survivors, war veterans, party representatives. A closer look at the letters and some other sources allow identification of participation by many other layers of Soviet society. Tenancy registers identify some male members of a relative elite for

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29. Ibid., vol. 5:38, 4 October 1959.

30. Ibid., vol. 4:275 and 309; vol. 7:84 and vol. 9:213.

whom writing was a social duty. Among them were not only Party representatives, but also factory managers, military officers, or privileged inhabitants of newly built residential units.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, authors also included people from very modest backgrounds, especially women, as a housewife in a small farmstead, retirees, and repressed individuals, such as Tamara V. from Riga, unemployed, who had just been released from a labor colony,<sup>32</sup> or Vadim P., a common criminal prisoner at Riga central prison,<sup>33</sup> and a few men living in places of internal exile such as the Soviet Far East and Far North, or Kazakhstan. Vadim P. reflected on his own unfair fate and tried to legitimize himself in the society. Meier L., from Karaganda, asked about his two brothers who died fighting as soldiers of the Latvian division of the Red Army, but did not mention his own conviction: before the war, as a Latvian citizen he had crossed illegally the Soviet border and then been punished with deportation.<sup>34</sup>

Through this range of manners to introduce themselves, two main profiles appear: former inmates of the camp and their relatives, and people who had violent experience of the war in Latvia or in other Western Soviet regions. Former inmates of the camp (more than 40) often presented an episode from the violence they experienced there. Most of them had little specific to say about the defendant. They had been rounded up as children during anti-partisan operations in 1943–44 in the Vitebsk region, the Kalinin region, or Latvian Latgale (the

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31. As 106 Gorki Street, 30 Imants Sudmalis Street, 8 Pharmacy (Aptieka) Street, or 222 Moscow Street, put into operation respectively in 1953, 1954, 1957, and 1958. PDVA, 2909-3-20–21, 3051-3-936–937, 3251-1-251, 3681-4-695. For the letters coming from these addresses: LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 8:143 and 213, vol. 9:7 and 163.

32. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:225, to *Soviet Latvia*, 6 October 1959; PDVA, 3681-4-523 and 524, registers of the building at 48/50 Lāčplēsis Street.

33. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:109–10, to the Supreme court of Latvia, 10 October 1959.

34. Ibid., vol. 9:247–248, to *Soviet Latvia*, 12 October 1959; Ojārs Niedre and Viktors Daugmalis, *Slepenais karš pret Latviju. Komunistiskās partijas darbība 1920.-1940. gadā. Arhīvi apsūdz* (Rīga: Totalitārisma seku dokumentēšanas centrs, 1999).

eastern-most region of Latvia), and arrived at the camp after Kačerovski had left; and had subsequently rebuilt their lives near Riga.

The stories of those who had been deported earlier to the camp aroused the interest of investigator Izvestny, such as Boris P., dispatcher at the 'Avtoelektropribor' factory in Riga:

I don't remember the name Kačerovski but it would be interesting to check out this bandit. I saw how prisoners were exhausted by screams "lie down," "stand up," "run." I was also worn out like that. I was aware that the prisoners from the Salaspils concentration camp were moved to the central prison. Among them, my brother Aleksandr Evstaf'evič.<sup>35</sup>

Oskars A. wrote to the KGB directorate in Gulbene (Latvia) from a farmstead after reading articles in a local newspaper, and offered the names of potential witnesses:

That winter morning, while I was working in the workshop, I heard the desperate cries of several women, looked out the window and saw women lined up, holding their children by the hand. Many carpenters from Gulbene witnessed this scene, (...) many of them have disappeared, the only one who has returned is the blacksmith Žviriņš Roberts who works at the Kirov kolkhoz.<sup>36</sup>

Both episodes (the abuse of political prisoners and the separation of the first families deported to the camp from Belorussia) not only aroused the interest of the investigators but were also widely used later in the publicization of the case.

Many others had experienced Nazi violence during the war in the Western parts of the Soviet Union. Jews but others as well, had lost all their relatives. POWs had personally experienced torture and starvation. Several war veterans from Russia offered to provide information to the inquiry and claimed they could authenticate the atrocities committed in

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35. Ibid., vol. 9: 128–29, 3 October 1959. Original in Russian.

36. Ibid., vol. 4: 105–06, 26 October 1959. Original in Latvian.

Salaspils, for they participated in the liberation of the region.<sup>37</sup> Petitioners linked the case to their general memories and sufferings from the war.

Some of them became very emotional. Worker and former prisoner of war Anatoli F. from Pavlov Posad near Moscow wrote to the Latvian KGB: “Forgive me for the lack of tact. I am overwhelmed, very overwhelmed, you see. I can’t stand it anymore.” On the following day, continuing his writing: “I didn’t sleep all night because of this criminal.”<sup>38</sup>

But some authors did not highlight their emotional motivations to write, although they had no less to say. Herberts K. and Edvīns M., two other former carpenters deported from Gulbene to Salaspils, now working at the training center of the Riga Society for the Blind, addressed a joint letter to the board of *Soviet Latvia*. A later interview with the KGB revealed their sufferings in the camp. According to that testimony, Herberts K. had lost his sight and a hand from an anti-personnel landmine in autumn 1944. Their letter does not expand on this but joins “the many people who are calling for the Kačerovski case to be reexamined”.<sup>39</sup> Cira L. wrote an impersonal letter to Kliment Vorošilov, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR that conveys almost the opposite of the intense suffering she must have gone through.<sup>40</sup> Her family had been murdered in Jelgava during the Holocaust.<sup>41</sup> Single, a bookkeeper at the Latvian Invalids’ Union, she was the only Jewish survivor among the residents of a building unit in Riga, sharing a small apartment with a single mother.<sup>42</sup> The experience and her status in Soviet society help not to reduce the gesture of writing to the obedience to an injunction.

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37. Ibid., vol. 7:95–101 and 140–43, Letters respectively to the Supreme Courts of the USSR (25 November 1959) and Latvia (26 November 1959).

38. Ibid., vol. 8:73–75, 23 November 1959.

39. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 4:309, 28 October 1959.

40. Addressed to Vorošilov, LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:89, 15 November 1959.

41. <http://names.lu.lv/>

42. PDVA, 3051-3-432, register of the house at 45 Street of the [Military] Hospital Street (Hospitāļu iela).

### *Letters as vector of the turmoil in Riga*

The letters also give insights about spaces, social and geographical, where information on the case and from the news was spread. While mentioning discussions and information circulation, they configure a public sphere around the case, condensed in space and time: Riga in October 1959.

The furor spread across the entire city. Authors wrote abundantly about the discussions in public transport as well as the reading of newspapers in collective spaces. Among others, a man commuting to Riga for work asked the editorial board of *Soviet Latvia* to publish his letter and underscored that “these days, newspapers were out of stock. Everybody was wondering how the story would end up. People were talking about it in trains, on trams, on the street.”<sup>43</sup> This unprecedented turmoil around the memory of the war was certain to exert influence or social pressure to write, as suggested by a laboratory assistant at the university.<sup>44</sup>

Well-informed members of the community could attract others to discuss and sign such letters. Close neighborhoods, courtyards and kitchens were structuring spaces for discussion. In addition to family circles, communal apartments were such spaces, for instance apartment no. 10 at 13 January Street.<sup>45</sup> At 12A Sloka Street, neighbors from various apartment buildings wrote letters, first individually to *Soviet Latvia* and the Latvian KGB, and then together to Rudenko.<sup>46</sup> The daughter of a survivor of the camp remembers watching television with neighbors (the only ones that had a TV set)—and talking with them about the

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43. Ibid., vol. 7:301, 5 October 1959.

44. Ibid., vol. 7:360–62, 25 October 1959.

45. Ibid., vol. 9: 219–22, 4 October 1959.

46. Ibid., vol. 7: 288–290 and 304–305, vol. 9: 106–107 and 189–90.

case.<sup>47</sup> TV sets being in short supply at the time, viewing programs within one's neighborhood helped with the formation of small, semi-private spheres of discussion. As the allocation of living space had been mostly done by big companies to their employees since 1945,<sup>48</sup> these semi-private spheres partially served as the extension of the workplace.

A picture of the people who formed these small communities and wrote letters, emerges from analysis of tenancy registers. From eighty personal addresses in Riga given in letters, we found twenty-four in tenancy registers. 20 of the 24 authors had recently settled in the city. They had arrived from Russia in the late 1940s as demobilized veterans, or administrative executives and workers looking for a better life. Moisei S., born in 1896 near Mogilev, arrived from Gorki in 1945 as a technical executive; Anna D., born in the Altai in 1925, arrived in the same year with her sister after they were both demobilized from the Red Army.<sup>49</sup> Among them were also two members from the Latvian community in Russia. One of them was Jānis K. born in Latgale in 1897, a party member since 1917. He had lived near Smolensk before the war and in Western Latvia after 1945.<sup>50</sup> Later newcomers were few and often military. Lieutenant-Colonel Mikhail K., born in 1906 near Viatka, was a Party member from 1926. He arrived to Riga from the Soviet-controlled zone of Austria in 1952 and his family from Sverdlovsk in 1954.<sup>51</sup>

Because most of them wrote in Russian, one might be tempted to classify these authors as members of the Russian community of Latvia. But none disassociate themselves

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47. Interview with Žaneta F., 3 August 2017.

48. Tenancy registers show a majority of employees of the factory 'Medpreparatov' housed at 222 Moscow Street (PDVA, 3251-1-251), the factory 'GMP' at 91 Gorki (3051-3-925), of the post, telegraph and telephone at 30 Imants Sudmalis Street (3681-4-695), or of the military at several addresses (for instance 3681-4-259).

49. PDVA, 3051-3-101 and 102, registers of the house at 29 Veidenbaums (now Church/Baznīcas) Street; 3051-3-583, register of the house at 10 Moon Street (Mēness iela).

50. PDVA, 3681-4-254 to 259, registers of the house at 9 Blaumanis Street.

51. PDVA, 3681-4-664 to 666, registers of the house at 22 Kirov (now Elisabeth) Street.



from Latvia or from the locals as ‘having remained in occupied territories during the war.’ Moreover, the letters emerged from a culturally diverse residential environment, except a few Russian military people. Their authors shared communal apartments with Latvian families, lived in predominantly Latvian workers’ neighborhoods, had married locals (or had children who did).<sup>52</sup> Those who had moved to the city after 1945 from never-occupied Soviet territories were perhaps more likely to take the pen first but it does not mean that they formed a separate public space for the reception of the affair.

Letters and tenancy records help only partially to reconstruct circles of sociability where discussions around the case occurred. But repeated addresses and places of work help to define their traces in the city space, for instance, at Sloka Street or in the ‘Gidrometpribor’ factory, where professional and residential spheres were intermixed, and at the intersection of linguistic communities.

The reference to the letters as a manifestation of “public opinion” (*obščestvennost’*) can be found both in the writings<sup>53</sup> and in a report drawn from them. In Russian and under their pen, this notion refers to a politically acceptable opinion, promoted by pro-Soviet activists and militants (a ‘plebiscitary-acclamatory public sphere’). Its usage reveals that indignation was expected. But at the same time, it blurs the identities of the petitioners. A simultaneous scrutiny of the content of the letters and the residential environment from which they emerged helps to identify specific groups who felt involved, as well as the dynamics of the spread of information at the crossroads of professional and everyday spaces. Recent scholarship on the concept of *obščestvennost’* has approached the fragmentation of opinion into professional and semi-public spaces, as well as the accommodation towards vocabulary

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52. PDVA, collections 3253 and 3051.

53. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 8:46, 26 November 1959.

settings offered by the media.<sup>54</sup> This study on the turmoil in Riga in October 1959 contributes to understanding the pathways these opinion fragments could follow and collide, and how personal commitment could meet with collective incentives.

### ***Multiple understanding of the Kačerovski's scandal***

What did these individual expectations convey, whether they were expressed as personal opinions or cast in collective molds? This section studies the claims that the letters raised. While they incorporated interpretative frameworks and the vocabulary spread by the media, they also echoed hostility towards the authorities.

### *Channeling and questioning indignation*

No petitioner seemed to discover war violence at the moment of the Kačerovski uproar. On the contrary, the slightest word uttered about his alleged crimes activated painful and detailed recollections about mass murders as well as forced labor. One of those who affirmed themselves as eyewitnesses, an anonymous war veteran, inserted a personal passage into a collective letter:

When I was in the ranks of the Red Army, I exhumed the corpses of people tortured or shot by Kačerovski and people like him in the Katyn Forest and Babi Yar in Smolensk [sic.]. I personally saw the bones of the burned children in Riga.<sup>55</sup>

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54. Rittersporn, Rolf, and Behrends, *Sphären von Öffentlichkeit...*; Karl E. Loewenstein, "Re-Emergence of Public Opinion in the Soviet Union: Khrushchev and Responses to the Secret Speech," *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 8 (2006), 1329–45.

55. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:227, Letter signed by 30 persons, addressed to *Soviet Latvia*, undated. Original in Russian.

In disregard of the specific responsibility of Kačerovski, for this author the accused embodied the figure of the Nazi “executioner”—in Russian *karatel*, ‘punitive expeditioner’ (Latvian *šāvējs* ‘shooter’), a word offered by the press and massively used in the letters. Numerous writings attest to low interest in a strict correlation between the violence committed by the accused and the sum of war crimes they had knowledge of—and to locate Babi Yar in Smolensk is evocative of this. The authors underpinned a peculiar conception of justice when deliberately extending the accusation. For example, in his letter to the Supreme Court of Latvia, written in the name of ‘a group of Komsomols and pupils,’ a schoolchild from Madona blamed Kačerovski for the murder of ‘tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war and tens of thousands of Jews.’<sup>56</sup> Some people acknowledged such a deliberate extension: ‘even if the author of the article [Dmitriev] did not say it, we are convinced of it.’ The recurrence of this extrapolation suggests that it had been assumed.

‘Death for death! Blood for blood!’, the vengeful tone of partisan flyers and mass media that targeted the population for mobilization during the war, reappeared in a part of the letters.<sup>57</sup> Authors demanded that he be hanged and his body exposed in front of the survivors, or that he be incarcerated on death row<sup>58</sup>—the degree of radicalness with which the authors perceived the punishment was at the heart of the discussions within people’s daily environment. A letter that also highlighted the use of the register of legitimacy (e.g. affiliation to the Party), declared:

We read your newspaper [...] at work in the workshops and at home with the neighbors. There are always a lot of people in the kitchen. Discussions and conflicts arose. Some said that this Kačerovski deserves to be shot. Others said that it was not even enough to hang him in the main square. The third said: ‘No, it is not enough. We need to cut off from his living flesh, one

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56. Ibid., vol. 7:158–62, undated.

57. For instance ibid., vol. 7:102–04, to the newspaper *Cīņa*, received on 4 December 1959.

58. Ibid., vol. 7:36–39, a group of ‘21 workers’ from Odessa to the newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 2 December 1959.

piece of meat a day, until there is nothing left to cut off.' Of course, I was for the shooting. [...] We, communists express our strong protest against the Latvian Supreme Court and demand the review of the Kačerovski case. [...] My name is Arkhip R. K., I live in Riga, 55 Gorki Street, apartment 11. I work at the plant no. 249s of the Baltic military district, I am a member of the CPSU. I was asked by Nina M. Č., the director of the Planning Department, to join her voice of protest against the 10-year verdict, in order to replace it with shooting. She is also a member of the CPSU.<sup>59</sup>

Demands for harsh punishment were numerous. Petitioners were very creative about it—they moved far beyond Soviet legality. Moreover, as no explicit State policy existed on the sentencing of collaborators since the partial amnesty of 1955, the writers framed their indignation in a range of other contexts offered by the press—the memorial site, corruption, 'Western revanchism.' Demand for justice overwhelmed political expectations.<sup>60</sup>

However, a handful of authors did not allow themselves to be seduced by the media's words and showed a critical distance. Some identified articles' *genre* as 'detective' and asked ironically, 'Basically, what were [Dmitriev's] articles aiming at? Reassuring human consciousness or indignation? Most likely, indignation...' <sup>61</sup> Others questioned the veracity of witnesses' statements.<sup>62</sup> In order to compensate for the blind spots, they searched for additional information, by collecting documents from the Extraordinary State Commission in

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59. Ibid., vol. 8:314–17, to *Soviet Latvia*, 4 October 1959. Original in Russian.

60. In the same manner as a popular fear of Khrushchev amnesty was problematic for the authorities. Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer. Gulag Returnees, Crime and the Fate of Reform after Stalin*, (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2009) 164–75.

61. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:225–26, two individuals from Riga to *Soviet Latvia*, 6 October 1959. See also vol. 7:82–83, Anonymous letter to Dmitriev who transmitted it to the KGB, although it attacked him personally, 12 December 1959.

62. Ibid., vol. 7:206, the director of a kindergarten in Daugavpils to the section for Party life in the board of *Soviet Latvia*, 1 October 1959.

Salaspils<sup>63</sup> or requesting ‘a lawyer to make a contribution and answer the workers’ questions.’<sup>64</sup> One of the inhabitants of the building at 12A Sloka Street explained in her letter to the Latvian KGB:

I didn’t have to go to concentration camps. I only know what happened through books and movies. And even in this situation, I’m on the verge of fainting. [...] On 4 October, I went to Salaspils, where the concentration camp was located, on purpose.<sup>65</sup>

To an agitprop publication aiming to stir up emotions, a number of readers responded with a request for tools for autonomous reflection.

### *Soviet authority under critics*

The petitioners also mobilized their knowledge of the legal framework. They mentioned the war crimes trials previously conducted in the USSR and abroad, as the Krasnodar trial (1943), the IMT in Nuremberg (1945–1946), as well as the recent Liudinovo trial (1958) and Koch’s trial in Warsaw (1958–59). Since the late 1950s, the Soviet media had been repeatedly addressing this issue and criticizing the reluctance of Western countries to pursue some of those holding power for accountability in war crimes. Still, several letters went far beyond this media message and compared the USSR to European countries that were failing in their duty of purging their society. “How would the Soviet Union be different from West Germany?” – asked another inhabitant of the building at 12A Sloka Street.<sup>66</sup>

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63. Ibid., vol. 7:43–45, retirees Nikolai P. and Khaim D. (Riga) to Nuritdin A. Mukhitdinov, secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, 20 October 1959.

64. Ibid., vol. 7:48–49, three representatives of the match factory ‘Kometa’ (where Rozanov was working) in Riga to *Soviet Latvia*, 13 October 1959.

65. Ibid., vol. 9:189, received on 7 October 1959. Original in Russian.

66. Ibid., vol. 7:304–05, to *Soviet Latvia*, 3 October 1959.

Other letters sarcastically noted the ‘magnanimous attitude’ of the Soviet government<sup>67</sup> which, indeed since 1955 had for the most part amnestied previously condemned collaborators.<sup>68</sup> The perception of the amnesty was erroneous and negative. Thus, an author from Riga, who had lost his entire family during the Holocaust in Latvia, conceded that to denounce criminals, as Rozanov had, was perfectly ‘understandable’.<sup>69</sup> More common among writers was the preoccupation that Rozanov and the other witnesses would be in danger if Kačerovski could ‘return among us in 6–8 years,’<sup>70</sup> that is after a reduction in his sentence.

More generally, the ability of the Soviet detention system to deal with criminals (not specifically war criminals but those considered as an elite) was largely questioned by the petitioners:

People like Kačerovski find themselves in the system of correctional labor camps. After the 10 years of their sentence, they are quickly promoted and become ‘irreplaceable workers’ as brigade leaders. This gives them the opportunity to ‘give orders’ again and to some extent to humiliate people.<sup>71</sup>

Such critics, bearing a certain knowledge of the carceral hierarchy, appear mostly in individual letters, often anonymously. Nevertheless, the expression of criticism of the Soviet legal system was facilitated by a media context that addressed criminal justice. Those who invoked the latter in their letter emphasized the irrelevance of applying the death penalty to

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67. Ibid., vol. 7:328, Letter written by 52 employees of a shoe factory in Riga and sent to the Supreme Court of Latvia, undated.

68. Vanessa Voisin, “Déstaliniser l’épuration ? L’amnistie Soviétique de 1955,” in *Pour une histoire connectée et transnationale des épurations en Europe après 1945*, eds. Marc Bergère, Jonas Campion, Emmanuel Droit, Dominik Rigoll, and Marie-Bénédicte Vincent (Bruxelles : Peter Lang, 2019), 237–54.

69. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:219, to *Soviet Latvia*, 3 October 1959.

70. Ibid., vol. 7:175, Collective letter sent by railway staff to the newspapers *Soviet Latvia* and *Rīgas balss*, undated.

71. Ibid., vol. 7:233–36, Individual letter sent from Riga to *Soviet Latvia*, 7 October 1959. Original in Russian.

those accused of dilapidation of state property, of speculation and involuntary manslaughter. One particular news item came up as a precedent in several letters: a car accident in the suburbs of Riga that caused the death of several bus passengers. After publication of the story in Riga's main local newspaper in March 1959, its editorial board received many letters that requested the death penalty for the drunk driver who had caused the accident, a sentence he in fact received in spring 1959.<sup>72</sup> In their letters, numerous authors denounced the discrepancy between this verdict and the 10-year labor camp sentence that Kačerovski had received. Thus, they raised the issue of misalignment of punishment to the gravity of the crime.

Some authors proceeded in general terms and denounced the glaring inequalities in the Soviet regime. A considerable number of letters explained the first lenient verdict against Kačerovski by his belonging to a privileged fringe of society. A common criminal prisoner, Vadim P., used the public campaign as an occasion to send to the Supreme Court of Latvia his autobiography, close to a confession and to a critical overview of his social environment. He asserted that he had become a homeless child during the war, was incarcerated several times for minor offenses, and could never find work. From his point of view, Soviet society knew two registers—the path for a person of popular origin and the other, secured by networks, material and symbolic capital. Thus, he offered his reader a global interpretative framework within which he situated what he had been seeing in the carceral universe:

Being a director, this Kačerovski knowingly abused his professional prerogatives and stole state property. [...] But he was out of the reach. He wasn't punished. That is understandable: he is a director; he has a graduate degree; he is educated. In brief, a man with a certain status. [...] These Kačerovskis are so numerous. They hold positions of responsibility. They allow themselves unimaginable crimes and arbitrariness. Not only in the free world, but also in the camp and prison system. [...] Please answer my question, you who are well aware of Kačerovski's peregrinations and crimes, whom you sentenced to 10 years in a labor camp. Tell

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72. *Rīgas Balss*, 21 March 1959; *Latvijas Zinātnieks*, 22 April 1959; *Latgales Zemnieks*, 28 May 1959.

me who's more dangerous to society, him or me? [...] It seems to me that such Kačerovskis [...] have deliberately put people on the path to crime, because it works in their favor. Why then is the attitude towards these Kačerovskis more humane than that towards their victims?<sup>73</sup>

Information about Kačerovski as a privileged individual in Soviet society was indeed available in Dmitriev's articles and numerous letters touched on the issue of corruption. Within his multifaceted media portrait, the journalist had retained social and economic aspects of Kačerovski's story. Moreover, narrating the inequalities reinforced by the war, Vadim P. stated that he, too, was Kačerovski's 'victim' in a very broad sense of the term. The total absence of consideration of the Nazi occupation is remarkable here. This author replaced the denunciation of the crimes committed during the Second World War in a continuum of Soviet social injustice, before, during, and after the war.

Still, other authors linked the social inequality and the problem of corruption with the alleged tension between 'locals' and 'Russians.' One author, mostly reasoning through the logic of the denunciation, wrote:

Nor do we understand the position taken by the National Economic Council, where I work [...] and where Kačerovski's sister also works. Our colleagues who know her better say that she keeps jewelry, worth hundreds of thousands of rubles, jewelry stolen by Kačerovski. They claim that she owns a real estate acquired by him. [...] We didn't learn about it after the discovery of Kačerovski's crimes. We had already suggested several times that she should no longer be part of the collective, that she should join her murderer brother on the bench of the accused. [...] We, the fighters who participated in the liberation of Riga, must feel at home here. [...] Many of us have left Latvia because of repeated discrimination.<sup>74</sup>

Whistle-blowing, suspicion of concealing wealth, and a perception of illegitimacy of the court decision found fertile ground in the multi-level Kačerovski's case. The economic interpretation framework was omnipresent and articulated with the memory of the war.

73. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:109–10, to the Supreme Court of Latvia, 10 October 1959. Original in Russian.

74. Ibid., vol. 7:348, to *Soviet Latvia*, no date.



A constant to-and-fro between the individual and the communal was a space where the authors could make numerous observations about the functioning of Soviet society: its justice system, the media, the way in which the wounds of war had not healed. The trial appeared for a number of them as an occasion to denounce social inequality. Although partially formulated in a stabilized media vocabulary, the disturbing questions<sup>75</sup> drew heavily on rumors circulating in society, which the authorities were barely able to control.

*Muted or explicit threat to authorities?*

Letters expressed widespread suspicion of All-Union and local elites – the architecture sector, justice, KGB, press, and local authorities – and partially claimed to ‘purge’ these corrupt sectors. Indeed, the Kačerovski’s scandal laced with the ongoing political and administrative purge of those later called the ‘national communists’ who formed the core of the Latvian communist government. In a context where the Kremlin had been trying to control what it perceived as growing forms of autonomy in the country’s periphery, an internal struggle in the LCP led in summer 1959 to the denunciation as ‘nationalists’ of Latvian communist leaders, mostly wartime members of the local leftist partisan underground. Among other defaming grievances, they were accused of “Russophobia”, especially towards the group of demobilized officers and Russian veterans who had priority in the distribution of consumer goods and housing. The deputy president of the Latvian council of ministers Eduards Berklavs<sup>76</sup> was the scapegoat and the symbol of the conflict that led to the dismissal of about 75. As when Soviet citizens had targeted the silences in the ‘secret’ report of the 20th Party Congress. Jean-Paul Depretto, “La réception du xx<sup>e</sup> Congrès dans la région de Gorki,” *Nouvelles FondationS* 1, no. 1 (2006), 138–158.

76. Berklavs was a veteran of the war and an important member of the Latvian Komsomol who came to power after Stalin’s death. He was the first secretary of the Party Committee of the city of Riga from 1956 and 1958 and then deputy president of the council of ministers of Latvia (and in that position launched in 1958 the project

2,000 thousand party leaders in three years (1959–62), including the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the LCP, the president of the Latvian council of ministers, and many actors in the fields of culture and media such as the editors of the most widely read Latvian newspapers.<sup>77</sup>

A previously mentioned anonymous petitioner asserted his Russian identity and linked the case with the alleged social inequality between locals and Russians, in the spirit of the purge:

People who sympathize to Kačerovski have not yet disappeared from Latvia. Just remember Berkļavs, this unbridled nationalist who forgot that mostly Russian fighters liberated Riga. [...] The Berkļavs invented a whole bunch of prohibitions for us, as if we were Negros [negry].<sup>78</sup>

From the point of view of this petitioner, the failed judgment of Kačerovski was an expression of a ‘nationalist’ policy conducted by the already dismissed or accused local communist leaders. This letter was an isolated one in its animus but reflected more generally the local context of purge that came up in a few other letters.

Other letters connected with the purge in the sense that they accused various entities in authority for the failed verdict, but did not reduce themselves to the “anti-Berkļavs” line. “Why had the KGB failed to start the investigation earlier?” wrote one such group of workers of the factory ‘Metaltehnika’ to Khrushchev<sup>79</sup>. Likewise Vladimir L., author of an individual

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to build a memorial site at Salaspils) until his dismissal in July 1959 and his banishment to Vladimir.

77. William Prigge, “The Latvian Purges of 1959: A Revision Study,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 35, no. 3 (2004), 211–30; Michael Loader, “The Death of ‘Socialism with a Latvian Face’: The Purge of the Latvian National Communists, July 1959–1962,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 48, no. 2 (2017), 161–81; Michael Loader, “Restricting Russians: Language and Immigration Laws in Soviet Latvia, 1956–1959,” *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 6 (2017), 1082–99.

78. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:348–52, Anonymous letter to *Soviet Latvia*, undated. Original in Russian.

79. *Ibid.*, vol. 7:345–46 (and copies in vol. 8:40 and 237), 7 October 1959.

letter, living within a milieu made up of ministry employees, police and military personnel, former Salaspils inmates as well as skilled workers.<sup>80</sup>

A few long-term members of the party and former partisans attacked the district party committee which was responsible for Kačerovski's office.<sup>81</sup> Thus, within the logic of partisan justice, a leader of a group of former Soviet partisans who had operated in Western Latvia, wrote from Jēkabpils to *Soviet Latvia*:

I do not understand how the former partisan Paškov [...], now the secretary of the party committee in the Kirov District [in Riga], has so far not taken note of the Committee of Construction and Architecture, where Kačerovski had founded his fascist nest. [...] If Paškov was still my subordinate, I would question his responsibility.<sup>82</sup>

The press was suspected of withholding information.<sup>83</sup> A 'group of readers' took the cautious attitude of Dmitriev in their attempt to plead in favor of Kačerovski. They called into question the practices used in the press to show popular support:

Usually, your newspaper is very active in denouncing certain defects in our lives, certain citizens who violated Soviet law. But you, who represent 'public opinion,' [obščestvennost'] as you like to point out systematically, had not said a single word about our public opinion concerning the executioner Kačerovski. Only when it was no longer possible to keep silent did you publish a brief compilation of letters from readers...<sup>84</sup>

Raising the question of the effectiveness of the second wave of articles, the letter ends with a threat: "If for reasons of 'diplomacy' our letter is not published, we will send it to Moscow asking [them] to put this shameful case in order..."

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80. Ibid., vol. 9:217; PDVA 3051-3-732: 3.

81. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 7:43-45, to the Central Committee LCP, 20 October 1959.

82. Ibid., vol. 7: 357-58, 24 October 1959. Original in Russian.

83. Ibid., vol. 7:43-45.

84. Ibid. 7: 82-83. Original in Russian.

From writing to acting, the border is narrow. Those who demanded transparency and publicity for the whole procedure (opening of archives, court, verdict, execution) also insisted that they had the capacity to affect political decisions. Some citizens approached the prosecutor, including by telephone,<sup>85</sup> requested investigation into the corrupted ranks of the judiciary and severe penalties for its employees, and took charge of spreading the information orally.<sup>86</sup> This naturally increased the risks of rumor propagation.

Content and strategies of action varied according to the addressees. Half of the letters from the KGB collection were addressed directly to the editorial board of *Soviet Latvia*. The other half was destined for political, judicial or police authorities at the republican and All-Union levels (50 to Rudenko; 22 to the Supreme Court of the USSR, about 20 to the CC CPSU or Khrushchev, etc.). Writing to central leaders and federal Soviet institutions, including the central KGB, meant bypassing the republic-level authorities. Some authors adapted their strategies and progressively targeted their mailings: a few factory employees, having already sent several letters, wrote to Rudenko directly.<sup>87</sup> A considerable proportion of the letters that ended up on the tables of leaders in Moscow weakened the republican authorities. Mentions of ‘the nest of Former Latvia in the core of the Soviet city of Riga’<sup>88</sup>, a rhetorical link between war criminals and the pre-Soviet regime created by written press and cinema during the immediate post-war period, are relatively frequent and some suggested that a new trial should be organized elsewhere than in Latvia. Yet, a disavowal of the republic written by an anonymous author from Riga to the secretary of the Central Committee of

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85. Ibid., vol. 7:275, a resident of Riga to *Soviet Latvia*, 3 October 1959. Its author presented herself as having lost two sons during the war. She claimed to have spoken on the phone with the prosecutor who would have told her: “These are trifles. The newspaper lied.”

86. Ibid., vol. 7:179, five workers (Riga) to *Soviet Latvia*, 3 October 1959.

87. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 9:151–53, 20 October 1959, addressed to Rudenko.

88. Ibid., vol. 7:125, 2 October 1959.

CPSU Mikhail Suslov is remarkable. The author drew certain conclusions from a comparison with war crimes trials in other regions:

In Belgorod, Šakhty, Krasnodar, where such trials have recently been conducted, the executioners were shot. [...] The Latvian Supreme Court protects the Hitlerian personnel!!! For the whole period, since the liberation of Latvia, not even one death penalty of executioners and killers of the Soviet people has been decreed. [...] The unmasked party leadership, led by Berklavs and Co., has friends in the apparatus of the Court and the Procurator. At the LSSR Lipin prosecutor's office [...] a group of corrupt people were unmasked. [...] The whole counter-revolution has risen to defend Kačerovski in Latvia. The active participation of his colleagues was engaged and a public defender was proposed. He is the former member of the SS [group of] Janson, who had served as an *Obersturmführer* in the Gestapo...<sup>89</sup>

The author was mistaken about the absence of capital punishment for 'executioners.' The error reveals that, having secretly conducted expeditious trials in the immediate post-war period, the authorities faced the risk that the misinformation of citizens would be turned against them. This author targeted in particular senior officials and called for 'opening the archives' in order to 'destroy the national movement for the rebirth of fascism in Latvia.'

What characterized the majority of the letters was an idea of the possible impact of citizens' actions, especially at the level of an institution or a republic. The diverse positions held by the authors and their socio-professional origins impacted the entanglement of interpretations not of Kačerovski's crimes, but of the justice rendered. This crossover of reading registers and the action strategies involved continued through the multiple lives of the letters in the offices of those undertaking public action.

### *The multiple lives of the letters*

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89. Ibid., vol. 7:31, 6 October 1959. Original in Russian.

The diversity of trajectories and uses of letters enhanced their private and public existence. The authors targeted future readers of their opus, but the recipients also made them circulate. Some of the letters were redirected to the Latvian general prosecutor, then to the Department of Control of the KGB at Rudenko's office, and later to the Latvian KGB. The letters contain various layers of potential: to weaken local authorities; to help the investigation; and to contribute to the narrative of the Second World War.

*Political output: overflow of public involvement*

The conservation of the letters, mainly by the Latvian KGB, bears marks of their usage. Volumes 7, 8, and 9 of the investigation folder hold a set of the letters that the KGB discarded. Among them are those that expressed critical statements. On 17 October, Lev N. Smirnov, the deputy chairman of the Supreme Court of the USSR, urged the Latvian Supreme Court to find a way to challenge the verdict, and he made it clear that he would monitor the case from then on.<sup>90</sup> On 23 October 1959, the central committee of the LCP reacted to a signal 'from the Central Committee of the Communist Party.'<sup>91</sup> On the same day an influential group of 'old Latvian Bolsheviks' called out the Central Committee of the LCP for its relaxed vigilance.<sup>92</sup> The letters managed to generate a top-down incentive within the Soviet central institutions while, as Alain Blum and Emilia Koustova have shown, the flow of letters could also lead local authorities to change their practices in a less official way.<sup>93</sup> During an internal meeting, the first secretary of the CC of LCP Jan Kalnberzin, who would be soon dismissed, acknowledged the risk located in the letters:

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90. Ibid., vol. 8:172.

91. LVA, PA 101-22-58.

92. LVA, PA 101-22-23, received 24 October 1959.

93. Blum and Koustova, "Negotiating Lives...".

We have to explain to the irritated population that the case will be studied again and new documents will be made public. [...] We have to say to people that new material, new witnesses appeared. So, the population will be soothed until the next verdict. I think that the new verdict will be correct. I read somewhere that such persons were arrested and condemned to death. [...] Sure, the major tendency is to lower the number of executions, because it disadvantages us on the international arena, but such persons deserve it.<sup>94</sup>

Kalnberzin pointed out this intermediate zone between the fear of public influence (the risks of the publicization) and the belief in his capacity to control public action, without any ambiguity as to the independence of the investigation. Even before the reopening of the case, he mentioned ‘correct’ justice which would be accomplished.

The Central Committee of the LCP dismissed the prosecutor in charge and organized an investigation led by a special commission.<sup>95</sup> It acted in multiple directions: it identified the person responsible for recruiting alleged former Nazi collaborators in the Heritage Restoration workshops, blamed the party organization of the Kirov District (in Riga) responsible for the defendant’s company, and conducted an evaluation of the common criminal proceedings against Kačerovski for corruption.<sup>96</sup> The Central Committee pinpointed structural corruption in various Latvian administrations including the council of ministers, but also the recruitment of politically suspect people. During the internal discussion on 11 November one of the commission’s members observed, concerning the Heritage Restoration workshops:

More than half of their employees do not inspire any political confidence. These are former *aizsargi*, former members of the SS, moreover, of a high profile. As long as Kačerovski was

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94. LVA, PA 101-22-58. Original in Russian.

95. It was composed of three heads or deputy heads of CC Departments (E. Peterson, E. Baško, J. Katsen) and a CC member (P. Plesum) and was chaired by the CC Secretary for Industry (A. Miglinik).

96. LVA, PA 101-22-31, 32 and 73.

there, no communist could remain. All of them were evicted. It has only recently become clear that they are forming an SS legion of counter-revolution there.<sup>97</sup>

Proportions were exaggerated.<sup>98</sup> Still, the workshops were a less strategic sector of the architectural branch, and the only one where specialists suspected by the KGB could find work.<sup>99</sup> The director of the Latvian Construction Committee and, as such, supervisor of Kačerovski, implied that the presence of ‘former members of the SS’ in public institutions was no secret for the KGB. Moreover, the members of the Party commission observed problems in the circulation of information between the KGB and local administrations, which might have been unaware of Kačerovski’s crimes. Second Secretary Vilis Krumin’s appealed to the commission:

About a year ago [Latvian KGB director Jan] Vever took possession of the material according to which Kačerovski had been in Salaspils, etc. When the decision to conclude his case was taken, these materials were already known to some extent... Sure, it was not clear, but it could be said with certainty that he had worked there and directed the construction of the Salaspils camp. It was well known a year ago, or even more. I am dumbfounded: Treilib and the prosecutor, did not they know it?<sup>100</sup>

The very functioning of secrecy would publicly weaken the authorities. Facing it, another member of the commission, Katsen (close to Berkļav and soon dismissed) recognized:

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97. LVA, PA 101-22-73: 88. Original in Russian. From 1945 ‘aizsargi’ (national civil guard from 1919 to 1940) and ‘legionnaires’ (young men mobilized in the Waffen-SS in 1943-44) had been suspected for collaboration; these were local synonyms for ‘traitors’. None of these groups was repressed collectively. Still, many of individuals had been defamed and arrested.

98. LVA, PA 102-17-13: 37–42, Secret report from Jan Vever, director of the Latvian KGB, to the First Secretary of the party organization of the city of Riga, 2 September 1959.

99. Éric Le Bourhis, “Avec le plan, contre le modèle. Urbanisme et changement urbain à Riga en URSS (1945-1990)” (PhD in History, EHESS, 2015), 435–36.

100. LVA, PA 101-22-73 : 90. Original in Russian.



...before the publication of the article [in *Soviet Latvia*], the problem was not known to the general public. Although the trial was not held *in camera*, it went unnoticed by the public. The controller from Moscow claims that here also the judicial institutions had made a mistake...<sup>101</sup>

He pinpointed a risk of, and at the same time a rule for the publicization, which would be the transition of the proceedings from an officially open trial towards a trial as a public event. The fear of being bypassed by Soviet central institutions in the regulation of the case was dramatically amplified by the ongoing replacement of the major political figures in the republic. As a result, referring to ‘new data provided by citizens,’ the Supreme Court rescinded the first verdict, relaunched the investigation against Kačerovski, and requested the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union for authorization to apply the death penalty.<sup>102</sup> The Committee reprimanded, mostly on an administrative level, representatives of the architecture administration, as well as a former official of the Latvian council of ministers.<sup>103</sup>

The first life of the letters was deployed within the offices of political decision makers and implied the risks of the trials’ publicization. The authorities of the republic comprehended the letters as testifying to dangerous rumors circulating in society. Observing this usage of the letters permits identification of the points where the letters’ influence spread beyond the narrow needs of the investigation and the desire to instrumentalize popular support.

#### *Judicial presence: utility for investigation and symbolic weight*

The second life of the letters consisted in their use by the investigation into Kačerovski. This use started in November 1959. Studying the letters as the first impulse for

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101. Ibid: 91.

102. LVA, PA 101-22-91, 19 November 1959.

103. LVA, PA 101-22-68.

the interaction between their authors and the KGB sheds light on two aspects. First, the usefulness of the abundant information on the suffering of the war for the case was limited. Secondly, the ‘titles of nobility’ asserted by the authors were of relevance for the investigators: they partly shaped the selection of witnesses to be convened.

Not all such letters were interpreted by the investigators. Exchanges with former inmates identified from the first investigation or received after the second trial, were grouped in volume 1. Others were inserted into the interrogation files (volumes 4 and 5). The creation of these collections as archival objects illuminates the positions taken by police and judicial actors in the face of this flow of information. The successive stamps, written comments, and transmission letters enlighten the differentiated processes. Letters were rerouted to the Latvian general prosecutor (identified as responsible for the case) for the benefit of the investigation and transmission letters asked for a reply. Others were forwarded to the department with oversight of the KGB within prosecutor Rudenko’s organization. The latter trajectory shows a process of institutional control that soon faded away. Later, letters were mechanically rerouted to the Latvian KGB ‘to be added to the case’.

The investigators paid close attention to information from eyewitnesses regarding construction work in the camp or to Kačerovski’s activity. The witnesses who explained they had nothing incriminating to say about Kačerovski,<sup>104</sup> do not appear in the KGB interrogation files, or were asked simply to write a short report about it. This did not prevent the use of these letters in *Soviet Latvia*.

Between November and December 1959, the KGB carried out interrogations with at least a half of the 40 former inmates whose letters had arrived on its desk. Later, the prosecutor utilized 11 of them in the bill of indictment and summoned 9 of them to present their testimony during the second trial. The judge mentioned the evidence provided by seven of them in the verdict on 3 August 1960.

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104. LVA, 1221-1c-232: 238.

Some identified witnesses, former victims of the anti-partisan operations, turned out to have difficulty when asked to identify the defendant, Kačerovski, in court. Another, Pavel Koršunov, a prisoner of war captured in 1941 and former Salaspils inmate living in Moscow, suggested he would be able to recognize Kačerovski from photographs. Three weeks later, he was questioned<sup>105</sup>. In his note to the Latvian KGB, not only did ex-POW say he could provide information on the construction phase of the camp, but suggested that he had been personally beaten by Kačerovski. However, in his testimony under caution to the investigator, he admitted finally to have learned of the defendant's crimes only from the press.<sup>106</sup>

Other letter writers advanced fragmentary statements but held the attention of investigators as well as of the prosecutor and judge. Thus, Ksaverija S., empowered by her legitimacy as the widow of a local communist and an activist herself, seemed to have incited another former prisoner to reveal her personal story. Ksaverija S. participated in photographic recognition and reported on brutalities committed by Kačerovski.

The information such witnesses probably provided appeared fragile to the investigators. They tracked down the chain of prisoners who had personally suffered at the hands of Kačerovski and undertook this investigative work more seriously than had been done for the first trial. Indisputably, the logic of evidence and the political decision regarding this trial were intertwined. In this process, while some of the witnesses mentioned in the indictment were not directed to appear in court, Ksaverija S. managed to impose her presence continually, from the writing of the letter to her testimony in the courtroom (including through publication of her account in the second *Soviet Latvia* article, her interrogation, and her appearance in the indictment). Finally, through these letters the KGB identified at least two people who reported concrete acts of violence committed by the accused: they were

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105. Ibid., vol. 5:145–54.

106. Ibid., vol. 5:25–30, 24 December 1959.

questioned as witnesses, participated in a confrontation of Kačerovski, and finally testified on the witness stand; one of them was recognized by the court as a “victim”.<sup>107</sup>

The police and media spheres were connected. The first link was established between their employees who exchanged letters and coordinated their actions. The second link existed at the witness level. Indeed, some were prepared better than others for the public arena. Thus, political prisoners were mobilized as witnesses in both trials. They were connected with other survivors through more or less formal and pre-existing contacts and friendships.

### *Media life: writing a story of the war*

The media field offered a third destination for letters. The writing of a public narrative on the conflict had in the end more posterity than the outrage surrounding Kačerovski and the two trials. Here, the trajectories of the letters entered in dialogue with another form of social mobilization—that of the former political prisoners of Salaspils. The group was not formed as an entity before the scandal. Before the trial, survivors’ burials were one of the reasons to meet.<sup>108</sup> Discussions on the memorial site started in late 1958 and were an impetus for them to mobilize more massively. A first large meeting was organized on site in July 1960, a few days before the second trial. Thus partially united in the wake of the writing they formed an influential group. Furthermore, by inciting others to write, overtaking a large part of the organization of commemorative events, the former prisoners gave rise to other testimonies. As a result, their actions rendered the newspaper editorial boards more complex, demonstrating once again that public investment was hardly driven by the political authorities.

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107. Kazimir L. from Valka and Marija S. from Ērgļi. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 5:113, 169.

108. *Latvijas kara muzejs* (Latvian Museum of War), Riga, 10400-7319-n, photograph of a burial in January 1959 with Sausnītis.

On 25 October 1959, *Soviet Latvia* published the article ‘We don’t agree’(My ne soglasny), based on letters, called ‘life documents.’ There was a distinction between the portrait of the camp for the investigation and for the media. Unlike Captain Izvestny, the journalists were interested in survivors deported to the camp as mothers or children and who had no contact with Kačerovski because they had not been utilized in construction works. In particular, the place of the ‘Belorussian children’ surfaced.<sup>109</sup> These letters attested among other points to the coerced taking of blood from young people. From the very first information collection in Salaspils at the end of the war, the Extraordinary State Commission had given great significance to these crimes. Such information had been widely disseminated by the press, during the trial of Friedrich Jeckeln in Riga 1946 and the Nuremberg international tribunal. However, the crime of ‘blood transfusion’ in Salaspils was not corroborated by additional sources and, technically, was hardly possible, so has been approached by historians with the greatest caution.<sup>110</sup> Remarkably, investigator Izvestny dismissed the torments inflicted on children. Nor was he interested in the fate of those who had been allegedly sold as slaves after incarceration in Salaspils, as it was relatively obvious that Kačerovski was not involved in those crimes. On the contrary, the successive memory books created later with the complicity of the KGB reported on it.

Such an injection of letters into the press aroused a new epistolary wave. However it was pressure from the central authorities that finally provoked the investigation. At the same moment, the media sphere extended the echoes of the letters. In November 1959, journalist Dmitriev and a couple of survivors of the camp (including Rozanov) participated in a public

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109. LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 8:102–06, Letter by Felician R. (Riga) to Soviet Latvia, 30 September 1959; vol. 8:99–101, Letter by Evgenia Ju. to Soviet Latvia, 5 October 1959.

110. Nathalie Moine, « Les vivants et les morts. Genèse, histoire et héritages de la documentation soviétique des crimes commis en territoires occupés pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, fin XIXe-début XXIe siècle » (habilitation thesis, EHESS, 2015), 158 and 390–97.

event at the Cultural Center of the Latvian House of Syndicates in Riga entitled ‘People, be cautious!’ After remarks by Dmitriev on growing ‘revanchism’ in the FRG and testimonies about the camp, the East German documentary film *You and Some Comrade*<sup>111</sup> was screened. Reports about the event were published in the press and the filmed meeting was shown in newsreels.<sup>112</sup>

On the wave of this public investment, praised in the press, and after the KGB interrogations during winter 1959–60, the former inmate and journalist at the main Latvian-language newspaper *Cīņa* [The Struggle] Kārlis Sausnītis (1911–1998) collected testimonies of survivors. During the first half of 1960, *The Struggle* published several of them, and other papers related to the memory of the camp but not directly connected to the affair. During a meeting at the Revolution Museum in November 1960, he called to survivors to transmit to him their testimonies and personal documents.<sup>113</sup> From this date and for at least two decades, the Latvian press regularly reinjected elements from testimonies or the proceedings into new articles, mentioning Kačerovski occasionally. The action of former inmates, united in the ‘group of former political prisoners’ (*bijušo politiešlodzīto grupa*) of the Riga section of the Soviet War Veteran Association, as the driving force and editors of the testimonies, began to take public form. The preparation of successive prints of the memorial book<sup>114</sup> left in Sausnītis’ personal papers the traces of his shaping of information (selection, editing work, censorship).

These actors’ positions were intermediate: they were neither accomplices of the judicial case nor just an infra-public that would be disconnected from insiders’ circles. The

111. *Du und mancher Kamerad*, dir. Andrew and Annelie Thorndike, DEFA, 1956.

112. Announcement in *Rīgas Balss*, 10 November 1959; report in *Padomju Ceļš*, 17 November 1959; Newsreel *Padomju Latvija* # 36/1959.

113. *Cīņa*, 3 November 1960.

114. *Salaspils nāves nometrē. Atmiņu krājums* [In the death camp of Salaspils. Collection of memories] (Rīga: Latvijas valsts izdevniecība, 1962). Second print in 1963, Russian print in 1964, last print in 1975.

journalist Kārlis Sausnītis was a crucial node of the survivors' network. He also had contact with survivors members of the local intelligentsia, such as writer Miervaldis Birze and painter Kārlis Bušs, both engaged in disseminating information on the case. Bušs, Sausnītis and another member of the association had been residing for a long time on the short Indrāni Street in Riga, and often met privately.<sup>115</sup>

For the benefit of the investigation and of the publicization of the case, Sausnītis initiated or maintained an exchange with several survivors such as Pavel Koršunov who wanted to publish his memoirs.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, he established communications with a single Jewish survivor from Czechoslovakia, Josef Gärtner, and put him in contact with judicial authorities.<sup>117</sup> Gärtner had survived deportation to Theresienstadt, Riga, Salaspils and finally Liepāja. *The Struggle* published Gärtner's first text in February 1960. Far from the general accusatory tone of published testimonies, this article emphasized his gratitude to his 'Latvian friends' from the camp.<sup>118</sup> For the first print of Sausnītis' book, Gärtner took some initiative and wrote a long prologue about his deportation experience before he was interned in Salaspils,<sup>119</sup> which was finally published with few modifications.

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115. J. Kļaviņš. Latvijas nacionālā bibliotēka (National Library of Latvia, henceforth LNB), collection RXA 355 (Sausnītis' papers) 9, lists of members of the association in the 1960 with their private addresses; interview with Zaiga Eglīte, Bušs' daughter, July 2017.

116. LNB, RXA 355 38.

117. LNB, RXA 355 24, Correspondence Gärtner/Sausnītis (in German, Latvian and Russian); LVA, 1221-1c-232, transmission of Gärtner's letter to the prosecutor by the Latvian KGB.

118. 'To nedrīkst aizmirst. Vēstule no Čehoslovākijas tautas republikas' (It should not be forgotten. Letter from the Czechoslovak people's republic), *Cīņa*, 4 February 1960.

119. LNB, RXA 355 24. Gärtner's letter from 26 January 1961.

Sausnītis had close ties to investigator Izvestny.<sup>120</sup> Sausnītis' competences, resources, contacts, and knowledge about the camp and the case, made him irreplaceable for the investigation and for the mediatization. As deputy head of the 'letters' section of the editorial board, he had access to materials and knew literary editors.<sup>121</sup> At the same time, his position was weakened because, being part of the local leftist underground before the war, he had close ties to Latvian authorities who were being purged in 1959–60, including on the board of *The Struggle*. But he was not a member of the Communist Party until autumn 1960.<sup>122</sup> No source suggests that Sausnītis would have had access to secret documents from the investigation. On the contrary, controlling him, Izvestny wrote the introductions for successive prints of the memory book and led a meeting with the publishers.<sup>123</sup> Thus, Sausnītis's status helps to explain role the former inmates played between the judicial field and the public. They had exposure to fragmentary information about the progress of the investigation, but were not full members of inner circles of secrecy.

Such multi-positioned actors adapted the testimonies during the edition process. Sausnītis managed the assignment of categories of victims to each published testimony: deported Jews to Gärtner, Belorussian children to Akulina Lele. Persecution of leftist activists as inmates and the resistance in the camp were strongly underscored by several texts, while other categories of victims were silenced despite the preparation of testimonies about them, as non-communist

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120. See the correspondence between the KGB and editor Sausnītis in January 1958, LVA, 1986-1-42918,

vol. 1; in the early 1960s, his daughter may have eventually married the captain; a few years later, Izvestny gave him a couple of volumes from an investigation file to get him to write a book on the burnt village of Audriņi. LNB, RXA 355 3.

121. Annotations on drafts in LNB, RXA 355.

122. LVA, PA 346-1-53, personal file in the archive collection of Cīņa editorial board.

123. Izvestny led the only editing meeting at the publishing house we could trace (LVA, 478-15-17, meeting of 1 March 1963).



political prisoners and resistance fighters, notably women.<sup>124</sup> The case of Soviet prisoners of war was a specific issue because many of them had been turned by the Germans. Successive efforts of authors and editors to mention them faced censorship. For example, Pavel Koršunov's draft lost a long passage on a group of such traitor-victims who had 'volunteered' in the Vlasov Army but subsequently lost the confidence of the Germans.<sup>125</sup> The passage includes a discussion, through the words of two inmates, about the engagement of Soviet citizens in the German forces. In the draft copy in Sausnītis' archive, this passage is erased and annotated: 'What to do with this section about the painter? Traitors too naive!' suggesting Sausnītis himself was involved in the censoring, accordingly to what he understood of the line between secrecy and publicity.<sup>126</sup> In 1963, this problem was expressed again during a discussion on the reprint of the book. According to the meeting report, after two participants suggested devoting more attention in the book to Russian victims and prisoners of war, Captain Izvestny concluded: 'We could add Zelenskij's testimony. [...] But we shall not give the names of prisoners of war as many of them went over to the Vlasov army.'<sup>127</sup> Indeed Mikhail Zelenskij's politically correct text was included in later prints. Thus, a long and very modest evolution in the public presence of this category of victims emerges in tiny steps.

The letters encouraged various bodies to undertake action. They raised the boundaries of the 'sayable' in different fields: politics, justice, and media. By their very content and by the way in which they waltzed among addressees, the published testimonies marked a fluid boundary between secrecy and publicity. The authorities, KGB actors and well-known intellectuals, deconstructed them, taking usable fragments from political, police, and memorial discourse. It is not only the life of the letters as objects that has preoccupied us

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124. Unpublished testimony of Marija Rūse, LNB, RXA 355 51.

125. LNB, RXA 355 51. Original in Latvian (translated from Russian).

126. During the war, any mention of former POWs escaping German units was censored.

127. LVA, 478-15-17.

here, but also the way in which they participated in sociability fifteen years after the end of the war.

### ***Conclusion***

The mediatization of Kačerovski's affair activated memories of the war. The letters started from a *stimulus* but, putting local authorities and even the KGB at risk, they had unexpected effects. Reconstituting the environment in which they were written enables us to portray semi-public spheres located at the point where professional and residential spaces intertwined. Although fragmented, these spheres allowed the circulation of information, vertically (submission links) and horizontally (workplace exchanges). This included letters with critical potential. Turning in derision to the preferred Soviet term, '*obščestvennost*,' which aimed to categorize them as a group, the authors appropriated the media message. They used it as an occasion to denounce the inadequate State response to the suffering inflicted during the war, and the corruption and social inequalities that permeated the Soviet legal system. This critical and informative potential was ventilated among the political, journalistic, judicial and memorial spaces. Therefore, other sociability spaces and collective actors contributed to the interpretation of the information: former Salaspils prisoners and other groups as holders of legitimacy in Soviet society. Thus, the group of former inmates, whose legitimacy was ensured yet fragile, participated as accredited professionals in the publicization of the case; they also relaunched other horizontal vectors of information gathering (letters). This study emphasizes a constant balance between inputs and outputs, among the 'plebiscitary-acclamatory public sphere', individuals and multiple semi-public spheres.

In many respects, the flow of letters between institutions and the reactions to them revealed the risks of insufficient public dissemination of information. Thus, in the letters the

authors referred to discussions that were spreading (dangerously for some of them). Also, the political actors understood that they didn't possess all the data on the suspects, that the KGB did not communicate with the architecture administration and other bodies. Having understood that, they grasped the potential and the risks of information retention. On the reverse, information followed semi-public channels. Letters and recollections appeared as full-fledged protagonists in the spread and of the referral of information about war crimes. They participated in the publicization of the case, without being totally coordinated with and framed by propaganda campaigns. Thus, the boundary between secrecy and publicity was fluctuating: erasure of some statements from the courtroom and their emergence in the media, public meetings, and collective gatherings in private. They complemented, corroborated and gave direction to the published information around Salaspils.