

The Nuremberg Trials

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Essay Intensive, Lesson 5

Student Paper: Writing about History

Welcome to Nazi Germany, post-World War II. It's 1945 and most Europeans are trying to put their lives back together after their countries were conquered and then liberated. While peace is starting to become more prevalent, in the American-held German region of Nuremberg, major, significant decisions are being made about life, the right to life, and whether there is a higher law than the government's law. The Nuremberg War Crime Trials were an important part of these decisions and left a remarkable historical legacy behind. What were the Nuremberg War Crime Trials? What did the judges have to decide? And finally, what does Nuremberg teach us?

The Nuremberg War Crime Trials were a series of trials held between November 20, 1945 and October 1, 1946 in Nuremberg, Germany. Judges from the United States, France, England, and the Soviet Union prosecuted 21 German medical officials, doctors, administrators, and other members of the German armed forces and *Schutzstaffeln* (SS). The International Military Tribunal (IMT) and the United States Nuremberg Military Tribunals (NMT) conducted these trials. The German defendants were "accused of organizing and participating in ...crimes against humanity in the form of medical experiments and... procedures inflicted on prisoners and civilians" (Summary of the Introduction to NMT Case 1 U.S.A. v. Karl Brandt et al., Nuremberg.law.harvard.edu). The purpose of these trials was to decide if the German defendants perpetuating the Holocaust, though they were acting within their government's law, were first and foremost responsible for obeying a higher law, God's law.

After eight months of sifting through documents, listening to accusations and the defendants' replies, and discussing the evidence, the members of the IMT and the NMT began to decide the German officials' fates. According to the Nuremberg Trials page on the website pbs.org, the judges spent around a month deciding the verdicts. On the first day alone, they decided the fates of 19 of the 22 defendants. "Karl Brandt and six...defendants were...sentenced to death,...nine defendants were...sentenced to terms in prison;...seven defendants were acquitted" (Summary of the Introduction to NMT Case 1 U.S.A. v. Karl Brandt et al., Nuremberg.law.harvard.edu). The decisions of the IMT and NMT judges remind me of what the Founding Fathers had believed and had tried to establish the American government upon: the fact that there *is* a higher law than

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the government. “The fact that the defendant acted pursuant to order of his government or of a superior shall not free him from responsibility [of obeying a higher law]” (Whatever Happened to Justice, pg 122, by Richard J. Maybury).

The significance of Nuremberg lies in the conclusion the judges came to. There is a higher law than our governments. And first and foremost, we have the responsibility to obey that law. “Millions were sent to the death camps because of the assumption that there was no higher law than the government’s law” (Whatever Happened to Justice, pg 123 by Richard J. Maybury). As Isaiah 10 verse one reads, “Doom to you who legislate evil, who make laws that make victims.” It certainly was dooms-day for the Nuremberg defendants after their trials were concluded. What the IMT and NMT members agreed upon is something we need to remember today: there is a higher law than the government. This fact is why the Nuremberg War Crime Trials were a significant event in history.

The trials were an amazing event, however, as Former U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson said, “A single landmark of justice and honor does not make a world of peace.” Sixty-six years ago, Nuremberg decided that we had a responsibility to obey a higher law even when the government says it’s okay to kill other people, but what about today? Whose example will we choose to follow- the Nazis, who thought it was alright to make distinctions among people and eliminate those who were ‘inferior’, or the IMT and NMT judges, who completely disagreed with the Nazi’s conclusion? Nuremberg, and the remarkable actions, thoughts, and decisions that came out of the trials, forever changed history.