

NEWSLETTER

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Review of the International Conference

“Operation 1005: Nazi attempts to erase the evidence of mass murder in Eastern and Central Europe, 1942-1944”

organized by Yahad In Unum, Paris IV-Sorbonne University, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, as well as Collège des Bernardins, that took place June 15th and 16th 2009 in Paris.

Introduction

Operation 1005: such was the code name for this large-scale secret campaign that Nazi Germany carried out to destroy the evidence of the mass murders it perpetrated in Europe during World War 2. The first international conference to take place on the subject was held June 15th and 16th at the Collège des Bernardins, in Paris, in cooperation with the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington DC, the Collège des Bernardins, Paris IV-Sorbonne University, and Yahad-In Unum Association.

Both days were divided into multiple round tables that dealt with the decision-making process that led to the implementation of this campaign for the effacement of crime evidence (A), and that would entail case studies of the places where Operation 1005 was put into action, both within and outside the camps and ghettos, as well as an analysis of the Sonderkommando 1005, its uprisings, and attempts to escape or sabotage Operation 1005. The conference will explain the technique employed by the Nazis to make the bodies disappear (B) before looking into the role of third parties and dedicating a large part to what the witnesses and survivors have to say (C). After having addressed the postwar judicial proceedings, the conference will move on to the field of comparative studies to finally focus on the analysis of the link between Operation 1005 and Holocaust denial.

While “Operation 1005” is known to historians, it is not the case for the general public. It concerns the disappearance of bodies, making bereavement very difficult, if not impossible. What is certain is that in the summer of 1942, men and techniques were mobilized in various countries of Eastern Europe to disinter the bodies and burn them. However, many questions remain, as Father Patrick Desbois pointed out during his inaugural address: Can we talk of a single, centralized operation, or localized initiatives? Can we refer to it as a secret when the pyres burned in public? Finally, is there a link between this Operation and Holocaust denial? Bringing together witnesses and protagonists of Operation 1005, notably Leon Weliczker Wells, Jewish survivor of the “killing brigades”, and various specialists from all over the world, this conference hopes to gain better knowledge and comprehension of this Nazi attempt to make Jews disappear.

The Holocaust, or Shoah, is the most documented genocide. And Holocaust deniers lie, Deborah Lipstadt, professor at Emory University, Atlanta, immediately declared; they get their reasoning

from the anti-Semitism they wish to spread. When, for example, they say that Anne Franck's journal is false, they quote nothing but truncated phrases, which they know very well. They rely on a distorted perception of the world.

A. The implementation of Operation 1005

The first round table consisted of shedding light on how Operation 1005 stood in Nazi policy as well as its field of action and the secrecy.

According to Edouard Husson, lecturer at Paris IV-Sorbonne University, this subject creates more questions than answers. The fear of defeat was without a doubt an important factor for Operation 1005, but it was not the only one, as this operation is intrinsically linked to the Jewish genocide. In the autumn of 1941, the war seemed long, and certainly hygiene problems would arise with the accumulation of the corpses. During the summer of 1942, Himmler gave Paul Blobel the order to open the grave pits and burn the corpses. Operation 1005 begins. According to a burner's testimony, "destroying the corpses was to deny what was known to all". Operation 1005 falls within the genocidal process, which considered the local population as "sub-humans" destined to die or being displaced.

Worried about techniques, they searched for the best method: Blobel, inspired by Operation T4, tested acid baths, which did not prove to be at all effective; he once used flame-throwers and dynamite, only to give up shortly after; many oven models were experimented with....because it was necessary to empty the mass graves, make all the bodies disappear, and to do it quickly. Those who worked on that were bound by the secret, and were aware that they would be killed immediately afterwards. Between 1943 and 1944, most of the 1005 commandos would be killed.

German researcher Andrej Angrick, who is currently working on an in-depth piece of work concerning Action 1005, described Operation 1005 in its full geographic extent. From the Baltic States and the Leningrad region in the north of Eastern Europe, to Serbia in the south, Operation 1005 was a European mission. The goal to erase all traces was not reached, but as long as only Auschwitz and other extermination camps were talked about as synonymous of the Holocaust in the East, this denial objective would be accomplished.

And yet, proof would exist; photos taken by the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission (notably at Yanowska, close to Lvov) and numerous testimonies from prisoners from the operation who were able to escape would be recorded. In the 1950s, the Jews' experience seemed "too extreme to be true". Suzanne Brown-Flemming from the USHMM tells us that one of the many perished wrote: "I beg that you keep this information". A collection of the photos and testimonies can be found today in the USHMM archives.

Radio transmissions intercepted by the British secret service during the war already hint at the coordination of Operation 1005. Analyzed by English researcher Stephen Tyas, they address the technical points: the pyres must be entirely consumed; this is talking about 5500 liters of gasoline as well as the smoke and odor; it is specified that this operation is linked to Eichmann's office; the opening of the mass graves in Treblinka is also mentioned. Even if this information could not be understood in its entirety, it shows that Operation 1005 could not be hidden. The

failure of the secret is proven even further by the number of Operation 1005 escapees and of the dozens of witnesses found by Yahad-In Unum in Ukraine and Belarus.

B. Local studies, techniques and protagonists of Action 1005

Following this first debate, local studies were presented during the second round table. First, the cremation of the bodies at Auschwitz and the Action Reinhard camps were presented. Andreas Kilian, researcher at Frankfurt/Main, described the cremation labor at Auschwitz and the interaction with Paul Blobel, the director of Action 1005. Thomas Vojta, from Charles University in Prague, presented the erasure of evidence at Treblinka. And finally, David Rich from the Department of Justice in Washington DC analyzed the link between Action 1005 and the Action Reinhard camps. Even if the cremation of the bodies in these places did not *stricto sensu* make part of Action 1005, the common origin of these techniques is known: Paul Blobel experimented and researched the best method of cremation in the summer of 1942 in the Chelmno camp.

During the second part of this round table, three researchers presented Action 1005 in Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland.

Here, Alexandre Kruglov, researcher at Kharkov University in Ukraine, was able to demonstrate diverse applications of Action 1005 in Ukraine, occupied and divided into four zones. In the Lvov district, which made part of the General Government, what would be best called “cremation training” was held, with various sections: how to effectively disinter the bodies, how to even out the soil, to burn well, use the bone grinders... In Ukraine, those Nazis who were sure of their victory did not want to force anything, but after Blobel’s arrival two teams were created, the Sonderkommandos 1005A and 1005B. When Blobel asked about the number of grave pits in August of 1943, the local authorities of SD of the Generalbezirk Volhynie-Podolie gave him a list of 198! But when the Russians liberated the region, only one part of the pits had been “emptied”. Did the Germans run out of time? The goal was not reached, and the secret was also out.

In Belarus too, the goals were not reached, according to Israeli researcher Leonid Smilovitsky. And yet the numbers are impressive: 260 retention camps and 300 Jewish ghettos; 250,000 dead before the summer of 1942. And so the operation began after Blobel’s arrival to Minsk; he knew where the grave pits were and knew very well the methods of the Einsatzgruppen, of which he was a member. The records are detailed: ovens next to the roads, trucks dumping the bodies directly into the ovens whenever possible; the Nazis were often so hurried that they would shoot directly at their victims at the edge of the ovens and the local population would have to bring the wood... But the Red Army found the bodies and, even now, we question the secrecy of an operation in which the smell and glow of the pyres made their presence be clearly noticed.

Finally, based on the reports established at the time of the trials and the survivors’ testimonies, Jens Hoffman, journalist from Berlin, wrote a book on Action 1005. He describes a scenario that repeats itself, always banefully the same in the Polish countryside and in the Borek camp.

A third round table brought to light the protagonists of Operation 1005.

At the age of 22, Michel Morrachini from France was a translator at the Nuremberg Trials and met Paul Blobel. He describes him as active and organized, but above all loathsome and remorseless. “He had no remorse, he was even proud of what he had done, and yet he tried pass off as if he was only following orders”. During the Cold War they told Michel, “you’re not going to make us believe that this cremation story is true”; even his editor was skeptic when he wanted to write about the frequent rapes committed by the Einsatzgruppen when under the influence of alcohol.

Parisian PhD candidate Patrice Bensimon has met various witnesses, for Yahad-In Unum, in Ukraine and Belarus, on the field as well as in the Soviet commission reports. Since the mass execution of Jews was not carried out without the inhabitants’ knowledge, all of them knew that the Jews were killed and burned; Operation 1005 was not a secret, it was the task of the occupants – who could not care less about these sub-humans – to ask for the cooperation of the local authorities. Yahad’s witnesses were at the time curious children, either ignored or encouraged by the Germans. But those who did not obey, paid with their life. Likewise, Andrej Umansky, member of the Yahad-In Unum team, recounted the life of two lesser known survivors of Action 1005 in Kiev and Kaunas. Umansky and Bensimon eventually beg the question regarding the coexistence of the elimination of evidence and the last victims, burned alive in the grave pits.

The second day opened with a speech from one of the few still living survivors of Action 1005: Leon Weliczker Wells.

He was not yet 18 when he was arrested to be part of the “killing brigades” in Lvov. 120 people slept in the same tent as him, the young and the elderly; in the other tent, the stronger ones were assigned the more difficult tasks: open the grave pits, take out the corpses, and burn them. Leon Weliczker Wells would at first keep count of the bodies and later gather golden teeth or other valuable objects, which he would hand over each night to an SS.

In 1943, he was able to escape and would later write a book based on a journal he kept during the events.

This most ordinary local artisan came in close contact with high technology, and would make note to Father Patrick Desbois of his involvement with the Action 1005 techniques. He also specifies that “no material was created, that which was used came from the villages”. Thus, Action 1005 was took more of an artisan approach, never industrial.

C. Justice and representation of the destruction of bodies

This part of the conference was opened by American researcher Joe Delap, from University of Jacksonville (Florida), who presented his analysis of Daniel Silva’s novel “A Death in Vienna” and its content related to Action 1005. According to Delap, novels can give memories substance; fictional characters help us understand those of reality. Literature can create a more precise system of thought than public memory.

German prosecutor Joachim Riedel gives us a glimpse of the persecution of Nazi crimes, mainly those linked to Operation 1005, by the German justice. From 1945, the German justice became interested in Operation or Action 1005, but it wasn’t until the 1960s that the first so-called

“1005” trials took place in Stuttgart, Hambourg, and other German cities. As far as the RDA is concerned, there was no trial regarding the Operation.

Next, Serge Farnel presented the similarities with Rwanda where, after the massacres, removal of evidence was put into action in certain places. Here, the destruction of the bodies rendered all research impossible and the truth difficult to establish.

The psychoanalytic perspective of the subject was presented by Jean-Jacques Moscovitz, according to whom psychoanalysis suggests the enjoyment of the executioners, which, pushed to the extreme, can lead to horror. The act of killing can be repressed once it has been committed. In this case, it happened before the act; it is all about the denial, which Operation 1005 has made concrete. “Thou shalt not kill” thus became “Thou hast not killed”. The silence established by the State allowed these executioners’ acts. To name these acts of violence is to give each victim a proper burial.

D. Operation 1005 and Holocaust Denial

The last round table was opened by German researcher Dieter Pohl, who presented one of the reasons the Germans applied Operation 1005. There were two key events: the discovery of mass graves in Katyn and the Stalingrad defeat. This would push the Germans to try to erase this “never written” page in history

Next, Nick Terry from England presented the evolution of Holocaust denial starting from 1945 up to the 21st century, the age of the internet. Deniers reinterpret the facts, minimizing the extermination of the Jews and neglecting all documentation. And they are, certainly, quite abundant on the internet; they are less numerous than 10 years ago, but still present.

Finally, Serge Klarsfeld recounted his constant fight against Holocaust denial. “It was not possible,” he says, “to go to the trial of those who led the final solution in France – trials that took place years after the war – without having the names of the victims”. After long work, a reference book was published and translated into many languages in 1990. But, since the 1970s, pseudo-scientific publications questioned this book, and convictions soon followed.

Conclusion

This conference was closed by the diverse participants and partners of the last two days: following Paris Cardinal André Vingt-trois, Georges Molinié (president of Paris IV-Sorbonne University), Richard Prasquier (President of CRIF), Paul Shapiro (director of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies in Washington), Deborah Lipstadt, Edouard Husson, Andrej Angrick, and Father Patrick Desbois expressed their thoughts.

The Archbishop Cardinal of Paris thanked the historians and those who have gone out to interrogate the witnesses; he saluted the living, and recalled that the respect we give to the bodies of the deceased reflects the respect of men. He announced that the Bernardins will develop teaching and research that will make it the first catholic university center to study the Holocaust and its transmission.

Professor Molinié suggested that we reflect on this mix between industrialization and the artisan aspect of these massacres and to reflect upon the fact that this absolute extermination is one of, if not the only characteristic of the 20th century; an extermination that was neither economic, nor religious, nor military, nor ideological, and that took place in a world (Germany) where technological, philosophical, moral, and artistic development had reached a height never before attained.

Paul Shapiro warned against the danger of not listening to the voices of the victims and survivors, voices of the powerless. Operation 1005 hoped to destroy the bodies and, with that, make the crime, the criminals, and responsibility disappear.

Erasing the evidence is the first stage towards denial, Deborah Lipstadt restated. Pleased to find herself among scholarly and religious individuals, she brought to mind that for the Jewish tradition, to care for the dead is the best there is. "You're doing an absolutely good deed", she concluded while addressing everyone.

Richard Prasquier considered the misappropriation of modernity when this took place. To make the images disappear is to attack the memory; particularly today, where nothing exists without an image. Action 1005 also reduces the individual to nothing but biology, in doing as one pleases with bodies. The work of Father Patrick Desbois and his team gives the deceased their human presence.

We are in an era of suspicion, in which the truth is systematically put into doubt. Generally, this suspicion leads to denial. In this manner, Operation 1005 renders account to a distortion of modernity. But to study it is to look into the men that were forced to burn the bodies of men killed by other men. It is to give the deceased their humanity.