

## ***Stangl & the Holocaust***

Franz Stangl was born in Austria in 1908. From a working class family, Stangl trained as a master weaver. Unsatisfied in his career, at the age of 23, he applied to become a police officer. In 1936, despite his position in law enforcement, he joined the ranks of the then-illegal Nazi Party. When Germany invaded Austria, and subsequently annexed it in March 1938, he became a Gestapo agent. In 1940, under the order of Nazi leaders, Stangl was appointed as head of security at Hartheim Castle. At the time, Hartheim was one of the secret killing centers used by the authorities to administer “mercy deaths” to sick and disabled persons. A special unit within the German administration, codenamed T4, carried out this so-called “euthanasia” program. T4 employed doctors, nurses, lawyers, and police officers, among others, at killing centers in Germany and Austria. In all, historians estimate that the staff at Hartheim killed 18,269 people by August 1941.

After a brief stint in Berlin, Stangl transferred to German-occupied Poland in the spring of 1942. Nazi authorities appointed Stangl to be the first commandant of the killing center at Sobibór. By September 1942, having distinguished himself as an effective organizer, Stangl was transferred to what would become the most horrible of these death camps, Treblinka. While there, he managed and perfected a system of mass murder, using psychological techniques to first deceive then terrify and subdue his victims before they entered the gas chambers. In less than 18 months, under Stangl’s supervision, between 870,000 and 925,000 Jews were killed at Treblinka.

After the war, Franz Stangl and his family emigrated to Brazil where he lived and worked under his own name for decades. He was extradited to West Germany in 1967 and tried for his role in the murder of 900,000 men, women, and children during the Holocaust. During his trial, Stangl claimed that he was doing his duty and was not a murderer. Stangl defended himself by making three main claims. First, that he did not get to choose his postings, and that disobeying an order would put himself and his family at risk. Second, that once in a position, it was his nature to do an excellent job (he became known as the best commandant in Poland). And third, that he never personally murdered anyone. He saw himself as an administrator. Stangl claimed that his dedication to his work was not about ideology or hatred of Jews.

On October 22, 1970, the court found Stangl guilty of crimes against humanity and sentenced him to the maximum penalty, life in prison. During an interview while in prison, he stated, “My conscience is clear about what I did, myself. ...I have never intentionally hurt anyone, myself. ...But I was there. ...So yes, in reality I share the guilt.” He continued,



“My guilt...is that I am still here. That is my guilt.” On June 28, 1971, less than a day after this interview, Stangl died of heart failure in prison.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How did obedience to authority affect Franz Stangl’s perception of his responsibility? Explain. What other factors, biases, or pressures may have affected his perception?
2. Based on Stangl’s description of guilt while in prison, do you think he believed his previous claims in court? Why or why not?
3. What might have helped Stangl at the time to see his actions for what they were? Do you think this would have led Stangl to act differently? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of other historical examples in which obedience to authority may have played a significant role in the actions of individuals? Explain.
5. What do you think the moral responsibility of an individual is within a bureaucracy? Explain.
6. Does one’s position in a hierarchy affect one’s moral responsibility? Why or why not?

**Resources:**

*Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience*

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/into-that-darkness-an-examination-of-conscience/oclc/8493122>

Som Significant Cases: Franz Stangl - Simon Wiesenthal Archiv

[http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at/02\\_dokuzentrum/02\\_faelle/e02\\_stangl.html](http://www.simon-wiesenthal-archiv.at/02_dokuzentrum/02_faelle/e02_stangl.html)

*The Roots of Evil*

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/roots-of-evil/oclc/475233794>

*The Holocaust and the Revival of Psychological History*

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/holocaust-and-the-revival-of-psychological-history/oclc/880809015>

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