

OMGUS Survey on the Public Response to the Nuremberg Trials (October 9, 1946)

Abstract

The trial of the major German war criminals before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg was concluded in the fall of 1946. A poll conducted in the American zone after the verdicts were handed down confirmed that the public had a largely favorable opinion of the trial. A large majority of Germans considered the trial fair and the verdicts just. A large majority likewise believed that the Reich and NSDAP leaders who were sentenced in Nuremberg were not the only guilty ones. Half of Germans accepted some responsibility for the war, but the notion that all Germans bore collective guilt for the war was almost unanimously rejected.

Source

The Trend of Public Reactions to the Nuremberg Trials

Sample: 2,983 respondents in the American Zone.

Interviewing dates: 4 October 1946. (5 pp.)

There was a decline in interest in the trials beginning in late February 1946 and continuing through March and into April. Readership interest in newspaper accounts of the trials increased when it was announced in August 1946 that the trials would soon be completed. After the sentencing, public interest in the trials was almost as great as when the trials were getting under way: Ninety-three per cent of the population claimed to have heard what the verdicts were.

Most people were satisfied that the news reports of the trials had been complete and trustworthy. Those who were not satisfied criticized the news for its incompleteness rather than for inaccuracy.

There was widespread feeling that the defendants were receiving a fair and orderly trial. When the verdicts were announced in October 1946, just as many agreed that the trial was fair and orderly as had anticipated a year previously that the defendants would receive a fair trial.

Seven in ten (71%) felt that the current defendants were not the only guilty ones. After the verdicts, just as many (43%) thought that lesser leaders should be brought to trial as thought it was sufficient to have the higher leaders punished. Three in four (77%) felt that a heavier burden of guilt for the Hitler regime lay on NSDAP officeholders than on those who did not hold office. One-third thought pre-1937 Party members carried greater guilt for Party actions. Only 18 per cent felt post-1937 joiners more blameworthy. One-third held there was no difference in degree of guilt between the two groups.

The bulk of AMZON Germans (92%) rejected the idea of collective war guilt. A majority (51%), however, felt that the Germans, because of their support of Hitler's government, were at least partly responsible for its actions.

In August 1946 only about half felt all defendants to be guilty, whereas in December 1945 and in March 1946, 70 per cent had said this. After the sentences were announced, 60 per cent reported feeling none of the verdicts to be too harsh.

Majorities (57 per cent in November 1945; 60 per cent in January 1946; and 59 per cent in October 1946) favored the indictment of whole organizations, such as the SA, SS, and the General Staff. Although a considerable minority opposed indicting these organizations, few opposed indicting the Gestapo, the Reich cabinet, and the leadership corps of the NSDAP.

After the verdicts were announced, when asked what they had learned from the trial, 30 per cent pointed out the dangers of dictatorship and one-sided politics, and said caution was needed in the election of future statesmen. A quarter (25%) said that the lesson of the trials was to maintain peace. Only a few (6%) spoke in negative terms: that there is no justice, that only Germans get punished, that human rights were violated, that politics should be avoided. And over a third (34%) gave no articulate reply as to the lesson of the trials. Half (50%) said they had become more aware of the inhumanity of the concentration camps.

Source: A. J. and R. L. Merritt, *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany. The OMGUS Surveys*. Urbana, IL, 1970, pp. 121–23.

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