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Women and the post-war Nazi trials

À propos des femmes dans les procès du nazisme

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Complementary points of view

Women and the post-war Nazi trials

Annette WIEVIORKA

Nazism presents the unique case of a historical event whose agents, wherever they stood in the hierarchy, have been brought to trial over the last seven decades. And the judicial process is not yet at an end, since in the summer of 2013, the Simon Wiesenthal Center launched a poster campaign in Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne, with the slogan “Spät aber nicht zu spät” [Late, but not too late], in order to flush out the last Nazis still alive and able to appear in court. There could be another sixty. Simultaneously, the Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes, located in Ludwigsburg, announced that it was sending the German justice system files on forty Auschwitz camp guards, including some women, whose names and identities have not been communicated, so that proceedings could be initiated against them.

On the surface, this very long judicial history appears to have been an entirely masculine undertaking. The legal systems of the victorious countries were virtually closed to women, and when one studies the principal trials in national or international contexts, the prosecuting teams, like the judges, are uniformly composed of men. Photos and films show some women secretaries, stenographers or even journalists, among them Rebecca West, Erika Mann, Marguerite Higgins or Elsa Triolet. Pointless to dwell very long on this

distribution of roles: it is simply the reflection of what existed in these societies at the time.

Records of camp personnel have been preserved. It is therefore possible to know where and when these people worked there. However it is difficult, lacking witnesses, to know what they personally did. This question, which lies at the heart of all the trials, has now been resolved by what has come to be called “the Demjanjuk precedent.” This Ukrainian man, who emigrated to the United States, was extradited to Israel, where he was tried as “Ivan the Terrible,” the man who had directed the Treblinka gassings. He was sentenced to death (1988), but this judgment was annulled (1993) by the Israeli Supreme Court on the grounds of mistaken identity. The legal drama continued: American courts withdrew his nationality, he was extradited to Germany, and in a final trial was sentenced to five years imprisonment for his participation in the murder of 29,000 Jews at the extermination center of Sobibor (2011). The judgment was reached on the basis that his mere presence on the scene, without it being possible through witness statements to determine what he actually did, was sufficient to prove his guilt.

At the international Nuremberg Trials, those brought before the court were “serious criminals,” defined as having perpetrated their crimes in several countries. These men were therefore the highest-placed officials of the Nazi state, then in the hands of the Allies. There was not one woman among the accused. Only three women were among the witnesses called to the bar by the prosecution or the defense: Ribbentrop’s secretary, who was asked to confirm the contents of the secret protocols of the German-Soviet pact of 1939; Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, a leading figure in the French communist party, arrested for her resistance activities, who came to describe what conditions were like at Auschwitz, where she had been deported in the only convoy of non-Jewish women, the one of 24 January 1943;¹ and Severina Shmaglewskaya, a Polish woman who

¹ This convoy was the focus of the first monograph on a convoy, by author Charlotte Delbo (Delbo 1965). Besides a history of the convoy and a sociological study of this group of women, the work includes an individual note on each of them.

recalled for the Soviet prosecution her memories of Auschwitz where she too had been interned. She was one of a small handful of witnesses – the most celebrated among whom was the Yiddish poet Suzkever – who were called to the bar to illustrate the criminality of “Hitlerian fascism” as the Soviets designated Nazism. If one considers the twelve successive trials conducted by the American court alone, only two women figure among the hundreds accused in those trials dedicated to doctors and agents in the racial purification program. While Inge Vermetz, who was implicated in the Lebensborn program was acquitted, Herta Oberheuser was found guilty. At Ravensbrück camp, she had worked with Dr. Karl Gebhardt who had experimented with newly invented sulphur drugs on the Polish detainees, labeled “the rabbits,” whom he had previously mutilated. Gebhardt was condemned to death. Herta Oberheuser, who had also administered lethal injections to infants, was condemned to twenty years in prison for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Released for good behavior in 1952, she became a doctor at Stocksee. She lost her position in 1956, after a survivor of Ravensbrück recognized her; her license to practice medicine was revoked in 1958. In his film, *Memory of Justice*, Marcel Ophüls showed some excerpts from films of this trial, and pursued her without success in order to question her. She died in 1978.

One has to look at a different level of tribunal to find out about the women who were prosecuted, found guilty and executed. These were the women who worked in concentration camps² and extermination centers, many of whom faced charges during the trials related to the various camps: those for Bergen-Belsen and Ravensbrück, held respectively at Lüneburg (from 17 September to 17 November 1945) and Hamburg (5 December 1946 to 3 February 1947) before British military tribunals; or the trial for Stutthof, held at Gdansk from 25 April to 31 May 1946 before a special Polish-Soviet court. These trials, unlike Nuremberg, were not subject to international justice. They were conducted according to the already existing legislation of each of the liberating countries.

² See http://massviolence.org/fr/IMG/article_PDF/La-violence-des-surveillantes-des.pdf which assesses the considerable German literature on this topic.

To take the example of the Bergen-Belsen trial,³ the British troops who had entered the camp on 15 April 1945 had arrested some 70 SS and Kapos [supervisors], the majority among them having staffed the Auschwitz camps before the evacuation of their detainees in January 1945 ahead of the Red Army's advance, and who had then been assigned to Bergen-Belsen. Of the 45 persons who were indicted then, 16 were women. Like the Kharkov tribunal (December 1943) it was a military court, and the defendants were tried for war crimes. Eleven among them – three of them women (Irma Greese, Elisabeth Volkenrath, Johanna Bormann), all three having begun their career in various concentration camps including the women's camp, Ravensbrück, from which they had been transferred to Auschwitz and Birkenau – were condemned to death without possible appeal, and hanged on 13 December 1945 by the famous British executioner Albert Pierrepoint.

Their presence is explained by the fact that women were not admitted into the SS: consequently the SS needed them for the camps where women were interned, following the tradition of the German penitentiary system: women must be guarded by women. Thus some women were contracted to the SS. They were guards in the camp of Lichtenburg Castle, where women replaced men in 1937, then at Ravensbrück from 1939 on.⁴ It was in this camp that the guards received their training: some 3,500 women were trained there during the duration of the war. From this camp they dispersed into the other camps for women, Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau (from March 1942); Stutthof at the mouth of the Vistula from 1942, Bergen-Belsen mainly after January 1945, when the detainees of Auschwitz were evacuated there. They were never very numerous, if one compares them to the male SS-Totenkopf [Death's Head] squads who were in charge of the camps. For example, if some 7,000 SS men worked at various times in the network of Auschwitz camps (4,500 by 1944), the number of women there never surpassed 200. They could however attain posts of responsibility. Maria Mandel (tried at

³ We have chosen to focus on this trial because the transcripts are readily available: http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/TrialTranscript/Trial_Day_001.html

⁴ This information comes from Aleksander Lasik (Lasik 2011).

Krakow, condemned to death, executed) was the Lagerführerin [camp leader] of the Birkenau women's camp. She was replaced in this role on November 1944 by Elisabeth Volkenrath (born in 1919), previously a hairdresser. First one, then the other assumed leadership of the women's camp. But even in this position of very great power, they did not have the right to give an order to an SS man, even if he were of inferior rank. Mainly they differed from the men by their age – they were often very young, in their twenties – and by their initial training. Often they were not educated, and had performed various odd jobs before being signed up by the SS. Thus the character in Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader*, a camp guard whose secret shame was her illiteracy, and who was caught up with by the justice system, does not lack veracity. These very young women wore uniform. As women, they retained skirts. But like their male counterparts, the women wore caps, officer's shoes, jackets and ties, even if they were not allowed a military rank or decorations. They were authorized to carry a handgun, were often provided with a whip, and some of them were also assigned a dog. Detainees testified in various trials to their violence, and to the fact that according to them, these women had enjoyed inflicting the most extreme brutalities. Even so, in reading the testimonies and the indictments, it does not seem that any distinction was made between men and women, and the stereotype that "it would be surprising for a woman to behave this way" was not raised either by witnesses, judges, or lawyers.

Among the three women executed at Bergen-Belsen, Irma Greese, born 7 October 1923, was the youngest. She was in fact the youngest woman to be executed in the entire twentieth century under British justice. She had been a saleswoman before obtaining a contract with the SS to work at Ravensbrück camp (July 1942). In March 1943, she had been transferred to Birkenau camp, assigned at first to supervision of detainees building roads. She rose rapidly in responsibility, as *Blockhaus* leader in the various areas relegated to women at Birkenau camp, finally ending her career as one of the principal women responsible for the women's camp of Auschwitz.⁵

⁵ See Wiewiorka 2005: especially p. 75-79.

Thus the immediate post-war trials did not show any particular leniency towards women. Those who were arrested received heavy sentences. But collective memory has retained only the major trial of Nuremberg, thus giving the impression that women were not involved in Nazi criminality.

Translated by Jeanne ARMSTRONG

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