

# Protecting interpreters from being “concerned in” war crimes

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After the end of World War II, besides the well-known Tokyo War Crimes Trial (1946-1948), there were about 2,300 trials against over 5,700 personnel associated with the Japanese Army, held by different Allied nations in over 50 locations in the Asia-Pacific between 1945 and 1951. These trials are known as Class B/C trials as opposed to the Tokyo Trial that dealt with Class A crimes. One of the extraordinary features of these Class B/C trials is the fact that more than 100 interpreters were convicted as war criminals. They were mostly charged with being “concerned in” the ill-treatment of POWs and local citizens in Japanese-occupied territories. In particular, a number of interpreters were convicted for interpreting, and therefore participating in, torture. Defenses made by the accused of following orders and just interpreting did not prevail. In the British trials, one of the key criteria in the rulings was whether the interpreters knowingly participated in illegal acts. Another interpreter-related feature of the Class B/C trials is that a number of wartime interpreters testified as eyewitnesses of war crimes. They were mostly local residents hired by the occupying Japanese forces. Having been present while the Japanese military committed criminal acts, these interpreters made convincing witnesses against their former employers.

The possibilities of interpreters being convicted as war criminals and being called upon as eyewitnesses of war crimes are still relevant to interpreters in today’s conflict zones. How can we protect interpreters from being “concerned in” illegal acts such as torture? How should interpreters respond when asked to testify as witnesses of crimes? I will address these important questions in this presentation by referring to activities of organizations and programs supporting interpreters and translators in conflict and other high-risk settings.