

Germany: Demjanjuk trial sheds light on Nazi crimes

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The trial of alleged SS guard John Demjanjuk for complicity to murder opened at the end of November last year. The prosecution alleges that the 89-year-old was a guard at the Sobibor extermination camp between March and September 1943 in Nazi-occupied Poland and is implicated in the murder of at least 27,900 Jews.

At the start of the trial, the accused said via his defence counsel that he would not be making any statements, and the few survivors who appeared in court as witnesses and plaintiffs could not directly recall seeing Demjanjuk at the camp. As a result, the court has sought to reconstruct the events through the testimony of historical experts and from documents. The presence of the accused during the specified period at the Sobibor extermination camp is documented through his camp and service ID papers.

The trial continued earlier this year with testimony from historians and witnesses who had survived the Sobibor extermination camp. In the second week of January, historian Dieter Pohl from the Munich Institute for Contemporary History was called to speak as an expert witness.

Pohl, who had presented a report to the court, spoke in particular about the construction of the system for exterminating the Jews by the Nazis in the occupied territories of Eastern Europe, and the emergence of the death camps, including that of Sobibor.

In his statement to the court, Pohl said that beginning in May 1942, Jews from across Europe were systematically murdered at Sobibor in Poland. “The sole purpose was their murder,” he said. The camp administration was composed of 25 to 30 SS people, the dirty work was done by 100 to 120 so-called Trawniki.

Demjanjuk was one of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, employed by the Nazis from 1942 as stooges in the mass murder of Jews in the extermination camps built in Poland. Like him, most of them were Ukrainians, many others came from the Baltic states, there were a few Poles and so-called “ethnic Germans” from the Soviet Union. Named after the location of the forced labour camp Trawniki (a place near Lublin), they were used during the evacuation of Jewish ghettos to shoot people, and as guards. They also drove the concentration camp victims into the gas chambers.

The court-appointed expert historian Dieter Pohl estimates the number of Trawniki totalled about 4,800. They were recruited by the SS in large part from among Soviet prisoners of war. They were selected according to racial criteria. Decisive, however, were their German language skills, physical condition, and above all an

“anti-Bolshevik attitude.”

The historian also drew attention to the desperate plight of Soviet prisoners of war under the Nazis. From the end of 1941, some 3.7 million Red Army soldiers fell into German captivity. By mid-1942, i.e., six months later, only half were still alive. The others had died of hunger, epidemics and diseases. This itself represents a war crime of enormous magnitude.

Demjanjuk’s defence tried to present his behaviour—if it was accepted he actually was at Sobibor as a Trawniki—as if he had had no choice but to obey the orders of the SS. Otherwise, he would have been sent back to the POW camp and to almost certain death.

This assumption, however, stands in contrast to the historian’s testimony detailing escape attempts by Trawniki, along with prisoners, who avoided participating in the mass murder. Some of these escape attempts were successful. Had they been picked up by the SS again, it would have meant certain death.

The main task of Trawniki, according to Dieter Pohl, consisted in guarding the camp. Once transport trains arrived with Jews, they had to help unload and take the bulk of the victims directly into the gas chambers. Pohl quoted from the testimony of a former Trawniki, who was put on trial after the war in the Soviet Union and was later executed: “All the guards participated in the destruction of the people.”

Criticism from Poland and Ukraine

As reported in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on January 14, the Demjanjuk trial is being closely followed and commented on in the Polish and Ukrainian media. Demjanjuk comes from the central Ukraine region of Vinnitsa and was employed by the SS in the Sobibor extermination camp as a guard and henchman in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Observers at the trial from both countries regard the strict punishment of the 89-year-old Demjanjuk to be justified if his individual guilt can be proved. However, what many commentators from these countries find disturbing is the fact that the trial is taking place before a German court. In both countries there is concern that in putting a defendant on trial who comes from a country that was occupied at the time, German guilt and

responsibility for the Holocaust could be relativised.

According to a comment in the nationalist Warsaw newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, “We must not forget who made Demjanjuk into a perpetrator. It was the Nazis, who were masters over life and death.” The recently promoted thesis in Germany that the Holocaust would not have been possible “without the zealous support of millions of people from Eastern Europe” ignores the fact that the “diabolical machinery of destruction” was part of the state policy of Germany at that time.

This raises a key dilemma in the case against Demjanjuk—many of those who were principally responsible for the monstrous crimes of the Nazi regime and even most of their accomplices were never brought before the courts and held to account after the end of the Second World War and the demise of the fascist regime.

Historians estimate that around 170,000 people were involved in the murders carried out by Nazi Germany. Only 6,500 culprits were sentenced in post-war Germany, and often given very low fines. Not only were many of those responsible who had worked in the judiciary, the intelligence services and police in Nazi Germany never held accountable, but they seamlessly continued their activities in leading positions in post-war Germany.

In the eyes of the ruling elite, not only in Germany but also among Western allies like the US, these forces were needed due to their capacity to maintain the social order, suppress any potential rebellions and, shortly after the end of World War II, for propagating the so-called Cold War against the Soviet Union.

Almost all the Polish newspapers reporting on the Demjanjuk trial have pointed out that in the Sobibor trials held in West Germany during the 1960s and 1970s only six of the twelve SS men accused were ever convicted. Only the camp commandant received a life sentence at that time, while the other five accused were only sentenced to prison terms of between three and eight years.

The Ukrainian media has pointed out that Germany, responsible for the devastation and occupation of their country during the war, and for the resulting consequences, has never paid any kind of compensation.

Testimonies of Sobibor survivors

On January 19, 2010, 82-year-old Thomas Blatt, one of the few survivors of the Sobibor extermination camp, gave evidence as a witness in the trial of John Demjanjuk in Munich. In April 1943, Blatt had arrived at Sobibor as a 15-year-old with his parents and his 8-year-old brother. His parents and his brother were sent immediately to the gas chamber.

He was selected to do menial work in the camp. He had to sort the things taken from the prisoners after their arrival, burn passports and documents, and cut the hair of Jewish women before they were sent to the gas chambers. Later, he had to help build roads and barracks.

Thomas Blatt also reported hearing the screams of people from

the gas chambers and the crying of children. He told the court, “We never wept at Sobibor,” because those who cried were shot dead. He also explained why he appears as a witness and a co-plaintiff in the trial of Demjanjuk, “I do not seek revenge, I am looking for justice.” And above all, that the truth about what happened at Sobibor is known and is not forgotten; this is important for future generations, he said.

Blatt was among the 53 survivors of the camp. Along with other prisoners, he participated in the uprising at Sobibor on October 16, 1943, and was able to flee into the surrounding woods. The Nazis crushed the uprising and then razed the camp to the ground in order to destroy all traces of their work of annihilation.

Thomas Blatt has devoted his entire life to making the truth known about this death camp and to preserve its memory. He has written books such as *From the Ashes of Sobibor* and *Sobibor—The Forgotten Uprising—Report of a Survivor*. The feature film *Escape from Sobibor* is also based on his memoirs.

Blatt said he could not personally recall Demjanjuk, but his evidence to the court carries weight. If it can be proved that Demjanjuk worked as a guard at Sobibor, which would seem to be corroborated by his ID papers and duty rotas, then he has made himself guilty. Those who worked in Sobibor automatically became murderers.

In the six months that Thomas Blatt had to spend at Sobibor, he was able to study the equipment and the mechanisms of the killing machine very closely. He had grown up in the bitterly poor shtetl of Izbica in Eastern Poland, used from 1942 by the German occupying forces as a transit camp for Jews on their way to the extermination camps.

From the transport that took Thomas Blatt to Sobibor, 160 of the 200 people it carried were immediately sent to the gas chambers. The remaining 40 were allowed to live, as so-called “work Jews.” Blatt also had to carry out duties for the camp guard Karl Frenzel. He later tracked him down and ensured that he was brought to court for a second time and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1985, after having originally been acquitted in 1966 on technical grounds.

The 84-year-old Philip Bialowitz, who also survived Sobibor, gave evidence last week in court, saying, “I am here to tell you what Sobibor represents.” Like Thomas Blatt, he, too, comes from Izbica, some 70 kilometres from Sobibor, and was also selected as a working prisoner. He participated in the October 1943 uprising at the prison and escaped after months of terror. A large part of his family, including his two sisters, died in Sobibor.



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