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The Sentencing and Execution of Nazi War Criminals, 1946

In November 1945, twenty-one men sat in the dock of a Nuremberg courtroom on trial for their lives. The group represented the "cream of the crop" of the Nazi leadership including Herman Goering, Hitler's heir apparent until falling out of favor in the closing days of the war, and Rudolph Hess, Hitler's deputy who had been in custody since parachuting into England in 1941. (A 22nd defendant - Martin Bormann - had escaped capture and was tried in absentia).

Each defendant was accused of one or more of four charges: conspiracy to commit crimes alleged in other counts; crimes against peace; war crimes; or crimes against humanity. Specific charges included the murder of over 6 million Jews, pursuing an aggressive war, the brutality of the concentration camps and the use of slave labor. The judges represented the major victors in the war in Europe - Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the United States. The defendants all proclaimed their innocence, many declaring that they were just following orders or questioning the authority of the court to pass judgment.

The verdicts were announced on October 1, 1946. Eighteen of the defendants were found guilty while three were acquitted. Eleven of the guilty were sentenced to death by hanging, the remainder received prison sentences ranging from 10 years to life.

The Defendants React to their Sentences

Dr. G. M. Gilbert was a prison psychologist assigned the responsibility of monitoring the behavior of the defendants while they stood trial. He became intimately familiar with all the defendants and was present when each was escorted from the courtroom to their prison cell after hearing their verdict. His description of each individual reaction provides insight into the mindset of the Nazi hierarchy. Here are a few of his observations: (Click the name of each defendant for more information.)

Goering came down first and strode into his cell, his face pale and frozen, his eyes popping. 'Death!' he said as he dropped on the cot and reached for a book. His hands were trembling in spite of his attempt to be nonchalant. His eyes were moist and he was panting, fighting back an emotional breakdown. He asked me in an unsteady voice to leave him alone for a while.

When Goering collected himself enough to talk, he said that he had naturally expected the death penalty, and was glad that he had not gotten a life sentence, because those who are sentenced to life imprisonment never become martyrs. But there wasn't any of the old confident bravado in his voice. Goering seems to realize, at

last, that there is nothing funny about death, when you're the one who is going to die.

Hess strutted in, laughing nervously, and said that he had not even been listening, so he did not know what the sentence was and what was more, he didn't care. As the guard unlocked his handcuffs, he asked why he had been handcuffed and Goering had not. I said it was probably an oversight with the first prisoner.

Hess laughed again and said mysteriously that he knew why. (A guard told me that Hess had been given a life sentence.)

Ribbentrop wandered in, aghast, and started to walk around the cell in a daze, whispering, 'Death!-Death! Now I won't be able to write my beautiful memoirs. Tsk! Tsk! So much hatred! Tsk! tsk!' Then he sat down, a completely broken man, and stared into space. . .

Keitel was already in his cell, his back to the door, when I entered. He wheeled around and snapped to attention at the far end of the cell, his fists clenched and arms rigid, horror in his eyes. 'Death-by hanging!' he announced his voice hoarse with intense shame. 'That, at least, I thought I would be spared. I don't blame you for standing at a distance from a man sentenced to death by hanging. I understand that perfectly. But I am still the same as before. - If you will please only - visit me sometimes in these last days.' I said I would.

Frank smiled politely, but could not look at me. 'Death by hanging,' he said softly, nodding his head in acquiescence. 'I deserved it and I expected it, as I've always told you. I am glad that I have had the chance to defend myself and to think things over in the last few months.'

Doenitz didn't know quite how to take it. 'Ten years! - Well - anyway, I cleared U-boat warfare. - Your own Admiral Nimitz said - you heard it.' He' said he was sure his colleague Admiral Nimitz understood him perfectly

Jodl marched to his cell, rigid and upright, avoiding my glance. After he had been unhandcuffed and faced me in his cell, he hesitated a few seconds, as if he could not get the words out. His face was spotted red with vascular tension. 'Death - by hanging! - that, at least, I did not deserve. The death part - all right, somebody has to stand for the responsibility. But that -' His mouth quivered and his voice choked for the first time. 'That I did not deserve.'

Speer laughed nervously. 'Twenty years. Well; that's fair enough. They couldn't have given me a lighter sentence, considering the facts, and I can't complain. I said the sentences must be severe, and I admitted my share of the guilt, so it would be ridiculous if I complained about the punishment.' "

The Executions

The hangings were carried out during the early morning hours of October 16, 1946 in a small gymnasium erected in the prison's courtyard. Three gallows filled the room - two to be used alternatively as each condemned man was dispatched and the third to act as a spare. The executions were briskly conducted - the entire procedure lasted just over 3 ½ hours.

Herman Goering cheated the hangman by swallowing a cyanide capsule and dying in his cell shortly before his scheduled hanging.

Kingsbury Smith was a reporter for the International News Service and was selected as the sole representative of the American press at the executions. Here are some of his observations:

"Von Ribbentrop entered the execution chamber at 1:11 a.m. Nuremberg time. He was stopped immediately inside the door by two Army sergeants who closed in on each side of him and held his arms, while another sergeant who had followed him in removed manacles from his hands and replaced them with a leather strap. It was planned originally to permit the condemned men to walk from their cells to the execution chamber with their hands free, but all were manacled immediately following Goering's suicide. Von Ribbentrop was able to maintain his apparent stoicism to the last. He walked steadily toward the scaffold between his two guards, but he did not answer at first when an officer standing at the foot of the gallows went through the formality of asking his name. When the query was repeated he almost shouted, 'Joachim von Ribbentrop!' and then mounted the steps without any sign of hesitation. When he was turned around on the platform to face the witnesses, he seemed to clench his teeth and raise his head with the old arrogance. When asked whether he had any final message he said, 'God protect Germany,' in German, and then added, 'May I say something else?'

The interpreter nodded and the former diplomatic wizard of Nazidom spoke his last words in loud, firm tones: 'My last wish is that Germany realize its entity and that an understanding be reached between the East and the West. I wish peace to the world.'

As the black hood was placed in position on his head, Von Ribbentrop looked straight ahead.

Then the hangman adjusted the rope, pulled the lever, and Von Ribbentrop slipped away to his fate.

Keitel entered the chamber two minutes after the trap had dropped beneath Von Ribbentrop, while the latter still was at the end of his rope. But Von Ribbentrop's body was concealed inside the first scaffold; all that could be seen was the taut rope.

Keitel did not appear as tense as Von Ribbentrop. He held his head high while his hands were being tied and walked erect toward the gallows with a military bearing. When asked his name he responded loudly and mounted the gallows as he might have mounted a reviewing stand to take a salute from German armies.

He certainly did not appear to need the help of guards who walked alongside, holding his arms. When he turned around atop the platform he looked over the crowd with the iron-jawed haughtiness of a proud Prussian officer. His last words, uttered in a full, clear voice, were translated as 'I call on God Almighty to have mercy on the German people. More than 2 million German soldiers went to their death for the fatherland before me. I follow now my sons - all for Germany.'

Hans Frank was next in the parade of death. He was the only one of the condemned to enter the chamber with a

smile on his countenance.

Although nervous and swallowing frequently, this man, who was converted to Roman Catholicism after his arrest, gave the appearance of being relieved at the prospect of atoning for his evil deeds.

He answered to his name quietly and when asked for any last statement, he replied in a low voice that was almost a whisper, 'I am thankful for the kind treatment during my captivity and I ask God to accept me with mercy.'

Ninth in the procession of death was Alfred Jodl. With the black coat-collar of his Wehrmacht uniform half turned up at the back as though hurriedly put on, JodI entered the dismal death house with obvious signs of nervousness. He wet his lips constantly and his features were drawn and haggard as he walked, not nearly so steady as Keitel, up the gallows steps. Yet his voice was calm when he uttered his last six words on earth: 'My greetings to you, my Germany.'

At 2:34 a.m. Jodl plunged into the black hole of the scaffold.

The last of the condemned men was executed at 2:38 AM. Although Herman Goering had escaped the hangman's noose, his death had to be officially recognized:

.the gymnasium doors opened again and guards entered carrying Goering's body on a stretcher.

He had succeeded in wrecking plans of the Allied Control Council to have him lead the parade of condemned Nazi chieftains to their death. But the council's representatives were determined that Goering at least would take his place as a dead man beneath the shadow of the scaffold.

The guards carrying the stretcher set it down between the first and second gallows. Goering's big bare feet stuck out from under the bottom end of a khaki-colored United States Army blanket. One blue-silk-clad arm was hanging over the side.

The colonel in charge of the proceedings ordered the blanket removed so that witnesses and Allied correspondents could see for themselves that Goering was definitely dead. The Army did not want any legend to develop that Goering had managed to escape.

As the blanket came off it revealed Goering clad in black silk pajamas with a blue jacket shirt over them, and this was soaking wet, apparently the result of efforts by prison doctors to revive him.

The face of this twentieth-century freebooting political racketeer was still contorted with the pain of his last agonizing moments and his final gesture of defiance.

They covered him up quickly and this Nazi warlord, who like a character out of the days of the Borgias, had wallowed in blood and beauty, passed behind a canvas curtain into the black pages of history."

References:

Dr. Gilbert's account appears in Gilbert, G.M., Nuremberg Diary (1947); Kingsbury Smith's account appears in Kinnaird, Clark (ed.), It Happened in 1946 (1947), reprinted in Carey, John (ed.) EyeWitness to History (1987); Marrus, Michael R. The Nuremburg War Crimes Trial, 1945-46 : A Documentary History (1997).

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