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Topic 2: John Demanjuk’s Nazi Contributions

**General Overview:**

**John Demjanjuk, a Ukrainian-born autoworker suspected of working as a Nazi camp guard during WWII, was born on April 3, 1920, in Makharintsy, Ukraine, USSR, and died on March 17, 2012, in Bad Feilnbach, Germany.**

**During WWII, Demjanjuk served in the Soviet army. In 1942, he was apprehended by Germany and imprisoned in a POW camp. After the war, he emigrated to the United States and later became an American citizen in 1958. He finally settled in Ohio and began working at a car factory.**

In the 1970s, after Holocaust survivors recognized Demjanjuk as "Ivan the Terrible," a Nazi guard who commanded the Treblinka death chambers in Poland, US authorities investigated him. In 1981, a US court canceled his citizenship, and five years later, he was extradited to Israel to face war crimes allegations. Accusers claim that after becoming a prisoner of war, Demjanjuk opted to work as a guard in a concentration camp, subsequently in Treblinka, where his cruelty earned him the title Ivan the Terrible. He fought the allegations, but in 1988, a jury found him guilty and sentenced him to death by hanging. However, in 1993, the Israeli Supreme Court reversed the verdict due to evidence revealing that Ivan the Terrible was actually another person.

Demjanjuk returned to the country in 1993 and reacquired his citizenship in 1998. However, his legal troubles continued. Demjanjuk's citizenship was revoked again in 2002 when a federal judge determined that he had served as a Nazi concentration camp guard. Three years later, he was given the go-ahead to be transported to Germany, Poland, or Ukraine.

Despite Demjanjuk's appeal, the decision was upheld. Germany demanded his extradition after a Munich court charged him with complicity in the death of around 28,000 Jews at the Sobiror extermination camp in Poland. Demjanjuk was deported in May 2009 after the United States Supreme Court denied his most recent appeal.

Demjanjuk, who had various health concerns, was deemed fit to stand trial three months later. In May 2011, he was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison after his trial began in November 2009. Demjanjuk was permitted to travel to a nursing home while waiting for an appeal; he passed in March of 2012. Demjanjuk was stationed in the Sobibor extermination camp as well as two other camps while working as a Nazi Wachmann (guard) for the Trawniki unit, according to the judges.

According to legal historian Lawrence Douglas, the German verdict brought the case "to a proper and just conclusion," and Demjanjuk was released awaiting appeal following his conviction. As mentioned prior, he died on March 17, 2012, in a care home in Feilbach, Germany.

Even today, Demjanjuk is still regarded innocent under German law since he died before his appeal could be heard. After a picture album by a Sobibor guard called Johann Niemann was made public in January 2020, historians suggested that a guard who appears in two photographs may be Demjanjuk.

**History of the Issue**

**In 1940, John Demjanjuk enlisted in the Red Army. Following a battle in Eastern Crimea, he was caught by the Germans and imprisoned at a camp for Soviet POWs near Chem. According to German documents, Demjanjuk arrived at the Trawniki concentration camp on June 13, 1942, to begin his training as a Nazi camp guard.**

**On September 22, 1942, he was given a manorial land named Okzow to reside on, but on October 14, he returned to Trawniki. On January 18, 1943, he was sent to the Majdanek detention camp for punishment. On March 26, 1943, he was sent to the Sobibor concentration camp after being returned to Trawniki.** He was moved to Flossenbürg on October 1, 1943, and stayed there until at least December 10, 1944.Demjanjuk would later claim that he enrolled in the Russian Liberation Army in 1944. However, a US Office of Special Investigations inquiry in the 1990s proved that this was a cover tale. From December 1944 until the end of the war, OSI was unable to locate Demjanjuk.

Demjanjuk spent some time after the war in several displaced persons (DP) camps in Germany. Demjanjuk had originally planned to go to Argentina or Canada; nevertheless, he applied for relocation to the United States under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. He formerly worked as a driver in the eastern Polish town of Sobibór, according to his application. (The town served as the model for the nearby Sobibor extermination camp.)

Later, Demjanjuk stated that it was all a coincidence, and that he picked the name "Sobibor" from an atlas possessed by another applicant since it was heavily populated by Soviets. In the case of Demjanjuk, historian Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg observed that Nazi war criminals sought to evade prosecution after the war by presenting themselves as victims of Nazi persecution rather than perpetrators. Demjanjuk found work as a driver at a refugee camp in the Bavarian city of Landshut. He was then transferred to camps in several southern German towns until arriving in Feldafing, near Munich, in May 1951. He married Vera Kowlowa, another DP he met there.

Demjanjuk and his family boarded the USS General W. G. Haan on February 9, 1952, heading for New York City. They first settled in Indiana before relocating to Seven Hills, Ohio, a Cleveland suburb. He joined the United Auto Workers (UAW) at the nearby Ford vehicle factory, where a friend from Regensburg had found work, and learned how to handle diesel engines. His wife got a job at General Electric, and the couple had two additional children. On November 14, 1958, Demjanjuk legally changed his name from Ivan to John after becoming a naturalized citizen of the United States.

**Major Parties Involved:**

**Russian Liberation Army (RLA)**:

In 1943, Lt. General Andrey Vlasov led the formation of the Russian Liberation Army. Following the tragic defeat of German forces at Stalingrad, the German treatment of civilians in occupied territories of the USSR was improved in order to increase support for the German rule. The Russian Liberation Army, also known as the Vlasov army after its commander Andrey Vlasov, was a collaborationist unit that fought under German command during World War II. Later on in 1944, John Demjanjuk was drafted into an anti-Soviet Russian military group funded and supported by the Nazi German government known as the Russian Liberation Army.

**The US Department of Justice (DOJ)**:

The United States Department of Justice, usually known as the Justice Department, is a federal executive department of the United States government in charge of enforcing federal law and administering justice in the country. It is comparable to other nations' justice or interior ministries. The DOJ began investigating John Demjanjuk in 1975 and launched denaturalization procedures against him in 1977, accusing him of fabricating his immigration and citizenship documents to conceal his World War II service at the Treblinka extermination camp.

**Trawniki and Majdanek Concentration Camps**:

During World War II, Nazi Germany established the *Trawniki Concentration Camp* near the hamlet of Trawniki, some 40 kilometers southeast of Lublin. The camp fulfilled a dual purpose throughout its existence. During the German occupation of Poland during World War II. The *Majdanek Concentration Camp* was established and maintained by the SS on the outskirts of the city of Lublin. It included seven gas chambers, two wooden gallows, and a total of 227 buildings, making it one of the largest Nazi concentration camps. John Demjanjuk was recruited by German forces and trained at Trawniki concentration camp before being sent to Sobibor Extermination Camp.

**Sobibor Extermination Camp**: Sobibor was a Nazi Germany extermination camp built and managed as part of Operation Reinhard following the Nazi regime. It was located in the General Government territory of German-occupied Poland, near the settlement of Obek Duy. John Demjanjuk was charged with being an accessory to the murder of 28,060 Jews at the Sobibor extermination camp.

**Key Terms**

**Concentration Camps**: Internment centre for political prisoners and members of national or minority groups who are confined for reasons of state security, exploitation, or punishments, usually by executive decree or military order.

**Extermination camps**: Nazi German concentration camps that specialized in the mass annihilation (Vernichtung) of unwanted persons in the third Reich and conquered territories.

**Extradition:** In international law, the process by which one state, upon the request of another, effects the return of a person for trial for a crime punishable by the laws of the requesting state and committed outside the state of refuge.

**Holocaust**: “The Holocaust, also known as the Shoah, was the genocide of European Jews during World War II. Between 1941 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its collaborators systematically murdered some six million Jews across German-occupied Europe; around two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population.”

**Nazi**: “The Nazi Party, officially the National Socialist German Workers' Party, was a far-right political party in Germany active between 1920 and 1945 that created and supported the ideology of Nazism. Its precursor, the German Workers' Party, existed from 1919 to 1920.”

**Nazism**: The common name in English for National Socialism, is the far-right totalitarian political ideology and practices associated with Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Nazi Germany. During Hitler's rise to power in 1930s Europe, it was frequently referred to as Hitlerism.”

**Prisoner of War (POW):** Any person captured or interned by a belligerent power during war.

**Sobibor:**Nazi German Extermination Camp located in a forest near the village of Sobibór in the present-day Polish province of Lublin.

**Treblinka:** major Nazi German concentration Camps and Extermination camps located near the village of Treblinka, 50 miles (80 km) northeast of Warsaw on the main Warsaw-Bialystok railway line. There were actually two camps. The Nazis opened the first, Treblinka

**Previous Attempts to Solve the Solution**

Demjanjuk's First Trial: Israel, 1987

## Beginning in 1975, the *US Department of Justice (DOJ)* began an investigation into John Demjanjuk, and in 1977, denaturalization proceedings were initiated against him on the grounds that he had falsified his citizenship and immigration documents in order to conceal his involvement in the Treblinka extermination camp during WWII.

## Because of Demjanjuk's alleged role in that killing site, as well as the testimony of a Soviet witness called Ignat Danil'chenko in the late 1940s, the case began as an investigation into the Sobibor camp.

## Demjanjuk's Second Trial: Germany, 2009

John Demjanjuk was transported from the United States to Germany in May 2009. German authorities grabbed him upon his arrival and imprisoned him at Munich's Stadelheim prison.

In July 2009, German authorities indicted Demjanjuk with 28,060 charges of assisting and abetting murder at Sobibor. The deaths of people transferred to Sobibor from the Dutch Westerbork camp between April and July 1943, including individual German citizens who had fled to Holland in the 1930s, served as the foundation for German legal power. Prosecutors said that for the first time in a German case, a guard at a place where mass murder was the main purpose shared responsibility for the killings of those killed while on duty there.

On March 17, 2012, John Demjanjuk died at a German care facility. Despite the fact that Demjanjuk died before his conviction could be reviewed by a German appeals court, German prosecutors successfully prosecuted following cases against killing center and concentration camp guards using the same hypothesis explored in the Demjanjuk case.

**Useful Links**

* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Demjanjuk>
* <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/john-demjanjuk-prosecution-of-a-nazi-collaborator>
* <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/former-nazi-death-camp-guard-john-demjanjuk-deported-germany>
* <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/john-demjanjuk-prosecution-of-a-nazi-collaborator>
* <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-01-28/demjanjuk-sobibor-nazi-holocaust-death-camp>
* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/12/ivan-demjanjuk-timeline>
* <https://www.internationalcrimesdatabase.org/Case/191/Demjanjuk/>
* <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/former-nazi-death-camp-guard-john-demjanjuk-deported-germany>
* [cases | International Criminal Court (icc-cpi.int)](https://www.icc-cpi.int/cases)
* [Result List: ICC Library Collections (ebscohost.com)](https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/results?vid=1&sid=55498efd-3356-41e1-86e0-07e8dd3e4bb6%40redis&bdata=JmJxdWVyeT0mY2xpMD1GVDEmY2x2MD1ZJnR5cGU9MCZzZWFyY2hNb2RlPUFuZCZzaXRlPWVkcy1saXZl)
* [Court records and transcripts | International Criminal Court (icc-cpi.int)](https://www.icc-cpi.int/documents)

**Bibliography**

* “Former Nazi Death Camp Guard John Demjanjuk Deported to Germany.” *ICE*, https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/former-nazi-death-camp-guard-john-demjanjuk-deported-germany.
* “John Demjanjuk.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Demjanjuk.
* *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/john-demjanjuk-prosecution-of-a-nazi-collaborator.