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tried the major war criminals, some fifty top echelon political, military, and economic leaders of Germany and Japan. Pursuant to a UN General Assembly resolution, the International Law Commission subsequently formulated the principles of international law that were recognised in the Charter of the International Nuremberg Tribunal and in its judgment. The Nuremberg Principles are a set of guidelines that determine what constitutes a war crime.

There were thousands of war crimes trials, mostly by military tribunals in more than twenty countries of Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Pacific, for lesser war criminals. The four powers occupying Germany agreed that trials should also be held in each of the occupation zones. The London Charter did not provide for trials for alleged war crimes by Allied forces. There is perhaps a natural enough tendency not to apply the law for excesses against the enemy -- combatants and non-combatants -- too vigorously to one's own side in times of conflict. The Allied force had its share of "gung-ho" general officers. General Curtis LeMay was in charge of strategic air operations against Japan. The operations included incendiary attacks on cities and the fire bombing of Tokyo in the waning months of the war. LeMay fully expected to be tried as a war criminal if the outcome of the war had been different.

War crimes trials were held in many tribunals in different countries. In retrospect, it would seem that the quality of justice meted out was not uniform, and that the severity of a sentence imposed was related as much to the enormity of the crime committed, as to the timing of the offender's capture and trial.

Field Marshal Albert Kesselring (top, extreme left) was tried by a British military court in Padua and sentenced to death in 1947. The charges against him were ugly. He was accused of terrorising the local population by executions of hostages and civilians as reprisal against operations by partisans. The most infamous episode was the Ardeatine massacre: 335 Italian hostages were shot after an attack by the resistance, in which 33 German and Italian soldiers were killed.

Contrary to the Moscow Declaration, he was not handed over to Italian justice. Winston Churchill (top, middle), by that time the leader of the opposition, interceded with Prime Minister Attlee and sought clemency for Kesselring, as did an old adversary Field Marshal Alexander.

Much earlier, Churchill, as prime minister, had mulled the feasibility of summary executions of top war