

After seven years, \$17 million and more than 800 investigations, Australia's pursuit of World War II war criminals is drawing to a close next month - without having achieved one conviction.

Although three men were brought to trial, all in South Australia, none of the prosecutions was successful because of a lack of evidence and difficulties in tracking down aging witnesses to give evidence in Australia.

The director of the War Crimes Prosecutions Support Unit, Mr Graham Blewitt, said yesterday the investigations would have been more successful if they had been started years earlier.

Mr Blewitt said he hoped it was not "30, 40, 50 years" before something was done about investigating allegations from more recent wars.

He called for amendments to the War Crimes Act, which enables prosecutions only for war crimes committed in Europe during World War II.

The Federal Minister for Justice, Mr Kerr, said yesterday the Government was not considering amending the War Crimes Act to cover war criminals living in Australia from, for example, Cambodia. He also defended the work of the unit.

"The object of a justice system is not revenge and it's not to secure convictions improperly: we knew at the start there were going to be great problems obtaining evidence for prosecutions," Mr Kerr said.

"We are convinced that all serious allegations have been pursued and rigorously followed through, that every possible person has now been investigated."

The Government established the Special Investigations Unit in 1987, after it received evidence that World War II war criminals could be living in Australia.

The unit was disbanded in 1992, but staff were transferred to the War Crimes Prosecutions Support Unit to complete its task.

Of the 841 suspects who were investigated throughout Australia, many had died, allegations could not be substantiated, or the suspect could not be located. There was insufficient evidence to prosecute 27 suspects about whom the unit believed the allegations to be true.

Three people were charged under the War Crimes Act: Mr Ivan Polyukhovich, who was found not guilty by a jury last year; Mr Mikolay Berezovsky, who was found to have no case to answer when two witnesses could not attend the case; and Mr Heinrich Wagner, against whom charges were dropped last year after he suffered a heart attack.

Yet the unit achieved a major success when it unearthed three mass burial sites of Jews in Ukraine, at Serniki, Israelovka and Gnivan.

Hundreds of bodies were exhumed and reinterred with a Jewish ceremony, and artefacts from the graves, including photographs, clothing and jewellery, were presented yesterday to the **Sydney Jewish Museum**.

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