

## Hitler's European Holocaust Helpers

By SPIEGEL Staff

**The Germans are responsible for the industrial-scale mass murder of 6 million Jews. But the collusion of other European countries in the Holocaust has received surprisingly little attention until recently. The trial of John Demjanjuk is set to throw a spotlight on Hitler's foreign helpers.**

He's been here before, in this country of perpetrators. He saw this country collapse. He was 25 at the time and his Christian name was Ivan, not John; not yet.

Ivan **Demjanjuk** served as a guard in Flossenbürg concentration camp until shortly before the end of World War II. He had been transferred there from the SS death camp in Sobibor in present-day Poland. He was Ukrainian, and he was a Travniki, one of the 5,000 men who helped Germany's Nazi regime commit the crime of the millennium -- the murder of all the Jews in Europe, the "Final Solution."

He was part of it, if only a very minor cog in the vast machinery of murder. Ivan Demjanjuk stayed in post-war Germany for seven years before he emigrated to the US in 1952 with his wife and daughter on board the *General Haan*. Once he arrived, he changed his name to John. His time as a supposed DP or "displaced person," as the Anglo-American victors called people made homeless by the war, was over.

DP Demjanjuk had lived in the southern German towns of Landshut and Regensburg where he worked for the US Army. He moved to Ulm, Ellwangen, Bad Reichenhall, and finally to Feldafing on Lake Starnberg. Feldafing belongs to the area covered by the Munich district court, which is why Demjanjuk has been sitting in Munich's Stadelheim prison since he was deported from the US last week. His cell measures 24 square meters, which is extraordinarily spacious by usual prison standards.

### Last Big Nazi Trial in Germany

He faces charges of aiding and abetting the murder of at least 29,000 Jews in Sobibor. The trial could start in late summer, provided Demjanjuk, now almost 90, is deemed fit to stand trial. Witnesses will be called to testify, but none of them will be able to identify him. The only evidence lies in the files, but that evidence is strong. Twice, in 1949 and 1979, former Travniki Ignat Danilchenko, who is now dead, stated that Demjanjuk had been an "experienced and efficient guard" who had driven Jews into the gas chambers -- "that was daily work."

Demjanjuk has denied this charge throughout. He says he was never in Flossenbürg or in Sobibor, never pushed people into the gas chambers. The ex-American has adopted the same tactic of denial as many other defendants who stood trial for war crimes after 1945.



But it's already clear that this last big Nazi trial in Germany will be a deeply extraordinary one because it will for the first time put the foreign perpetrators in the spotlight of world publicity. They are men who have until now received surprisingly little attention -- Ukrainian gendarmes and Latvian auxiliary police, Romanian soldiers or Hungarian railway workers. Polish farmers, Dutch land registry officials, French mayors, Norwegian ministers, Italian soldiers -- they all took part in Germany's Holocaust.

Experts such as Dieter Pohl of the German Institute for Contemporary History estimate that more than 200,000

DER SPIEGEL non-Germans -- about as many as Germans and Austrians --  
 The Holocaust in numbers. "prepared, carried out and assisted in acts of murder." And often  
 they were every bit as cold-blooded as Hitler's henchmen.

Just for example, on June 27, 1941, a colonel in the staff of the Germany's Northern Army Group in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas passed a petrol station surrounded by a crowd of people. There were shouts of bravo and clapping, mothers raised their children to give them a better view. The officer stepped closer and later wrote down what he had seen. "On the concrete courtyard there was blonde man aged around 25, of medium height, who was taking a rest and supporting himself on a wooden club which was as thick as an arm and went up to his chest. At his feet lay 15, 20 people who were dead or dying. Water poured from a hose and washed the blood into a drain."

The soldier continued: "Just a few paces behind this man stood around 20 men who -- guarded by several armed civilians -- awaited their gruesome execution in silent submission. Beckoned with a curt wave, the next one stepped up silently and was (...) beaten to death with the wooden club, and every blow met with enthusiastic cheers from the audience."

### **Orgy of Murder Like a Lithuanian National Ceremony**

When all lay dead on the ground, the blonde murderer climbed on the heap of corpses and played the accordion. His audience sang the Lithuanian anthem as if the orgy of murder had been a national ceremony.

How could something like that happen? For a long time now, this question hasn't just been directed at the Germans, whose central responsibility for the horror is undisputed -- but also at the perpetrators in all countries.

What led Romanian dictator Ion Antonescu and his generals, soldiers, civil servants and farmers to murder 200,000 Jews (and possibly twice that many) "of their own accord," as historian Armin Heinen puts it. Why did Baltic death squadrons commit murder on German orders in Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine? And why did German Einsatzgruppen -- paramilitary "intervention groups" operated by the SS -- have such an easy time encouraging the non-Jewish population to wage pogroms between Warsaw and Minsk?

It's completely undisputed that the Holocaust would never have happened without Hitler, SS Chief Heinrich Himmler and the many, many other Germans. But it's also certain "that the Germans on their own wouldn't have been able to carry out the murder of millions of European Jews," says Hamburg-based historian Michael Wild.

It's a perception that many survivors never doubted. When the Association of Surviving Lithuanian Jews convened in Munich in 1947, they passed a resolution that bore an unmistakable title: "On the guilt of a large part of the Lithuanian population for the murder of Lithuania's Jews."

In the Third Reich with its well-functioning bureaucracy, there were comprehensive registers of the Jewish population. But in the territories conquered by the German army, Hitler's henchmen needed information of the type supplied in the Netherlands by registry offices whose staff went to a lot of trouble to compile a precise "Register of Jews."

And how would the SS and police have been able to track down Jews in the cities of Eastern Europe with their broad mix of ethnic groups if they hadn't had the support of the local population? Not many Germans would have been able "to recognize a Jew in a crowd," recalls Thomas Blatt, a survivor of Sobibor who wants to testify as a witness at Demjanjuk's trial.

At the time, Blatt was a blonde-haired boy and tried to pass for a Christian child in his Polish home town of Izbica. He didn't wear a yellow star and tried to appear self-confident when he ran into uniformed people. But he was betrayed a number of times -- the Germans paid for information on the whereabouts of Jews -- and he always escaped with a lot of luck.

### **Denunciation Was Common**

Denunciation was so common in Poland that there was a special term for paid informants

"Szmalcowniki" (previously a term for a fence). In many cases, the denouncers knew their victims. And while the French, Dutch or Belgians could submit to the illusion that the Jews deported to the east from Paris, Rotterdam or Brussels would be all right in the end, the people in Eastern Europe learned through the grapevine what lay in store for the Jews in Auschwitz or Treblinka.

For sure, many counter-examples can easily be found. A senior officer in Einsatzgruppe C, responsible for the murder of more than 100,000 people, complained that the Ukrainians lacked "pronounced anti-Semitism based on racial or ideological reasons." The officer wrote that "there is a lack of leadership and of spiritual impetus for the pursuit of Jews."

Historian Feliks Tych estimates that some 125,000 Poles rescued Jews without being paid for their services. It's clear that the perpetrators always made up a small minority of their respective population. But the Germans relied on that minority. The SS, police and the army lacked the manpower to search the vast areas where the Nazi leadership planned to kill all people of Jewish origin. Across the 4,000 kilometers stretching from Brittany in western France to the Caucasus, the Nazis were bent on hunting down their victims, deporting them to extermination camps or to local murder sites, preventing escapes, digging mass graves and then carrying out their bloody handiwork.

Of course only Hitler and his entourage or the army could have stopped the Holocaust. But this doesn't invalidate the argument that without the foreign helpers, countless thousands or even millions of the approximately six million murdered Jews would have survived.

In the killing fields of Eastern Europe, there were up to 10 local helpers for every German policeman. The ratio is similar in the extermination camps. Not in Auschwitz, which was run almost entirely by Germans, but in Belzec (600,000 killed), Treblinka (900,000 deaths) or in Demjanjuk's Sobibor. There, a handful of SS members were assisted by some 120 Travniki men.

Without them, the Germans would never have managed to kill 250,000 Jews in Sobibor, says former prisoner Blatt. It was the Travniki who guarded the camp, drove all the Jews from the railway wagons and trucks after their arrival in the camp, and who beat them into the gas chambers.

### **Was the Holocaust a European Project?**

Such a stupefying number of victims raises disturbing questions, and Berlin historian Götz Aly already started asking them a few years ago: was the so-called Final Solution in fact a "European project that cannot be explained solely by the special circumstances of German history"?

### **Many Foreign Perpetrators Acted Voluntarily**

There is no final verdict yet on the European dimension of the Holocaust. The French and Italians started late -- when most of the perpetrators were already dead -- to deal comprehensively with this part of their history. Others, such as the Ukrainians and Lithuanians, are still dragging their feet; or they have only just begun, like Romania, Hungary and Poland.

Since 1945 the countries invaded and ravaged by Hitler's armies have seen themselves as victims -- which they doubtless were, with their vast numbers of dead. That makes it all the more painful to concede that many compatriots aided the German perpetrators.

In Latvia, local assistance was greater than anywhere else. According to the American historian Raul Hilberg, the Latvians had the highest proportion of Nazi helpers. The Danes are at the other end of the scale. When the deportation of Denmark's Jews was about to begin in 1943, large parts of the population helped Jews to escape to Sweden or hid them. Some 98 percent of Denmark's 7,500 Jews survived World War II. By contrast, only nine percent of the Dutch Jews survived.

Does the Holocaust represent the low point not only of German history, but of European history as well, as historian Aly argues?

There is evidence challenging the widely-held notion that foreign perpetrators were forced to help the Germans commit murder. It's true that local helpers risked their lives by refusing to assist the

German occupiers. That applied to the police units and civil servants in occupied Western Europe as much as it did to newly-formed auxiliary police in the east. But it's also true that in many places people volunteered to serve the Germans or participated in crimes without being forced to.



The Holocaust in numbers.

There is also the often-repeated claim that the governments of countries allied with Hitler had no choice but to hand over Jewish citizens to the Germans. That's not true either. The Balkan countries in particular quickly understood how important the "solution to the Jewish Question" was to Hitler and his diplomats -- and they tried to extract the highest possible price for their complicity.

There's also reason to doubt the assumption that the helpers were pathological sadists. If that were true, they should be easy to identify, for example within the group of 50 Lithuanians who served under the command of SS Obersturmbannführer (Lieutenant Colonel) Joachim Hamann. The men would drive around the villages up to five times a week to murder Jews, and ended up killing 60,000 people. It only took a few crates of Vodka to get them in the mood. In the evenings the troop would return

to Kaunas and boast of their crimes in the mess hall.

None of the Lithuanians had been criminals before. They were "totally and utterly normal," believes historian Knut Stang. Almost everywhere after the war, the murderers returned to their ordinary lives as if nothing had happened. Demjanjuk too was a law-abiding citizen. In Cleveland, Ohio, where he lived, he was regarded as good colleague and a friendly neighbor.

It's the same as with the German perpetrators. There's no identifiable type of killer -- that's a particularly disturbing conclusion reached by historians. The murderers included Catholics and Protestants, hot-blooded southern Europeans and cool Balts, obsessive right-wing extremists or unfeeling bureaucrats, refined academics or violent rednecks.

Among them was Viktor Arajs (1910-1988), a learned lawyer from a Latvian farming family who commanded a unit of more than 1,000 men that murdered its way around Eastern Europe on behalf of the Nazis. Or the Romanian Generaru, son of a general and commander of the ghetto in Bersad in Ukraine, who had one of his victims tied to a motorbike and dragged to death.

### **Anti-Semitism Was Rife Across Europe**

And anti-Semitism? In the 1930s, anti-Semitism grew across Europe because the upheaval after World War I and the global economic crisis had unsettled people. In Eastern Europe, the tendency to regard Jews as scapegoats and to try and exclude them from the job market was especially strong. In Hungary, Jews were banned from public office at the end of the 1930s and were forbidden to work in a large number of professions. Romania voluntarily adopted Nazi Germany's racist and anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws. In Poland, many universities restricted access for Jewish students.

The extent of the hatred of Jews is also reflected in the fact that after the end of the war in 1945, mobs in Poland killed at least 600, and possibly even thousands of Holocaust survivors. However, excessive nationalism appears to have been the more important factor, at least in Eastern Europe. Many there dreamed of a nation state devoid of minorities. In this sense, the Jews were simply one of several groups that people wanted to rid themselves of. As World War II raged, the Croats didn't just murder Jews but also killed a far larger number of Serbs. Poles and Lithuanians killed each other. Romania liquidated Roma and Ukrainians.

It's hard to determine what motivated people to kill. Often nationalism or anti-Semitism were just excuses. During the war, no one had to go hungry in Germany, but living conditions in Eastern Europe were squalid. "For the Germans, 300 Jews meant 300 enemies of humanity. For the Lithuanians they meant 300 pairs of trousers and 300 pairs of boots," says one eyewitness. That was greed on a personal level. But it also featured on a collective level. In France, 96 percent of aryanized companies remained in French hands. The Hungarian government used the assets

seized from Jews to extend its pension system and reduce inflation.

### **Jews Were Scapegoats for Soviet Crimes**

Imaginary revenge also played a part. Pogroms in Poland by local people against Jews in 1941 were based on the assumption that the Jews formed some sort of base for Soviet rule, because communists of Jewish descent had for a time been over-represented in some areas of the Soviet bureaucracy. As a result, many people blamed Jews for the crimes committed during the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland between 1939 and 1941. Stalin's secret police the NKWD had actual and presumed opponents of the regime in the Baltic States, eastern Poland and Ukraine shot or deported to Gulags. As the German troops advanced, the Soviets left behind a deeply traumatized society between the Baltic and the Carpathians -- and many fresh mass graves.

Hitler hadn't worked out all the details of the Holocaust from the start, instead assuming he would be able to drive out all Jews from his sphere of influence after a quick victory over the Soviet Union. But the German advance into the Soviet Union started faltering in autumn 1941, which raised the problem of what to do with the people crammed into ghettos, especially in Poland. Many Gauleiter, SS officers and top administrators called for their territory to be made "judenfrei" ("free of Jews" -- which meant liquidating them. The construction of extermination camps began, first in Belzec, then Sobibor, then Treblinka.

### **Brief Holocaust Training Course**

It was a gigantic killing program in which most of Poland's Jews, 1.75 million, were murdered. The SS preferred to recruit its helpers among Ukrainians or ethnic Germans in prisoner-of-war camps where Red Army soldiers like Demjanjuk faced the choice of killing for the Germans or starving to death. Later, increasing numbers of volunteers from western Ukraine and Galicia joined the unit. The men had to sign a declaration that they had never belonged to a communist group and had no Jewish ancestry. Then they were taken to Travniki in the district of Lublin in south-eastern Poland where they were trained for their deadly profession on the site of a former sugar factory. In mid-1943 some 3,700 men were stationed in Travniki. Training for the Holocaust took several weeks. The SS men showed the new recruits how to carry out raids and how to guard prisoners, often using live subjects. Then the unit would drive to a nearby town and beat Jewish residents out of their homes. Executions were carried out in a nearby forest, probably to make sure that the recruits were loyal.

At first the Travniki were used to guard property and to prevent supply depots from being plundered. Then their German masters sent them to clear ghettos in Lviv and Lublin, where they were remorseless in rounding up their Jewish victims. Finally they were put to work in eight-hour shifts in the extermination camp. "Everyone jumped in where he was needed," recalled one SS officer. Everything worked "like clockwork."

Historians estimate that a third of the Travniki absconded despite the punishment that entailed if they were caught. Some were executed for disobedience. And the others? Why didn't they try to get out of the killing machine? Why didn't Demjanjuk? Die he allow himself to be corrupted by the feeling of "having attained total power over others," as historian Pohl argues. Was it the prospect of loot? In Belzec and Sobibor the Travniki engaged in brisk bartering with the inhabitants of surrounding villages and paid with items they had seized from the prisoners.

Perhaps there was something else, something even more disturbing that many people have deep in their psyche: following orders from authorities even if they ran counter to their conscience. Total and utter obedience.

### **Germany Relied on Outside Help in the Monstrous Murder Project**

Germany's troops didn't have the whole of continental Europe under the gun to the same extent. Outside the Third Reich and the occupied territories the Germans needed the help of foreign governments in their monstrous murder project -- in the west as well as the south and southeast of Europe. Their support was strongest among the Slovaks and Croats whom Hitler had given their own states. The Croatian Ustasha fascists set up their own concentration camps where Jews were killed "through typhoid, hunger, shooting, torture, drowning, stabbing and hammer blows to the

head," says historian Hilberg. The majority of Croatian Jews were killed by Croats.

Anti-Semitism wasn't so deep-rooted in Italy and was ordered by the state out of consideration for the Germans. An Italian military commander in Mostar (in today's Bosnia) refused to chase Jews from their homes because he said such operations "weren't in keeping with the honor of the Italian army." That wasn't the only the only such case. But it's clear that Benito Mussolini's puppet government of 1943 eagerly took part in persecuting Jews. More than 9,000 Italian Jews were deported to their deaths.

Some 29,000 Jews from Belgium were murdered, many after being denounced in return for cash. Denunciations also happened in the Netherlands and France. Local authorities obediently paved the way for the deportation of Jews and later said they hadn't suspected what fate the Jews faced. That excuse was used by henchmen, opportunists and pen-pushing bureaucrats -- a category of perpetrator that was denied for a long time after the war in France as the country sought to build a myth that the entire French people had been involved in the heroic resistance.

France was divided into two parts. Hitler's troops had occupied three fifths of the country but the southern part of the country remained unoccupied until November 1942 and was ruled by a right-wing government based in Vichy that collaborated with the Germans.

### **How Many Were Betrayed?**

The first major roundup of Jews took place in mid-July 1942 in occupied Paris when almost 13,000 Jews who had no French passport were taken from their homes by French policemen. At least two thirds of the Jews deported from France were foreigners. The remaining third consisted of naturalized French citizens and children born in France to stateless Jews. Police "repeatedly expressed the desire" that the children should be deported as well, one SS officer noted in July 1942. Almost all deportations ended in Auschwitz.

In total almost 76,000 Jews were deported from France and only 3 percent of them survived the Holocaust. It's unknown how many of them were betrayed by the local population. In the Netherlands there's a figure that gives an indication of the extent of denunciation. The country had an authority that hunted Jews on behalf of the Nazis and that listed the property of Jews who had gone into hiding or already been deported. The "Household goods registry office" paid 7.50 guilders for every Jew who could be located -- that's about €40 in today's money. Dutch journalist Ad van Liempt has analyzed historical records and estimated that between March and June 1943 alone, more than 6,800 Jews were tracked down in this way, and that at least 54 people had taken part in this hunt once or even several times. "Most of them made this their main occupation for months," he says.

The head of the unit was a car mechanic called Wim Henneicke who evidently had good connections in the Amsterdam underworld. He built up an extensive network of informants who told him where Jews were hiding. Some 100,000 Jews from the Netherlands were murdered in concentration camps, a far greater proportion than in Belgium or France.

However, in contrast with France, Dutch collaborators were quickly punished after the war. Some 16,000 were put on trial by 1951, and most of them were convicted.

Demjanjuk is a different category of perpetrator. He's not a collaborator or head-hunter, not a policeman of the sort that contributed to the Holocaust far away from the actual killing. He was at the scene, prosecutors say in their detailed arrest warrant.

### **The Terrible World of the Holocaust Helpers**

In the coming days doctors will decide will decide whether and for how long Hitler's last henchman from Sobibor can be put on trial. The German government wants him to face trial. "We owe that to the victims of the Holocaust," says Vice Chancellor Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Those who suffered in the camps under Travniki men like Demjanjuk don't feel any desire for revenge when they talk about him today. American psychoanalyst Jack Terry, who was imprisoned in Flossenbürg concentration camp while Demjanjuk was a guard there, says it would suffice if Demjanjuk "had to sit in his cell for even just one day."

And Sobibor survivor Thomas Blatt says he "doesn't care if he has to go to prison, the trial is important to me. I want the truth."

Demjanjuk could provide information about Sobibor -- and about the terrible world of the Holocaust helpers.

*Reporting by Georg Bönisch, Jan Friedmann, Cordula Meyer, Michael Sontheimer, Klaus Wiegrefe*

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