

Polish Presidential Hopeful Calls for Extradition of Canadian Ukrainian Member of Nazi SS-led Galician Division

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“Certainly, Czarnek is not credible as a defender of Holocaust memory, given his vicious attacks on the Holocaust historians in Poland,” says one expert.



The embarrassment of Yaroslav Hunka’s invitation to the House of Commons to attend a speech by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has quickly become a scandal and media event drawing various levels of ire and offence from a variety of sources.

The revelation that the Ukrainian “war hero,” as he was hailed in Parliament, was a member of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS, also known as the 1st Galician Division, has resulted in the resignation of Speaker Anthony Rota, who invited Hunka to the gallery.

Rota’s resignation came at the behest of the NDP and Bloc Québécois, but the latest layer of the pile-on has not come from within the country, but from a European far-right politician.

Polish Minister of Education and Science Przemysław Czarnek took to social media, indicating that he is exploring the possibility of the 98-year-old Hunka’s extradition.

“In view of the scandalous events in the Canadian Parliament, which involved honouring, in the presence of President Zelenskyy, a member of the criminal Nazi SS Galizien formation, I have taken

steps towards the possible extradition of this man to Poland,” Czarnek wrote on X, the site formerly known as Twitter.

Expanding on his position in a public letter, Czarnek decried Hunke receiving a standing ovation, including from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and asked for an investigation into whether “Hunke is wanted for crimes against the Polish Nation and Poles of Jewish origin.”

“Such crimes,” he writes, “could constitute the basis for applying to Canada for his extradition.”

Canada has an unsettling history specifically with the Galician Division. Monuments to the groups fallen dead still standing in Oakville, Ontario and Edmonton, Alberta bear little indication of their connections to Nazi command.

According to the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, the Galician Division also took part in a massacre in the village of Huta Pieniacka. Taking place on February 28, 1944, Ukrainian soldiers of the 4th SS Police Regiment made up of volunteers from the division, descended on the primarily Polish town. Under the leadership of a German commander, members murdered an estimated 850 Polish men, women and children.

The group was selected from tens of thousands of volunteers to form a branch of the SS. Some who did not make it into the division were recruited into similar volunteer police forces.

An investigation into Hunke’s role during the Second World War may be warranted, though it would not be the first time the issue of the Galician Division was explored in Canada. The 1985 Deschênes Commission was appointed to investigate and report on possible war criminals living in the country. While the commission identified 774 possible suspects at the time, they formally cleared Galizien Division members of “collective war crimes.”

No matter what Hunke’s personal history turns out to be, he should not have appeared in the gallery, he should not have received (multiple) standing ovations, and his appearance is condemnable. At 98 years old, and with extradition proceedings sometimes taking years to reach a conclusion, there is little chance of Hunke ever being sent to Poland.

None of this changes the fact that the embarrassing and public blunder of his appearance is more fodder for pervasive anti-Ukrainian narratives that paint the entire country as a neo-Nazi occupied state, nor the fact that the Polish Minister currently courting headlines has his own connections to the far-right and a history of making disparaging comments against a number of groups — including Ukrainians.

A potential contender for the presidency, according to one researcher of the Polish far right, Czarnek has gone on the offensive against LGBTQ+ education and even those who research the Holocaust.

“Certainly Czarnek is not credible as a defender of Holocaust memory, given his vicious attacks on the Holocaust historians in Poland,” Dr. Rafal Pankowski, head of the Never Again Association, told the Canadian Anti-Hate Network in an email.

Czarnek has vowed that he will not fund any institution that "seeks to slander the good name of the Polish state." Part of a pressure campaign against academics critical of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War, among others, Prof. Jan Grabowski, a Holocaust researcher with the University of Ottawa, was targetted when another member of the Polish Parliament destroyed a microphone and PA system rather than allowing a critical lecture to move forward.

An instrumental force behind the ruling Law and Justice Party's (PiS) anti-LGBTQ+ policies, in September 2022, Czarnek issued a public apology for stating that "LGBT ideology comes from the same roots as Nazism" and adding that LGBTQ+ "people are not equal to normal people" during television and radio appearances, according to Notes From Poland, an English-language Polish news outlet.

He has made numerous other statements disparaging the community since the apology.

Czarnek has spoken at rallies for the organization, National Radical Camp (ONR) — which a Polish court ruled could fairly be called fascist in 2021. When Czarnek was appointed education minister, 350 Polish academics signed a letter demanding his dismissal based on a history of "Ukrainophobia, antisemitism, dehumanization of non-heteronormative people, misogyny and praising corporal punishment of children."

Pankowski believes the minister is appealing to the more anti-Ukrainian parts of the nationalist electorate.

"He has not been vocal on Ukraine since the start of the war until the last days when Polish-Ukrainian relations have been strained over the grain export issue and his party Law and Justice is competing for votes against the openly anti-Ukrainian party Konfederacja," Pankowski said. "However, he has said some controversial things about refugees from Ukraine such as warning against 'privileges' for Ukrainian refugee children in Polish schools—what a despicable thing to say."

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