

ited collection, sixteen historians develop a new approach to the trials  
persons accused of war crimes and mass murder in Europe during the  
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s of the demand for justice and making use of previously underexploited  
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uncover the expectations around accountability and forms of mobilization  
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s, and civic activists. In addition to the perspective of these citizens,  
invoke the expertise of reporters, filmmakers, historians, investigators,  
tors who shaped public representations of justice. These shaping efforts,  
how, often supported the desire of political authorities to benefit from the  
the trials and to contain the spontaneous dissemination of information.  
close examination of interactions between citizens and authorities thus  
s the extent and limits of what might be called a “coproduction” of justice,  
s shedding light on the interdependence between historical knowledge  
secution of mass crimes.

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Seeking Accountability for Nazi and War Crimes  
in East and Central Europe: A People's Justice?

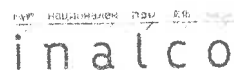
# Seeking Accountability for Nazi and War Crimes in East and Central Europe

*A People's Justice?*

EDITED BY ERIC LE BOURHIS,  
IRINA TCHERNEVA, AND  
VANESSA VOISIN



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Cultures et sociétés d'Europe orientale, balkanique et médiane

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## Conclusion

Establishment of honor courts was a process that emanated from within the community. Through them, the postwar Polish-Jewish collective formulated its position on guilt and trauma. The trials were very much an internal community matter, with scant media coverage in the Jewish press and almost none in the Polish-language press. They were not meant to affect the understanding of the Holocaust in wider Polish society. Instead, the narration produced during those trials was intended to meet internal communal needs and was starkly different from the official Polish-Jewish memory of the Holocaust of the period, with the spectrum of responses divided between heroic youth underground and traitorous Judenrat. The rooms of honor courts were not places for generalization; rather, they discussed the Holocaust as a human experience.

In the chaos of post-Holocaust migrations and societal transformation, the honor courts served as a secular ritual of passage.<sup>67</sup> As their history clearly shows, the trauma of complicity, guilt, and responsibility could also be comprehended within the procedural framework of the criminal trial, even as specific a one as unfolded in front of an honor court.<sup>68</sup> Thus, while the courts were set up to address the needs of the community, they did not necessarily blindly follow popular expectations. Their aim was to rebuild, rather than purge. The trials carried out in Israel following the implementation in 1950 of the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law show that the courts did not end the discussion within the community, but were rather a stepping stone.<sup>69</sup> The need to settle accounts followed Polish Jews on their way out of Poland as they left to build new lives abroad. Thus, the Civic Court became their link to the past, a tie to their former homeland, and an important element in rebuilding the shattered communities of Polish Jews, however dispersed they might have been in the postwar world.

67 Rothberg, *Implicated Subject*, 92.

68 On the criminal trial as a didactic spectacle see Lawrence Douglas, *The Memory of Judgment: Making Law and History in the Trials of the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 3.

69 On *Kapon* trials in Israel see Dan Porat, *Bitter Reckoning: Israel Tries Holocaust Survivors as Nazi Collaborators* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019).

## Chapter 8

# Risks and Results of Citizens' Commitments

## The Kačerovski Case in Riga, 1958–1963

Eric Le Bourhis and Irina Tcherneva

In August 1960, the Supreme Court of Soviet Latvia condemned Soviet engineer Magnus Eduardovič Kačerovski (born 1907) to death, for having participated in mass crimes as the architect-in-chief of a concentration camp near Riga in 1941–43. This harsh verdict was partly due to the mobilization of some of his fellow citizens. With regard to the wartime activity of the defendant, most of the information gathered in the investigative file has been corroborated by the most recent works on the history of the camp.<sup>1</sup> 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 near Salaspils. During the time of Kačerovski's supervision and until the summer of 1944, the number of inmates interned in the camp was, according to most estimates, about two thousand at a time: deported Jews from the Reich, Latvian political and common law prisoners, families rounded up during antipartisan operations, deserters of the Waffen-SS, a few prisoners of war,

1 See the first comprehensive study of the camp's history, published in Latvian: Kārlis Kangeris, Uldis Neiburgs, and Rudīte Viksne, *Aiz šiem vārtiem vaid zeme: Salaspils noietne 1941–1944* (Riga: Lauku Avize, 2016).

and Vlasov Army soldiers serving sentences.<sup>2</sup> After 1945, Kačerovski had been cleared by Soviet security services: his war activities were known, but he was not one of those thousands of Soviet citizens who had been secretly tried and condemned for treason.<sup>3</sup> In 1957, being in charge of the renovation of the Lutheran cathedral in Riga, he was recognized and 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, Capt. Vladimir Izvestny (1929–2012). In March 1959, the KGB arrested Kačerovski. A first open trial at the Supreme Court in Riga (July 23–25, 1959) condemned him for crimes against the state (under the law of December 25, 1958) to ten years of forced labor. He was deported to the Dubravlag (a correctional labor camp for political prisoners in Mordovia). This verdict revealed a harsh interpretation of the renewed legal and investigative frame for trials after 1955, which were supposedly focused on prominent perpetrators.<sup>4</sup> In the autumn of 1959, the case was reported by the press. In reaction to this media coverage, thousands of Soviet citizens engaged in discussions and wrote “outraged” letters to various authorities. Protesters provoked judicial and political turmoil in Riga, which led to the reopening of the case “due to new elements” related to the violence the defendant allegedly inflicted on the prisoners. After a new open trial (July 25 to August 3, 1960), the accused was condemned, by the same court and under the same law, to death by shooting.

While relying on the most recent works on the history of the camp,<sup>5</sup> and remaining vigilant with regard to the information gathered in the investigative file, in this chapter we raise the problem of the societal commitment to the trial. Exploring in a new perspective the letters conserved in

2 Ibid. About fifteen thousand people were interned for various periods of time in the camp, and four thousand died there. These numbers do not include the victims of the nearby stalag. See also Franziska Jahn, “Salaspils,” in *Der Ort des Terrors: Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager, Band 9: Arbeitserziehungslager, Ghettos, Jugendschutzlager, Polizeihäftlager, Sonderlager, Zigeunerlager, Zwangsarbeiterlager*, ed. Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009), 548–58.

3 Tanja Penter, “Local Collaborators on Trial: Soviet War Crimes Trials under Stalin (1943–1953),” *Cahiers du Monde russe* 49, nos. 2–3 (2008): 341–64; Vanessa Voisin, *L'URSS contre ses traîtres: L'Épuration soviétique (1941–1955)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015).

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

5 Kangeris, Neiburgs, and Viksne, *Aiz šiem vārtiem vaid zeme*.

the investigative file, their origins, and the consequences of their propagation, this chapter contributes to an emerging historiographical tendency that enlightens the engagement of society in the course of seeking justice for the crimes of the Second World War.<sup>6</sup> In the Soviet case, the commitment of citizens' groups to any cause is often viewed as problematic. Soviet history is marked by a long-running debate over the destruction of social relations and the relevance of the Habermasian notion of “public sphere.” The scholarship carried out since 2000 makes it possible to distinguish several types of Soviet public spheres: official and plebiscitary; semicontrolled; and opposed to the authorities. Researchers have shown the connections between these types, examining “intraorganizational” public spheres or “midlevel public spheres” inside institutions.<sup>7</sup> We will draw on the following inputs from these studies: a shift of attention to geographic spaces where individuals interact daily; an emphasis on the practices within which various groups are under construction and on the diversity of membership(s) for each citizen; the plural and fragmented nature of semipublic spheres; and the compartmentalization of the circulation of information among them. 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

6 On the role of witnesses see Gabriel N. Finder and Alexander Prusin, *Justice behind the Iron Curtain: Nazis on Trial in Communist Poland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); and 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, see Sylvie Lindeperg and Annette Wieworka, eds., *Le Moment Eichmann* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2016); Sylvie Lindeperg, *Nuremberg, La bataille des images* (Paris: Payot, 2021); and Guillaume Mouralis and Marie-Bénédicte Vincent, eds., *The Nuremberg Trials: New Perspectives on the Professions* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2017).

7 Gabor T. Rittersporn, Malte Rolf, and Jan C. Behrends, eds., *Public Spheres in Soviet-Type Societies: Between the Great Show of the Party-State and Religious Counter-Cultures* (Frankfurt: 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); Larissa Zakharova, “Soviet Public Spheres,” 2017, <https://www.politika.io/en/notice/soviet-public-spheres>.

and public spheres.<sup>8</sup> This chapter examines several vectors of creating “mid-level” and “semicontrolled public spheres” around the trials, highlighting the practices of collective and individual appropriation and transmission of information.

Far from being spontaneous, these letters expressing outrage emerged in reaction to calls published in the press. They were framed by habits of writing complaints to authorities or editorial boards—practices that had a long history in the Russian world, were transformed under Stalin, and were renewed after his death in 1953. 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>9</sup> For the understanding of social investment in Soviet justice, this chapter examines the social life of letters in their genesis, diversity, and complementarity. It reconstructs the social context of letter-writing and the authors’ profiles, and confronts these elements with the content of the letters, as well as with their fate, use, and collecting. After the first input given by the Russian-language newspaper of the Latvian Communist Party (LCP), *Soviet Latvia* (*Sovetskaja Latvija*), letters and information circulated among ordinary citizens, journalists, and officials. More than four hundred of the letters, but not all of them, sent to various addressees, were incorporated into the KGB investigative file.<sup>10</sup>

Letters were not a mere controlled byproduct of propaganda or of the ongoing purge of the Latvian Communist leaders.<sup>11</sup> They are relevant

8 Marc Élie and Isabelle Ohayon, “L’expérience soviétique à son apogée: Culture et société des années Brežnev,” *Cahiers du Monde russe* 54, nos. 1–2 (2013); Dina Fainberg and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

9 It is not worth quoting here the abundant scholarship on letter-writing in the Soviet Union. For an ample presentation of it, 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.

10 Latvijas valsts arhīvs [Latvian State Archive; hereafter LVA], Riga, 1986-1-42918.

11 Kangeris, Neiburgs, and Viksne, *Aiz šiem vārtiem vaid zem*, disqualified these letters as manipulated and not acute, thus not relevant for the history of the camp. We approach the letters not as sources for the history of the camp, but as revealing the commitment of citizens in the “publicization” of the case.

sources with which to study the tools of interactions between criminal justice and society 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 (dissemination of information) 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 records, the personal papers of one of the leaders of a group of former prisoners,<sup>12</sup> tenancy registers in Riga,<sup>13</sup> as well as published materials from 1959 on.

After a prologue on the propagation of information about of the case in the press, the first section of this chapter will profile the letters’ authors and their social environment to apprehend the dynamics of writing. The second part addresses the range of citizen requests and interpretations of data on war crimes and justice policies, as a way 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 September 27 and 30, October 1 and 2, 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 articles. 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 implicitly called for new testimony, warned against the

12 Latvijas nacionālā bibliotēka [National Library of Latvia; hereafter LNB], Riga, collection RXA 355.

13 Kept at State Archives for Personnel Records [Personāla dokumentu valsts arhīvs; hereafter PDVA], Riga. The registers of twenty-four 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).



revival of pro-Nazi forces in Western countries, and alerted the people to “remain cautious.”<sup>14</sup> This text could not have been written and published without close collaboration with the KGB, and it testified to a desire to raise popular support to reopen the case. The series highlighted the variety of victims, insisting on the Jewishness of a part of the deportees, but characterized them all as leftist political prisoners, created confusion with the stalag prisoners nearby, and silenced 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 Ljudinovo,” *Sovetskaja Rossija*, March 17, 1957). Another of Dmitriev’s installments 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 that 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 was the corrupted head of the Latvian Heritage Restoration workshops. The colleagues who were called to defend him during the trial were also labeled as fascists. These allegations were partially based on real concerns within the KGB.

The Latvian-language newspapers, which were being targeted by the purge at that time, did not publish such a text at first. The orientation of the Russian-speaking media determined which sections of the public were first affected—in particular, Russian-speaking milieus. After at least one complaint about this lack of information in Latvian,<sup>15</sup> the press of several small Latvian towns published translated and adapted versions of Dmitriev’s texts.<sup>16</sup> In parallel, *Soviet Latvia* published a review of the letters received by its editorial board and a few excerpts.<sup>17</sup> This last article was republished in the Latvian-language provincial press.<sup>18</sup> Before the end of November 1959, information on the case was offered to larger audiences via articles in

14 Czechoslovak resistance fighter Julius Fučík’s slogan meaning “Against former traitors who live among us.” It was widely used in Soviet literature, cinema, and radio during the 1960s.

15 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 4:275.

16 For instance, in Gulbene: *Sarkanais Stars*, October 13, 1959.

17 “My ne soglasny,” *Sovetskaja Latvija*, October 25, 1959.

18 For instance, in Gulbene: *Sarkanais Stars*, November 5, 1959.

newspapers distributed throughout the country, such as *Komsomolskaja Pravda*.<sup>19</sup> From September to December 1959 at least, after these publications, letters landed on the desks of newspaper editorial offices, as well as 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 investigative file.<sup>20</sup>

### Pathways from Media to Citizens: Social Context of Reception and Letter-Writing

The content of the letters provides information on the social circumstances of writing as well as on the titles of legitimacy on behalf of which the authors took up the pen. We will demonstrate how they help us recognize the channels through which information on the case was disseminated in the society and how the affair was received within social groups. We explore two frameworks of collective writing (at workplaces and in neighborhoods) and their connection to 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 electromechanical factory “REZ” and addressed to the Soviet prosecutor general Roman Rudenko or to *Soviet Latvia*. Most such letters were typewritten in Russian and present similar structure. After a brief justification (typically “having read the article by Dmitriev during a meeting”), they characterize Kačerovski with words taken from the press: renegade, torturer, sadist, and so on. They qualify the initial 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

19 Lidija Lesnaja, “Ne zabudem geroizm, ne prostim predatel’sstva,” November 22, 1959.

20 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:2–9.

inmate, survivor, and so forth.<sup>21</sup> These details hint at the identities of those who initiated the writing.

The review of letters published on October 25 by *Soviet Latvia* as well as a KGB report from December that incorporated them into the investigative file outline collective letters among the collection and qualify them as “authentic voices” from Soviet society.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, a short comment written recently by historians in their history of the camp highlights this collective dimension as a reason to classify these letters among a variety of sources “organized” by the KGB.<sup>23</sup>

A large number of the letters were written at workplaces and this writing was undoubtedly framed by the Party, Communist youth (Komsomol), or 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, instead of the dichotomy between individual-authentic and collective-constrained, a wide variety of collective and individual engagements<sup>24</sup>—partially or completely constrained or, on the contrary, appropriated—is a fertile focus of analysis. The letters were but one element among various patterns of engagement that were indicative of the perception of the case and the formation of discussion groups.

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 information: from a “five-minute discussion with workers” at the meat factory in Valmiera (sixty-three signatures), to an affirmative active interest: “We [thirty] workers at the Riga disinfection station must say that every day we waited impatiently for . . . the result of the investigation

21 For instance, one of the many collective letters sent from “REZ” in the first week of October 1959 bears the signatures of Gennady C. and Voldemārs Z., identified as “former inmates of the ‘Salaspils’ concentration camp.” LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:309.

22 Ibid., 7:2–9, Captain Izvestny, Inspection record (8 pp.), December 28, 1959.

23 Kangeris, Neiburgs, and Viksne, *Aiz šiem vārtiem vaid zeme*, 39–40.

24 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, nos. 2–3 (2019): 597–618.

and the verdict.”<sup>25</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’ reactions.<sup>26</sup>

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 often acted as a magnet that attracted the attention of individuals. In some factories, collective letters were preceded by individual ones or were written in parallel.<sup>27</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, kolkhozy (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>28</sup> Individuals utilized collective settings to express themselves. Several collective letters were written in the first person, suggesting an impulse that was fortified by the adding of signatures.<sup>29</sup>

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>30</sup> Indeed, the negotiation was also linguistic. Since the late

25 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:120, to *Soviet Latvia*, n.d.; and 8:150–51, to *Pravda*, October 8, 1959.

26 Ibid., 8:221, October 3, 1959.

27 See, for instance, five letters sent from the factory “Avtoelektropribor.” Ibid., 9:128–29, 148–52.

28 Ibid., 7:158, letter to the Supreme Court of Latvia, n.d.

29 For instance, ibid., 7:227, letter signed by thirty people and sent to *Soviet Latvia*, n.d.

30 Ibid., 5:38, October 4, 1959.



1940s, Russian speakers made up half the population of Riga, and collective discussions and encounters in its factories were 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 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 other two were written in November by school employees and teachers in Latvian provincial communities (Atašiene and Ērgļi).<sup>31</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 socioprofessional categorization of the authors—workers, survivors, war veterans, Party representatives. A closer look at the letters and some other sources allows identification of participation by many other layers of Soviet society. Tenancy registers identify some male members of a social and political elite for 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>32</sup> Authors also included people from very modest backgrounds, especially women—among them a housewife on a small farmstead; retirees; and repressed individuals, such as Tamara V. from Riga, unemployed, who had just been released from a labor colony,<sup>33</sup> or Vadim P., a common criminal prisoner at Riga central prison;<sup>34</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 the unfairness

31 Ibid., 4:275, 309; 7:84, 9:213.

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

33 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:225, to *Soviet Latvia*, October 6, 1959; PDVA, 3681-4-523 and 524, registers of the building at 48/50 Bear Slayer [Lāčplēša] Street.

34 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:109–10, to the Supreme Court of Latvia, October 10, 1959.

of his own fate and tried to legitimize himself in 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 the Soviet border illegally and then been punished with deportation.<sup>35</sup> Overall, the Latvian names of the authors and the uncertain spelling make it possible to recognize that the authors of certain letters were of Latvian culture but decided to adopt the Russian language to address Russian media or Pan-Soviet authorities.

Through a range of manners of introducing themselves, two main profiles appear: former inmates of the camp and their relatives (with a majority of Latvians), and people who had experienced the war's violence in western Soviet regions. Former inmates of the camp (more than forty) 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 antipartisan operations in 1943–44 in the Vitebsk region (Belorussia), the Kalinin region (Russia), or Latgale (the easternmost region of Latvia) and arrived at the camp after Kačerovski had left.

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 E.”<sup>36</sup>

Oskars A. wrote to the KGB directorate in Gulbene (Latvia) from a farmstead after reading articles in a local Latvian 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 Žvirīņš Roberts who works at the Kirov kolkhoz.”<sup>37</sup> Both episodes (the abuse of political prisoners

35 Ibid., 9:247–48, to *Soviet Latvia*, October 12, 1959; Ojārs Niedre and Viktors Daugmalis, *Slepenais karš pret Latviju: Komunistiskās partijas darbība 1920–1940 gadā; Arhīvi apsūdz* (Riga: Totalitārisma seku dokumentēšanas centrs, 1999).

36 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 9:128–29, October 3, 1959, original in Russian.

37 Ibid., 4:105–6, October 26, 1959, original in Latvian.

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. Prisoners of war 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 Salaspils, for they participated in the liberation of the region.<sup>38</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 Pavlovskij 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." The following day, continuing, he wrote: "I didn't sleep all night because of this criminal."<sup>39</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 Latvian carpenters deported from Gulbene to Salaspils, who now worked at the training center of the Riga Society for the Blind, addressed a joint letter to the editors 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 antipersonnel landmine in the autumn of 1944. Although their letter does not expand on this, by it they join "the many people who are calling for the Kačerovski case to be reexamined."<sup>40</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 undergone.<sup>41</sup> Her Latvian-Jewish family had been murdered in Jelgava (Latvia) during the Holocaust.<sup>42</sup> Single, a bookkeeper at the Latvian Invalids' Union, she was the only Jewish survivor among the residents of a building unit in Riga where she shared a

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

39 Ibid., 8:73–75, November 23, 1959.

40 Ibid., 4:309, October 28, 1959.

41 Addressed to Vorošilov, *ibid.*, 7:89, November 15, 1959.

42 See <http://names.lu.lv/>.

small apartment with a single mother.<sup>43</sup> Her experience and status in Soviet society help us see that the gesture of writing cannot be reduced to just obedience to an injunction.

### Letters as Vectors of the Turmoil in Riga

The letters also give insights about the spaces, social and geographic, where information on the case and from the news spread. While mentioning discussions and information circulation, the letters 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 public and 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>44</sup> This unprecedented turmoil around the memory of the war was certain to influence people or exert social pressure to write.<sup>45</sup>

Well-informed members of the community could attract others to discuss and sign such letters. Close-knit neighborhoods, courtyards, and kitchens were structuring spaces for discussion. In addition to family circles, communal apartments were such places.<sup>46</sup> In the building at 12A Sloka Street, neighbors from various apartments wrote letters, first individually to *Soviet Latvia* and the Latvian KGB, and then together to Rudenko.<sup>47</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 case.<sup>48</sup> TV sets being in short supply at the time, viewing programs together with one's neighbors contributed to the formation of small, semiprivate spheres of

43 PDVA, 3051-3-432, register of the house at 45 Street of the Military Hospitals [Hospitāļu].

44 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:301, October 5, 1959.

45 Ibid., 7:360–62, October 25, 1959. This letter written by a university lab assistant highlights the social pressure to take up the pen.

46 For instance, apartment No. 10 at 13 January Street. Ibid., 9:219–22, October 4, 1959.

47 Ibid., 7:288–90, 304–5, 9:106–7, 189–90.

48 Interview by Eric Le Bourhis with Žaneta F., Riga, August 3, 2017.

discussion. Because big companies were largely responsible for the allocation of living space to their employees in the city since 1945,<sup>49</sup> these semiprivate spheres partially served as an extension of the workplace.

A picture of the people who formed these small communities and wrote letters emerges from analysis of tenancy registers. Of eighty personal addresses in Riga given in by letter-writers, we found twenty-four in tenancy registers. Twenty of the twenty-four 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 mountain region in 1925, arrived in the same year with her sister after they were both demobilized from the Red Army.<sup>50</sup> Among those listed in the tenancy registers were also two members from the Latvian community in Russia. One 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>51</sup> Later newcomers were few and often military. Lt. Col. Mikhail K., born in 1906 near Viatka, was a Party member from 1926. He arrived in Riga from the Soviet-controlled zone of Austria in 1952, and his family came from Sverdlovsk in 1954.<sup>52</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 from Latvia or from the locals. Moreover, the letters emerged from a culturally diverse residential environment. Except for a few Russian military personnel, their authors shared communal apartments with Latvian families, lived in predominantly Latvian workers' neighborhoods, or had married locals (or lived together with their children who did).<sup>53</sup> Those who had moved to the city after 1945 from Russian Soviet territories were

49 Tenancy registers show a majority of employees of the factory "Medpreparaty" were housed at 222 Moscow Street (PDVA, 3251-1-251). Those of the factory "GMP" lived at 91 Gorki Street (3051-3-925), of the post, telegraph, and telephone at 30 Imants Sudmalis Street (3681-4-695), or of the military at several addresses (e.g., 3681-4-259).

50 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 [Mēness] Street.

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

52 PDVA, 3681-4-664 to 666, registers of the house at 22 Kirov [now Elisabeth] Street.

53 PDVA, collections 3253 and 3051.

perhaps more likely to take the pen first, but they did not form a separate public space for the reception of the affair.

Letters and tenancy records help only partially to reconstruct circles of sociability where discussions about 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 intertwined, and at the intersection of linguistic communities.

Reference to the letters as a manifestation of "public opinion" (*obščestvennost'*) can be found both in the writings<sup>54</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 (i.e., in 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 that 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 addressed the fragmentation of opinion into professional and semipublic spaces, as well as the use by individuals of vocabulary offered by the media.<sup>55</sup> This study on the turmoil in Riga in October 1959 contributes to understanding the pathways these opinion fragments could follow and collide on, and how personal commitment could meet with collective incentives.

### Multiple Understandings of the Kačerovski Scandal

Whether they were expressed as personal opinions or cast in collective molds, what did these individual expectations convey? 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 toward the authorities.

54 E.g., LVA, 1986-1-42918, 8:46, November 26, 1959.

55 Rittersporn, Rolf, and Behrends, *Public Spheres*; 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.

## 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 myriad painful and detailed recollections about mass murders as well as forced labor. One of those who affirmed themselves as an eyewitness, 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>56</sup>

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)—a word offered by the press and frequently used in the letters. Numerous writings attest to the low level of interest in a strict correlation between the violence committed by the accused and the sum of war crimes they had knowledge of—and wrongly locating Babi Yar (Babin Yar) in Smolensk (not Kyiv) 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>57</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 some of the letters.<sup>58</sup> Authors demanded that Kačerovski be hanged and his body exposed in front of the survivors, or that he be incarcerated on death row<sup>59</sup>—the degree of radicalness with which the authors

56 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:227, letter signed by thirty persons, addressed to *Soviet Latvia*, n.d., original in Russian.

57 Ibid., 7:158–62, n.d.

58 For instance, *ibid.*, 7:102–4, to the newspaper *The Struggle*, received on December 4, 1959.

59 Ibid., 7:36–39, "twenty-one workers" from Odessa to the newspaper *Komsomolskaja Pravda*, December 2, 1959.

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 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 [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]. I was asked by Nina M. Č., the director of the Planning Department, to add her voice of protest against the ten-year verdict, in order to replace it with shooting. She is also a member of the CPSU.<sup>60</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 announced project to create a memorial at the site of the camp, or the denunciation of domestic corruption and "Western revanchism." Demand for justice overwhelmed political expectations.<sup>61</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 Dmitriev's articles' genre as detective and asked ironically, "Basically, what were articles aiming at? Reassuring human consciousness or indignation? Most likely,

60 Ibid., 8:314–17, to *Soviet Latvia*, October 4, 1959, original in Russian.

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

indignation . . .”<sup>62</sup> Others questioned the veracity of witnesses’ statements.<sup>63</sup> In order to compensate for the blind spots, they searched for additional information, by collecting documents from the Extraordinary State Commission in Salaspils<sup>64</sup> or requesting “a lawyer to make a contribution and answer the workers’ questions.”<sup>65</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 October 4, I went to Salaspils, where the concentration camp was located, on purpose.”<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, responding to an agitprop publication aiming to stir up emotions, a number of readers requested tools for autonomous reflection.

### Soviet Authority under Criticism

The petitioners also mobilized their knowledge of the legal framework. They mentioned the war crimes trials previously conducted in the Soviet Union and abroad, such as the Krasnodar trial (1943), the IMT in Nuremberg (1945–46), as well as the recent Ljudinovo trial (1958) and Koch 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. Several letters went far beyond this media message and compared the USSR to European countries that were failing in their duty to purge their society. “How would the Soviet Union be different from West Germany?” asked an inhabitant of the building at 12A Sloka Street.<sup>67</sup> Other letters sarca-

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

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

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

65 Ibid., 7:48–49, three representatives of the match factory “Kometa” [where Rozanov was working] in Riga to *Soviet Latvia*, October 13, 1959.

66 Ibid., 9:189, received on October 7, 1959, original in Russian.

67 Ibid., 7:304–5, to *Soviet Latvia*, October 3, 1959.

cally noted the “magnanimous” attitude of the Soviet government,<sup>68</sup> which, indeed, since 1955 had for the most part amnestied previously condemned collaborators.<sup>69</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>70</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>71</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 part of a social and economic elite) was largely questioned by the petitioners: “People like Kačerovski find themselves in the system of correctional labor camps. After the ten 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>72</sup>

Such critics, bearing a certain knowledge of the carceral hierarchy, are represented 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. Authors who invoked the latter in their letters emphasized the irrelevance of applying the death penalty to those accused of “squandering of state property,” 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

68 Ibid., 7:328, letter written by fifty-two employees of a shoe factory in Riga and sent to the Supreme Court of Latvia, n.d.

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

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

71 Ibid., 7:175, collective letter sent by railway staff to the newspapers *Soviet Latvia* and *Rīgas Balsis*, n.d.

72 Ibid., 7:233–36: individual letter sent from Riga to *Soviet Latvia*, October 7, 1959, original in Russian.

he in fact received in the spring of 1959.<sup>73</sup> In their letters dedicated to the Kačerovski affair, numerous authors denounced the discrepancy between this verdict and the ten-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 to denounce the glaring inequalities in the Soviet regime. A considerable number of letters explained the initial, 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, which was close to a confession and included 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 social networks, material possessions, and symbolic capital. Thus, he offered his reader a global interpretative framework within which he situated what he had been seeing within 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 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 toward these Kačerovskis more humane than that toward their victims?<sup>74</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

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

74 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:109-10, to the Supreme Court of Latvia, October 10, 1959, original in Russian.

journalist had retained social and economic aspects of Kačerovski's story. In his letter, Vadim P. stated that the war reinforced social inequalities in Soviet society and that he, as an orphan and a delinquent, was thus a victim of the privileged social group the defendant belonged to. 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 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 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>75</sup>

Whistleblowing, suspicion of wealth concealment, and a perception of illegitimacy of the court decision abounded in responses to the Kačerovski case. The inegalitarian economic interpretation framework was omnipresent and was woven into the memory of the war.

The constant back-and-forth between the individual and the communal provided an opportunity for letter-writers to 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. For a number of them, the trial represented an occasion to denounce social inequality. Although partially formulated in a stabilized media vocabulary, the disturbing questions they raised<sup>76</sup> drew heavily on rumors circulating in society, which the authorities were barely able to control.

75 *Ibid.*, 7:348, to *Soviet Latvia*, n.d.

76 This is reminiscent of when Soviet citizens had targeted the silences in the "secret" report of the Twentieth Party Congress. Jean-Paul Depretto, "La réception du xx<sup>e</sup> Congrès dans la région de Gorki," *Nouvelles Fondations* 1, no. 1 (2006): 138-58.



### Muted or Explicit Threat to Authorities?

The Kačerovski scandal laced with the ongoing political and administrative purge of the core of the Latvian Communist government, those later called “national communists.” In a context where the Kremlin had been trying to control what it perceived as growing movements toward autonomy in the periphery of the Soviet Union, an internal struggle in the LCP led in the summer of 1959 to the denunciation as nationalists of Latvian Communist leaders, mostly local left-wing activists, many of whom were veterans of the war. Among other defaming grievances, they were accused of “Russophobia,” especially toward 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 Berkļavs,<sup>77</sup> became the scapegoat and the symbol of the conflict that led to the dismissal of about two 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>78</sup>

Letters that explicitly echoed this campaign are rare. However, 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

77 Berkļavs 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 to 1958 and then deputy president of the Council of Ministers of Latvia (and in that position launched in 1958 the project to build a memorial site at Salaspils) until his dismissal in July 1959 and his banishment to Vladimir in Russia.

78 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.

forgot that mostly Russian fighters liberated Riga. . . . The Berkļavs invented a whole bunch of prohibitions for us, as if we were Negros [negry].”<sup>79</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 unique in its animus but reflected more generally the local context of a 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. They 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. “Why had the KGB failed to start the investigation earlier?” wrote one such group of workers of the factory “Metaltehnika” to Khrushchev.<sup>80</sup> Likewise Vladimir L., author of an individual letter, who lived within a milieu made up of ministry employees, police and military personnel, former Salaspils inmates, as well as skilled workers.<sup>81</sup>

A few long-term members of the Communist Party and former partisans attacked the district Party committee, which was responsible for Kačerovski’s office.<sup>82</sup> 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>83</sup>

The press was suspected of withholding information.<sup>84</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

79 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:348–52, anonymous letter to *Soviet Latvia*, n.d., original in Russian.

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

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

82 See, e.g., LVA, 1986-1-42918, 7:43–45, to the Central Committee LCP, October 20, 1959.

83 Ibid., 7:357–58, October 24, 1959, original in Russian.

84 Ibid., 7:43–45.

certain defects in our lives, certain citizens who violated Soviet law. But you, who represent 'public opinion,' 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>85</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."

From writing to acting is a short step. Those who demanded transparency and publicity for the whole procedure (opening of archives, access to the court, publication of the verdict, public execution) insisted they had the capacity to affect political decisions. Some citizens approached the prosecutor, including by telephone,<sup>86</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>87</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 were destined for political, judicial, or police authorities at the republic and All-Union levels (50 to Rudenko; 22 to the Supreme Court of the USSR, about 20 to the CPSU Central Committee, or to 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, for example, having already sent several letters to newspapers, wrote to Rudenko directly.<sup>88</sup> A considerable proportion of the letters that ended up on the desks of leaders in Moscow effectively weakened the republic-level authorities. Mentions of "the nest of Former

85 Ibid., 7:82–83, original in Russian.

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

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

88 Ibid., 9:151–53, October 20, 1959, addressed to Rudenko.

Latvia in the core of the Soviet city of Riga,"<sup>89</sup> a rhetorical link between war criminals and the pre-Soviet regime created by print media and cinema during the immediate postwar 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 CPSU Central Committee 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 Berkļavs and Co., has friends in the apparatus of the court and the prosecutor. 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>90</sup>

The author was mistaken about the absence of capital punishment for "executioners." The error reveals that the authorities, having secretly conducted expeditious trials in the immediate postwar period, now faced the risk that the misinforming 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 letters was an idea of the possible impact of citizens' actions, especially at the level of an institution or a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. The diverse positions held by the authors and their socioprofessional origins had an impact on 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.

89 Ibid., 7:125, October 2, 1959.

90 Ibid., 7:31, October 6, 1959, original in Russian.

## The Multiple "Lives" of the Letters

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 circulated them. 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. Such 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>91</sup> On October 17, 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>92</sup> On October 23, 1959, the Central Committee of the LCP reacted to a signal from the Central Committee of the Communist Party.<sup>93</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>94</sup> During an internal meeting, the first secretary of the LCP Central Committee Jan Kalnberzin, who would soon be dismissed, acknowledged the risk located in the letters:

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

91 Blum and Koustova, "Negotiating Lives."

92 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 8:172.

93 LVA, PA 101-22-58.

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

major tendency is to lower the number of executions, because it disadvantages us in the international arena, but such persons deserve it.<sup>95</sup>

Kalnberzin pointed out this intermediate zone between the fear of public influence (the risks of 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 the "correct" justice that would be accomplished.

The Central Committee of the LCP dismissed the prosecutor in charge and organized an investigation led by a special commission.<sup>96</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>97</sup> The LCP Central Committee pinpointed structural corruption in various Latvian administrations including the Council of Ministers, but also the recruitment of politically suspect persons. During the internal discussion on November 11, one of the Party special 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 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>98</sup>

95 LVA, PA 101-22-58, original in Russian.

96 The commission was composed of three heads or deputy heads of the LCP Central Committee's departments (E. Peterson, E. Baško, J. Katsen) and a member of the Central Committee (P. Plesum) and was chaired by the secretary for industry (A. Miglinik).

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

98 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 of collaboration; these were local synonyms for "traitors." None of these groups was repressed collectively. Still, many of individuals had been defamed, arrested, and repressed.

Proportions were exaggerated.<sup>99</sup> Still, the workshops comprised a less strategic sector of the architectural branch, and almost the only one where specialists suspected by the KGB could find work.<sup>100</sup> The director of the Latvian Committee of Construction and, as such, supervisor of Kačerovski, implied that the presence of “former members of the SS” in public institutions was no secret to 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 Kruminš appealed to the special 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 [the director of the Latvian Committee for Construction] and the prosecutor, did they not know it?<sup>101</sup>

The very functioning of secrecy would publicly weaken the authorities. Facing it, another member of the special commission, Katsen (close to Berklavs and soon dismissed), recognized that “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>102</sup>

Katsen pinpointed a risk of, and at the same time a rule for, the publicization. Indeed, on the path from an officially open trial to a trial as a public event, the Latvian Communist leaders wanted to rely on a carefully supervised popular mobilization and avoid discrediting state bodies. The fear of being bypassed by Soviet central institutions in the regulation of the case was

99 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, September 2, 1959.

100 Eric Le Bourhis, “Avec le plan, contre le modèle: Urbanisme et changement urbain à Riga en URSS (1945–1990)” (PhD diss., EHESS Paris, 2015), 435–36.

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

102 Ibid., 91.

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 of Latvia rescinded the first verdict, relaunched the investigation against Kačerovski, and requested the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union to authorize the application of the death penalty.<sup>103</sup> The LCP Central 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>104</sup>

The letters’ first “life” 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 the interaction between their authors and the KGB sheds light on two aspects. First, the usefulness of the abundant information on the suffering inflicted during the war for the case was limited. Second, 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 selected by the investigators. Exchanges with former inmates identified from the first investigation and letters received after the second trial were grouped in volume 1. Others were inserted into the interrogation files (vols. 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. First 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

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

104 LVA, PA 101-22-68.

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 Kačerovski's activity. Some witnesses explained they had nothing incriminating to say about Kačerovski;<sup>105</sup> they 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 of at least a half of the forty former inmates whose letters had arrived on its desk. Later, the prosecutor utilized eleven survivors in preparing the bill of indictment and summoned nine of them to present their testimony during the second trial. The judge mentioned the evidence provided by seven of them in the verdict on August 3, 1960.

Some identified witnesses, former victims of the antipartisan 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 in his letter that he would be able to recognize Kačerovski from photographs. Three weeks later, he was questioned.<sup>106</sup> In his note to the Latvian KGB, the ex-POW not only said he could provide information on the construction phase of the camp, but suggested he had been personally beaten by Kačerovski. However, in his testimony to the investigator under caution, he admitted finally to have learned of the defendant's crimes only from the press.<sup>107</sup>

Other letter writers advanced only fragmentary statements yet 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 as an activist herself, seemed to have incited another former prisoner to reveal her personal story. Ksaverija S. participated in photograph recognition and reported on brutalities committed by Kačerovski.

The information such witnesses provided appeared fragile to the investigators. They tracked down the chain of prisoners who had personally suffered at the hands of Kačerovski, undertaking 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

105 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9; see also LVA, 1221-1c-232: 238.

106 LVA, 1986-1-42918, 5:145-54.

107 Ibid., 5:25-30, December 24, 1959.

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 a letter to her oral testimony in the courtroom (including through publication of her account in Dmitriev's second *Soviet Latvia* article, her interrogation, and her inclusion 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 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>108</sup>

The police and media spheres were connected. The first link was established between employees in both spheres who exchanged letters and coordinated their actions. The second link existed at the witness level. Indeed, some witnesses were better prepared than others for the public arena. Political prisoners of Salaspils were mobilized as witnesses in both trials. They were connected with other survivors through more or less formal and preexisting 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 of the conflict ultimately had more lasting impact than the outrage surrounding Kačerovski and the two trials. Here, the trajectories of the letters entered into dialogue with another form of social mobilization—that of the former political prisoners of Salaspils. The group was not formed as an entity prior to the scandal. Before the trial, obsequies were one reason to meet.<sup>109</sup> Discussions regarding the construction of a memorial monument on the site of the camp started in late 1958 and were an impetus for a more massive mobilization. A first large meeting was organized at the site in July 1960, a few days before the second trial began. Thus, having partially united in the wake of the letter-writing, they now formed an influential group. Furthermore, by inciting others to write and taking over much of the organizing of commemorative events, the former prisoners enabled them to

108 The two were Kazimir L. from Valka and Marija S. from Ērgli. Ibid., 5: 113, 169.

109 Latvijas kara muzejs [Latvian Museum of War], Riga, 10400-7319-n, photograph of a burial in January 1959.

testify. As a result, their actions demonstrated once again that public involvement was hardly driven by the political authorities.

On October 25, 1959, *Soviet Latvia* published the article “We Don’t Agree” (*My ne soglasny*), based on letters, called “life documents.” This article portrayed the camp in a way that was distinct from that created by the investigation. Unlike Captain Izvestny, the journalists were highly 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 work. In particular, they utilized the letters written by “Belorussian children.”<sup>110</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 in Riga in 1946 of Friedrich Jeckeln, a high SS and police figure (successively in southern and northern occupied Soviet territories), 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 it has been approached by historians with the greatest caution.<sup>111</sup> Remarkably, the investigator Izvestny dismissed the physical torments inflicted on children in the camp. Nor was he interested in the fate of those who allegedly had been sold as slaves after incarceration in Salaspils, as it was relatively obvious that Kačerovski was not involved in those crimes. Rather, it was first the press and later memory books about the camp that reported on it.

Such an injection of letters into the press prompted a new epistolary wave. However, it was pressure from the central authorities that finally provoked a new investigation. At the same moment, the media sphere expanded the echo effect of the letters. In November 1959, the journalist Dmitriev and a couple of survivors of the camp (including Rozanov) participated in a public event at the Cultural Center of the Latvian House of Syndicates in Riga entitled “People, Be Cautious!” After remarks by Dmitriev on growing “revanchism”

110 Such trajectories can be found, for instance, in LVA, 1986-1-42918, 8:99–106, Felician R. and Evgenia Ju. to *Soviet Latvia*, September 30 and October 5, 1959, respectively.

111 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 XIX<sup>e</sup>-début XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle” (habilitation thesis, EHESS Paris, 2015), 158, 390–97.

in the Federal Republic of Germany and testimonies about the camp, the East German documentary film *You and Some Comrade* was screened.<sup>112</sup> Reports about the event were published in the press and the filmed meeting was shown in newsreels.<sup>113</sup>

On the wave of this public involvement, which was praised in the press, and after the KGB interrogations during the winter of 1959–60, the former inmate and journalist at the main Latvian-language newspaper *The Struggle* (*Cīņa*), Kārlis Sausnītis (1911–98), collected testimonies of survivors. During the first half of 1960, *The Struggle* published several of these testimonies and also articles related to the memory of the camp but not directly connected to the Kačerovski affair. During a meeting at the Revolution Museum in November 1960, Sausnītis called on survivors to transmit to him their testimonies and personal documents.<sup>114</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. In the preparations for successive printings of the Salaspils memorial book<sup>115</sup> that were left in Sausnītis’s personal papers, one can see the traces of his shaping of information (e.g., selection, editing, censorship).

These actors’ positions were intermediate: they were neither accomplices of the judicial case nor just an infrapublic that would be disconnected from insiders’ circles. The journalist Kārlis Sausnītis was a crucial node of the survivors’ network. He also had contacts with survivors—members of the local intelligentsia—such as writer Miervaldis Birze and painter Kārlis Bušs, both of whom were 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>116</sup>

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

113 Announcement in *Rīgas Bals*, November 10, 1959; report in *Padomju Ceļš*, November 17, 1959; newsreel *Padomju Latvija* #36/1959.

114 *Cīņa*, November 3, 1960.

115 *Salaspils nāves noņemē: Atmiņu krājums* (Riga: Latvijas valsts izdevniecība, 1962); 2nd printing 1963, Russian printing in 1964, final printing in 1975.

116 LNB, RXA 355 (Sausnītis’ papers), 9, lists of members of the association in the 1960s with their private addresses; interview by Eric Le Bourhis with Zaiga Eglīte, Bušs’s daughter, Riga, July 2017.



For the benefit of the investigation and of the publicization of the case, Sausnītis initiated or maintained an exchange with several survivors, including Pavel Koršunov, who wanted to publish his memoirs.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, he established communications with a single Jewish survivor from Czechoslovakia, Josef Gärtner, and put him in contact with judicial authorities.<sup>118</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>119</sup> For the first printing of Sausnītis's book, Gärtner wrote a long prologue about his deportation experience before he was interned in Salaspils,<sup>120</sup> which was published with few modifications.

Sausnītis was in direct contact with Izvestny.<sup>121</sup> Sausnītis's competencies, 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>122</sup> At the same time, his position was weakened because, being part of the local leftist underground before the war, he also had connections to Latvian authorities who were being purged in 1959–60, including some on the board of *The Struggle*. But he was not a member of the Communist Party until the autumn of 1960.<sup>123</sup> No source suggests that Sausnītis would have had access to secret documents from the investigation. On the contrary, as a way of controlling him, Izvestny wrote the introductions to successive printings of the memory book and led a meeting with the

117 LNB, RXA 355 38.

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

119 "To nedrīkst aizmirst: Vēstule no Čehoslovākijas tautas republikas," *Cīņa*, February 4, 1960.

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

121 See the correspondence between the KGB and editor Sausnītis in January 1958, LVA, 1986-1-42918, vol. 1. A few years later, Izvestny gave him a couple of volumes from an investigation file to get him to write a book on the burned village of Audriņi. LNB, RXA 355 3.

122 Annotations on drafts in LNB, RXA 355.

123 LVA, PA 346-1-53, personal file in the archive collection of *The Struggle* editorial board.

publishers.<sup>124</sup> Thus, Sausnītis's status helps to explain what 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 they were not full members of the inner circle of secrecy.

Such multipositioned actors adapted the testimonies during the editing process. Sausnītis managed the assignment of categories of victims to each published testimony: deported Jews to Gärtner, Belorussian children to Akulina Lele, and so forth. 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, such as noncommunist political prisoners and resistance fighters, notably women.<sup>125</sup> The case of Soviet prisoners of war was treated as 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, "served in an SS death squad, and somehow quarreled with the Germans."<sup>126</sup> The passage includes a discussion, through the words of two inmates—the painter Miķelis Strazdiņš and one such "traitor"—about the engagement of Soviet citizens in the German forces. In the draft copy in Sausnītis's 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, according to what he understood of the line between secrecy and publicity.<sup>127</sup> In 1963, this problem was expressed again during an editorial meeting on the reprint of the book. According to a report of this meeting, 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>128</sup> Indeed,

124 Izvestny led the only editing meeting related to the memorial books we could trace in the archives of the publishing house (LVA, 478-15-17, meeting of March 1, 1963).

125 For instance, see the unpublished testimony of Marija Rūse, LNB, RXA 355 51.

126 LNB, RXA 355 51, original in Latvian (translated from Russian).

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

128 LVA, 478-15-17.

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 "lives" of the letters as objects that has preoccupied us here, but also the way in which they participated in sociability fifteen years after the end of the war.

## Conclusion

The media propagation of information about the Kačerovski affair activated memories of the war. The letter-writing was generated by a stimulus from the media, but, putting local authorities and even the KGB at risk, it had unexpected effects. We have proposed here an enriched analytic linkage of several dimensions relating to letter-writing in the Soviet Union; reconstituting the social environment in which they were written and the sociological profiles of the authors, tracing the circulation of the letters between institutions, their formation as an archival object per se, and their collective usages. Doing this enables us to portray semipublic spheres located at the point where professional and residential spaces intertwined. Although fragmented, these spheres allowed the circulation of information both 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, as well as 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 that held 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 semipublic 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 did not 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. Conversely, information followed semipublic channels. Letters and recollections appeared as full-fledged protagonists in the spread and 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—resulting in the erasure of some statements from the courtroom and their emergence in the media, public meetings, and private collective gatherings.