



Human Rights after Hitler: The Lost History of Prosecuting Axis War Crimes by Dan Plesch.

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Dan Plesch's admirable new study aims to bring attention to the significance of the United Nations War Crimes Commission (UNWCC, 1943-48) in facilitating the prosecution of war crimes across Europe and Asia after the Second World War. While the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal considered twenty-four individual cases of the most infamous Nazi war criminals in 1945-46 and then hosted twelve subsequent trials, the UNWCC supported national trials of some eight thousand cases, involving over thirty-six thousand individuals (46). Prosecutors in a coalition of seventeen countries submitted cases for review by the Commission, which then authorized them or not; it also notified concerned countries in order to enable them to assist each other in the arrest of charged individuals and their extradition to a relevant national court. During the second half of the war, the UNWCC gave "international legitimacy to local processes" (53) often led by governments-in-exile based in London, while working to establish important legal precedents and practices in the pursuit of justice against war crimes.

Plesch (School of Oriental and African Studies, Univ. of London) documents the Commission's work regarding various types of crimes to demonstrate that scholars' ignorance of its role is a problem in the historiography of war crimes and their prosecutions. He details the UNWCC's facilitation of cases brought against German war criminals by Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Poland, and Yugoslavia, among others (91); against Italians by Ethiopia, Greece, the United Kingdom, and the United States (92); and against Japanese by China, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and India (100).

The author also clarifies how the UNWCC's study of each national case helped enable the development and prosecution of war crimes charges, setting critical precedents in international law. These included charges for waging aggressive war brought in Yugoslavia and Greece (60); for rape brought by Australia and by American authorities in Papua New Guinea and Guam (20-25). The rejection of 454 of the nearly eight thousand cases presented to the Commission attested to its close adherence to relevant standards and principles (139).

Also highlighted is the (overlooked) key role the UNWCC played in expediting charges brought against soldiers and "foot soldiers" of the Holocaust in local postwar trials. In Czechoslovakia, trials against high- and mid-level officials were being planned by late 1944, with the help of UNWCC offices in London. Many staff members of the Westerbork transit camp were tried in the Netherlands in 1947. Poland brought 1535 cases to the Commission's attention, including thirty-two involving the murder of Jews on Polish soil prior to Poland's liberation in 1944 (123).

Plesch is less clear in linking the famous Allied acknowledgment of the Holocaust in a joint UN statement (17 Dec. 1942) condemning Germany for the "barbarous and inhuman treatment" of Jews to the UNWCC and its work after its creation in October 1943.

This otherwise excellent and compelling book is hurt by its problematic structure and organization. Its first chapter concerns the UNWCC's readiness to support prosecution of rape and gen-

der-based violent crimes after the war. Well and good. But this means that readers must wait till chapter 2 to learn precisely what the UNWCC was, how it was organized, and what its mission was. Chapter 3 then backtracks to the UN's December 1942 declaration about the Holocaust before chapters 4-5 examine its impact on local war crimes trials in 1944-48. Interspersed are somewhat disorganized discussions of effective vs. ineffective legal principles. All this, unfortunately, impedes the flow of a much needed and persuasive argument about the history of war crimes.