



Kevin T. Hall. *Terror Flyers: The Lynching of American Airmen in Nazi Germany.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. 400 pp. Ill. Tables. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-05015-1.

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Published on H-TGS (January, 2022)

Commissioned by Jeremy Best (Iowa State University)

Kevin T. Hall, *Terror Flyers: The Lynching of American Airmen in Nazi Germany*

Most narratives indicate that American prisoners of war (POWs) were relatively well cared for in German POW camps given the conditions that existed at the time. With the possible exception of American POWs sent to the slave labor camp at Berga or the concentration camp at Buchenwald, most POWs avoided the worst of Germany's camps. Kevin T. Hall, however, has written an extensively researched narrative of the more horrific fates that faced many Allied airmen shot down over Germany and German-held territory in World War II. His book brings to light a less-known history and integrates a psycho-social analysis of Germany's Nazis, both civilian and official, and the dastardly punishment they meted out to several downed Allied flyers by ignoring their injuries, physically assaulting them, and then simply killing them.

Three main themes run through the book's six chapters, each of which could be a stand-alone essay. The first is that the damage, destruction, and deaths caused by the Allied forces' heavy bombardment of Germany was considered by the Germans to be "beyond the pale of normal warfare" and that the pilots and aircrewmen responsible were criminals and murderers.[1] Second, these

criminal acts of "air terror" deserved punishment by the civilians affected by them, actions which the Nazi government encouraged. Last, the revenge exacted on the downed flyers could be justified by the violence committed against African Americans in the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To the Germans, lynching was an appropriate punishment for Americans. After all, the argument went, the Americans had sent African Americans, the same people terrorized by lynching in the United States, to rape and murder innocent German women and children.

The introduction to Hall's book begins with a horrific example of the type of *Lynchjustiz* perpetrated on one downed American flyer that serves as a preview of the book. It contains an analysis of the groups that made up the perpetrators, the various ways *Lynchjustiz* was applied, and the problems of researching this issue due to the lack of data. While the book has much to commend it, there are areas where Hall's arguments and analyses could have been more convincing. An example is his analysis in chapter 4 of only 490 perpetrators when there were hundreds more that, if

identified, might have changed his findings regarding the nature of perpetrators.

Chapter 2, which supports the first two themes mentioned above, contains the most damning and eye-opening sentence in the book. Hall contends that while *Lynchjustiz* was not official Nazi policy, the propaganda campaign unleashed by the Nazis led to these “illegal and immoral actions,” that is, the physical assaults and even murder of downed airmen, being carried out with zeal. However, the numerous statements made by Nazis at the highest levels of government, such as Josef Goebbels and Martin Bormann, and orders passed down by the Nazi Security Service (SD) and SS that those assaults and murders should not be interfered with by anyone, arguably appear to have constituted *de facto* policy.

Another weakness of Hall’s book is the occasionally repetitive presentation of evidence. Hall’s research addresses the third theme and takes the reader deep into the German use of propaganda to influence and justify *Lynchjustiz*. At times, however, the narrative becomes overly repetitive. To make his point in chapter 2, for example, he repeatedly cites the Nazis’ use of slavery and American gangsterism to rationalize the assaults and killing of downed airmen, providing twenty-seven illustrations in support. One questions whether the repetitive narration was used to justify the use of twenty-seven illustrations or whether the illustrations were used to justify the narration.

While the illustrations are mostly propaganda from the satirical German journal *Kladderadatsch*, some do not address the point Hall is making. It is a case where less would have been more. Similarly, in chapter 5, “*Lynchjustiz* Narratives,” Hall provides twelve narratives, with photos and diagrams, of the capture and murder of downed airmen. While each is of interest and clearly described, the repeated narrative of a soldier shot down, captured, and murdered, loses its impact.

Last, following Hall’s 280 pages of narrative are six appendices (111 pages). Appendixes A and

B are examples of official German documents and newspaper articles for which Hall provides English translations. While these primary sources are an important addition to the overall telling of the story, they would have had more impact had some of them been included in the chapters in which Hall first described them. Appendix C is a spreadsheet index of the “Flyer Trials” and their outcome while appendix D is a spreadsheet index of unresolved cases where the outcome is unknown. Appendix E contains three tables listing American airmen imprisoned in St. Giles Prison in Brussels, American and Allied airmen known to have been imprisoned in the Fresnes Prison in Paris, and airmen sent to Buchenwald. The last, appendix F, is a short list of six known *Stolpersteine* (stumbling blocks), concrete cubes bearing brass plates inscribed with the names and life dates of Allied airmen murdered by the Nazis that have been placed at the locations of their murder.

The above notwithstanding, Hall’s research has provided important insights into how and why some downed American flyers were victims of extralegal violence while others ended up in POW camps. He also addresses the little-known issue of what became of some of those found to have committed these acts against the airmen. In particular, he brings to light that, on the one hand, the lack of evidence and witnesses made the trials of those involved in the crimes of secondary importance. On the other hand, Hall informs the reader that the need to establish a Western-oriented, democratic West Germany and the exigencies of the emerging Cold War led to the shortening or commuting of some sentences. That said, the often gruesome accounts of murder of downed flyers who surrendered and should have been treated as prisoners of war make for hard reading, but also provide a glimpse into an aspect of World War II that is not very well known but needs to be told.

Note

[1]. It should be noted that the “precision bombing” claimed by the US Army Air Forces was not very precise at all and that toward the end of the war, the air force executed Operations CLARION and THUNDERCLAP, which attacked transportation assets, infrastructure, and equipment in smaller towns and villages all over Germany and devastated the entire population of a nonmilitary area of Berlin. See John M. Curatola, “Marshall and an Independent Air Force,” in *George C. Marshall and the Early Cold War*, ed. William Taylor (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020), 25-26.

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Citation: Sheldon Goldberg. Review of Hall, Kevin T. *Terror Flyers: The Lynching of American Airmen in Nazi Germany*. H-TGS, H-Net Reviews. January, 2022.

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