

## **First Place High School:**

**Jacob Lang, 10th Grade, Holt High School, Wentzville, MO**

### **Nuremberg: A Trial of the Individual**

The International Military Tribunal was the group of four prosecutors who presided over the first of the Nuremberg Trials. They were entrusted by the world to open a series of trials for war crimes committed by the Nazi party, and they faced a difficult task. As stated by Justice Robert H. Jackson, "The privilege of opening the first trial in history for crimes against the peace of the world imposes a grave responsibility. 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." For the first time in human history a group of people had deliberately murdered millions of innocent people not by acts of war, but through crimes of choice. Genocide like this had no precedent, and since there was no precedent for this type of crime there was no precedent for dealing with it. It was up to the judges to pursue either justice or vengeance. They were tasked with deciding the fates of people who had slaughtered millions and gassed men, women and children. Vengeance was the obvious choice. However, despite the details of the horrific crimes committed by those on trial, the judges chose to seek real justice. Instead of a rush to punishment, they sought the truth of how it had all happened, and with that choice the trials gave humanity a path to follow in the future.

Justice isn't a tangible thing; it is the abstract culmination of the human ideal of balance, held up and built upon over the course of our past and present. What these judges needed was a way they could apply justice both to fit the crimes and to discourage any such mass genocide from happening in the future. The last part of Jackson's quote says, "We must never forget that the record on which we judge these defendants today is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow." To me, Jackson was saying that although the actions committed by those being prosecuted were unequivocally diabolical a just society must rise to uphold true justice rather than exacting empty vengeance. They were going to judge justly and rightly, to make clear to future generations of humanity that everyone is subject to the universal codes of human morals that have held for centuries and that we in the future should remain mindful our own individual responsibility to justice.

While some of the defendants at Nuremberg were directly responsible for carrying out the machinery of murder, others acted at a distance. They gave the orders to those on the ground. Justice Jackson tried the top twenty four Nazi leaders. It was argued that these people were ultimately to blame for the genocide, and equally guilty of murder. They each played an integral part in the death of millions, and it was for their deliberate choice to act outside of the standards of humanity that they were held accountable by the rest of the world.

Leaders can be chosen by those they lead, or they can seize power by defeating rivals. If allowed to continue in power, it demonstrates that they represent the values their people hold. The Nazi leaders were not good or just, but they were supported by a majority of their people. Blinded by greed and power and hate, the defendants committed such evil deeds that no punishment was truly sufficient. The Nuremberg judges decided to take into account the amount of power and free will each defendant possessed when they committed the crimes, and to assign a measure of responsibility to every participant. A death sentence is considered the penultimate punishment, and that sentence was given to twelve top Nazi officials tried at Nuremberg. Others were jailed and stripped of their assets because

they followed their leaders without question, and sometimes with enthusiasm. Three were even acquitted because they had spoken out during the Nazi reign of terror, despite having been involved with Nazi policies at the beginning. The Nuremberg trials sent a clear message that silently standing by in the face of hate crimes was a crime in itself.

By doing this, these judges had successfully given the world a legal blueprint to deal with any mass genocide in mankind's future by including the element of individual responsibility. They also set a precedent that merely following orders did not excuse anyone for not doing the right thing. The ideals enshrined at Nuremberg echo now, while we in the US struggle with the question of how to handle issues like immigration and violence against minorities.

Today in our own country we have elected officials who dehumanize whole groups of people with rhetoric. Some take their position out of fear that people from these groups will take resources and jobs, some are filled with hatred of anyone who is different from them, and some are just following along with their party leaders. We see the real consequences of this in border detention camps and minority incarceration rates. We have friends, family and neighbors who are ordinary people faced with the choice of supporting or denouncing our government's handling of these issues, and there is a real struggle occurring as people try to sort these issues out. Should we tolerate hatred and bigotry in individuals as long as it is not institutionalized into policies that actively harm others? Can we condone violence done in the name of justice? At what point does our own silence become a crime as we watch these things unfold? What is real justice here? It can be hard to answer questions like these in real time, but we can look to history for guidance.

We are the judges of whom Justice Jackson spoke when he said "history will judge us tomorrow." I believe the true lesson we should learn from Nuremberg is to embrace our individual responsibility to justice before our society reaches a point that demands vengeance.

## **Second Place High School:**

**Madeleine Kern, 12th Grade, Rice Memorial High School, Morrisville, VT**

### **The Nuremberg Trials: The Record of Tomorrow**

*"We must never forget that the record on which we judge these defendants today is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow."*

When Judge Jackson uttered these words in his opening speech, he might not have known that we would be discussing them seventy-four years later. What he did know, however, is that he was standing at a crucial point in history. The world was changing, and he—along with the other judges—were about to play a major role in its history. The Nuremberg trials were the first of their kind, and carried an incredible weight and significance. Judge Jackson's words about the monumental event have echoed throughout history, and remain relevant today.

Judge Jackson was correct in describing the trials and the justice the world sought through them as a "grave responsibility". He knew that the trials would set a precedent for years to come, and that the ramifications of the trials would be far more complex than anyone would ever realize. Justice truly is a

grave responsibility, particularly in the case of these trials. Who becomes the absolute authority on what is just and unjust? How do we set a uniform code of conduct with the entire world watching?

Even today, when the Nuremberg trials have been regarded as a significant step forward in the development of international law and generally accepted, we can take Judge Jackson's words to heart. Laws are constantly changing; new precedents are always being set. We must remember that the justice we seek is fluid, and that there might not be a set definition for it.

There will never be a unanimous agreement by everyone on what is just and unjust. We see this in the news constantly: people argue over who should be punished and how, whether something is undeniably bad or a justifiable evil. There is no answer to this dominating question, and history will continue to debate the meaning of justice for years to come.

The Nuremberg trials were not a proceeding that would occur and quickly be swept under the rug of history. Judge Jackson knew that these trials would never be forgotten, and would be scrutinized for years into the future. Our past will never be perfect. As a society, we learn and grow from our histories, or at least we hope to. Throughout history, we look back on our actions and are shocked and appalled. We look back on the Atlantic slave trade and wonder how we ever thought it right to own another human. We look to the Trail of Tears, and ask how could we treat an entire group of people in such an atrocious way. Perhaps Judge Jackson knew that there was a possibility that these trials, the first of their kind, and those who took part in them would not be remembered kindly by history.

Yet, we still must risk that "history will judge us tomorrow" and proceed with our pursuit of justice. Even without a uniform definition or understanding of it, it is undeniable that we need to seek justice in the face of atrocity. There will always be tragedies in the world, and there will always be people that deserve punishment. Justice reminds us that there is light in the dark that we can draw out the good from the bad.

World War II and the actions of the Nazis were horrific, and there is no question that the millions who died deserved justice. There was a question, however, in how we achieve this justice. Winston Churchill called for executions without a trial, Russia called for a "show trial", yet the United States' desire for a fair trial prevailed. Despite the already insurmountable evidence against the Nazi officials, the world decided that they too deserved a fair trial. Ultimately, all but three of the defendants were found guilty and justice was brought to the world.

Justice was brought to the world, but only if you believe that there can be justice in the face of tragedy. Does the execution and imprisonment of a handful of people reconcile the deaths of an estimated 75 million people worldwide? There is no clean answer to whether everyone found justice in the Nuremberg trials. It is undeniable, however, that they changed the world and the course of history forever.

**Third Place High School:**

**Jacob Salinas, 12th Grade, Valle Verde Early College High School, El Paso, TX**

**Choices Today, Consequences Tomorrow**

No other time in history is a person's morality challenged more than during war, where the differences between the right and wrong decisions often depend on which side of the gun you're on. However, when looking back on world history, the easiest way to determine who are the real heroes is by looking at the ones who are reluctant to hurt others yet also unhesitant to bring justice and do whatever they can to ensure history's mistakes are never repeated. For example, during the Nuremberg Trial of 1945, Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, rather than using his position to subject the Nazis to horrific deaths rivaling their atrocities, declared, "The privilege of opening the first trial in history for crimes against the peace of the world imposes a grave responsibility...We must never forget that the record on which we judge these defendants today is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow..." Jackson quickly distinguished himself from the Nazis with just those sentences alone. While the Nazis' mission was to exterminate those they deemed inferior and ensure that the world would remember the power of the Aryan race for thousands of years to come, Jackson established that the restoration of society and determination of the fate of the men responsible for these crimes rested in the hands of the prosecutors. However, while he was well-aware of the atrocities his subjects before him were guilty of, he wanted to set a positive example for future generations by showing the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions and ensuring that all evidence was sufficient before holding wrongdoers to account.

It's easy to understand why many people were frustrated with the results of the trials. Out of the 199 defendants tried, only 167 were convicted and 37 were sentenced to death, some of whom committed suicide before they could be executed. Unsurprisingly, many citizens wondered why the men accused of heinous war crimes and causing unimaginable suffering were shown mercy, enduring long trials that could have set them free or even declared them innocent and not responsible for World War II at all. However, these trials by jury were a necessary part of bringing justice to everyone involved, as they both reinforced the positive elements of humanity as well as discouraged negative ones. Jackson's "grave responsibility" was to carefully examine Nazi actions, the motives behind them, and what punishments were the most appropriate for them; seeking justice based on morals and psychology rather than emotion and impulse. Therefore, the human search for justice is incredibly vital because it warns us to avoid repeating the same mistakes as the accused, something Jackson himself mentioned when he uttered how "the record on which we judge these defendants today is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow." He knows that seeking justice is vital primarily for determining the future rather than just the present.

While it is open to interpretation due to various cultural values, on a universal level, the defining trait of justice is fairness. This means it should include input from both sides of the fight: the good and the bad. This is why all of the Allied forces had representation during the Nuremberg Trials; Jackson was a vital member, but he was only a small part of a bigger picture. England and Russia all had the chance to serve a purpose in the Trials, and even the German defendants had permission to choose their own lawyers and methods of defense, such as the victor's defense, which painted the Allies' advantages as unfair since they were the ones who had won the war. However, the trials all evoked justice for everyone involved in the end. The discovery of Nazi experimentations led to the creation of the Nuremberg Codes, which strove to ensure that no such cruelty regarding human experimentation would ever occur again in the future. Most notable of all, the collaboration between nations also led to the innovations of instantaneous translations and establishment of new international laws. Through these innovations, the search for justice no longer depended on a single country. Now, it was up to dozens of world leaders to come together and establish the universal desire for justice within every nation wronged by the horrors of World War II. This was the moment the Allies fully comprehended that restoring their societies was

their main responsibility. It took several countries to nearly end the world, so it would take several more to fix it.

The “grave responsibility” Jackson believed rested in the hands of the Nuremberg court as well as any other person willing to help is the restoration of life in the present to avoid repeating the same disastrous mistakes in the future. Thanks to history books, museums, and countless memorials found all over the world, Jackson and the rest of the Allied forces have fulfilled this responsibility. By educating humanity on the kinds of savagery we are capable of when blinded by power and prejudice, our history reminds us to do what we can to correct past mistakes and seek redemption. No matter what horrible thing we may do to each other throughout the years, we don’t remember the atrocities to hold them against each other; we remember them to make sure we don’t hurt someone that same way again.

### **High School Honorable Mentions:**

Kenneth Anttila, Bemidji High School, Bemidji, MN

Nadiyah Williams, Morrow High School, Stockbridge, GA

Michael Abraham, Bronx Compass High School, NYC, NY

Hannah Hauck, Archbishop Chapelle High School, New Orleans, LA

Kyle Voong, Brandon High School, Brandon, MS