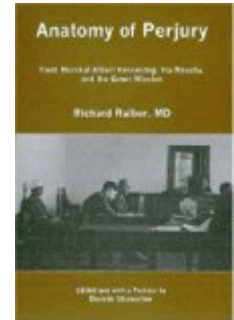


Richard Raiber. *Anatomy of Perjury: Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Via Rasella, and the Ginny Mission.* Edited and with a preface by Dennis E. Showalter. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008. 269 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87413-994-5.



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Historians sometimes despair that we may never find a "new" or "groundbreaking" document in the archives, especially in collections that have been much pawed over. With this book, the late Richard Raiber proves that important discoveries still remain. A World War II veteran and retired physician who embarked on a second career as a historian, he took as his subject German Field Marshal Albert Kesselring and his involvement in two specific atrocities that occurred while Kesselring was Oberbefehlshaber Heeresgruppe Süd-west in Italy: the reprisal shootings at the Ardeatine Caves and the execution of fifteen American special operations soldiers, both in 1944. The work seeks to demolish what Raiber terms a "Lügegebäude" created by the field marshal and his close associates, a construction that endured for over fifty years (p. 164).

Raiber begins with a concise but informative biography of Kesselring. He paints Kesselring as a capable, ambitious officer with little experience commanding troops. He was "one of four over-achieving [General Staff] colonels transferred

from promising careers in the *Heer* to the *Luftwaffe* in autumn 1933" (p. 26). Raiber points out Kesselring's origins in the middle class, not the Prussian aristocracy. Having won favor over Erwin Rommel, he became one of Adolf Hitler's trusted commanders. This characterization becomes important in explaining his later behavior. On March 23, 1944, Italian partisans detonated a bomb in the Via Rasella in Rome as a German police company marched by, killing thirty-three soldiers. Upon notification, an incensed Hitler ordered reprisals carried out on the order of ten civilians executed for every dead German. The Gestapo chief in Rome, SS-Obersturmbannführer Herbert Kappler, was eventually tasked with carrying out the reprisal and selecting the victims. He initially chose from those "deserving death" in his own jails (p. 81). (Of course, this definition could have included a wide range of innocent individuals.) When Kappler had exhausted those prisoners, he turned to Jews to complete the required number. The sentence was carried out by the SS and Gestapo in the Ardeatine Caves, where

335 civilians and Jews were shot in the backs of their heads.

In 1947, Kesselring was tried for war crimes because he approved the execution order. He was convicted and sentenced to death, but his sentence was later overturned. Raiber's examination of the trial transcripts and testimony about this reprisal is presented in an interesting, albeit complex, narrative that offers readers a glimpse into the decision-making behind it and the execution of the action. Though exploring the combination of racial and military policy is not Raiber's primary goal, his analysis provides details about yet another instance in which these two important aspects of National Socialist policy intersected in the selection of victims. For Raiber, however, the importance of this trial was that Kesselring, his chief-of-staff Siegfried Westphal, and his adjutant Dietrich Beelitz all swore (falsely) under oath that Kesselring was at his headquarters at Monte Soratte on the evenings of March 23 and 24, to receive the two orders. Raiber connects this conspiracy to a second war crime that occurred in the same period on the Italian peninsula.

On March 23, 1944, a fifteen-man squad of uniformed U.S. soldiers belonging to an Office of Strategic Services group landed near La Spezia, Italy. They were conducting Operation GINNY, a mission to destroy a railroad tunnel. The next day, however, they were captured. On the morning of March 26, following a standing *Führerbefehl* that demanded the execution of all "commandos" and "saboteurs" whether uniformed or not and regardless of prisoner status, all fifteen were executed by a coastal fortification unit. Raiber's research provides a fascinating account of the capture and execution of these men. One German officer refused to carry out the order and another allowed a prisoner to steal his pistol for an escape attempt. In the end, on the orders of General Anton Dostler (who claimed to have received them from his higher headquarters), the Americans were shot and buried in an unmarked grave. Dostler was

convicted of war crimes, sentenced to death, and shot by a firing squad on December 1, 1945--the first German general to be executed for war crimes committed during World War II.

It is the considerable achievement of Raiber's research that he is able to tie Via Rasella and GINNY together to expose the body of lies concocted by Kesselring and his associates. In short, the author's careful investigation of captured German documents in the National Archives proves that Kesselring was not at his headquarters at Monte Soratte as he (and others) testified, but instead on an inspection tour of the coast, placing him in La Spezia on both the day the Americans were captured and the day they were condemned to death. Kesselring and his men lied about his location to cover up this proximity to the GINNY crimes. They went so far as to refuse to support Dostler (who requested that Kesselring and Westphal testify on his behalf regarding the GINNY killings.) Thus, Raiber suggests, Kesselring was personally involved in the order to kill the U.S. POWs. Knowing that involvement in the murder of American servicemen was likely the more dangerous charge, Kesselring and others concocted the alibi that he was nowhere near La Spezia. While the book does not offer definitive proof of a Kesselring order specifically regarding the execution of the U.S. POWs, its evidence is strongly suggestive and likely to implicate him deeply. In light of Kesselring's character and prior behavior, his participation in this event is not a huge surprise. It is also interesting to note that the same honor that Kesselring and others claimed prohibited them from disobeying Hitler did not preclude them from making Dostler the "fall guy" for an atrocity for which they were culpable.

The strength of Raiber's book lies in his ability to marshal a large amount of testimony and significant number of military documents to construct what is probably a highly accurate narrative of events. He provides a detailed (if sometimes factually overwhelming) description of both

the Via Rasella reprisal killings in Ardeatine Caves and the GINNY executions. He opens the door for future research on German complicity in war crimes in the Italian theater. This book will also be of interest to those studying postwar policy on prosecution of war criminals. Raiber documents the process of U.S. military justice in a very useful manner, showing the general confusion in which the immediate postwar trials took place. It might also be an excellent companion piece to the English edition of Kerstin von Lingen's book, *Kesselring's Last Battle* (2009), which also deals with the Kesselring trial and its political reverberations.

Given the level of detailed research involved, Raiber's work comes to a slightly anti-climactic ending. Greater issues beyond the matter of Kesselring's perjury are raised by his results. Raiber seems to be focused on the Ardeatine Caves purely as they relate to the field marshal's faulty alibi. Readers may find themselves asking questions not answered here, such as how much Kesselring knew about events and the nature of the victims, or why it was legally advantageous for him to admit to passing along an order to kill 335 civilians rather than to the killing of 15 POWs. Likely, the answer is that the Allies at this point were more interested in trying those accused of killing their own than crimes against civilians. But Raiber doesn't explain why this was the case. One might also have hoped, perhaps, for a better placement of these events in the greater context of Wehrmacht war crimes in Italy. However, it is to his credit that in a relatively short book he is able to touch on so many important questions

It is perhaps unfortunate that Raiber's indignation at Kesselring's perjury does not appear to extend to his (and the Wehrmacht's) attitudes toward civilians. Throughout the book phrases appear that attempt to blame the reprisals upon the population itself or to explain the behavior of the German army in comparison to the Allies. Raiber writes, rather controversially, that "[p]artisans are patriots in the eyes of those who are the occupied,

but nothing more than murdering 'bandits' to the occupiers, exactly as today's terrorists are heroes among their own kind but vicious killers to others. Which wears the white or the black hat depends solely on perspective" (p. 181). Later, Raiber mentions My Lai in a similar vein. Given the brutal behavior of the Wehrmacht and its collusion with the worst genocidal policies of the Nazi regime, it requires a rather harsh perspective to see Italian partisans as "black hats." It is true that reprisals against civilians were lawful according to the Allies, as well. It is also true that the Allies committed atrocities (and that U.S. soldiers have done so since then), but the sheer scale and brutality of the Wehrmacht's policies (which Kesselring fully supported) make a comparison here distracting and counterproductive. Perhaps the inclusion of a survey of recent historiography regarding the German army and occupation policy, much of which was available before the author's death, would have tempered this tendency. Indeed, the trials of the Balkan generals at Nuremberg (*United States of America vs. Wilhelm List et al.*, also known as the Hostages Trial) covered in detail international law and demonstrated systematic violations of that law by the German military.

Overall, however, Raiber is to be commended for wading through the voluminous and often contradictory postwar testimonies of German officers as well as memoirs in order to reconstruct two important war crimes in the Italian theater and Kesselring's involvement in them. His work is convincing because he is able to demonstrate the perjury of Kesselring clearly and to suggest a motive for it. Such a rebuttal is an achievement in itself. In a relatively short book, Raiber manages to provide much to historians of various topics, including material on postwar justice, German occupation policies in Italy, war crimes, and, of course, Via Rasella and the GINNY operation. This work also invites historians to continue the investigation of Wehrmacht crimes in Italy in 1944. As the recent trial (and conviction) of former Ger-

man army officer Josef Scheungraber demonstrates, there is much that we still do not know about the behavior of the German army in Italy. [1] This book is a credit to Raiber, whose descendants can add "scholar" to his impressive list of lifetime achievements.

Note

[1]. Judy Dempsey, "Former Nazi Officer Convicted of Murdering Italian Civilians," *New York Times*, August 12, 2009, A7.

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