

R. Hoess, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the ss Kommandant at Auschwitz* (1992); P. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (1958); R.J. van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (2001).

[Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan Van Pelt (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)]

**AUSCHWITZ BOMBING CONTROVERSY.** The debate over whether the Allies could have bombed the gas chamber-crematoria complexes of \*Auschwitz-Birkenau, or the rail lines leading to them, had its origins in 1944. Jewish groups appealed to the U.S. and British governments to do something in the face of the Nazis' frighteningly rapid concentration and deportation of Hungarian Jews that quickly followed the German occupation of Hungary, a shaky ally of Hitler's Reich, beginning on March 19. Word of the preparations in Auschwitz for a major new gassing campaign reached the Slovakian resistance in late April with the escape of two Slovaks from the camp, Rudolf Vrba, a name he assumed – his original name was Walter Rosenberg – and Alfred Wetzler. The so-called Vrba-Wetzler Report was smuggled through underground channels and reached Allied representatives and Jewish groups in Switzerland only in June. Earlier in May, the mass deportations began, leading to specific Slovakian requests for the Allies to bomb two rail lines leading to Auschwitz in order to disrupt these movements. These requests, followed by summary versions of the report, filtered to the top of the U.S. War Department in late June, where they met a chilly reception. Requests to divert military resources to "rescue" operations were viewed unsympathetically by Assistant Secretary John McCloy as only likely to slow victory at a time of climactic battles in Europe.

On June 11, 1944, the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, in a meeting chaired by David \*Ben-Gurion, voted against requesting that Auschwitz be bombed. Their reasoning: "It is forbidden for us to take responsibility for a bombing that could very well cause the death of even one Jew." Early in July 1944, presumably after the Vrba-Wetzler report informed the Jewish leadership of the true nature of Auschwitz, two leaders of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, Chaim \*Weizmann and Moshe \*Shertok, went to London to appeal to the British government. Although Prime Minister Winston \*Churchill subsequently told Foreign Secretary Anthony \*Eden "to get anything out of the Air Force you can and invoke me if necessary," the idea of attacking the rail lines or crematoria met bureaucratic resistance in the Air Ministry. Inertia only increased when word leaked out that the Hungarian regent, Admiral Horthy, ordered a stop to the deportations on July 7, following Allied air raids on Budapest mistakenly interpreted as punishment for the Holocaust. Renewed appeals to the U.S. government during the summer and fall also got nowhere. McCloy's claims that such air attacks were unfeasible, however, is belied by the fact that U.S. four-engine heavy bombers based in Italy attacked the IG Farben plant at Auschwitz III-Monowitz, only 5 mi. (8 km.) from the gas chambers, on August 25. A follow-up raid on September 13 damaged Auschwitz ss barracks as an

accidental by-product, and two further raids against Monowitz took place in December, after the gassing operations had already stopped at Birkenau. In the interim, however, trains full of Jews from all parts of Europe had continued to roll toward Auschwitz, if with less frequency than during the Hungarian campaign.

The futile attempt to get Allied air power to intervene in mid- to late 1944, the only time when U.S. or British bombers had the realistic capability to attack the extermination camps, had been carried out almost entirely through secret government channels and was little known after the war. Combined with the fact that public interest in and understanding of the Holocaust rose only rather slowly through the 1960s, it is perhaps not surprising that the "bombing of Auschwitz controversy" did not erupt until 1978. The catalyst was the publication of an article by the historian David A. Wyman. He summarized powerfully the futile appeals to the U.S. government in 1944, and presented four possible scenarios for attacking the Birkenau crematoria or the rail lines leading to them: (1) a diversion of U.S. B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers from IG Farben to the crematoria; (2) the employment of two-engine B-25 medium bombers, which would presumably bomb more accurately from a lower altitude; (3) a dive-bombing raid by two-engine P-38 fighters, such as the U.S. Army Air Forces carried out on the Romanian oil complex of Ploesti on June 10, 1944; (4) a special mission by Royal Air Force Mosquito two-engine bombers, like the ones executed against Gestapo prisons and headquarters in Western Europe. In 1979, CIA photo-analysts Dino Brugioni and Robert Poirier reinforced Wyman's arguments by presenting to the public dramatic aerial reconnaissance photos of Auschwitz taken by Allied aircraft in 1944 and early 1945, showing prisoners being marched to the gas chambers, albeit through the use of magnification unavailable to Allied photo-interpreters 35 years earlier. Allied intelligence had photos of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, but ignored them because no priority was placed on a bombing mission, and because camps were viewed only as places to avoid in an attack.

Wyman's arguments in the American media drew only scattered opposition at the time, mostly from veterans who pointed out that bombing accuracy left much to be desired in 1944. Knowledge of the appeals to Britain, which greatly expanded in the late 1970s and early 1980s, notably through the publication of Martin \*Gilbert's *Auschwitz and the Allies*, only seemed to strengthen the Wyman case. Scholarly replies were slow to appear, in part because the military history community was mostly dismissive of ex post facto hypothetical arguments for a raid. Retired physician Richard Foregger wrote the first articles in the 1980s against the Wyman thesis, and was reinforced in the 1990s by James Kitchens, an Air Force archivist writing unofficially, and by Richard Levy, a retired engineer, both of whom published articles in scholarly journals. Their major arguments were (1) that bombing accuracy of heavy bombers was indeed often poor in World War II, and such a raid on Birkenau might have led to untold prisoner deaths in

the barracks while failing to put any or most of the crematoria out of order; (2) that B-25 range was marginal and accuracy was no better, and that the P-38 raid on Ploesti was such a disaster that U.S. Army Air Force leaders had been scarcely likely to try that method again; (3) that Wyman consistently underestimated the effectiveness of German fighter and anti-aircraft artillery defenses and overestimated Allied intelligence knowledge of Auschwitz-Birkenau; (4) that breaking rail lines through bombing was difficult to do, especially from high-altitude bombers, and breaks were easy to repair; (5) that RAF Mosquitoes in the Mediterranean theater were the wrong type of aircraft for a precision raid and the elite squadron used for the raids in northern Europe would not likely have been diverted south for such a mission.

Stuart Erdheim, a theologian and filmmaker, in turn defended Wyman, responding in detail to the above arguments, and a U.S. Air Force officer, Rondall Rice, independently published a detailed analysis of bombing accuracy and types of missions, arguing for the feasibility of attacking the Birkenau crematoria. Others have noted that Soviet air forces were much closer, but in view of Josef \*Stalin's indifference to the Holocaust, this attack scenario has not received close attention. In 2002, after examining the actual and hypothetical response of the Auschwitz SS to air raids, Joseph Robert White concluded, however, that they would likely have found ways to continue the killing even after the complete destruction of the Birkenau crematoria complexes.

As the debate is by its very nature hypothetical, it can never be settled, but a few conclusions can be reached: (1) a raid or raids on Birkenau were certainly feasible, but it remains debatable whether such attacks would have been effective in taking out the gas chambers, and what the cost would have been in prisoner lives; (2) such raids were only possible in late spring 1944 at the earliest, at a rather late stage of the Holocaust; (3) bombing railroads at the long ranges needed for such missions was indeed very unlikely to succeed; (4) the use of U.S. heavy bombers, being the smallest diversion from the practice of the Army Air Forces in the summer of 1944, is a historically much more likely scenario than others presented by Wyman; (5) that sustained pressure from top Allied leaders, most notably President \*Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, would have been required to overcome the inertia of the Allied military command, which was tasked with winning a gigantic war with resources that were always less than ideal. It appears, however, that Roosevelt was unsympathetic to the idea and most appeals never reached him anyway; Churchill did not sustain his interest. Ultimately, the failure to give much consideration to bombing Auschwitz in 1944 is symbolic of the Western Allies' failure to do anything except verbally denounce the genocide. A raid would likely have had a strong symbolic value even if it was unlikely to actually save many lives.

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[Michael J. Neufeld (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)]

**AUSCHWITZ CONVENT.** In 1984 Cardinal Macharski, archbishop of Cracow, announced the establishment of a Carmelite convent in Auschwitz in a building on the camp periphery which had originally been a theater but was utilized during World War II to store the poison gas used in the Auschwitz-Birkenau crematoria. When a Catholic organization called Aid to the Church in Distress issued an appeal to mark the pope's visit to the Benelux countries in 1985 under the slogan "Your gift to the Pope – a convent in Auschwitz," the Jewish community – initially in Belgium – reacted with outrage. They were joined in their protest by leading Catholic dignitaries in Western Europe. Jews stressed that although others had suffered there, Auschwitz had become a symbol of Jewish martyrdom and while not objecting to a convent devoted to commemoration of Catholic suffering in Auschwitz, it should not be situated within the boundaries of the camp. Although similar Christian institutions existed in other camp sites, Auschwitz, it was felt, was different. The presence of the convent would contribute to the minimization of the Jewish aspect, already scarcely mentioned in the official communist era descriptions on the site as prepared by the Polish government. One reaction in Polish circles was to emphasize the theme of the fate of Poles for whom Auschwitz was also "a synonym for martyrdom and extermination." The issue energized the Jewish world and became the major subject in Jewish-Catholic discussions, overshadowing all other aspects of the ongoing dialogue.

Two top-level meetings in Geneva in 1986 and 1987 (attended on the Catholic side by four cardinals and on the Jewish side by West European leaders) led to the undertaking by the Catholics to create a new "center of information, education, meeting, and prayer outside the area of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps" with the Carmelite convent transferred to this new area. Cardinal Macharski, who was one of the participants, agreed that the nuns would be moved to the new site within two years.

The issue then dropped to the background and only came again to the fore as the two-year deadline approached and there was still no sign of progress and indications that the Catholics were not fulfilling the Geneva promises. Macharski claimed that the problems encountered with the Polish authorities over the new site made postponement inevitable. Moreover the nuns in the convent and some elements in the Polish Catholic Church were opposed to the move. Tensions rose as the Catholics announced a delay, and the Jews complained that no indication was being given for the fulfillment