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Human Rights Watch investigator suspended over Nazi memorabilia

Organisation removes Marc Garlasco from research work pending an inquiry

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Tue 15 Sep 2009 19.18 BST

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A senior military analyst with the international watchdog, Human Rights Watch, has been suspended by the organisation following controversy surrounding his collection of Nazi wartime medals and memorabilia.

Marc Garlasco, a former intelligence officer for the Pentagon, has in recent days become the subject of pro-Israeli bloggers who have pointed out that he is an avid collector of Nazi memorabilia from the second world war. The bloggers have questioned whether this is an appropriate hobby for someone who has led Human Rights Watch's investigations into the two recent Israeli wars in Lebanon and Gaza.

The watchdog has announced that it has now suspended Garlasco from his research work on full pay pending an inquiry. The group stressed that this is not a disciplinary move, but its associate director Carroll Bogert, said that "we do know he collects German and American World War II memorabilia, but we have questions as to whether we've learned everything we need to know".

The suspension marks an abrupt change of tact for Human Rights Watch, which has until now dismissed all discussion of Garlasco's collection as absurd and "an affront to serious military historians". On Saturday the group criticised coverage of the controversy in the Guardian, saying that it had repeated "defamatory nonsense unworthy of this newspaper", four days before his suspension and the admission there were unanswered questions

Some staff privately expressed dismay at the way the affair had been handled. "It's been a disaster," said a senior employee. "We're not some multinational corporation and we shouldn't behave like one. We should have been completely straightforward and said there is a legitimate issue here. Should someone who collects this kind of stuff be investigating human rights in Israel?"

It is not clear why the watchdog has decided to overturn its previous position. The body has declined to comment on what new information about Garlasco, if any, has come to light to explain its change of heart. In previous comments, the group has

depicted the internet-fuelled controversy surrounding Garlasco as an Israeli-government campaign to discredit the organisation as a whole.

Israel has certainly stepped up its criticism of Human Rights Watch. In July, Ron Dermer, policy director to Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, threatened to "dedicate time and manpower to combating these groups; we are not going to be sitting ducks in a pond for the human rights groups to shoot at us with impunity."

Garlasco's hobby involves the collection and chronicling of hundreds of wartime medals handed out by the anti-aircraft Flak units of the Werhmarcht, in which his German grandfather was a conscript. He is author of a 430-page book on the Flak badges.

The greatest controversy has focused on postings he has made to military memorabilia online bulletin boards under the moniker Flak 88. In one he was shown wearing a jumper bearing an Iron Cross. In another he wrote: "That is so cool! The leather SS jacket makes my blood go cold it is so COOL!"

The comments were picked up by a range of pro-Israeli bloggers who have been critical of Human Rights Watch in the past for its investigations into the tactics of the Israeli Defence Forces. They included Mere Rhetoric, the first blog to run with the Garlasco story, Elder of Ziyon and NGO Monitor.

Garlasco defended himself in a posting to the Huffington Post. He said that he was used to "taking heat" in his role as Human Rights Watch investigator. "Now I've achieved some blogosphere fame, for my hobby (unusual and disturbing to some, I realise) of collecting second world war memorabilia associated with my German grandfather and my American great-uncle".

Garlasco described himself as a "military geek" and said suggestions that he himself had any Nazi tendencies were "defamatory nonsense, spread maliciously by people with an interest in trying to undermine Human Rights Watch's reporting".

Gerald Steinberg, an Israeli academic who heads the blog NGO Monitor, said the decision to suspend Garlasco was "late and incomplete". He called for an independent investigation into all Garlasco's reports.

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