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OMGUS Survey on German Attitudes toward the Nuremberg Trials (1945-46)

The trial of the major German war criminals before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg began in the fall of 1945. At first, accompanying polls showed that the trial served not only a legal function but an educational one as well, since reports on the proceedings forced Germans to confront the crimes of the Nazi regime. A large majority of Germans regarded this first trial as fair and believed that all of the accused were guilty. It was only during later trials that the German side voiced complaints that a “victor’s justice” was being imposed by the Western powers.

German Attitudes towards the Nuremberg Trials

Sample: summary of eight surveys, with sample sizes ranging from 331 in November 1945 to 2,969 in August 1946.

Interviewing dates: not specified; relevant surveys from 26 October 1945 to 9 August 1946. (6 pp.)

The results of a survey shortly after the International Military Tribunal convened in November 1945 revealed that, in the intervening few weeks, 65 per cent of the German people had learned something from the proceedings. In later polls the percentage of people having gained some information rose to 87 per cent. When asked at the time of the survey what they had learned, 29 per cent reported first learning about the concentration camps. At the time of the second survey, 57 per cent reported first learning of the concentration camps. In this second survey, 30 per cent of the respondents said they first learned of the annihilation of the Jews from the Trials. No one on the first survey reported having gained this knowledge.

The number of respondents believing that the Nazis would receive a fair trial never dropped below 75 per cent. The average for the eight surveys showed the belief by 80 per cent that the Nazi leaders would receive a fair trial; four per cent thought that the trial would not be fair, and 16 per cent held no opinion.

A majority of the population felt that the war leaders on trial were guilty. Seventy per cent thought all to be guilty. Among the nine per cent who named someone they considered to be not guilty, Hess was mentioned most frequently. Sixty per cent of the respondents felt that the indictment of whole organizations – such as the Reich Cabinet, the leadership corps of the Nazi

Party, the SS, the SA, the Gestapo, and the General Staff and High Command of the Army – was justified. A quarter (25%) saw no justification for such an indictment.

Nearly half the respondents believed that the accused would receive the death sentence. The sampled group split sharply on the question of whether all defendants would receive the same punishment. Over a third (37%) thought that they would; and nearly all of these thought that the punishment would be death. Almost half (46%) felt that the punishment would vary according to the individual defendant.

Seventy per cent thought that there were others guilty of war crimes in addition to the 21 then on trial. Respondents most frequently named Nazi Party members and lesser leaders as being guilty. Almost 60 per cent felt that those guilty should be charged after the Nuremberg Trials, but a similar percentage did not know which of these groups would be charged. And although they expected further trials to be held at the conclusion of the trial of the 21 major defendants, 82 per cent of the people did not know that the political leaders then in prison camps were expected to be tried.

The series of surveys showed that a majority of the readers found newspaper reports of the Trials to be complete and trustworthy.

Source: A. J. and R. L. Merritt, *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany. The OMGUS Surveys*. Urbana, IL, 1970, pp. 93-94.