



Angelika Benz. *Handlanger der SS: Die Rolle der Trawniki-Männer im Holocaust.* Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2015. 309 S. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-86331-203-9.



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A. Benz: Trawniki-Männer im Holocaust

The trial of Ivan Demjanjuk opened in Munich on 30 November 2009. This was to be the last trial for Demjanjuk, the culmination of a legal odyssey that began in the late 1970s which stretched over three decades and involved many years of statelessness, a stint on death row in Israel, and numerous civil and criminal trials. Tried with 28,060 counts as an accessory to murder, Demjanjuk was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison in May 2011. While appealing his conviction, Demjanjuk died one year later. Angelika Benz, *Der Henkersknecht. Der Prozess gegen John (Iwan) Demjanjuk in München*, Berlin 2011.

Demjanjuk belonged to the group of SS auxiliaries known as the "Trawniki Men." Numbering around 5,000 men and described both during and after the war as "more brutal than the SS," the Trawniki men were involved in some of the most heinous crimes of the Holocaust (S. 276). Under *Operation Reinhard*, the code name given to the Nazi plans to murder Poland's Jewish community, the Trawniki men were employed by the SS to do the "dirty work" of the genocide: participating in ghetto raids, guarding the death camps, and manning the exter-

mination machinery. In all, between one and two million Jewish men, women, and children would perish under their supervision.

Despite the international attention to Demjanjuk's trial, and the trials of a few other Trawniki men by various governments during the past four decades, little is known about this group of men and the camps in which they operated. Scholarship has largely been hindered by both a scarcity of materials, as well as appropriate access to existing records from the former Soviet Union. As a result, only a few articles and book chapters have dealt exclusively with the Trawniki men. Peter Black, *Foot Soldiers of the Final Solution. The Trawniki Training Camp and Operation Reinhard*, in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25 (2011), pp. 1â99; Sergei Kudryashov, *Ordinary Collaborators. The Case of the Trawniki Guards*, in: Ljubica Erickson / Mark Erickson (eds.), *Russia, War, Peace, and Diplomacy*, London 2005, pp. 226â239; Dieter Pohl, *Die Trawniki-Männer im Vernichtungslager Belzec 1941â1943*, in: Alfred Gottwaldt / Norbert Kampe / Peter Klein (eds.), *NS-Gewaltherrschaft: Beiträge zur historischen Forschung und juristischen Aufarbeitung*,

Berlin 2005, pp. 278â289. Typically, however, this group has been relegated to passing comments or footnotes, despite their integral role in the Holocaust and Nazi plans for the east. Angelika Benz's compelling study seeks to remedy this situation. Her recently published work *Handlanger der SS: Die Rolle der Trawniki-Männer im Holocaust* is the first book study dedicated completely to the investigation and examination of the Trawniki men and the places in which they lived and operated. Her study fits into the growing scholarship on Eastern Europe, exploring the difficult themes of collaboration, guilt, and justice.

In *Handlanger*, Benz utilizes an extensive array of sources from contemporary documents, such as communiqués, identification cards, and visuals such as maps and photographs, and post-war materials drawn largely from Allied interrogations and trial transcripts. In addition, she draws upon perpetrator and victim testimony, interspersing statements from German SS men and Jewish victims with the voices of the Trawniki men themselves. In doing so, Benz produces a complex picture of the Trawniki men, examining their motivations, choices, and agency from their recruitment to the end of the war. Commonly referred to as "Trawniki men" after the camp in which they trained in eastern Poland, they were also known as "Askaris," "Hiwis," "Czarnis," or simply "Ukrainians." Peter Black, *Police Auxiliaries for Operation Reinhard. Shedding Light on the Trawniki Training Camp through Documents from Behind the Iron Curtain*, in: *Secret Intelligence and the Holocaust*, David Banker (eds.), New York 2006, pp. 327â366, here p. 329. Previous considerations of the group have tended to approach the Trawniki men as a homogenous group. Benz challenges and then dismantles this misconception by illustrating the multiplicity of backgrounds and choices the Trawniki men faced. Hailing from a number of countries, and recruited at various times and under different pretenses, there was no typical pattern in accessing the way the Trawniki men approached and considered their position. In addition, their attitudes and behaviors ranged from a full embrace of their position and collaboration with the Germans, to outright mutiny and desertion. Through her exploration of the various responses and choices of this group, Benz offers a vital contribution to the growing recent scholarship exploring the complex question of collaboration and perpetration in Eastern Europe.

Benz's greatest contribution lies in her analysis of the dynamic social and individual perspectives of the Trawniki men and the reconstruction of their everyday lives. Moving beyond simply examining who these men

were and what they did, she explores the world in which they operated, providing context to their choices and behaviors. The history of the Trawniki men, and the camp in which they were trained, was intimately intertwined with Nazi plans for the east, and the genocide of Europe's Jewish community. Benz investigates the warped world of *Operation Reinhard*, which sought to rob, exploit, and murder Europe's Jewish community through the specially designed death camps of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. SS-Ausbildungslager Trawniki opened in September 1941 as a training and distribution center for the auxiliary guards who would ensure the objectives of *Operation Reinhard*. Recruited from deadly POW camps, and then later from conscription drives in Ukraine, the future Trawniki men were often given little choice regarding their decision to collaborate with their former captors and occupiers. Individual motivations are difficult to reconstruct, but their youth, desperation, and need to navigate the increasingly volatile conditions of the POW camps and the eastern occupation made this group quite adaptable within the Nazi plans for the Final Solution (S. 47). After a period of training at the Trawniki camp, guards were either assigned to an extermination camp, or were used for other purposes from fighting partisans, guarding forced labor camps, or participating in ghetto roundups.

The book raises important questions concerning the relationships and behaviors of the Trawniki men, which operated against a background of violence. Benz chronicles not only the history of the Trawniki camp, which operated as a training center as well as a Jewish forced labor camp, but also the brief histories of the death camps themselves. She considers the administration and daily operations of these places of suffering and death, providing a necessary context in which to further explore the personnel who lived and worked there. Though the Trawniki composed the majority of the staff within the death camps, they exerted little authority over the camp administration. While the Trawniki were awarded nearly all pay and benefits available to their German counterparts, they were barred from becoming full-fledged members of the SS, and instead acted in an auxiliary and subordinated capacity. The institution of power hierarchies was frequently utilized by the Nazis in order to ensure collaboration and stimulate violence. Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror. The Concentration Camp*, Trans. William Templer, Princeton, NJ 1997. The hierarchical positioning of *Operation Reinhard*, in which the Trawniki men found themselves in the middle between their German superiors and Jewish victims, produced an

environment of mistrust and suspicion that colored the everyday personal interactions within the camps (S. 184). It was against this tense backdrop that genocide was carried out, and most of the Trawniki men readily participated, making it clear to Benz that these despite the conditions in which they operated and the uncertain question of their loyalty: "Sie gehen in der Regel formell auf die Seite der Täter,â (S. 12)

To conclude her study, Benz turns to the post-war period and the trial of Demjanjuk and the question of guilt, from both an ethical and legal standpoint. By ending on

a broader discussion of post-war justice and collaboration, Benz leaves the reader with important questions and insights into how to approach and address some of the most difficult and uncomfortable episodes in European history. Benz's work offers an important contribution to the field of not only Holocaust studies, but the study of violence and genocide. Her account of the Trawniki men and the Operation Reinhard camps fill an important gap in our understanding of the Holocaust in the east and the men behind the on-the-ground implementation. As the last trials of the Holocaust take place, this is both an important and timely discussion.

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