

‘The hangman awaits twelve of those sentenced’ from Il nuovo Corriere della Sera (2 October 1946)

Caption: On 2 October 1946, the Italian daily newspaper Il nuovo Corriere della Sera recounts the events of 1 October 1946 when 12 former high-ranking Nazis were sentenced to death by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg.

Source: Il nuovo Corriere della Sera. 02.10.1946, n° 125; anno 71. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Il capestro attende dodici condannati", auteur:B., L. , p. 1-2.

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In the courtroom at Nuremberg, the ultimate penalty has been read out

The hangman awaits twelve of those sentenced

Death sentences imposed upon Goering, Ribbentrop, Keitel, Kaltenbrunner, Rosenberg, Frank, Frick, Streicher, Sauckel, Seyss-Inquart, Jodl and Bormann — life imprisonment for Hess, Funk and Raeder — three accused acquitted: von Papen, Schacht and Fritzsche

Our special correspondent

Nuremberg, 1 October, at night

The curtain fell in Nuremberg today on the last act of the interminable trials of the major Nazi war criminals, in an atmosphere at once solemn and electric, as the exceptional circumstances warranted. After over ten months of endless hearings, the International Military Tribunal passed sentence, bringing to an end what history will recall as one of the most important and sensational trials of our age.

The principal accused, Hermann Goering, was the first to be brought into the courtroom, at 2.55 p.m., to learn his fate. He listened to the death sentence being read out in complete calm. Flanked by two American military policemen, he ascended the witness stand — the same stand from which in past months he has tried to conduct his own defence — with firm tread, stood to attention before the court, and then donned the headphones that relayed to him in German, via the interpreter, the words spoken in grave tones by the President, Lord Justice Lawrence: ‘On the counts of the indictment on which you have been convicted, the International Military Tribunal sentences you to death by hanging.’

Hitler’s main collaborator was thus denied the right to die by a means less shameful than the gallows, as he had requested. Impassively, Goering removed his headphones with an abrupt gesture, handed them to an MP, performed a rapid about-turn, and made his way back to the door through which he had come. It all took no more than a few seconds.

How they reacted

The same procedure was then repeated as the remaining guilty men were brought in, each of them leaving the courtroom after hearing his own sentence pronounced. Not all, however, displayed the same stubborn pride as Goering. Frank, also sentenced to death, raised his eyes to heaven in apparent bewilderment. Funk, although the judges had spared his life, stood in a daze on hearing the sentence of life imprisonment, and the MPs had to support him back to the exit. Ribbentrop, although at the previous hearing he had been visibly despondent, listened with apparent calm, arms folded, as the death penalty was announced. The two soldiers condemned to death, Field Marshal Keitel and Colonel General Jodl, differed in their demeanour: the former Chief of the Armed Forces High Command — who had previously declared his intention to ‘remain a soldier to the end’ — stood aloof and rigid, while a nervous sneer played over the features of Jodl, who left the courtroom with his head bowed.

The final day of the Nuremberg trials, reported the *International News Service*, took place in a climate of feverish expectation, a tense atmosphere whose influence even the spectators could not escape. Even the most teutonically impassive of the accused had shown signs of profound anxiety until the morning session began at 9.30. Brought into the courtroom together, the twenty-one accused talked animatedly in low voices for a few minutes until the entry of the judges. The court’s first act was to complete the reading of the summing-up of the trial findings before it began to deliver the individual verdicts on the guilt of each of the accused.

The indictments

Did they cherish any hopes? For men such as these, the nature of the previous day’s summing-up was such as to dispel any illusions they may have had. This, of course, was particularly true of Goering and some of

those who had been found guilty of the most atrocious crimes against humanity and the international rules of war. As at any major trial, however, so too at Nuremberg there were surprises, both during the verdicts and in the sentences handed down.

The International Military Tribunal had subdivided the indictments against the Nazi leaders into four types of crime: conspiracy against peace, waging aggressive war, violation of international conventions and crimes against humanity. Found guilty on all four counts of the indictment were Hermann Goering, Ribbentrop, Keitel, Rosenberg, Jodl and, to general surprise, the former ambassador to Rome and subsequent Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, von Neurath. In Goering's case there was no doubt, given the personality and activities of Hitler's main collaborator. He had been the architect of the *Luftwaffe*, which had committed its first bloody and cruel depredations over Warsaw and during the Polish war; he had ordered the mass murder of the Allied airmen; and he had personally enriched himself by despoiling the Jews and plundering Europe's art collections.

In the case of Ribbentrop, the former Foreign Affairs Minister who was also Commissioner for the Occupied Territories, the atrocities ordered or tolerated by him had been amply proved. The two generals, Keitel and Jodl, had played major roles not only in the preparation of the war but also in the brutalities inflicted by the *Wehrmacht* upon the populations of the invaded territories.

Three acquittals

By contrast, the offences committed by Rosenberg were political and ideological in nature: his racist theories inspired the exploitation and plundering of the occupied territories in the east, which were inhabited by peoples he considered inferior. As for von Neurath, the fourfold guilty verdict arose from his diplomatic activities, the assistance he had provided with German rearmament and the part he had played in the oppression of the Czechoslovak people in Prague.

None of the other accused has been found guilty on all four counts. For example, Hess was convicted only of plotting and waging aggressive war; in view of his flight to Britain, he was acquitted of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The second, third and fourth counts of the indictment were considered proven against the merciless former Governor General of Poland, Hans Frank, the Reich Minister of the Interior, Wilhelm Frick (responsible for arranging the 'elimination' of the incurably insane and sick in the hospitals of the Reich), and Arthur Seyss-Inquart, Reich Commissioner of Austria and subsequently of the Netherlands. After some ten verdicts had been read out, the hearing was suspended for a few minutes.

The monotonous series of 'guilty' verdicts against the accused was interrupted on three occasions by three full acquittals.

The shady diplomat von Papen was completely cleared of all charges. The verdict censured his political morality but did not find him specifically guilty of any of the Nazi crimes. Dr Schacht, the German financial wizard, would now count himself extremely fortunate to have resigned all his official posts in 1937 — after he had succeeded in reconstructing the German economy and reviving the country's exports — as a result of his disagreement with Hitler's policy, which was clearly geared to providing the German economy with an infrastructure outstandingly well suited to the waging of a future war. Also acquitted was Fritzsche, very much a second-rank figure, who was no more than the director of German radio propaganda at a time when it had ceased to function and was no longer in a position to do any harm. These three men were unable to conceal the emotion that overcame them on hearing that they had been spared. Schacht's face lit up with unrestrained delight: a similar expression appeared on the features of Fritzsche, who then passed a hand across his eyes as if to hold back a tear; von Papen exhibited the greatest control of the three, but the withered figure of the former spokesman of the Catholic Centre suddenly seemed to straighten. As each acquittal was announced, subdued murmuring broke out on the benches where the accused sat, as the others offered their congratulations to the acquitted.

It was to take another full hour to go through the full details of all the verdicts. Guilty verdicts under counts three and four were returned against Sauckel, the 'slavemaster' of the Third Reich, whose workforce

comprised the five million foreign workers deported to Germany, and Walther Funk, who had taken on the mantle of Schacht, and filled the vaults of the Reichsbank with gold and jewels taken from the Jewish victims in the concentration camps; the first, second and third heads of the indictment were found to be proven against Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, the reorganiser of the German navy and initiator of that submarine warfare that had later been continued by the man who succeeded him in 1943, Admiral Doenitz, who upon Hitler's death in 1945 became, for a few short days, the head of the final German government. Doenitz was guilty only of crimes under the second and third counts: waging aggressive war and violations of the international rules of war.

Kaltenbrunner and Speer were convicted under the third and fourth counts only: but clearly the responsibility of the savage former chief of the Gestapo was far graver than that of the man who had succeeded the engineer Todt as director of Germany's war production. The same verdict was returned in the case of Bormann. Baldur von Schirach, as the organiser and director of the Hitler Youth, and Julius Streicher, the ferocious propagandist and agitator of anti-Semitism, were found guilty on one count only — the fourth.

When he heard the guilty verdict given against him, Fritz Sauckel, who had been shaking his head as he followed the interpreter's version of the grounds, burst out furiously, 'Nein!' He was to be the only one from whom the reading of the death penalty brought a visible reaction of anger towards the judges.

The American press service in Germany reports that Ribbentrop, Sauckel and Seyss-Inquart, who are among those sentenced to death, will be appealing for clemency. Keitel will ask to be shot rather than hanged. Counsel for Hess, who received a life sentence, will seek to have the verdict set aside, while counsel for von Schirach has stated that he believes the verdict against his client to be 'exceptionally wise, just and moderate' and that he will therefore not be appealing against it.

Possibility of appeal

Counsel for Doenitz, however, is considering an appeal; he has said he believes that 'ten years' imprisonment is too much for a man who has been found not guilty'. Counsel for Goering does not yet know whether his client intends to seek clemency; he will be discussing the question with his client forthwith. Counsel for Streicher has stated that he believes his client would prefer death to a long period of incarceration.

The condemned men have four days within which to appeal to the Allied Control Council. However, Albert Pierrepoint, the official British hangman, is already in Germany, and it is said that he has already taken delivery of a long coil of very strong rope. He has previously carried out a number of death sentences on condemned Nazi criminals, including camp staff from Belsen, and the consensus is that that it is he who will place the ropes around the necks of the bigwigs convicted by the Nuremberg Tribunal. In all probability, according to today's popular opinion, the only concession that will be granted before the sentence is carried out will be that the men will be allowed to see their families again. To prevent the risk of the memory of those who dragged Germany into the greatest and most disastrous adventure in its history becoming the object of fanatical worship by future generations, once again seduced by dreams of greatness, they will be buried in unmarked graves and at unknown locations.

Von Papen may have been acquitted, but his perils are not yet over. The Austrian Government has applied to extradite him and von Schirach to stand trial in Vienna: von Papen for the part he played in bringing about the Anschluss and von Schirach for his activities as head of various Nazi organisations in the Austrian capital. Not even Fritzsche is yet completely free to go: the Soviets wish to interrogate him — it was they who brought him before the International Tribunal, having arrested him in Berlin. The only accused who is now free of any concern about his future is Dr Schacht. The 'Reich finance wizard' could be seen this afternoon in an outer room at the courthouse distributing autographs to the Americans around him in exchange for a little chocolate for his children. 'Anyone who wants an autograph can just write to me,' Schacht was saying, 'but don't forget to send me something.'

The Nazi leaders sentenced by the Nuremberg court have been returned to their cells, where they will be held until the death sentences are carried out or the terms of imprisonment decided upon by the International Tribunal have been served.

The military chaplains, according to *United Press*, spent the entire afternoon with the accused. Only Rosenberg refused to take advantage of this exceptional day to talk with religious representatives authorised by Nuremberg prison. Hermann Goering, on the other hand, followed his normal routine of attending a religious service in the prison chapel.

Schacht, von Papen, and Fritzsche will spend the night of 1–2 October in prison, because the American police authorities have reason to fear for the safety of the three acquitted men if they venture to travel by night. The three will not, however, spend the night in their cells, but in rooms that have external access. They have already been given their release certificates.

The Nuremberg verdicts have produced varying reactions among the German public. They have been the subject of harsh criticism from the press in the Russian Zone, which considers the court's decisions as too lenient.

Soviet dissent

With regard to the acquittals of von Papen, Schacht and Fritzsche, some officials and spokesmen of the United Socialist Party have stated that the three Nazi leaders escaped guilty verdicts at Nuremberg only because they represented Germany's capitalist circles.

'The capitalists in London and Washington,' added a prominent member of the United Socialist Party, 'are hoping that the acquittals of von Papen, Schacht and Fritzsche will give them an advantage in negotiating future contracts with German industry. But the German population, the wretched victim of Nazi fascism, has the right to demand that in the foreseeable future those acquitted at Nuremberg be tried in a German people's court that represents the will of the German people — a court which, I can assure you, will certainly be less indulgent than the judges at Nuremberg.'

Criticisms have also been voiced by the radio services of Vienna, Moscow and Warsaw. We know, too, that the Russian judge Major General Iola Nikitchenko has expressed the desire to record his dissent from the decisions to acquit von Papen, Schacht and Fritzsche, whom he feels should have been found guilty; he also dissents from the failure to impose the death penalty on Hess, and the exoneration of the German High Command and the Reich Cabinet.

The dissenting opinions of the Soviet judges on the verdict reached by the International Tribunal also gave the Nuremberg judges with various causes for concern. They feared that the Russian judges intended to disclose their own opinions on the verdict before it had been notified to the accused, thus frustrating all the security measures adopted by the court. The Russians, however, have acted with complete probity and discretion, forwarding the content of the statements made by the Russian judges on the verdicts to the President in order that he might disclose it to the public.

We have now learnt that counsel for von Papen has asked for a police escort for his client tomorrow during his journey from the American to the British Zone.

L. B.