

The Nuremberg Trials: Chronology (c) 2000

August, 1944

Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau submits his plan for post-war treatment of Nazi leaders to President Roosevelt. He proposes shooting many leaders upon capture, using German POWs to rebuild Europe, and tearing down industry and remaking Germany as an agricultural society.

September 15, 1944

Colonel Murray Bernays, of the War Department's Special Project Branch, proposes part of the framework that will be used in Nuremberg. Bernays proposes treating the Nazi regime as a criminal plot. William Chanler, a friend of Secretary of War Stinson, suggests another part of the framework: making the waging of a war of aggression a crime.

February, 1945

Meeting at Yalta, FDR, Churchill and Stalin agree that a prosecution of Axis leaders should follow the expected conclusion of World War II.

April, 1945

President Truman asks Samuel Rosenman to approach Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson and inquire about his willingness to serve as chief U. S. prosecutor in a war crimes trial.

April 30, 1945

Adolph Hitler commits suicide in his bunker below the Berlin sewer system.

May 2, 1945

President Truman appoints Robert Jackson as chief U. S. counsel for the prosecution of Nazi war criminals.

May 6, 1945

Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering surrenders to the Allies. Goering is at first toasted with champagne, but later is transferred to Bad Mondorf in Luxembourg.

May 7, 1945

Colonel General Alfred Jodl signs the terms of unconditional surrender for Germany in Rheims World War II in Europe ends.

May 23, 1945

British tanks enter Flensburg, Germany. In Flensburg, the British take several of the Nazis that will be tried in the Major War Figures Trial, including Donitz, Jodl, Keitel, Rosenberg, and Speer. Heinrich Himmler, the most powerful and terrifying of the Nazi leaders after Hitler, commits suicide.

June 26, 1945

Robert Jackson departs Washington to meet with his Allied counterparts in London to discuss legal proceedings against Nazi officials. Numerous disagreements are discussed, including whether to use the adversarial system favored by the Americans and British, or the inquisitive system favored by the French and Soviets. The Allies agree to prohibit the use of the defense of superior orders, although they agree to allow its consideration in mitigation of sentence.

July 7, 1945

Robert Jackson visits Nuremberg--a city 91% destroyed by Allied bombs. He inspects the Palace of Justice and decides to recommend it as a site for the upcoming trials. The Soviets prefer that the trials take place in Berlin, within their zone of occupation.

July 21, 1945

Jackson returns to Nuremberg with British and French representatives. They inspect possible housing accommodations.

August 8, 1945

The London Agreement is signed by the Allies, enabling the prosecution of war criminals.

August 12, 1945

Major war criminals that had been housed in Luxembourg are flown to Nuremberg, where they are incarcerated in a prison adjacent to the Palace of Justice.

September 5, 1945

Robert Jackson meets with President Truman. Truman proposes naming former attorney general Francis Biddle as the American judge at Nuremberg. Jackson, who does not think highly of Biddle, suggests alternatives, but Biddle gets the appointment.

October 14, 1945

British representative Sir Geoffrey Lawrence is elected President of the International Military Tribunal (IMT).

October 19, 1945

Indictments are issued against the major war figures.

October 25, 1945

Robert Ley, former chief of the German Labor Front and one of the prisoners awaiting trial, commits suicide.

November 20, 1945

The trial of the major war criminals by the International Military Tribunal begins at 10 a.m. in Nuremberg, Germany.

November 21, 1945

The defendants enter their pleas of "Not Guilty." Goering tries to make a statement, but is prevented by the Court from doing so. Justice Robert Jackson delivers his opening statement for the prosecution.

November 29, 1945

The prosecution introduces a film shot by Allied photographers in liberated areas. The graphic footage of Nazi horrors causes weeping in the courtroom. Some defendants appeared shocked by what they see; others seem bored.

December 13, 1945

The prosecution introduces grisly evidence from Buchenwald concentration camp. Items include tattooed human skin (favored by the commandant's wife for use in tablelamps and other household furnishings) and the head of an executed Pole used as a paperweight by Commandant Karl Koch.

December 18, 1945

The prosecution begin introducing evidence to prove the criminality of seven German organizations: the Nazi party leadership, the German High Command, the SS, the SA, the SD, the Reich Cabinet, and the Gestapo.

January 4, 1946

Colonel Telford Taylor makes the prosecution case against the German High Command. His impressive performance will help secure his appointment as lead prosecutor in the subsequent Nuremberg trials.

January 8, 1946

The prosecution begin its case against individual defendants.

January 28, 1946

During the French phase of the prosecution, French journalist Marie Claude Vaillant-Courtourier provides heart-wrenching eyewitness testimony of atrocities at Auschwitz.

February 11-12, 1946

Chief Soviet Prosecutor Roman Rudenko examines Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, who provides testimony relating to German activities in the eastern Europe that incriminates Goering, Jodl, and Keitel.

February 16, 1946

The decision is made to end the practice of allowing all the defendants to eat together on days the court is in session. From this date on, the defendants eat in groups of four--except for Goering who is left to eat alone in an attempt to reduce his influence over the rest of the defendants.

February 18, 1946

Russian prosecutors offer into evidence a 45-minute film, including footage from captured German films, showing shocking evidence of atrocities.

March 5, 1946

In Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill delivers his famous "Iron Curtain" speech, urging the West to unite against the Soviets.

March 6, 1946

The Soviets finish their presentation and the prosecution rests. The news of Churchill's speech gives the defendants renewed hope.

March 8, 1946

The defense begins its case.

March 13, 1946

Goering begins his testimony.

March 18-22, 1946

Goering is cross-examined.

March 29, 1946

Robert Jackson appoints Telford Taylor to succeed him as chief prosecutor in the subsequent Nuremberg trials.

April 1-2, 1946

Ribbentrop testifies.

April 11, 1946

Kaletenbrunner testifies.

April 1-, 1946

Rudolf Hoess (not to be confused with defendant Rudolf Hess), commandant at Auschwitz concentration camp, provides graphic testimony of mass executions at his camp.

April 18, 1946

Hans Frank testifies.

April 26, 1946

Julius Streicher testifies

April 30, 1946

Hjalmar Schacht testifies.

May 3, 1946

Walther Funk testifies.

May 8, 1946

Grand Admiral Karl Donitz testifies.

May 20, 1946

Grand Admiral Erich Raeder testifies.

May 23, 1946

Baldur von Schirach testifies.

May 28, 1946

Fritz Sauckel testifies.

June 3, 1946

General Alfred Jodl testifies.

June 10, 1946

Arthur Seyss-Inquart testifies.

June 14, 1946

Franz von Papen testifies.

June 21, 1946

Albert Speer testifies.

July 4, 1946

Defense summations begin in the Major War Criminals Trial.

July 26, 1946

The prosecution begins its summation in the Major War Criminals Trial.

July 30, 1946

The defense of the seven indicted Nazi organizations begins.

August 20, 1946

Goering returns to the witness stand.

August 30, 1946

Testimony is completed in the Major War Criminals Trial.

August 31, 1946

Defendants make their final statements.

September 2, 1946

The justices meet to discuss verdicts in the Major War Criminals Trial.

October 1, 1946

The verdicts against the major war criminals are handed down by the International Military Tribunal. Eleven of the twenty-one defendants are sentenced to death.

October 13, 1946

The Allied Control Council--with the power to reduce or commute sentences--rejects all appeal in the Major War Criminals Trial.

October 15, 1946

Goering commits suicide by swallowing a smuggled cyanide pill.

October 16, 1946

Ten of the war criminals are hanged in Nuremberg.

October 25, 1946

The United States Military Government for Germany establishes Military Tribunal I, which will try twenty-three Nazi physicians in the first of eleven subsequent trials in Nuremberg.

April 10, 1947

Military Tribunal II-A sentences twenty convicted defendants in the Einsatzgruppen Trial. Fourteen of the defendants, members of German mobile killing units, are sentenced to death.

August 21, 1947

Military Tribunal I sentences sixteen Nazi doctors found guilty in the Doctors Trial. Seven doctors are sentenced to death.

December 4, 1947

Military Tribunal III sentences ten convicted officials in the Reich Ministry of Justice and judges of the People's and Special Courts, as the Justice Trial concludes.

April 13, 1949

Military Tribunal IV-A sentences nineteen defendants found guilty in the Ministries Trial, a trial involving three Reich Ministers and eighteen other members of the Nazi party hierarchy accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Although appeals continue in this case until January of 1951, sentencing in the Ministries Trial brings an end to the four-year-long series of Nuremberg trials.

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Famous Trials
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