

# ...The Allies Had Bombed Auschwitz?

By Mark Grimsley

It is a hot August afternoon in 1944. The scene is Birkenau, that portion of the vast Auschwitz concentration camp dedicated to the industrialized killing of Europeans the Nazis regard as unworthy of life. They have already slain over five million through shooting, carbon monoxide poisoning, and, since September of 1941, the use of the lethal insecticide Zyklon B. Of the five original death camps, all in occupied Poland, Birkenau is the only one still in use. But it is efficient: its gas chambers can kill 2,000 prisoners in a single day.

Another group of Jews has just emerged from the fetid cattle cars of the train that has carried them from their homes to this forbidding place. Weak from disease, hunger, and dehydration, most are too bewildered or too frightened by the brutal SS officers and guards to pay much attention to the drone of aircraft approaching from the south. The SS men are scarcely more concerned. Even as the drone resolves into 75 American B-17 bombers, the SS men assume that their target must be the I. G. Farben synthetic oil and rubber plants at Buna, an Auschwitz subcamp some seven miles away, which had been struck a few days earlier.

But the deafening crash of the first bombs, less than 600 yards away, announces that the objective is Birkenau. The guards scramble for cover; so do some of the prisoners but, weakened by the trip to Auschwitz, most do not get far. It soon becomes obvious that the planes are aiming for the four underground gas chambers and their adjacent crematoria, conveniently aligned on a



north-south axis at the western end of the camp, and easily identifiable by their tall chimneys and sheer size.

Three crematoria and three gas chambers suffer heavy damage. Several SS offi-

cers and guards are killed or wounded, along with a number of inmates and recent arrivals. Over the next two months, three more Allied raids strike Birkenau,

completing the destruction of the gas chambers and crematoria. Undeterred, Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss continues operations through mass shootings, and finds that bomb craters make serviceable pits for burning bodies.

The above scenario is plausible in several respects. The Auschwitz complex was well within range of the U.S. Fifteenth Air Force, based at Foggia, Italy. Buna was indeed the target of several Allied air raids. By the summer of 1944, escapees from Birkenau had supplied the Allies with detailed, accurate information about the facility. The crematoria and gas chambers could be readily identified in aerial photographs. The attack pattern described in the scenario is based on an analysis by Richard G. Davis, an air force historian familiar with “weapon-eering,” the science of determining the type and amount of

explosives required to destroy a given target. An attack on Birkenau thus stood a good chance of inflicting the damage described—but Höss stood just as good a chance of finding other means to carry out his grisly mission.

The chief departure from the historical record is not merely that the air raid never occurred. It is that the Allies never seriously considered it, despite repeated pleas from the War Refugee Board and several Jewish groups. The British objected that such an attack was beyond the capability of Bomber Command, which operated almost exclusively at night. The Americans repeatedly responded along the lines of this comment by assistant secretary of war John J. McCloy: “Such an operation could be executed only by the

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diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations elsewhere and would in any case be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not warrant the use of our resources.” Both Churchill and Roosevelt were briefed on the industrialized killing under way at Birkenau and the pleas for an aerial attack. Neither exerted the slightest influence on their military commanders to make the effort.

Most “what if” scenarios begin with a plausible rewrite of a historical event. The bombing of Auschwitz does not have this characteristic. As the historical record makes clear, those who could have authorized the attack firmly rejected the idea. Because of this, many historians reject the scenario as ahistorical. Usually they also endorse the view that even if an attack had damaged or destroyed the Birkenau facility—an outcome they deem unlikely—it would not have seriously impeded the Final Solution. The Nazis could simply revert to earlier methods of slaughtering the Jews.

Others insist that such an attack was feasible and that, in any case, the enormity of the genocide made trying to stop it a moral imperative. The debate has raged since 1978, when historian David Wyman first condemned the Allied failure to bomb Auschwitz. It culminated in the publication of *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?* (2000), a volume of essays stemming from a 1993 symposium jointly sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. As its most perceptive contributors note, the real question is not whether Auschwitz could or should have been bombed, but rather why the Allies, despite detailed knowledge of the Holocaust, made only perfunctory attempts to stop it. They view the rejection of an aerial attack on Auschwitz as part of a larger pattern of Allied indifference to the fate of the European Jews.

Even a symbolic raid on Birkenau, they

argue, would have mattered. After all, the Allies had made symbolic attacks on other occasions. FDR ordered the April 1942 Doolittle Raid—a pinprick attack on Tokyo by 16 B-25 medium bombers—primarily to raise the American public’s morale. Churchill ordered his commanders to make air drops in support of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, an expensive diversion of effort that, as the commanders foresaw, gave scant assistance to the

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embattled Polish Home Army but underscored British political support of the Polish government-in-exile. Even if bombing Birkenau had failed to slow the progress of the Final Solution, it would have sent a powerful message to the inmates of Auschwitz.

Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, recalled the initial American raid on Buna: “To see the whole works go up in fire—what revenge! ... We were not afraid. And yet, if a bomb had fallen on the blocks, it alone would have claimed hundreds of lives on the spot. We were no longer afraid of death; at any rate, not of that death. Every bomb filled us with joy and gave us new confidence in life.” Another Holocaust survivor, the famed psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, observed that the ability to find meaning in the midst of the nihilistic horror of the concentration camps had survival value. Those who lost it often lost the will to live. And in a world of obscene, systematic, relentless cruelty, meaning was easily lost. An attack on Birkenau might have restored hope to thousands. It would have been an affirmation that justice was not asleep, like a strike from the hammer of God. ★