

The (Non)-Bombing of Auschwitz-Birkenau

Excerpt from interview with Professor David Bankier

Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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Interviewers: Amos Goldberg and Adi Gordon

Q- I want to move on to a different subject. Why wasn't Auschwitz bombed?

B- The bombing of Auschwitz is a very controversial issue. Until David Wyman investigated this topic there was the conception that it could not be done. Studying the files of the American airforce, he showed that technically it could have been done; he passed a harsh judgment that it could have been executed technically, but the Americans did not want to do it.

New research has investigated not only whether Auschwitz could have been bombed from the point of view of the range of the planes, but also the accuracy of bombing in the Second World War; whether it could have been carried out from a military viewpoint, and not merely from a political one.

Differing views exist. There are those who say that it was not viable, that the accuracy was at best 50 percent in target bombing, and that carpet bombing was ineffective in dealing with a concentration camp. For sure, when the Allies wanted to do something in the Second World War, they invested time, money, and training. An example is the British decision to destroy the dams in Germany: They spent six months training their pilots, their dam-bombers, and finding a way of doing it -- till they did it.

The same thing applied when they wanted to get rid of the "Tirpitz," a ship in one of the fjords in Norway that was holding up the convoys. The convoys from America could not reach Russia with supplies, because the "Tirpitz" was constantly ambushing them. The moment the British decided that this was a target that had to be bombed, they went to work. They dismantled the bombers, the Lancasters, and filled them to the brim with just fuel and bombs. They sent the bombers and finished off that ship.

But the question of the concentration camps was not considered on a par with either the "Tirpitz," or the dams of the Ruhr area; it was a very minor issue for the Americans and the British at the time.

Q- Why?

B- It was a humanitarian issue, and not a military one. In wartime, humanitarian issues don't count, unless someone applies some political pressure. At that time, the Jews had no government-in-exile in London, as did the Poles, the Dutch, the Belgians, and others. The Jews were simply a small minority without any political power; they could not simply ring up Churchill or Roosevelt and apply pressure to solve their particular problems.

Q- I have three questions within this context: What were the reactions around the world to the Nazi steps before the extermination of the Jews? When did the extermination of the Jews become known? And what were the reactions to this knowledge?

B- The antisemitic policy and the extermination policy were never issues for the Allies, and they played an absolutely marginal role in their anti-Nazi policy during the Second World War. The Allies behaved accordingly: Since it was a marginal issue, they invested no effort at all in dealing with it. The magnitude and the significance of what we today call the Holocaust was not realized at the time.

Q- Would you consider this a moral distortion?

B- I don't know if people who behave in this way are morally twisted. I think that this is how people behave. Look at the tragedies of other nations: Even today, look at the reaction of the British, as they continue selling arms to Indonesia which carried out a genocidal policy in East Timor. Or take Saddam Hussein: Before he got involved with the Americans and was attacked, he gassed the Kurds, and no one cared. Only when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, did America speak out about the gassing of the

Kurds because of the U.S. interest in Kuwaiti oil. I don't know if this has to do with a moral twist, or with Realpolitik, with how people behave in this world when it comes to politics.

Source: Multimedia CD *'Eclipse Of Humanity'*, Yad Vashem, 2000.