
Mission at Nuremberg: An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis

by Tim Townsend

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Reviewed by Harold Ristau

Mission at Nuremberg: An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis by Tim Townsend follows the story of two US German-speaking army chaplains, one Roman Catholic and one Protestant, who were tasked with the mission of offering spiritual care to the highest ranking Nazis incarcerated at Nuremberg facing trial for atrocities committed during the Second World War. These chaplains' new congregation consisted of twenty-one convicts, including Hermann Goering, Albert Speer, Wilhelm Keitel, Hans Frank, and Ernst Kaltenbrunner, primary orchestrators of one of the worst genocides in modern history. Based upon scrupulous research through various documentations, including formerly classified material, eyewitness accounts, journal entries, and letters only recently made available, renowned journalist Tim Townsend provides fascinating insights into the minds and souls of these criminals, and, in some cases, by

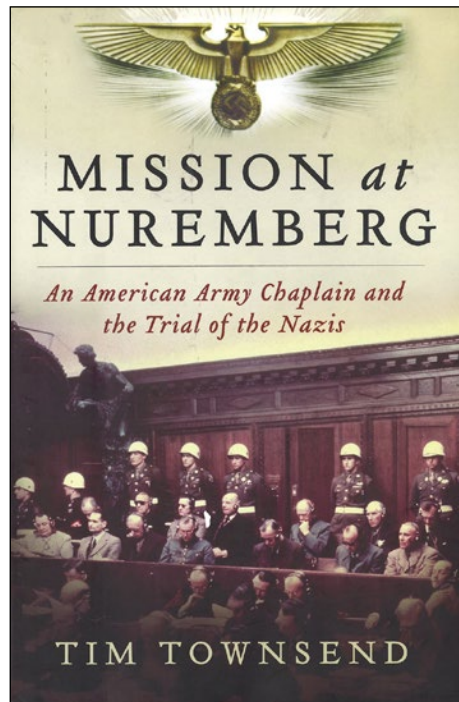
tracking the kinds of psychological and spiritual transformations underwent by these key players in the Nazi party between their capture and execution. Although the Roman Catholic chaplain, Father Sixtus (Richard) O'Conner, is referred to throughout, the book follows primarily the Lutheran chaplain, fifty-year old Henry Gerecke, who lost three sons to death or wounds in the battlefield, and his own personal journey of faith as he wrestles with the ethical and moral conflicts tied to the task set before him. Yet, this intriguing biography of a chaplain is not only of interest to religious leaders, but to any professional or lay student of history, military logistics, and political science, as well as those interested in exploring the darkest spheres of human psychology, and courageous enough to ask some of the most significant questions regarding morality and spirituality. The book is especially relevant to military personnel in light of current international conflicts in which similar motivations, world views, and justifications steering the Nazi mindset underlie our enemies today. For example, one of the incarcerated Nazis who had shown remorse explains the intricate logistical considerations of the extermination camps in order to maximize efficiency and dehumanize the victims. The frightening rationalizations underpinned by a mechanistic world view serves as a warning to us all of the dangerous repercussions of an ethos driven by a military mindset that has forgotten that it *serves*, and *consists of*, a society of people created in the image of God. Written by a journalist who is clearly not anti-religious, but as to what his religious or spiritual convictions are is unclear, provides a factual account, with a minimum of editorial bias.

BOOK REVIEWS

Townsend provides a window into the hearts, minds and souls of, not only the criminals struggling with end of life issues in light of personal guilt and responsibility for their sins, but also the moral and ethical conflicts undergone by the chaplains. For instance, initially when assigned with the task, an obvious crisis of conscience developed as to whether or not these criminals should have access to a chaplain, either because they were beyond redemption, or because they did not deserve it: "...why preach the Gospel of mercy to those responsible for such atrocities?" The author notes how many Americans wanted to deprive the convicts of any spiritual counsel as part of their punishment. However, the general religious sentiment driving the deployment of these two chaplains was that even the worst of people, no matter how evil the crimes, still have value before God. The belief was that even all criminals should be offered the opportunity to repent and receive the forgiveness of sins, and even comfort for their souls, from their Maker in heaven while still undergoing the consequences of their crimes by the State on earth. The notion was in accordance with the Christian principle that all humanity is created in the image of God, and that Christ, believed to be sent by God as the savior of the world, gave his life for all people without discrimination—even the most wicked among us. Thus, in their minds, the battle and war was as *spiritual* as it was *physical*. The Bible passage, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," (Ephesians 6:12) provided the fuel for these chaplains' ministry despite even their own personal doubts at times. After all, the concept of extending forgiveness to such criminals committing crimes of such a caliber is neither intuitive nor "reasonable." These sentiments and troubling moral questions were complicated by the inevitable pastoral relationships created between the chaplains and these murderers, since many of the Nazis began attending a chapel reserved specifically for them, faithfully and regularly, as they underwent their trials, which they knew full well would end in their execution. These chaplains were priests shepherding a congregation of Nazis, and walking with them to their death. In the end, none of these criminals remained neutral in their faith convictions; while some displayed sincere remorse, others totally rejected God and love for humankind.

But what I, as a Lutheran military chaplain myself, found most surprising was the repentance shown by many of the criminals, and without any wish or desire to avoid the punishment sought by justice. For each one, the reader is forced to decide to what extent their 'conversion' was a result of personal disillusionment of the Nazi party and fear of the afterlife, or true repentance and profound horror for their deeds. The chaplains seemed to be just as surprised by the results of their ministry, to the point of even being reluctant at first to offer the Sacrament of Holy Communion to any of them, since, for Lutherans and Roman Catholics, the Lord's Supper is believed to be the main method of reconciliation

between God and man. Naturally, the chaplains wondered whether or not the criminals had alternate motives, or may have been trying to manipulate them towards other ends. They could be likened to a doctor trying to determine the remedy when the symptoms are unclear. The book also delves into the emotional involvement of these chaplains, and even the prison guards, who were practically confined to living as a community with these prisoners over the course of two years of trial, as well as the challenging ministry to the convicts' wives and children by conveying messages, leading prayers, and providing counsel. One powerful theme throughout the book involved the relationship developed between Chaplain Gericke and the key Nazi, Hermann Goering, who Gericke hoped would repent in order to escape what he believed to be an eternal damnation, and his disappointment when the Nazi showed very few signs of remorse for his sins, nor faith in a good and merciful God.



While the book follows in incredible detail the last days, hours and minutes of the escort of prisoners towards the gallows, including the particularities of last meals, timings, preparations, etc., it more interestingly records the vast mixed reactions of all those who died: final words, facial expressions, prayers, cries, pleads, and even a final sign of "Heil Hitler" in the case of one of the unrepentant. For history buffs fascinated by politics in the aftermath of the Second World War, a sub-theme of the book revolves around the unique political considerations surrounding the trials. For instance, the author explores some of the unsurprising oddities of how the criminals were executed, such as deliberate, though illegal, loose nooses, and the logistical and political considerations of disposal of bodies, due to the impact it may have had on any Nazi sympathizers, to name a few.

My only criticism of the work was the author's lack of insight into several theological summaries, which greatly oversimplified Christian doctrines. For most laity, the inaccuracies by no means hinder the advancement of the plot, nor would they be all that noticeable. But without delving further into some of the theological concerns, they tend to deprive the reader of the depth of some of the deeper complexities of matters at hand. But overall, as an historical non-fiction work, accompanied by unique photos, written in a simple and accessible style, but with the pace of an action novel, this book is definitely a thought-provoker for CAF officers and NCMs alike.

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