


AUSCHWITZ



Should the Allies have bombed the railroad facilities and crematoriums at Auschwitz and other death camps?

Viewpoint: Yes, the Allies should have bombed the death camps and more aggressively opposed the Holocaust in order to save lives and send a message of condemnation to the Nazis.

Viewpoint: No, Allied bombing raids on the death camps would have been difficult without inflicting heavy losses on the inmates and would have slowed the war effort by diverting airplanes needed for military targets.

The failure of the Allies to bomb the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp is one of the central issues of the Holocaust. Such attacks, however impossible as they were in the early years of World War II, certainly seemed feasible by mid 1944. In particular, U.S. heavy bombers based in Italy regularly struck targets in the same region. Two areas of analysis shape current discussion. One addresses technicalities: could in fact heavy bombers have hit targets within the camps, as opposed to making area attacks that would have caused heavy casualties among the inmates? Did the Allies possess adequate intelligence to plan a raid, or series of raids, in which the potential for success was balanced by the losses inflicted by German air defenses? More fundamentally, what would have defined success: a mass breakout, destruction of camp infrastructure, or disruption of camp routines? Or were lives to be risked and lost making what amounted to a “feel-good” gesture?

The other level of interpretation addresses the question of will. How wide was the knowledge and how deep the understanding of what was being done at Auschwitz? Is the moral and cultural centrality of that particular site a post-war construction, that contemporaries cannot be expected to have shared? Was the effort and risk of bombing regarded as too great on a basis of rational calculation, or was it that the Jews were so marginalized and powerless that their fate simply did not register with Allied decision makers?

Somewhat outside the main framework of this discussion, but no less significant for that, is a strain of analysis that focuses on the Nazis. Given their determination to fight to the finish and their commitment to destroying as many Jews as possible, the specific targeting of Auschwitz, or the railroads leading to it was unlikely to have had significant effect. The only consequent action that would save even a remnant of Europe’s Jews was to end the war—and as quickly as possible.

Yet, when all is said and done, the fact remains that sometimes gestures—symbolic actions—have an importance that transcends their immediate consequences. A policy statement on the mass murder of Jews, made with even a few tons of bombs on Auschwitz, would have been difficult for both victims and executioners to misunderstand. The absence of such a statement speaks for itself.



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By the summer of 1943 many in the Allied high command were aware of the Final Solution, the German operation to eliminate Jews from Europe. Eyewitnesses to activities in the concentration camps, several of them carrying film, had managed to reach the safety of Allied lines. Jewish organizations based out of Palestine and London had accumulated significant evidence and passed it on to British and American intelligence operatives. As Russia went on the offensive, German POWs and civilians who had lived under the oppressive Nazi yoke corroborated reports of death-camp operations. By the autumn of 1944, Soviet forces overran several death-camp and massacre sites, such as Babi Yar, and opened them to the world for inspection. Intelligence operatives inside occupied Europe filed alarming reports of mass deportations and railroad cattle cars loaded with the condemned, which received the highest shipping priorities. Polish freedom fighters hiding in Warsaw reported the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, after the valiant but vain uprising of Jews in that tormented city during April and May of 1944, and provided, as well, the names of infamous death camps: Treblinka, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald. Even the Catholic Church, which failed to launch any type of active, vigorous response to the Holocaust, secretly passed reports through its network of priests and nuns that not just concentration camps, but camps specifically designed for extermination, were in operation.

The only postwar defense that has any shred of credibility regarding the total lack of response by the Allies to this atrocity is that they were not fully aware of the horrifying extent of the operation. Even that defense is hollow, especially for the highest levels of command in the English government. One British official even stated that Adolf Hitler was actually doing the world a favor by ridding Europe of Jews, a comment that in and of itself is evidence enough of just how much was known. His punishment was exile to a remote foreign posting.

The question of exactly “who knew what and when did they know it?” still needs extensive study. It is impossible to conceive that the U. S. president or British prime minister were not fully briefed about the Holocaust by early 1944. If information was indeed reaching Allied lines and top elected

officials were not aware of it, then where did it stop and why?

Throughout the war, but particularly in 1944–1945, when the Holocaust neared its ghastly conclusion, repeated appeals were made by a variety of groups to launch some sort of “special” operation. Several plans were put forward, originating from special-operations units, Zionist groups, and representatives of resistance movements. The most radical was a suggestion to drop weapons and personnel directly into a camp with the intent of triggering a rebellion. The gesture would have been suicidal for those involved on the ground, but it might have at least afforded the opportunity for the condemned to go down fighting. It was rejected out of hand by British Bomber Command with the statement that no air crew would ever be sent on a one-way mission, or transport personnel on such a mission.

Less-radical proposals included the strafing and bombing of camp perimeters to take down the barbed-wire fences and guard posts, combined with weapons drops and destruction of rail lines leading to the camps. Again Bomber Command refused all such operations on the grounds that such a gesture was futile and would divert precious equipment from the far more important objective of destroying the German capacity to wage war, claiming that ending the war sooner promised to save more of those condemned.

The Churchill government refused to directly support such operations, as did the Roosevelt administration. The only direct efforts in relation to prisoners held in German-occupied territory was the airdropping of supplies on Allied prisoner-of-war camps in the final days of the war. A couple of specialized missions were initiated but were extremely limited in scope, the most famous being a strike launched against a Gestapo headquarters in France where prisoners from the Resistance faced torture and execution. Not one mission, not one bomb, not one volunteer commando, however, was dropped on a German death camp.

Such a glaring refusal to directly attack the German death camps begs for an answer. The claim of ignorance is false: postwar analysis of data indicates a clear knowledge by the last year and a half of the war that something sinister was taking place in relationship to the Jews inside occupied Europe. Nearly all of Europe, as far east as the old Soviet frontier, had been meticulously photographed from the air. The vast Auschwitz compound, with its twin sites of industrial complexes and the nearby death camp, were repeatedly photographed and analyzed.

The argument that precious war assets could not be diverted to an attack on death-camp railroads might in some small way be valid, especially during the brutal period of struggle for air supremacy over Germany in late 1943 through the spring



HAVING THE KNOWLEDGE

On 8 August 1942, Dr. Gerhart Riegner, the World Jewish Congress representative in Bern, Switzerland, sent a secret telegram to the U.S. State Department and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise of New York. Wise was a leader of the Jewish community in America as well as a friend of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Riegner cable asserted that:

There has been and is being considered in Hitler's headquarters a plan to exterminate all Jews from Germany and German controlled areas in Europe after they have been concentrated in the east. The number involved is said to be between three and a half and four millions and the object to permanently settle the Jewish question in Europe.

The U.S. State Department, however, delayed giving this message to Wise because it was considered to have unsubstantiated information. In fact, the government actively attempted to stop any similar future messages originating from private sources. In a communique dated 10 February 1943, Undersecretary of State Sumner Wells informed American consulates in neutral countries of the new official policy:

In the future we would suggest that you do not accept reports submitted to you to be transmitted to private persons in the United States unless such action is advisable because of extraordinary circumstances. Such private messages circumvent neutral countries' censorship and it is felt that by sending them we risk the possibility that steps would necessarily be taken by the neutral countries to curtail or forbid our means of communication for confidential official matter.

Source: Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), pp. 161–162.

of 1944. An argument can even be made that the demands of supporting Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944, required full commitment of all air assets up to the middle of the summer of 1944. After air superiority had clearly been won, however, and long-range fighter protection ranged clear into Poland, it was increasingly evident that the nature of the war had changed. An effort could have been made against the camps. It was no longer a desperate defensive struggle for survival. Even the most secret of dreaded fears—that the Nazis were on the verge of deploying an atomic weapon—was realized to be hollow by the end of 1944. This overarching concern, known only to the highest circles, that every day was crucial and nothing could divert the Allies from the effort to beat the Axis to the bomb no longer held. The war at this point was simply a matter of driving a stake through the heart of Nazism while saving as many lives as possible.

Air strikes on the rail lines to the death camps, as well as against the fences and guard boxes, and even dropping weapons into the compounds would have served several purposes. First and foremost, it would have afforded a chance, no matter how slim, for some inmates to survive and fight back. The argument that these actions would have triggered a blood purge belies the fact that in the final weeks of the war *Schutzstaffeln* (SS) criminals murdered hundreds of thousands in a final orgy of killing in order to “cover their tracks,” and even more perversely, to fulfill their mission to “de-Jew” Europe, even as the Reich went down to defeat. Bombing would have seriously disrupted the precision machine-like manufacturing of death—a mere two or three days interruption of crucial railway networks to the death camps would have meant possible salvation for thousands. Perhaps most important, it would have served clear notice to the Nazi hierarchy that the Allies were fully aware of their crimes and would take whatever steps necessary to stop them.

Another disturbing mystery was the complete lack of clear communication to the Nazis that the Allies knew of their crimes. This lack of open outrage and direct challenge was seen by some within the Nazi high command as a tacit message of concurrence with their Final Solution. Given the powerful system of propaganda available to the Allies, such as the legendary BBC broadcasts that tens of millions listened to, the silence on this front is deafening. A nightly reading of a list of death camps and a description of what was being done there could have had a shattering effect. The naming of towns adjoining the camps, informing citizens of what was being done nearby, would have destroyed their defense that they knew nothing, in spite of the stench, smoke, and rain of human ashes.

A direct challenge to the German people should have been offered, clearly informing them what their government was doing, rather than allowing them to hide behind the veil of silence. The Nazi regime was, in fact, sensitive to public opinion. When word leaked out about the first Final Solution, the liquidation of the mentally and physically handicapped within their own country, some courageous individuals protested and the government was forced to stop, though it resumed the program later with greater secrecy. The far wider outrage of mass exterminations across Europe, if publicly revealed, surely would have drawn a response.

Would such messages have made a difference to the victims sent to the camps? Yes, because the entire German system was built on a cynical cultivation of hope, right down to the packing of luggage and sending of postcards to perpetuate the myth that victims were simply being sent to live in other areas. The horror had to be kept hidden until that final second when the showerheads proved false,



the airtight doors locked, and the gas pellets fell. This subterfuge was maintained so that the victims never had a chance to resist, for they outnumbered each of their murderers by the hundreds. One might argue that the victims were powerless and prior knowledge would have been needlessly cruel. Rather, had they known their fate, some might have chosen to flee or fight back rather than to go quietly to the grave or ovens.

Could the Holocaust have continued if all Europe, Gentile and Jew, knew that this was not relocation, but genocide? One of the truly great fears of the Schutzstaffeln (SS) was that word would indeed leak out and that every Jew, and possibly even some of their Gentile neighbors, rather than following a false hope would meet their enemy instead with a knife or gun.

A one-day diversion of several bomber groups might have saved many doomed lives in the German death camps. Air strikes on the fences and parachute bundles laden with weapons of vengeance might have seemed like a message of salvation to the condemned. To the murderers it would have sent a message of damnation, an acknowledgment that the secret was out and even if they survived that day they would know that the Allies were coming for them. A week of radio broadcasts about the Holocaust might have done more to set

Europe ablaze than all the years of coded messages to the few thousand resistance fighters in France. Many who died in the camps must have wondered if the world had forgotten them. The question still lingers.

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Viewpoint:
No, Allied bombing raids on the death camps would have been difficult without inflicting heavy losses on the inmates and would have slowed the war effort by diverting airplanes needed for military targets.

The question of Allied indifference to the Holocaust during World War II has increasingly come down to the subject of launching air raids against the concentration camps. It is generally recognized that ground operations, even on the level of commando raids, were for practical pur-

A British aerial reconnaissance photo of Auschwitz taken in 1944

(Yad Vashem)

poses impossible against facilities located deep in the political/geographic heart of the Third Reich. It requires, moreover, little technical knowledge to see that at the height of the extermination campaign, in 1942–1943, the British and Americans had no aircraft with the range and survivability to hit targets deep in Poland and return to any existing bases. Shuttle bombing too was impossible when the front line of the Russo-German War was on the Volga River.

What about 1944 and 1945, when the Allies had airfields in Italy, when the Combined Bomber Offensive was running out of strategic targets, when the P-51 Mustang could escort heavy bombers the length and breadth of the Reich? The work camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau in particular were running at full capacity. The Reich's railway lines still scheduled trainloads of Jews from the west and south—in particular from Hungary, which only fell under full Nazi control in 1944. The abortive Warsaw Rising of the Polish Home Army in 1944 was supported by air strikes. Surely a few planes might have been spared for an alternate target that cost no fewer lives in the same period. U.S. heavy bombers flew strikes against chemical plants only a few miles away from Auschwitz. Could not one or two of those missions have been redirected? Arguments that such attacks might have cost thousands of prisoners' lives are answered—often by camp survivors—that the dying would have blessed the names of the men striking at their murderers. At the end of the day, the field seems mastered by the argument, expressed in many variations, that “it should have been tried.”

Looking at the other side of the question, however, three elements stand out in support of an Allied decision that considered in isolation seems callous at best, anti-Semitic at worst. The first is on the technical/institutional level: how best could such missions have been undertaken? A favorite scenario involves using Royal Air Force (RAF) Mosquitoes in the low-level role. These planes demolished Gestapo headquarters in Oslo and Copenhagen. They blew in the walls of the Amiens prison. Could they not replicate those performances in Poland? The best answer involves complex analyses of ranges to the targets, and the nature of the objectives themselves, and indicates that the Mosquito was no super-weapon able to destroy gas chambers mostly constructed below ground. What about U.S. medium and heavy bombers? Even if their accuracy was not as great as claimed, surely they could hit something the size of the Auschwitz murder facilities. In an excellently reasoned essay in *War in History* (1999), Rondall Rice, a serving officer of the U.S. Air Force, makes a strong case that a daylight raid conducted by a single group of heavy bombers in the late summer of 1944

stood a good chance of destroying the Birkenau killing facilities—without either a hecatomb of camp inmates or heavy losses to the bombers.

That last point is important. The U.S. Army Air Force prided itself on never turning back from a mission, but it took as much pride in not risking or sacrificing its air crews unnecessarily. “Sideshow,” missions not perceived as having a direct positive effect on the war's outcome, were seldom approved, particularly in the war's later years. It is irrelevant that an attack on Auschwitz might well have produced more than enough volunteers—by no means all of them Jewish—to crew twice the number of aircraft needed. Rice makes the point that an operation such as attacking Auschwitz was “outside the box” of thought and doctrine in the U.S. Strategic Air Forces. It was within their capacities—but not to the extent that it would be considered routine. It would require superior orders, that is, high-level military and/or political intervention.

Such intervention was not forthcoming—not least because even as late as 1944, if the outcome of the war in Europe may have been certain, the path to victory was not. Allied air forces did not achieve clear superiority over the *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force) until the summer of 1944—and the timing is much clearer in hindsight than it appeared to the generals ordering the missions. Allied air power, moreover, was engaged in campaigns against German transportation networks, oil refineries, and flying-bomb sites. The latter were significant for their impact on the morale of a war-weary Britain—and even more so for their implied threat of worse to follow. It is clear in hindsight that Nazi boasts of “wonder weapons” were hollow. In the fall of 1944, few in responsible leadership positions were willing to take such a gamble.

It is worth noting as well that the “transportation campaign” remained subject well after D-Day to harsh criticism for generating small results at a high price in collateral damage to France and Belgium. That the generals would have directed any significant number of strikes against secondary lines leading from Budapest to nowhere more important than southern Poland is correspondingly unlikely. That their superiors would have made it an order is even less plausible.

This line of reasoning leads to a third governing factor. The argument that the best way to save Jewish lives was to end the war has been held up to ridicule through statistics. Since well before V-E Day the vast majority of Jews under Nazi control were dead, the case is considered moot. Yet, at the same time it is increasingly clear that nothing short of final, annihilating defeat could have deterred either the direct perpetrators of the Final Solution or their ideologically

driven masters. The kinds of damage even a successful raid, such as those postulated by Rice, could inflict were well within the capacity and will of those German officials on the spot to repair—and to keep repairing if the bombers returned. Given the fact, recently highlighted by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen in *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996), that thousands of Jews died during the war's final weeks in random marches across a shrinking Reich as the camps closed down, was the risk of even a few days' prolongation of the war a worthwhile exchange for a symbolic gesture?

Since 1945 analysis, myth, and plain second-guessing increasingly overshadow the experiences of World War II. In evaluating the Allied failure to strike Hitler's concentration camps from the air once that became technically—and theoretically—feasible, it must be remembered that modern war is not a postmodern experience. It is not a sequence of constructions—and it offers few second chances.

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