

essay

Hitler Abettors Must Feel Justice

Prosecuting former Nazi death camp guards for war crimes is more than a symbolic memorial to the 6 million Jews killed in the throes of the Holocaust during World War II. Prosecution also is a quest for justice no matter how much time has passed.

That's why it was so gratifying to hear a court in Detmold, Germany, had sentenced a former SS guard, now 94, to five years in prison. Reinhold Hanning's conviction and sentence on June 17 validated his role as an accessory in the murder of at least 170,000 people at Auschwitz-Birkenau. That notorious death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland was responsible for the gassing of more than 1.1 million people — mostly Jews. Following the verdict against Hanning, according to the Associated Press, a 95-year-old survivor from Berlin, Leon Schwarzbach, called Auschwitz "a hell on earth."

Witness testimony, always wrenching, proved pivotal in convicting Hanning, who ran a dairy store in Germany after the war. At sentencing, Judge Anke Grudde cut to the core of the criminal act, saying: "You were in Auschwitz for almost 2½ years and thus assisted in mass murder."

In April, Hanning told the court, "I'm ashamed that I knowingly let injustice happen and did nothing to oppose it." Still, the judge characterized him as a "willing and efficient henchman."

The judge didn't buy the classic defense argument that no proof existed their client

had committed individual acts of murder. She applied the time-tested timber of justice that aiding in murder is tantamount to committing it. Hanning has appealed the verdict.



Robert Sklar
Contributing Editor

BIGGER PICTURE

The judge's ruling shouldn't erase all the years Germany tried to obscure its Nazi past. But it does provide a measure of peace for victims and their families.

The trial reinforced that a death camp guard personally didn't have to kill or beat anyone amid Hitler's fury to be considered a Nazi collaborator. To sustain the death camps, the

Third Reich relied on guards who turned a blind eye toward genocide.

Hanning joined the Hitler Youth in 1935, at age 13. He volunteered for the Waffen SS in 1940. Following combat injury in Kiev in 1941, Hanning, a sergeant, was assigned to sentry duty at Auschwitz. He served from January 1942 to June 1944.

In profoundly compelling post-trial remarks, Central Council of Jews in Germany head Josef Schuster told reporters, according to JTA: "No perpetrator should be able to say, 'For me, it's the past.' The trial

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brings to the forefront, once again, what people are capable of doing to one another, and what incitement against minorities can lead to. So the trial made an important contribution to our dealing with Germany history."

It certainly did.

ON GUARD

The 2011 conviction of retired Ohio auto-worker John Demjanjuk in a court in Munich set a legal precedent for tying a guard at a death camp to complicity in murder. He was convicted for his alleged role in the murders of 28,000 Jews at the Sobibor death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Soon, the relentless march of time will end the possibility of such trials although a few are pending. Of 6,500 SS personnel who survived the war, fewer than 50 have been convicted under German justice, according to NBC News.

That conviction ratio shouldn't diminish the efforts of the governments of Israel and the U.S. and more recently Germany, or the doggedness of the U.S.-based Simon Wiesenthal Center and other Nazi hunters, in seeking long-overdue justice. More apt to grab headlines are Holocaust restitution and Holocaust denial.

A central tenet of deterring genocidal attempts is to punish perpetrators involved at every level — then keep the world spotlight trained on those pursuits of justice regardless of the passage of time.

Prosecuting as many former Nazi death camp guards as possible no doubt helps bolster the impact of the fervent rallying cry of Holocaust survivors: "Never Again!" *

commentary

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Referring to "radical Islam" or "radical Islamism" when discussing Mateen won't do a thing to solve the actual problem, no matter how much Donald Trump may claim to the contrary, but to contort oneself into knots to deny what appears to be plainly obvious recalls George Orwell's famous aphorism that "to see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

Equally clear should be that to tie either Mateen or Goldstein to religious motivation is not to disparage the entire religion itself. All religions simultaneously contain good and bad, with acts of monumental charity and monstrous barbarity perpetrated in their names constantly. That one sick, twisted individual or even thousands of sick, twisted individuals kill in service of a religion proves nothing. It does not mean that the religion's faithful are all terrorists in waiting, but simply means that the terrorists who kill in its name are using the religion to justify the unjustifiable.

Religion gives rise to terrible ideologies that cloak themselves in the mantle of faith and God, but it is foolish, absent evidence to

the contrary, to assume that the parasite has fully consumed the host. Many are quick to point to Mateen's connection to Islam as representative of Islam writ large, and I vigorously disagree with it but I understand where it comes from, given how many terrorist attacks are committed in Islam's name.

We can run multivariate regressions all day that demonstrate that Islam is statistically insignificant compared to poverty, political repression and all sorts of other factors when it comes to terrorism, but it seems to belie common sense. Also belying common sense is to then blanketly insist that Islam is synonymous with violence, rather than understanding that we live in a time when Islam is employed for violence more than other religions, as Christianity was employed for violence more than other religions during the Middle Ages (as Jews know full well).

The fact that American Jews would never tolerate being tarred by Goldstein's brush is precisely why it is so important to maintain the same standards with other religions, even when Jewish terrorism is a drop in the

bucket compared to Muslim terrorism.

Goldstein killed a group of Muslims for the crime of being Muslim. Mateen killed a group of gays for being gay. In Tel Aviv last week, two Palestinians killed a group of Israelis for being Israeli. There are complex factors and wider contexts involved in all of these cases, but it would be foolish to ignore some of them for political reasons. Acknowledging that there are uncomfortable truths at work does not justify any of these acts of terrorism in any way.

Terrorism and killing innocents are wrong no matter the reason and no matter the perpetrator. People should not be afraid of complexity, and when we give in to the temptation of turning everything into a black-and-white political issue that prioritizes ideology over the struggle for truth, we set ourselves up for a generation of leaders who prioritize sound bites over substance, platitudes over policy and division over discourse. *

This essay was originally published on the Israel Policy Forum, where Michael Koplow is policy director.

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