

**Review of Graham Blewitt & Mark Aarons,
eds, *Nazis in Australia: The Special
Investigations Unit, 1987–1994*
(Melbourne: Black Inc., 2025)**

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For the past thirty years, Australian efforts to prosecute Nazi war criminals in Adelaide have faded into obscurity. *Nazis in Australia* is a long-awaited volume which delves into not only Australia's history as a "safe haven" for Nazi war criminals, but also the lengthy process of investigating suspects, as well as the country's attempt to bring its own citizens, who were accused of committing atrocities in Nazi-occupied Europe, to justice.

It provides compelling insight into a chapter of Australia's legal history which is all too often relegated to dusty archives and forgotten scrapbooks of newspaper clippings. It is the culmination of a hugely diverse range of perspectives and decades of work. It brings into the open the whole history of the Special Investigations Unit (SIU) and the trials, from the challenges of "exhuming death in the woods" of rural Ukraine to the vicissitudes of language which exist in courtroom interpretations. It is an immensely important book and provides many "missing pieces" of this history which have not surfaced until now. It succeeds at documenting these perspectives in one volume as a "memorial" to the work of the SIU and seals its legacy for posterity.

While *Nazis in Australia* generally shifts between multiple perspectives and recollections logically, the structure of the book is unusual. Rather than being structured in the usual style of an anthology, this volume attempts to interweave various perspectives into one continuous linear narrative. Perhaps this is due to the mammoth undertaking of the SIU, and it is an attempt to make a dense chapter in Australian legal history more readable. However, it achieves the opposite. What is supposed to read as a

smooth transition from one account to another is sometimes jarring rather than conversational. Organising this book into the usual style of an anthology rather than “dissecting” contributions and interspersing them throughout the volume would have remedied this issue. As a result, one who already possesses some prior knowledge about the SIU, and the trials, will be well served.

Of particular note are the personal reflections of Graham Blewitt, who at the time of the trials, had the foresight to record his reflections, feelings and inner thought processes as the trials unfolded. Without having the opportunity to make his feelings known at the time, this act of preservation by Blewitt has endowed the history of the trials with integrity and a great deal of personal insight.¹ Blewitt’s accounts gives one the impression of proximity to the events. This granular perspective on a singular moment in Australian legal history illuminates the unprecedented nature of the proceedings, which marked the first and only occasion on which Australia sought to prosecute its own citizens for murder under the War Crimes Amendment Act. The reader is positioned as a close-hand observer to the legal, ethical, and emotional pressures that shaped the trials. By granting access to Blewitt’s deliberations and responses as the cases unfolded, the book offers a rare insight into the lived experience of prosecuting historical war crimes within a domestic legal framework. This immediacy and level of detail will be of particular value to scholars of law and legal history, while also rendering the significance of the trials accessible to a wider Australian readership concerned with questions of justice, accountability and national memory.

Another notable contribution comes from Konrad Kwiet, who served as an expert witness in the Polyukhovich case. Kwiet speaks to the unique tensions between the fields of history and the law, and articulates the many frustrations that he experienced as a historian navigating the courtroom.² Where one may assume a fundamental compatibility between historical inquiry and legal process, particularly in their shared ideal and commitment to establishing “truth”, Kwiet instead exposes a far more com-

1. Graham Blewitt & Mark Aarons, eds, *Nazis in Australia: The Special Investigations Unit, 1987–1994* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2025), 105. Henceforth only page numbers will be listed.
2. 149–50.

plicated relationship. Kwiet reveals the ways in which legal procedure can constrain historical nuance, and how historical methods may be at odds with the context of a judge and jury and how this is a significant hurdle in prosecuting historic war crimes.³

Ludmilla Stern's contributions on issues surrounding translations in the Polyukhovich trial is also a fascinating insight into the inner workings of this case and represents one of the chief reasons for Polyukhovich's acquittal. Stern brings together, for the first time in this format, a range of linguistic, procedural, and interpretive challenges that shaped how testimony was received and understood in the courtroom. By foregrounding the mediating role of translation, her chapter exposes a critical but previously underexamined dimension of the trial, one that undoubtedly affected the evaluation of evidence and witness credibility. As a result, Stern's analysis functions as a missing piece within the broader scholarly discussion, and when read alongside the other contributions in the volume, allows for a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of the factors that led to Polyukhovich's acquittal.

Despite being a book which deals with a very specific issue, that is, prosecuting Nazi war criminals and collaborators in Australia, *Nazis in Australia* tells a larger tale. It raises questions about complicity, societal responsibility, and human nature. All of these subjects are frequently explored to great effect in texts pertaining to the Holocaust. What sets this volume apart, is that rather than discussing these topics in relation to "innocent bystanders" or challenging the notion of choice, this book brings to light an important question which for many Australians may hit close to home. What responsibilities do we as a nation have towards victims of the Holocaust? Towards whom is empathy extended? In the case of the Adelaide war crimes trials, it seems that empathy and compassion were given far more freely to the elderly accused with whom the Australian public identified, rather than the roughly 850 victims whose remains lay in a Ukrainian mass grave.

The Adelaide jury members struggled to relate to events in German-occupied Ukraine decades earlier to the respe-

3. 150.

ctful, aging man sitting before them. The media's image of Nazis, "animated by murderous fervour"⁴ clashed with the elderly, polite defendants whose ordinary postwar lives made their involvement in such horror seem implausible. A media narrative which tended to be hostile towards the SIU, often considering it to be a "waste of money"⁵ reinforced this perception.

More broadly, the theme of public ambivalence and sympathy towards the accused perpetrators is a spectre which haunts the SIU. In *Nazis in Australia*, this resistance manifests across multiple institutional and professional contexts, from the reluctance of ASIO to meaningfully assist SIU investigations through the extensive redaction of documents,⁶ to a judiciary that at times appeared sceptical of the prosecutions themselves. This is exemplified by Justice Brian Cox's conduct during the Polyukhovich trial, including his dismissal of substantial portions of Konrad Kwiet's evidence and his interventions that seem to have had the effect of favouring the defence.⁷ At a more informal level, the purpose of the SIU's work was repeatedly questioned of those directly involved. Robert Greenwood, the unit's first director, carried a photograph of a mass grave in his wallet, which he would produce when asked why such investigations were necessary, a gesture that underscores how frequently the legitimacy of the unit's work was challenged.⁸ Indeed, it was widespread lack of support for the trials and the work of the SIU at both a public and governmental level which led to the eventual close of the SIU in 1992. This was devastating timing for those involved. At the time of the unit's closure, Karlis Ozols' investigation had nearly reached completion.

Ozols, a Latvian SS commander who had a prolific chess career both in Europe in the 1930s and then later in Australia for which he was well known within Australia's chess community, was being held responsible for roughly 30,000 deaths. Some of those involved suggest that of all of the accused, Ozols represented the strongest case for the prosecution.⁹ This, along with other so-called "forgotten" cases of Latvia, depicts one of the most memorable aspects of this book. Some of Australia's most serious

4. 250.
5. 110.
6. 215.
7. 250.
8. 77.
9. 77.

alleged war criminals, like Ozols, did not face trial. This is the first time that their stories have been recorded and published in such detail.

An example of this is seen in the story of Argods Fricsons, who allegedly killed thousands in Liepāja. Both he and Ozols lived out their lives, under the rule of law in Australia, and died as free men. The contrast between some 300 members of the Latvian SS Legion who lie side by side in an ornate graveyard in a Melbourne cemetery, as compared to their many victims lost to time and buried unceremoniously in Eastern European mass graves, is stirring and demands our attention as readers, and as Australians.¹⁰

Nazis in Australia seems to burst out of a long-held silence, revealing truths pertaining to the judiciary, and shortsighted politics which contributed to the disbanding of the unit. Despite the attempted prosecution of Nazi war crimes in Australia being widely regarded as a failure amongst the general public, *Nazis in Australia* provides new insights into the work of the SIU. Rather than a failed attempt at delivering justice, this book instead reveals a team of dedicated and passionate professionals ranging from lawyers to translators, and historians to analysts whose tenacity and dedication have shaped not only Australia's legal history, but also the prosecution of war crimes internationally.¹¹ It is worth noting that the Polyukhovich case is the first example of the exhumation of a mass grave being used to retrieve evidence which would then be used to prosecute accused genocidal killers. Indeed, many of the SIU participants went on to use their experiences in other legal contexts, including in the International Criminal Tribunal of the former Yugoslavia. This legacy is something which should be acknowledged with pride amongst Australians. As Michael Wolf notes in one of the book's closing chapters, "society must define morally and legally unacceptable conduct. Society falls apart without shared definitions of right and wrong".¹² This book seals the legacy of the SIU as an important attempt at contributing to such a society.

10. 110.
11. 280.
12. 269.

Author Biography

Erin O'Brien is an educator at the Sydney Jewish Museum and a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney. Her work focuses on Holocaust education, with a particular emphasis on object-based learning and its efficacy within museum contexts. Erin is the recipient of the Postgraduate Research Scholarship in Holocaust Museum Education, supporting her doctoral research into Holocaust museum pedagogy. She has developed and delivered educational programs and lectures on the Nazi War Crimes Trials held in Adelaide in the 1990s, as well as on the work of the Special Investigations Unit.