

History of World War II: Hitler's Favorite Commando and Committed Nazi: War Criminal Otto Skorzeny

Skorzeny is most widely known for securing Mussolini from a mountain top prison.

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As late as February and March 1945 the SS commander Otto Skorzeny, and his forces, were enjoying military headway on the Eastern front, however brief and temporary at this stage. Skorzeny's efforts to frustrate the heroic Soviet troops in their advance towards Berlin came against overwhelming odds, with German units under his command outnumbered by as much as 10 to 1 in places.

As the war was reaching its inevitable end, Skorzeny applied the unconventional and direct stealth criminal tactics learnt during his time as a commando, saying that,

"You cannot waste time on feinting and sidestepping. You must decide on your target and go in".

Skorzeny's exploits were once more not lost on Hitler, whose respect for the lieutenant-colonel had continued rising, helped by him also being a fellow Austrian. With increasing numbers of Hitler's underlings deserting him in their bid to escape Soviet armies, the Nazi leader was becoming an isolated figure back in Berlin.

Towards the end of March 1945, with Skorzeny having returned to the German capital, he saw Hitler emerge from a conference room in the now besieged Reich Chancellery.

Skorzeny writes, in his 1975 book *My Commando Operations*, that when Hitler recognized him in the corridor, “he came forward and put out his hands”, saying,

“Skorzeny, I want to thank you and your men for all you have done on the Eastern front. For days on end there was no good news except from your bridgehead. I have awarded you the Oak Leaves to the Knight’s Cross, and will give it to you personally in a few days”.

On 9 April 1945 he received the decoration, one of the highest military honors in Nazi Germany. Near war’s end, at 36 years of age, Skorzeny was at the peak of his global prestige and physical powers – known as “the most dangerous man in Europe”, resulting in America’s supreme commander, Dwight D. Eisenhower, having his personal security presence significantly bolstered in western Europe.

Skorzeny cut a formidable figure at six feet four inches tall with peaked cap, binoculars and Iron Cross, while draped in Waffen-SS tunic and winter overcoat. The scar on his left cheekbone running down to the chin, inflicted in 1928 during a dueling bout, betrayed itself when approaching close to him.

Having been involved from the June 1941 launch of Operation Barbarossa with the SS division *Das Reich*, Skorzeny was long acquainted with his Russian adversaries, whom he called “brave, tough and with an outstanding sense of camouflage, they put up astonishingly bitter resistance”. He [dedicated](#) his extensive 1975 memoirs to “the true heroes of the Second World War, the common Russian and German soldier”.

Yet Skorzeny believed the Wehrmacht “would have taken Moscow in the beginning of December 1941 if the Siberian troops had not intervened”, recalling how, “In the clear weather, I could see the spires of Moscow and the Kremlin with my field glasses”. Soviet resilience and gallantry intervened to rescue Moscow from a terrible fate, with those qualities resurfacing a year later at Stalingrad almost 1,000 kilometers further south – though the latter city was torn to shreds by German artillery and infantry fire, allied to Luftwaffe bombardment.

In his book published 30 years after the war, Skorzeny writes that after a discussion in early 1943 with the rocket engineer Wernher von Braun, Hitler predicted mankind would be able to venture into space. Skorzeny purports that Hitler said,

“I am convinced that this young scientist [Von Braun] is right when he says that in his opinion more powerful rockets would be capable of exploring space surrounding the earth, and perhaps even several planets in our solar system”.

In October 1944, Skorzeny claims that during a personal meeting Hitler told him how “humanity would inevitably exterminate itself” if atomic bombs were successfully developed. This latter viewpoint was supported by the prominent Nazi war minister Albert Speer who [noted](#) Hitler’s belief, in June 1942, that the planet “might be transformed into a glowing star” should nuclear research be pursued.

During his encounter with Hitler in late March 1945, Skorzeny observed “what a tired and bowed old man” he had become. Years of an unrelenting workload for the Nazi dictator, in the face of growing crises on both eastern and western fronts, had taken a major toll. Whereas quite as recently as the summer of 1942, Hitler had walked about with back and shoulders bolt upright – such as during his June 1942 visit to south-eastern Finland, in meeting that nation’s leader Carl Mannerheim – by late 1943, however, Hitler had developed a stoop and was noticeably deteriorating.

In his years in power before the war (1933-39), Hitler was known to dedicate himself to hard work but only as the occasion demanded it. When no major events were on the horizon, Hitler relapsed again into his idle ways; this often included staying up until the early hours watching light entertainment films with his inner circle. The war precluded such luxuries, however.

As the fighting wore on there was little respite and, particularly as events turned sour, Hitler overextended himself by becoming consumed with the fighting across various fronts. Quite aptly, Hitler’s physical decline mirrored that of the Reich itself, which was disintegrating from 1943 onward under firestorms released by Allied bomber aircraft.

As the war advanced, the crimes of Nazi Germany (and the insidious and direct role of *Otto Skorzeny*) had yet to peak, such as the genocide committed in the death camps, and continuing onslaughts against Soviet populations.

In Skorzeny’s memoirs, such as the original published in 1957, it is remarkable that he fails to mention the Nazis’ various atrocities and the fate of Jewish peoples. There is an absence of accountability on Skorzeny’s part for the great bloodshed spilled by this murderous organization of which he was an integral part (ie. through his membership of the SS). He was fully aware and supportive of the butchery in the USSR and of the death camps run by the SS.

Indeed, Skorzeny remained an unapologetic Nazi, a strong admirer of his leader who he felt that, “By killing himself, Hitler saved thousands of lives” as his death “relieved us of our oaths as soldiers”.

Skorzeny placed much blame for the Reich’s defeat on acts of “permanent treason”, in particular criticizing Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, who was hanged by the SS just weeks before Berlin’s fall. The behavior of high-ranking Nazis at the postwar Nuremberg trials “depressed”

Skorzeny, as he had expected that,

“they [Nazi leaders] would at least preserve their dignity and stand up for things they had advocated and practised for years past, so it was a terrible blow to me to find many high Nazi dignitaries proving themselves pitiable weaklings at Nuremberg”.

A few years before, Skorzeny had first met Hitler on 26 July 1943, when he was summoned to the Wolf’s Lair headquarters in East Prussia, 700 kilometers from Berlin. Skorzeny had been thunderstruck upon receiving the invitation, but he was unaware that his burgeoning reputation had attracted the attention of Heinrich Himmler, the SS Reichsführer.



During this opening meeting, Skorzeny was stirred by Hitler’s glowing admiration for the deposed Mussolini, with the Nazi dictator [insisting](#),

“I cannot and will not leave Italy’s greatest son in the lurch. To me the Duce is the incarnation of the ancient grandeur of Rome... I will keep faith with my old ally and dear friend”.

The operation to secure Mussolini from Allied control was proving increasingly complex, riddled with angst and frustration. After several false leads, Mussolini’s probable location was traced to the Hotel Campo Imperatore, located over 2,000 meters above sea level on a mountain grassland, and 100 miles east of Rome.

In executing such operations, Skorzeny was loath to open fire – and learned that the enemy, stunned at his unit’s swift arrival and advance, was often paralyzed with confusion. The first Italian sentry at Mussolini’s mountainside prison was rooted to the spot, responding only to Skorzeny’s shout of “Hands up!”, that was duly obeyed.

With his eyes scanning the hotel’s exterior, he spotted a bewildered Mussolini looking down at him from a first story window. Less than five minutes later Skorzeny was standing opposite the ill-dressed Italian dictator, saying to him,

“Duce, the Führer has sent me. You are free!”,

to which Mussolini replied,

“I knew my friend Adolf Hitler would not leave me in the lurch”.

Not a shot was fired during the entire escapade, which represented something of an embarrassment for the Allied powers. The date was 12 September 1943, exactly seven weeks to the day since Hitler had given orders to carry out the task.

After the war Skorzeny would be placed on trial in August 1947 at Dachau, southern Germany, having been interned by the Americans since war's end. The charges were his adoption of US military insignia during the 1944 Ardennes Offensive, theft of American uniforms and Red Cross parcels. He was not indicted for crimes against humanity.

On 9 September 1947, the case began falling apart when England's secret agent, Tommy Yeo-Thomas, testified that he and his men wore German uniforms behind enemy lines. In the years ahead, Skorzeny led a nomadic and controversial existence, residing from Argentina, Spain and onto Ireland, continuing his fascist policies and beliefs.

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