

**OTHER VIEWS COMMENTARY**

## Why the Nuremberg Trials still matter

We cannot love our country without loving our countrymen, and must constantly resist the urge to label our fellow humans as the “other.”

By John Geiringer and Kelley Szany | Nov 14, 2020, 2:07pm CST



Nazi leaders accused of war crimes are guarded over at the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal (IMT) court, held between Nov. 20, 1945, and Oct. 1, 1946. | Getty

**The Chicago Sun-Times is supported by readers like you. Get unlimited access to quality local journalism for only \$29.99/year.**

**JOIN TODAY**

Seventy-five years ago, on Nov. 20, 21 defendants sat under the bright lights of a courtroom as the International Military Tribunal first convened in Germany. The start of 13 trials in Nuremberg that brought the Nazi regime to justice, the IMT was the first trial in history to charge defendants with crimes against humanity.

The trial was so important that Justice Robert Jackson took leave from the U.S. Supreme Court to establish its procedures and serve as its lead U.S. prosecutor. In his opening statement, he set the tone: “The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant and so devastating that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated.”

Have we heeded Justice Jackson’s warning in the ensuing years?

## Opinion

Americans once took great comfort, bordering on hubris, in believing that our nation was somehow immune from the dark forces that spawned the Holocaust. And yet xenophobic, racist and antisemitic ideology, symbols and language sadly endure, and seem to thrive in our polarized, almost balkanized, society. Coupled with continued racial injustices and violations of human rights, it appears that our comfort was misplaced.

The IMT is a warning from history. It shined sunlight, the greatest disinfectant, on how the most enlightened democracy of its time slid into the abyss. The defendants in the trial were key leaders representing every element of the Nazi regime, including its political, military, diplomatic, economic and propaganda arms. By including “conspiracy” as one of the four counts against the defendants, Justice Jackson and his fellow prosecutors demonstrated to the world, and to history, that the Nazis could not have killed so many, so quickly, without a whole-of-government approach.

But it did not stop there. The subsequent Nuremberg trials exposed the crimes perpetrated by other elements of German society, including doctors, judges and industrialists, and further demonstrated that a whole-of-society approach was required for evil to occur on that monstrous scale.

The Nuremberg trials remind us all that each of us can — must — play a role in preventing that slide.

Under the Nazis, so-called “ordinary men” from German police battalions became triggermen in the killing fields of Eastern Europe. Doctors sworn to the Hippocratic Oath first honed their eugenic skills on fellow citizens designated *Lebensunwertes Leben* (life unworthy of life), and then deployed their expertise at killing centers like Auschwitz. As for

the judges of that era, prosecutor Telford Taylor said, “The dagger of the assassin was concealed beneath the robe of the jurist.”

We must be better.

The institutions we represent were founded in the wake of neo-Nazi marches almost 30 years apart, first in Skokie and then in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our collective mission is to help people explore the past to understand the present and impact the future, and to teach people to be upstanders, not bystanders.

As we gather for events to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the IMT, we are reminded that its legacy still resonates — the need to remain constant guardians of our democracy, and that untended, all democracies are fragile. When we treat ours with reverence, it thrives, but when treated with disdain, it shrivels.

Moreover, we cannot love our country without loving our countrymen, and must constantly resist the urge to label our fellow humans as the “other.” Because at its deepest level, a society can tell us who we are, but also who we are not.

Only by learning from Germany’s past mistakes, which we are increasingly making ourselves, can we hope to avoid its fate.

*John Geiringer, the son of a Holocaust survivor and a Chicago attorney in private practice, serves as co-director of Chicago-Kent College of Law’s Center for National Security and Human Rights Law and its Consortium for the Research and Study of Holocaust and the Law (CRSHL).*

*Kelley Szany is the Vice President of Education and Exhibitions at the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center.*

Send letters to [letters@suntimes.com](mailto:letters@suntimes.com).