

Thanksgiving in Nuremberg (1945)

*John Q. Barrett**

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In the autumn of 1945, Thursday, November 22, marked the first day of trial evidence at Nuremberg.

In that city, located in the United States military occupation sector of the defeated, surrendered former Germany, the international trial of accused Nazi war criminals had commenced two days earlier in Courtroom 600 in the Palace of Justice.

On November 20, the trial opened with Allied prosecutors reading the indictment against twenty-two individual defendants and six defendant Nazi organizations. Prosecutors from the U.S., the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and the French Republic took turns reading the lengthy document to the International Military Tribunal and the 20 of 22 individual defendants who were present in court. The process was serious and, as it filled the full day, soporific—reporters and spectators who had obtained courtroom tickets with difficulty began to leave early.

On the next morning, Wednesday, November 21, each defendant stood in turn and entered a plea of not guilty.

The president of the Tribunal then called on Justice Robert H. Jackson, the United States Chief of Counsel, to deliver his opening statement.

“The privilege of opening the first trial in history for crimes against the peace of the world imposes a grave responsibility,” Jackson began. “The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant and so devastating that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored because it cannot survive their being repeated.”

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THANKSGIVING IN NUREMBURG (1945)

Justice Jackson's third sentence summarized the entire Nuremberg undertaking: "That four great nations, flushed with victory and stung with injury stay the hand of vengeance and voluntarily submit their captive enemies to the judgment of the law is one of the most significant tributes that power has ever paid to reason."

Jackson's speech lasted more than four hours, filling the rest of that trial day. The packed courtroom, including the defendants, recognized immediately that the speech was a masterpiece of composition, delivery and vision.¹

When trial commenced the next morning, Thursday, November 22, the IMT first ruled on pending defense motions. Defendant Julius Streicher was, the Tribunal announced, sane and fit to appear to present a defense. Defendant Martin Bormann would be tried in absentia pursuant to the London Charter of August 8, 1945.

The Tribunal then called on the United States to begin presenting evidence on Count One, which charged defendants with engaging in a common plan and conspiracy to wage aggressive war.

Jackson's Executive Trial Counsel, Colonel Robert G. Storey, explained that most of the evidence to come would be German documents captured by the U.S. and British armies.

Associate Trial Counsel Ralph G. Albrecht then explained the Nazi Party and government structures and offered organizational charts as evidence.

Major Frank B. Wallis, Assistant Trial Counsel, then began to offer evidence on the Nazi rise to power in Germany and pre-1939 planning for aggressive war.

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Those trial proceedings did not conclude the courtroom activity in Nuremberg on Thursday, November 22, 1945.

¹ For video excerpts of Jackson's opening statement, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=L50ZSeDXeA.

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In the United States, it was Thanksgiving Day. In Nuremberg, the Allies had not taken the day off to observe the American holiday. But they did, in that first November of peace following years of world war, give thanks together and quite solemnly.

At Justice Jackson's invitation, hundreds of military and civilian Allied personnel gathered in Courtroom 600 at 5:15 p.m.²

Jackson spoke briefly, explaining the American history and tradition of Thanksgiving to his British, Russian and French colleagues.

Jackson then called on a member of his staff, Captain Edmund A. Walsh (U.S. Army). In civilian life, he was Father Walsh, a Jesuit priest, the vice president of Georgetown University, the rector of its School of Foreign Service, and long a Jackson friend. For all present, Father Walsh offered an opening prayer.

Lieutenant Commander Harold Leventhal (U.S. Coast Guard Reserve), a prosecutor on Jackson's U.S. staff (and twenty years later a Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit), then read from the Psalms.

Lieutenant Henry F. Gerecke (U.S. Army Chaplain Corps) gave the closing benediction. Pastor Gerecke was the newly-appointed chief Protestant chaplain at the Nuremberg prison, assigned to minister to the defendants and other prisoners there.³

Throughout this service, most of those present, including the senior Soviet prosecutors and the not-particularly-religious Justice Jackson, folded their hands and bowed their heads. (See the photograph below.)

On every Thanksgiving, I wish for all of us—religious and not, American and not—that Nuremberg spirit of gratitude, peace, human alliance and the pursuit of justice.

² See Frank S. Adams, *Americans Abroad and at Home Mark Thanksgiving Day*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 23, 1945, at 1, 34.

³ For Gerecke's story, see TIM TOWNSEND, *MISSION AT NUREMBERG: AN AMERICAN ARMY CHAPLAIN AND THE TRIAL OF THE NAZIS* (2014), available at www.amazon.com/Mission-Nuremberg-American-Chaplain-Trial-ebook/dp/B00ENGZLN8.

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November 22, 1945: Courtroom 600, Place of Justice, Nuremberg.
Pastor Henry J. Gerecke stands (back to camera). Justice Jackson is seated at his left.