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Auschwitz Bombing Debate

The issue of **why Auschwitz concentration camp was not bombed by the Allies** during [World War II](#) continues to be explored by historians and Holocaust survivors.

[Michael Berenbaum](#) has argued that it is not only a historical question, but "a moral question emblematic of the [Allied](#) response to the plight of the Jews during [the Holocaust](#) ..." ^[1] [David Wyman](#) has asked: "How could it be that the governments of the two great

Western democracies knew that a place existed where 2,000 helpless human beings could be killed every 30 minutes, knew that such killings actually did occur over and over again, and yet did not feel driven to search for some way to wipe such a [scourge](#) from the earth?" ^[2] During his second visit to the [Yad Vashem](#) Holocaust memorial in [Jerusalem](#) in 2008, the U.S. President [George W. Bush](#) said "We should have bombed it." ^{[3][4]}

What the Allies knew

The Polish Army Captain [Witold Pilecki](#) was the only known person to volunteer to be imprisoned at Auschwitz concentration camp. He spent a total of 945 days at Auschwitz before his escape. From October 1940, he sent numerous reports about camp and genocide to [Polish resistance](#) headquarters in [Warsaw](#) through the resistance network he organized in Auschwitz, and beginning with March 1941, Pilecki's reports were being forwarded via the Polish resistance to the British government in [London](#). These reports were a principal source of intelligence on Auschwitz for the [Western Allies](#). Pilecki hoped that either the Allies would drop arms or the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade troops into the camp, or the [Armia Krajowa](#) (AK) would organize an assault on it from outside. By 1943, however, Pilecki realized that no such plans existed. He escaped on the night of April 26–April 27, 1943. ^[5]

Pilecki's detailed report was sent to London, but the British authorities refused air support for an operation to help the inmates escape, as an [air raid](#) was considered too risky, and the AK reports on atrocities at Auschwitz were deemed to be gross exaggerations. The Polish resistance in turn decided that it didn't have enough force to storm the camp by itself.

In 1942 [Jan Karski](#) reported to the Polish, British and U.S. governments on the situation in Poland, especially the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Holocaust of the Jews. He met with Polish politicians in exile including the prime minister, as well as members of political parties such as the PPS, SN, SP, SL, [Jewish Bund](#) and Poalei Zion. He also spoke to [Anthony Eden](#), the British foreign secretary, and included a detailed statement on what he had seen in Warsaw and Belżec. In 1943 in London he met the then much known journalist [Arthur Koestler](#). He then traveled to the United States and reported to President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#). His report was a major factor in informing the West.

In July 1943, Karski again personally reported to Roosevelt about the situation in Poland. During their meeting Roosevelt suddenly interrupted his report and asked about the condition of horses in occupied Poland. ^[6] ^[7] ^[8] He also met with many other government and civic leaders in the United States, including [Felix Frankfurter](#), [Cordell Hull](#), [William Joseph Donovan](#), Samuel Cardinal Stritch, and [Stephen Wise](#). Karski also presented his report to media, bishops of various denominations, members of the Hollywood film industry and artists, but without success. Many of those he spoke to did not believe him, or supposed that his testimony was much exaggerated or was propaganda from the Polish government in exile.

On April 7, 1944, two young Jewish inmates, [Rudolf Vrba](#) and [Alfréd Wetzler](#), had escaped from the camp with detailed information about the camp's geography, the gas chambers, and the numbers being killed. The information, later called the [Vrba-Wetzler report](#), is believed to have reached the Jewish community in [Budapest](#) by April 27. Roswell McClelland, the U.S. [War Refugee Board](#) representative in [Switzerland](#), is known to have received a copy by mid-June, and sent it to the board's executive director on June 16,

according to [Raul Hilberg](#).^[9] Information based on the report was broadcast on June 15 by the [BBC](#) and on June 20 by [The New York Times](#). The full report was first published on November 25, 1944, by the U.S. [War Refugee Board](#), the same day that the last 13 prisoners, all women, were killed in Auschwitz (the women were "unmittelbar getötet," leaving open whether they were gassed or otherwise disposed of).^[10]

Allied bombing and reconnaissance missions

From March 1944 onwards, the Allies were in control of the skies over [Europe](#), according to David Wyman. He writes that the 15th U.S. Army Air Force, which was based in [Italy](#), had the range and capability to strike Auschwitz from early May 1944.

On July 7, shortly after the U.S. War Department refused requests from Jewish leaders to bomb the railway lines leading to the camps, a fleet of 452 15th Air Force bombers flew along and across the five deportation railway lines on their way to bomb oil refineries nearby.^[11] Several nearby military targets were also bombed, and one bomb fell into the camp grounds.

Buna-Werke, the I.G. Farben industrial complex located adjacent to the Monowitz forced labor camp (Auschwitz III) located 5 kilometres (3 miles) from the Auschwitz I camp was bombed four times.^[12] On December 26, 1944, the U.S. 455th Bomb Squadron bombed Monowitz and targets near [Birkenau](#) (Auschwitz II); an [SS](#) military hospital was hit and five SS personnel were killed.^[13]

The Auschwitz complex was photographed accidentally several times during missions aimed at nearby military targets.^[14]

However, the photo-analysts knew nothing of Auschwitz and the political and military hierarchy didn't know that photos of Auschwitz existed.^[15] For this reason, the photos played no part in the decision whether or not to bomb Auschwitz.^[15] Photo-interpretation expert Dino Brugioni believes that analysts could have easily identified the important buildings in the complex if they had have been asked to look.^[15]

On August 24, 1944, the U.S. Army Air Corps carried out a bombing operation against a factory adjacent to the [Buchenwald concentration camp](#). Despite perfect conditions, 315 prisoners were killed, 525 seriously harmed, and 900 lightly wounded.^[16]

The Allies' considerations

In June 1944, John Pehle of the [War Refugee Board](#) and Benjamin Akzin, a [Zionist](#) activist in America, urged the U.S. Assistant Secretary of War [John McCloy](#) to bomb the camps. McCloy is said to have told his assistant to "kill" the request, as the U.S. Air Force had decided in February 1944 not to bomb anything "for the purposes of rescuing victims of enemy oppression", but to concentrate on military targets.^[17]

The British Prime Minister, [Winston Churchill](#), did not see bombing as a solution, given that bombers were inaccurate and would also kill prisoners on the ground. The land war would have to be won first. Bombers were used against German cities and to carpet-bomb the front lines. Concerning the concentration camps, he wrote to his Foreign Secretary on July 11, 1944: "... all concerned in this crime who may fall into our hands, including the people who only obeyed orders by carrying out these butcheries, should be put to death..."^[18] The British [Air Ministry](#) was asked to examine the feasibility of bombing the camps and decided not to for "operational reasons", which were not specified in wartime. In August 1944, 60 tons of supplies were flown to assist the [uprising in Warsaw](#) and, considering the dropping accuracy at that time, were to be dropped "into the south-west quarter of Warsaw". For various reasons, only seven aircraft reached the city.^[19]

While the analysts' focus has been on the choices available to the western allies, the [Red Army](#) had taken areas in eastern Poland from the German army in July 1944, such as the town of [Kovel](#), 300 km (200 miles) east of Warsaw, much nearer to Auschwitz than

the U.S. and [Royal Air Force](#) bases in [England](#). Its leader [Joseph Stalin](#) also decided not to bomb the death camps; he gave priority to the land campaign on a front that was over 1,500 km long.

A 2004 documentary, *Auschwitz; the forgotten evidence* included interviews with historians [William Rubinstein](#) and [Richard Overy](#).^[20] It mentioned the Jewish Agency's request to the Allies on 6 July to bomb Auschwitz and showed the aerial reconnaissance photographs. It then examined the operational and technical feasibility aspects, in two categories: [precision bombing](#) by [Mosquito](#)-type aircraft, and area bombing by larger aircraft. It considered that precision bombing of railway lines was so common by 1944 that the Germans had specialist teams that could repair damage within hours or days. The inmates' food supplies were assumed to come by rail, and so an unrepaired railway would cause them hardship. Area bombing risked killing too many prisoners.

See also

[History of the Jews in Hungary](#)

[*The Abandonment of the Jews*](#)

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19. ^ Churchill, Winston. op cit. p. 115-117.
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Further reading

Wyman, David S. *The Abandonment Of The Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

External links

Why didn't the Allies bomb Auschwitz?, [BBC News](#), 23 January, 2005