

# Estonian Central Council in Canada

The Estonian Central Council (ECC) in Canada claims to oppose both Nazism and communism, which it equates as twin evils. However, since its creation in 1954, ECC efforts have focused entirely on battling communism. This, after

**In the 1960s, the USSR revealed that some Estonian Canadians, including several ECC leaders, had been Nazi collaborators. Labeling this a 'Soviet propaganda barrage' and 'smear campaign,' the ECC said all Estonians were innocent victims and had become the 'target of a Russian ... attack.' Canada's media, the RCMP, top government officials and politicians like Lester Pearson all rallied to defend their Estonian allies and to vilify the Soviets for exposing war criminals who were still hiding in Canada.**

all, was the fixation of various Nazi collaborators and their apologists who led the ECC throughout the Cold War.

ECC vice president Karl Eerme stated its goal in 1964. As a German-Estonian who had been a "war correspondent"<sup>71</sup> for the Nazi-led Estonian army, former lieutenant Eerme said the ECC's purpose was to "provide the focal point for the co-ordination ... of all Estonians in Canada ... in their avowed and

active opposition to the doctrine of Communism generally and the Communist regime in their native land."<sup>72</sup> After his time in a US POW camp in Germany,<sup>3</sup> Eerme emigrated to Toronto where he continued the anti-Soviet propaganda war through the ECC.

The ECC emerged from the pre-existing Estonian Federation in Canada (EFC), when it "was not deemed credible" by the Canadian government. The government did not trust the EFC to be the "national Canadian ethnic representative organisation," said sociologist Linda Blanshay, because "it represented all Estonians in Canada, regardless of political affiliation." Blanshay, program director for the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance, noted in her PhD thesis that the ECC, like Canada's other East European émigré groups, fulfilled several key functions. Besides "countering Communist activities in their respective 'national' foreign communities in Canada," they also aided by "proving the allegiance of their communities to Canada," and representing "their groups as 'non problematic' to the Canadian Christian democratic formation."<sup>74</sup>

In describing its Cold-War efforts, the ECC has said "it was easy to find allies amongst Western governments, politicians

and media."<sup>75</sup> This remains the case. The ECC still enjoys the same powerful allies that it enjoyed throughout the Cold War. For example, the ECC says it has "fought to further Magnitsky sanctions [see p.27] in Canada,... maintained support for NATO, ... [and] for Ukraine in their war with Russia." The ECC has also been very active in the Black Ribbon Day movement. It was founded in the 1980s by Markus Hess, who became the ECC's president (2011-15). (See pp.24-25.) He now represents the ECC on the board of Tribute to Liberty (TTL). It won unanimous support from parliament to fund a large monument in Ottawa dedicated to promoting anticommunism.<sup>6</sup> (See p.27.)

## ECC links to Nazi collaborators

In the early 1960s, the Soviet Union publicly exposed various ECC activists and leaders who it identified as Nazi collaborators. One 1964 article, in a Soviet Estonian publication for émigrés called *Homeland*, said:

The Canadian emigres' "Estonian Central Council," is justifiably called a "Sonderkomando" (Translator: Special activities group in German such as execution detachments, etc.) Its membership included ... Aksel Luitsalu and Aleksander Laak.<sup>7</sup>

The Soviets also named other Nazi-linked ECC leaders: former SS-lieutenants Ilmar Heinsoo, Eerick Heine and Lino Kurist; former SS-Legion staff member Harri Parkma; and former Gestapo police commissioners Samuel Kook and August Kala.<sup>8</sup>

## Winnipeg's Aleksander Laak:

### Commandant of a Nazi death camp

Using Nazi files, eye-witness accounts and other evidence gathered when liberating Estonia from German occupation in 1944, the Soviets identified Aleksander Laak as the most brutal of Estonia's Nazi collaborators in Canada. According to files available through the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Soviets indicted Laak on August 20, 1960, for "organizing extermination camp Jägala and personally shooting Jews."<sup>9</sup>

A week later the USSR's Tass News Agency reported that the former commandant of this Estonian death camp, who oversaw the murder of 3,000 prisoners, had been living in Winnipeg since 1948. Within six days, over 30 Canadian newspaper articles mentioned the Tass report, but not one was interested in pursuing the truth or falsehood of the Soviet statements.<sup>10</sup> Instead, most said that what they called the "Red Story," "Red Charges" or "Red Claims" were mere "propaganda." This spin was aided by the RCMP. Most of Canada's news articles quoted an

RCMP officer who denigrated the Tass report as "a piece of propaganda." Many added that after talking to Laak, "the RCMP appears satisfied he has a clear record."<sup>11</sup>

The RCMP showed its bias by harassing Keith Rutherford, a young Winnipeg reporter who dared broadcast Moscow Radio's report on Laak. The RCMP "wanted to know why I sent to Moscow for the tape," said Rutherford. "I guess they thought I was a Communist in disguise."<sup>12</sup> Mounties grilled him on links to a leftwing CCF youth group, his mother's turn-of-the-century labour actions and his brother's teacher, a WWII pacifist.<sup>13</sup> Thirty years later a gang of swastika-wearing skinheads shouting 'White Power' attacked Rutherford to avenge his 1960 program and left him blind in one eye. One of them, who pretended to be Laak's grandson, received a mere six-week jail term.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, corporate journalists, like Southam's Charles King, presented the government line. Writing from Ottawa about government reactions to Soviet news reports on Laak, King assured readers that "the experts here believe it is probably a phony."<sup>15</sup>

Laak, still unnamed by Canada's mainstream press, came forward to proclaim innocence. Laak admitted he was a WWII veteran who had fought the Soviets and that he had commanded Estonia's central prison. Saying he knew the Soviets were pursuing him for crimes, he insisted that he had never heard of the Jägala death camp. "The Russian story is 99 per cent lies," he claimed. "It is only Communist propaganda." His son, scolding Canada's media, demanded: "Why should you print that Communist propaganda?" Newspapers, he insisted, "are just letting themselves be used" by the Soviets, who "just wanted my father to be pestered."<sup>16</sup> Comments by Laak's wife, neighbours, co-workers and employer at Winnipeg's Air Force base, were used to reinforce Laak's story that he was a victim of Soviet lies.

After this initial flurry, media stories stopped. Three days later, the frenzy reignited when Laak killed himself.<sup>17</sup> Newspapers divulged his name and began spreading their verdict that Soviet propaganda had pushed this innocent man to suicide. A death notice in the Estonian war veterans' publication, *Võitleja (Combatant)*, memorialized Laak as a "victim of communism."<sup>18</sup> Four city papers said "Fear of communism aroused by Communist propaganda was blamed today for the death of a 53-year-old Estonian who hanged himself..."<sup>19</sup> Eight headlines that day falsely claimed that Canada's government had cleared Laak of all charges.<sup>20</sup>

## The ECC defends Laak's innocence

The ECC then took to the media battlefield. One article, "Estonians Fear Smear Campaign," said Toronto's 8,000 Estonians were afraid they would "come under a Soviet propaganda barrage of the kind" that "drove a former Estonian in Winnipeg to commit suicide." Then-ECC leader, Enn Salurand, told the press that Estonian Canadians were "bracing themselves for a Communist campaign designed to discredit them" and that it "is very easy for the Reds to make up all kinds of lies about innocent persons."<sup>21</sup>

Salurand, the ECC's secretary general for more than 25 years, was a veteran of Estonia's "War of Independence" against Soviet Russia (1918-20).<sup>22</sup> In 1931 he helped create and lead the Estonian National Club (EKN) and was editorial chief of its journal in 1935. The EKN was a "group of ultranationalist intellectuals, whose publication," says scholar Pin-Yu Chen, was "the platform of radical right ideologies." Chen, whose PhD thesis includes ERK's eugenics-based ethnonationalism, notes that the EKN's strong vision of the nation as a biological entity, threatened by degeneration and diseases, was behind their intolerance of national minorities, anxiety of assimilation and miscegenation, elitist and anti-democratic politics.<sup>23</sup>

When the Soviets took power in 1940 Estonia, they outlawed the EKN. After coming to Canada in 1950, Salurand helped found the ECC, and is said to have never missed a board meeting of *Võitleja*.<sup>24</sup>

"[T]he Soviet attack against Laak," said Salurand, "is just the beginning of a new war of nerves against all of us."<sup>25</sup> All too many Estonian Canadians were very nervous about being the next "target of a Russian news agency attack" because — like Laak — they too had collaborated with the Nazis against their shared enemy, the USSR. "[W]hoever was in the [Nazi-led] army during the occupation ... could be singled out next," said one Estonian émigré. "The Russians," he continued, "could easily say that Mr. X ... was a captain in an army unit which committed atrocities in Estonia."<sup>26</sup>

The next day, Sept. 10, 1960, a Regina editorial went further. Capitalizing on Laak's suicide, it spread Cold-War anti-Red hysteria to *nonEstonian* Canadians:

All too many Canadians have been prone to look upon the post-war, east-west struggle in terms of newspaper headlines that can have little or no effect on their private lives. The tendency has been to view the cold war as ... far from the daily rounds of the average Canadian communities. ... [But] the battle against totalitarianism is real. This was brought home last week when the long arm of interna-

## Estonia glorifies Nazi veterans as 'freedom fighters'

Since the USSR's destruction in 1990, Estonia has been free to honour the 60,000 Estonian soldiers who allied with the Nazis in WWII. In 2012, Estonia passed a law to hail Estonia's Waffen SS as "freedom fighters." The current prime minister Jüri Ratas and his foreign minister Urmas Reinsalu celebrate these Nazi-led soldiers as heroes. While these soldiers prolonged the Nazi occupation, the USSR finally did expel the Nazis in 1944 and freed the remaining survivors from Estonia's 200 Nazi concentration camps.

Russia continues to oppose the Estonian government's support for plaques, monuments, ceremonies, groups and political parties in Estonia that venerate SS heroes.

While Canada and its friends in the Estonian Central Council and the Estonian World Council praise Estonia's government, they have not condemned its glorification of Nazi veterans. In 2019, Ratas formed a coalition government with the ultraright EKRE party, giving them a third of the cabinet posts. While all government parties revere the SS and push NATO's bellicose Russophobia, EKRE's leaders flash white-power symbols, call for a "white Estonia" and use anti-immigration slogans like: "If they're black, send them back."

Even Marcus Kolga, president of the Estonian Central Council in Canada and vice president of the Estonian World Council, is concerned. EKRE, he says, has now sullied Estonia's "positive brand" with its "racist, antisemitic and sexist" talk. He thinks that Estonia's "positive brand" includes exalting the SS legion which allied with the Nazis (whose brand included ethnic cleansing). In 2012, Estonia passed a law declaring Estonia's SS Legion as "freedom fighters." As defence minister, Re-

insalu said he hoped "one day soon" Estonia would have a new monument to lionize the SS. In 2014, he celebrated SS soldier Harald Nugiseks, who had received the Nazi's highest medal. When Nugiseks was buried with full Estonian military honors, Reinsalu eulogised him as "a legendary Estonian soldier" who battled for "freedom." As justice minister, Reinsalu sent warm greetings to a 2018 ceremony that venerated Estonia's Waffen SS.

### Jewish women and 40 others identify Laak as death camp leader

Some Canadians, including a Jewish Holocaust survivor in Toronto, did not appreciate the press telling them that Laak was an innocent victim of communism. Czech refu-

In 2018, Foreign Minister Freeland tweeted about her "productive" meeting with Prime Minister Jüri Ratas of Estonia to discuss "defending our democracies, the international rules-based order, [and] Ukraine ...."



In 2004, Estonia and 6 other East European states joined NATO to oppose their dreaded Russian foe.

In 2012, Estonia passed a law that defined Estonia's Nazi SS veterans as "freedom fighters" for battling the USSR in WWII.

In 2019 Reinsalu decried Venezuela's elected leader. Blasting Russia for aiding the "fanatically communist" "dictatorship," Reinsalu joined Canada and the US in endorsing the ultraright coup efforts of Juan Guaido.

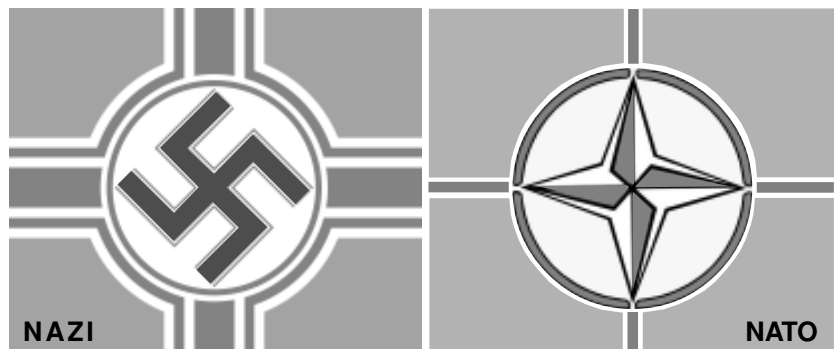
In May 2019, after speaking with Chrystia Freeland, Reinsalu said the two states "stand united" with Ukraine against Russia. Reinsalu said he especially "appreciate[d]... the Canada-led NATO enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group" in Latvia. This Battle Group is based on wildly Russophobic claims that Moscow plans to invade the Baltics.

gee Greta Zarkower, a survivor of the Jägala concentration camp, had seen Laak in 1942. After recognising his photo in the news, she and other former slave labourers at his prison camp called the media. "Laak was wearing the SS uniform and was in charge," recalled Zarkower. "Laak and his men took all our valuables"<sup>28</sup> and "I was beaten unmercifully, regularly, with a riding whip by SS men."<sup>29</sup>

Two other Holocaust survivors also contacted the Canadian Press after recognizing Laak's face in papers. They too confirmed seeing him when he was Jägala's commandant. These US citizens, Gizela Herzl and Susan Spalter, were among the Czech and German Jews that the Nazis

After talks with Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland in 2019, Estonia's Urmas Reinsalu praised "the Canada-led NATO enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group in Latvia" to prepare against Russia's alleged plan to invade the Baltics. "We can face the challenges that surround us," he said, "only when we stand united and work together."

As Estonia's Minister of Defence (2012-14), Justice (2015-19) and Foreign Affairs (2019-), Reinsalu repeatedly glorified Estonia's SS "freedom fighters" who stood united and worked with the Nazis to fight their Soviet foe in WWII.



trucked to Laak's camp on Sept. 5, 1942. Most, including their closest loved ones, were killed there that day. In late 1943, Herzl and Spalter were moved to Estonia's state prison where Laak became chief warden.<sup>30</sup>

*Vancouver Sun* columnist Harold Weir summed up the news with slurs about "parlor pinks," "fellow travelers" and "easy-bleeders." Claiming "the Reds reached out from Russia and put the finger" on Laak, Weir said Canadians "should not be picked off by long-range snipers from Moscow." Damning "Red Russia" and its "meddlesome and presumptuous bigots" who wanted "to have a blood-dripping finger in the Canadian pie," Weir ended his rant by slamming the infantile idea of "Canadian neutrality":

When the Communists ... have the gall to virtually sentence our residents to death, it seems to become crystal clear that any dream of Canadian neutrality is so much marijuana smoke, reminiscent of the mewling of *colicky infants*.<sup>31</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Ironically, Canada's press went quiet on Laak until seven months later when a Soviet court heard confessions about his key role in slaughtering crying infants "as young as a year old." Ralph Gerrets, who Laak had made his deputy at Jägala, confessed that they killed thousands of prisoners, mostly Jews and "Gypsies." Describing in gruesome detail one of their many massacres, Gerrets told the court they were aged only: three to five years, barefoot, hatless, dressed in pyjamas, icy cold and all crying.... I took those by the hand and led them to the trench...where they were shot.<sup>32</sup> The murderers, he testified, included Laak.

Another Estonian who pled guilty to these murders was Jan Vijk. He and Gerrets identified Laak as "the principal killer." Gerrets also described the mass execution of 900 foreign Jews brought to Jägala on September 5, 1942.<sup>33</sup> Vijk, Gerrets "and two score [i.e., forty] other witnesses indicated he [Laak] was the most bloodthirsty of the Estonian police force."<sup>34</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Soviet courts amassed overwhelming evidence against a third accused, Ain-Ervin Mere, commander of Nazi Estonia's Security Police. Mere was tried in absentia

because Britain refused to extradite him. If Laak had lived, Canada too would certainly have rejected Soviet extradition requests.

Soviet courts heard disturbing testimony from Jägala's female prisoners. They described being "ordered to undress on arrival at the extermination camp while they were being examined by Gerrets and Lt. Alexander Laak."<sup>35</sup> Witnesses testified that "girl inmates...were forced to take part in orgies at night and murdered afterward."<sup>36</sup> Mere and Laak arranged these "drunken orgies" during Mere's visits to Jägala.<sup>37</sup>

Despite such shocking evidence, including 40 witnesses who identified Laak as the camp's murderous leader, no Canadian newspapers mentioned Laak, or previous claims of his innocence by the ECC, RCMP, the government and media. Instead, most stories critiqued the trial by saying its "major purpose" "was to bring discredit upon the Estonian emigre organizations."<sup>38</sup> When the three Estonians were sentenced to death, Canadian papers did not mention Laak. Rather, most concluded that the "six-day show trial apparently aimed at discrediting anti-Soviet Estonian refugee groups."<sup>39</sup>

The only media response from Canada's Estonian community was a letter to the editor from the ECC-linked Estonian Society of Montreal. Its vice president, Martin Puhvel, castigated the *Gazette's* coverage of the trial and defended Estonia's Nazi collaborators as "patriots" who fought "unprovoked aggression by the Russian enslavers":

[I]t is incomprehensible how any paper could dignify such vicious propagandists fairytales by reporting them ... on its front page under a blaring headline 'Nazi firing squad shot children.' The Soviet propaganda machine has ... launched a campaign of calumny and vilification against Estonian patriots whose only 'crime' lies in defending their homes against murderous, unprovoked aggression by the Russian enslavers ....<sup>40</sup>

Calling it all a "vicious smear campaign," Puhvel blamed the media for giving "help and comfort to the enemies of freedom" by "spreading grisly, painful stories of massacre of infant children by men who were busy defending their homes" against the Reds.<sup>41</sup>

### Waffen SS officer Aksel Luitsalu, a prominent leader of the ECC, met both Pearson and Diefenbaker

After the trial, the Soviets reported that on Aug. 5, 1960 Prime Minister Diefenbaker had met Nazi collaborator and ECC leader, Aksel Luitsalu, the wartime police chief of Tartu, Estonia's second largest city. Tass said "investigating agencies on crimes committed in Estonia during the Nazi occupation" found that "14,000 were murdered in Tartu during the Nazi occupation, including a large number of children aged six to 12."<sup>42</sup>

Luitsalu admitted he "served on the Tartu police force from 1933 to 1944" and "rose to the rank of commissar," but denied any wrongdoing in Nazi Estonia.<sup>43</sup> After becoming Tartu's police chief in 1942 he was a company commander in Estonia's Waffen SS. With the Nazi SS rank of *Obersturmführer* (Senior Lieutenant), Luitsalu fought the Soviets on the Eastern Front. Following his time in a British POW camp (1945-46), he was active in Germany's Estonian community before moving to Canada in 1951.<sup>44</sup>

Luitsalu denied all charges as a "Pure lie from the very beginning."<sup>45</sup> His comments never critiqued the Nazis but always attacked the Soviets. "The charges" against him, he said, "are typical Russia smear tactics aimed at covering their own sins."<sup>46</sup> The Soviets, papers claimed, sought "to disgrace leaders of foreign communities in all cities in the free world." In this context, Luitsalu "recalled the recent suicide of a Winnipeg immigrant, Alex Laak, similarly charged and 'hounded to death' by the Russians."<sup>47</sup>

The "ECC took the necessary steps to counter the attacks on A. Luitsalu," their vice president. In the 1950s he led the Toronto Estonian Society<sup>48</sup> and the Baltic Federation in Canada (BFC).<sup>49</sup> To decry the Soviet's so-called "savage campaign against the Canadian prime minister and Estonian refugees," the ECC began a "counter campaign." This included media outreach, government briefs and *Estonia: Forgotten Nation*.<sup>50</sup> This ECC book was penned by Endel Kareda, editor of a Toronto-based Estonian weekly who was an *Untersturmführer* (2nd Lieutenant) in Estonia's SS in 1944.<sup>51</sup>



**One third of Estonia's 15 cabinet ministers are from the EKRE party. Its leaders flash white-power signs, call for a racially pure "white Estonia," and use this anti-immigration slogan:**

**"If they're black, send them back."**

EKRE's former leader (2015-19), is now Estonia's Finance Minister. He was appointed by Prime Minister Juri Ratas.

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12. "Beaten man not cowed by intimidation," *Edmonton Journal*, Apr.17, 1990, p.3. bit.ly/EJ-90

13. Warren Kinsella, *Web of Hate: Inside Canada's Far Right Network*, 1994, pp.180-81.

14. *Ibid.*, p.183-84.

15. Charles King, "Nazi torturer in Winnipeg? Ottawa thinks story 'phony'," *Province*, Aug. 30, 1960, p.26. bit.ly/VP\_8-30-60

16. See author's collection of ten articles, Aug.31-Sep.7, 1960. bit.ly/NewsLaak2

17. See author's collection of sixteen articles, Sep. 7, 1960. bit.ly/NewsLaak3

18. *Võitleja (The Combatant)*, Oct. 1960, p.8. In 1980, this "Global Voice of Estonian Military and Freedom Fighters," founded by veterans who fled to Nazi Germany in 1944, moved to the ECC's Estonian House, Toronto.

19. For example, "Laak Suicide Blamed on Fear of Communist Propaganda," *Star-Phoenix*, Sep.8, 1960, p.9. See also author's collection of articles, Sep.8, 1960. bit.ly/NewsLaak4

20. Headlines include: "No Evidence he was War Criminal: Probe Clears 'Nazi' Suicide Victim," "Laak Cleared in Check," "Ottawa Investigations Clear Man accused by Russians," "Records give Laak Clean Bill." These absolved the government for letting Laak into Canada because he had not divulged (or had not been asked) anything to incriminate him. See author's collection of eight articles, Sep. 8, 1960. bit.ly/NewsLaak5

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27. "Another cold war casualty," *Leader-Post*, Sep. 10, 1960, p.15. bit.ly/LP\_9-10-1960

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29. "Laak Took Valuables Toronto Woman Says," *Red Deer Advocate*, Sep.12, 1960, p.10. bit.ly/RDA\_9-12-1960

30. See author's collection of fifteen articles, Sep.10-13, 1960. bit.ly/NewsLaak6

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33. Preston Grover, "Led Tearful Children to Nazi Firing Squad," *Ottawa Journal*, Mar. 7, 1961, p.14. bit.ly/OJ\_3-7-1961

See author's collection of seventeen articles, Mar.6-8, 1961. bit.ly/NewsLaak7

"Estonian policemen stand trial for war crimes." (Soviet film from the trial includes Gerrets' testimony that Laak shot children.) bit.ly/USHMM-film

34. "Estonian Court Decrees 3 to Die; Laak Most Bloodthirsty," *Windsor Star*, Mar.13, 1961, p.12. bit.ly/WS\_3-13-1961

35. "Jewish Women Tell of Horror while Parents Exterminated," *Montreal Gazette*, Mar. 8, 1961, p.4. bit.ly/MG\_3-8-1961

36. "Girls Forced into Orgies, then Slain, Court told," *Ottawa Citizen*, Mar. 8, 1961. p.7. See author's collection of seven articles, Mar. 8, 1961. bit.ly/NewsLaak8

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41. *Ibid.*

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53. "Pearson Hits Reds for Smear Tactics," *Edmonton Journal*, Nov. 16, 1960, p.53. "Pearson Hits Propaganda and Smears," *Province*, Nov. 16, 1960, p.5. bit.ly/PearLuit

54. *Ibid.* Simanavicius was BFC president (1957, 1960-61), president of Toronto's LCC and on the LCC executive (1974-80). Fonds 14, Jonas Robertas Simanavicius fonds bit.ly/Simanavicius

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58. Kirm, *op. cit.*

While Diefenbaker "declined comment on charges" that Luitsalu "was a Nazi collaborator,"<sup>52</sup> Liberal Party leader Lester Pearson belittled the Soviet report by smearing it as communist propaganda. Pearson, who had helped lead Canada's anti-Red war of words for a decade, joined the Soviet bashing. "I detest smears,"<sup>53</sup> said Pearson, without any sense of irony. (See pp.2-13.)

Luitsalu met Diefenbaker during the BFC's Aug.-5 delegation to Ottawa. Its president, Jonas Simanavicius, was a leader of the Lithuanian Canadian Community.<sup>54</sup> (See pp.34-37.) He had also led a BFC delegation in June when Luitsalu and others met Pearson,<sup>55</sup> then opposition leader. They were lobbying for Canada to use its UN platform to rebuke the USSR.<sup>56</sup> Diefenbaker's stridently antiSoviet speech at the UN that September<sup>57</sup> is still fondly recalled by Estonian nationalists.<sup>58</sup> Joining the ECC in cheerleading Diefenbaker's diatribe was that network of former Nazi collaborators, the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations. (See pp.20-23.)

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