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"Last" Nazi war crimes suspect faces trial: how many more will there be?

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MOSCOW. (Andrei Fedyashin, RIA Novosti political analyst) - Germany is preparing for a trial of a Nazi criminal, widely referred by the local media as "the last one."

It is unknown as yet when the proceedings on Ivan (John) Demjanjuk, extradited to Germany from the United States, will begin. It is even less clear what the outcome will be. However, the deportation of the native Ukrainian 89-year-old retired auto mechanic from Cleveland, Ohio, his transportation to Munich, Bavaria and his impending trial have made the news in both Germany and the United States and elsewhere. This is probably natural, given that we are witnessing the "last" trial of a war crimes suspect.

Watching the unwinding justice exercise, one gets a strange feeling that this really is the last effort and a colossal victory, brought about by painstaking efforts of hundreds of legal officials and investigators. There is some obvious finality about the whole business.

The Second World War "biological clock" will indeed stop ticking five or eight years from now, as those Nazis who were the youngest to commit war crimes will be past the 100 years mark or nearing it then. They will certainly be beyond the reach of justice. Therefore, today seems like the last chance to hold a high-profile show trial - just to remind the younger generations how it used to be and check any possible revival of Nazism.

It may be a good idea, because there is increasing talk these days that there were no death camps and that the Wehrmacht was "clean" and only SS executed people. These things are horrible to hear. That is why the world should appreciate the effort put in by the Simon Wiesenthal Center to continue the search for former camp guards despite meager funds, which prevents the world from forgetting about the victims.

However, it is as strange and horrible to hear that the Nazis' worst crime was to exterminate Jews. Admittedly, it was a monstrous crime, even though many facts have now been exaggerated.

But what about the millions of Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Georgians and Uzbeks? No one seems to remember their plight. OK, many died. It was a war, wasn't it? No one knows what those colonized people were fighting for in the first place and what benefits they got from their victory. Their living standards are much lower than those of their defeated enemies.

It is even worse to read Western war memoirs mentioning only the Soviet "contribution" as an appendage to the "glorious victory" won by Anglo-Saxon forces in Normandy and the Pacific.

In fact high-profile public campaigns are well established in failing to do something, or failing to do it properly. Not necessarily on purpose - possibly by negligence. The search for war criminals is exactly the case.

With so much previous effort to forget about them, any declared suspect becomes a prized trophy. The triumph of each successful "catch" helps disguise the 60-years-old hypocrisy around the search for the suspects.

Contrary to the widespread belief, hundreds of war criminals have not gone into hiding or laid low after the end of the war. They simply divested their Nazi uniforms they swapped for civilian clothes and obtained fake passports. What's more, many did not do even that.

According to well-known German judge and prosecutor Fritz Bauer, over 100,000 Nazis involved in the Holocaust atrocities had been happily living in Germany through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Some of them even worked for federal agencies.

Other estimates cite over 300,000. However, since the end of the war, less than 5,000 Nazi criminals were exposed and convicted in Germany. "The West needed a strong West Germany and did not want to spend time hunting for Nazis, many of which were now part of the society and even the Federal Republic government," said Jean-Marc Dreyfus, professor at Manchester University and leading expert in Nazism. "Removing those

individuals would have weakened the nation, and for the West it was more important by then to have a strong West German position against Russia."

The situation in the United States was not much better - especially for a former member of the anti-Hitler coalition. The country had not extradited a single war crimes suspect before 1973 - the year when they finally deported former death camp guard Hermine Brauensteiner-Ryan, and only due to the insistence of the Wiesenthal Center.

Since then, the United States deported a mere 90 people. No one knows now how many more Demjanjunks America had. Meanwhile, America certainly was the place where most former collaborationists moved from Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic countries in the first post-war decade. They were granted citizenship (just like Demjanjuk). The authorities turned a blind eye to their fake IDs and hidden Nazi past. Many of them were later sought out to work for the CIA in the Soviet Union or other socialist countries.

Eli Rosenthal, head of U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Special Investigations (OSI), admitted shortly before Demjanjuk's deportation that it would take 100 years to expose all Nazi criminals at the current pace of searching. He was referring to the whereabouts of dozens of thousands of people. But there will be no one to search for ten years from now. They will die a natural death.

They use a simple search method in the United States. They match the lists of the 70,000 SS officers from Germany, and run the names and pictures through a computer in the hope of finding U.S. citizens with similar identities.

As a result, in the past eight years (2001-2008), 37 former Nazis were exposed. The current practice is to deport them once they are identified in the countries where they had committed the crimes.

For the same period, 26 war criminals were convicted in Italy, 6 in Canada, 3 in Germany, 2 in Lithuania, 1 in Poland and 1 in France.

There are 11 "most wanted" suspects on top of the Wiesenthal Center, including Demjanjuk. Three of them have been found and deported. They are now living normal lives in Estonia and Lithuania.

Former Belarusian national Mikhail Gorshkov, who was stripped of U.S. citizenship, found guilty of mass killing of Jews and communists during the war, now lives in Estonia. So does Harry Mannil, who executed Jews and communists in the Baltic republics. He was also deported from the United States and banned to return, but was later acquitted by the Estonian court.

Algimantas Dailide, also deported from the U.S., ended up in Lithuania. He was stripped of his U.S. citizenship, deported to Lithuania, convicted as a Nazi criminal, but released on parole.

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