Part One

The Nuremberg Trial in Historical Context
Chapter 1

The Atmospherics of the Nuremberg Trial

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I would like to begin by going back to a different time, a different place, and a different crime. On 1 December 1934, on a cold and gloomy day, a young man called Leonid Nikolaev entered the Smolny Institute in Leningrad and assassinated Sergei Mironovich Kirov, who was the head of the Leningrad Party Organisation in the Soviet Communist Party. This assassination was subsequently characterised by Robert Conquest as the crime of the century, and it was striking for the people of the Soviet Union because in its aftermath – and particularly in the years 1937–38 – the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union swung into action, producing a purge of public and private figures in the Soviet Union that was known within the USSR by the Russian word Yezhovshchina (derived from the name of Nikolai Yezhov, who was the head of the Secret Police), but which in Western countries came to be known as the Great Terror.

The culmination of the Great Terror was a series of show trials in Moscow which resulted in the elimination of a range of so-called ‘Old Bolsheviks’ – associates of the revolutionary leader Lenin – who had, up to that point, been amongst the most prominent members of the regime: Grigorii Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and ultimately Nikolai Bukharin. The prosecutor at those particular trials was a man called Andrei Vyshinskii, who was once described to me by somebody who had met him as being ‘a rat in human form’. In November 1945, Vyshinskii, by this time an official in the Soviet Foreign Ministry, turned up in Nuremberg. He proved rather an embarrassment when he met with the judges of the International Military Tribunal (IMT) because he proposed a toast in Russian, to which the judges present responded by raising their glasses simultaneously, which, when translated for them, nearly made them choke on their drinks. What he had actually said was ‘[t]o the defendants, may their paths lead straight from the court-

1 Robert Conquest, Stalin and the Kirov Murder (1989).
2 This was a singularly fitting label, since it emerged in the late 1980s that Vyshinskii, while an official of the Provisional Government in Russia in 1917, had actually ordered Lenin’s arrest as a German spy. See Stephen White, Gorbachev and After (1992) 84.