

# The United Nations War Crimes Commission and its Archives - 1987

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## Background

Approximately 40,000 files of accused Nazi war criminals have been lying dormant in UN archives for nearly 40 years. These files were handed over to the UN in 1948 by the War Crimes Commission established in 1943 by Winston Churchill. That original commission consisted of representatives of 17 governments (the Allies and Eastern European Governments with exile office in London).

The files contain the hierarchy of the Nazi extermination machinery, the leading war criminals and others accused of collaborating with them. The commission's purpose was to bring the guilty to justice and to have a full public accountability of their crimes so that they would not recur. Both considerations, of justice and history, have not been met. The files had remained under lock and key until the Waldheim Affair alerted Israel to their full significance and content. Israel requested that the files be open to public scrutiny to enable not only the government prosecutors to study them, but also historians, teachers, journalists, and researchers precisely as the commission intended.

Regrettably, the demand to open the files has so far not been met. One of the main contentions raised against the opening of this archive to the public at large is the possibility that persons not guilty of war crimes would be exposed to undue embarrassment and inference of guilt. That argument is not valid for two reasons. First, the master lists containing the names of the accused and a summary of the crimes they are accused of are publicly available in the United States, so confidentiality does not apply. Quite the contrary: those who claim their innocence ought to be interested in clearing themselves with a full and open investigation.

Second, given the magnitude of the Nazi war crimes and the grief of the millions of victims and their families, it would be absurd to insist that because there may be a small number of innocent persons documented in the Archives, this consideration should provide a shield to protect the overwhelming majority of war criminals who have not been brought to justice.

The opening of the Archives is at heart not a matter of procedure. It is rather a supreme moral and historic imperative. Vital information concerning the greatest crimes in history has remained unexposed for close to 40 years. Many of the criminals are still alive and are shielded from investigation and prosecution by a self-imposed confidentiality. Commitment to truth and justice requires that the files be opened to public scrutiny as soon as possible. Such scrutiny is the best assurance that the files will no longer be dormant as they have been since 1948. Confidentiality is neither appropriate nor acceptable. Removing it will help correct a major lapse in the international system of justice.

## Action

Therefore, the Board of Directors of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the Women of Reform Judaism:

- 1) Calls upon the Secretary General of the United Nations to use his office to effectuate a reversal of the decision not to release the secret archives of Nazi War criminals;
- 2) Calls upon the governments of the United States and Canada to reverse their votes that the archives be closed;

- 3) Urges those other governments of the Allied War Crimes Commission who objected to the release of the archive material to reverse their decisions;
- 4) Congratulates the government and people of Australia for their vote to release the archives.