

Cry for Nazi justice ends in a bitter - whimper - Age, The/The Sunday Age (Melbourne, Australia) - January 7, 1994 - page 3
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Australia's war-crimes investigators will end their work within weeks, bitter that after seven years and \$20 million in expenditure a Melbourne man suspected of some of the worst atrocities remains free, blaming Federal Government interference.

The man, 79, is one of at least two alleged Nazi war criminals that the War Crimes Prosecution Support Unit was convinced it could convict on charges of mass murder during World War II.

He is alleged to have been an officer in the Latvian Arajās Kommando, which was responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of Jews and other civilians in Latvia and Byelorussia.

Former accomplices were prepared to travel to Australia to give evidence against the man, who, the investigators say, commanded a notoriously brutal squad.

But Government funding was cut as charges were about to be laid, according to the unit's director, Mr Graham Blewitt.

Mr Blewitt said yesterday that he was angry that the man had escaped justice because the Government had decided, in the run-up to the last federal election, that "there were no votes in war crimes".

He said that while there was no evidence that the man had personally murdered people, there was strong evidence that he played a role in the "systematic killing of tens of thousands of people over a 12-month period".

Mr Blewitt, who worked on the war crimes cases for five years, said the unit would be closed within weeks, after exhaustive investigation and research in Australia and overseas but with "not much to show for it".

He said the unit had done a professional and thorough job and knew it would face difficulties. "But we were not going to lie down for anybody." The war-crimes investigation originally listed 804 suspects, which was reduced to 12 "live" cases, only three of which reached court.

The investigations and court cases in Adelaide were sharply criticised because of the high cost and the difficulty in getting the elderly witnesses to give reliable evidence more than 50 years after the event.

Mr Blewitt said the investigations were fraught with difficulties and hampered when witnesses or suspects died before the cases could be brought to court.

"It had to be done," he said. "But it was too late.

Time has beaten us. We are very disappointed that we did not make a case." He said he also regretted that the charges in the third and final war crimes trial, involving an Adelaide man, Mr Heinrich Wagner, 68, had been withdrawn because of the ill-health of the accused.

Mr Wagner had been charged with the murders of 19 Ukrainian children of part-Jewish decent and of a rail worker. He was also charged with involvement in the mass execution of 104 Jewish people in Ukraine during the 1942-43 German occupation of Europe.

Mr Wagner was the last person in Australia to be charged under the 1987 War Crimes Amendment Act, which established funding to pursue war criminals, and which expired at the end of June last year.

In June this year, Mr Ivan Polyukhovich, 77, of Adelaide, was acquitted by a Supreme Court jury of wartime murder charges after a long trial.

Charges against a third man, Mr Mikolay Berezowsky, 78, also of Adelaide, were dropped by an Adelaide

magistrate before the case went to trial.

But Mr Blewitt said the failure to bring a case against the Melbourne man was one of the greatest disappointments.

He said that in 1992, the Government knew it was going to have an election and closed down the investigation by cutting off the unit's funds.

"There was the constant criticism of the war crimes (unit) ... there (were) no votes in war crimes and they wanted to see the end of it," Mr Blewitt said.

"It was politically expedient that this (case) did not go ahead." Mr Blewitt said the decision was particularly regretful because it came at a time when Russian KGB archives in Riga were opening up, presenting the unit with an opportunity to gather more evidence about the Melbourne man.

Mr Blewitt said the man commanded about 100 men who performed guard duties at weekly executions by the Nazis by gunfire or by gassing people in gas vans.

"In terms of the allegations, the Melbourne (case) was much worse than any of the three (cases) in Adelaide," he said.

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