

ALSO BY DAVID S. WYMAN

*Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis,
1938-1941*

THE
ABANDONMENT
OF THE
JEWS

*America and the Holocaust,
1941-1945*

David S. Wyman

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FOR MIDGIE

*because of
the smell of summer earth after the rain,
roses by the study gate,
the magic of the shooting star,
and all the rest.*

rescue any more people from Axis Europe. He thought the President should inform the military that rescue was "extremely important . . . in fact sufficiently important to require unusual effort on their part and to be set aside only for important military operational reasons."^{*21}

No such thing happened. Soon afterward, the War Refugee Board was formed and, as has already been noted, the War Department unilaterally decided against involving the military in rescue. It was this policy—never disclosed to the WRB—that extinguished Rosenheim's plea for railroad bombing.

Before McCloy could advise Pehle of the decision on Rosenheim's proposal, another request reached the WRB. A cablegram from McClelland on June 24 summarized the information that had arrived in Switzerland concerning the Hungarian deportations. It also listed the five main railroad deportation routes and pointed out:

It is urged by all sources of this information in Slovakia and Hungary that vital sections of these lines especially bridges along ONE [the Csap, Kosice, Presov route] be bombed as the only possible means of slowing down or stopping future deportations.²³

Pehle, not aware that the War Department had already ruled against Rosenheim's request, relayed McClelland's cablegram to McCloy on June 29, along with a note emphasizing its reference to bombing deportation railroads. The chance for approval of a proposal to bomb five rail systems was minute; indeed, it received no separate consideration. Gerhardt, McCloy's executive assistant, drafted a response to Pehle and forwarded it, with McClelland's cablegram and Pehle's covering note, to his chief. He also included this two-sentence memorandum:

I know you told me to "kill" this but since those instructions, we have received the attached letter from Mr. Pehle.

I suggest that the attached reply be sent.

The reply simply adapted the Operations Division's language rejecting the earlier Rosenheim proposal to fit the new, expanded bombing request. McCloy signed it on July 4.²⁴

Calls for bombing the deportation rail lines continued to come to Washington. But starting early in July, appeals for Air Force action to impede the mass murders increasingly centered on destruction of the

* A few weeks later, the WRB sought War Department help in transmitting funds to the Jews on Rab so they could hire private boats to reach Italy. The military did not cooperate.²²

Auschwitz gas chambers. Even before the first of these proposals reached Washington, Benjamin Akzin of the WRB staff was arguing for strikes on Auschwitz. He held that destruction of the killing installations would, at least for a time, appreciably slow the slaughter. He also pointed out that Auschwitz could be bombed in conjunction with an attack on Katowice, an important industrial center only seventeen miles from the death camp.²⁵

Shortly afterward, the London-based Czech government forwarded to Washington the summary of the Vrba-Wetzler report that Riegner and Kopecky had sent out of Switzerland two weeks before. Riegner and Kopecky's accompanying plea for bombing the Auschwitz gas chambers stimulated further WRB discussion of that possibility. By mid-July, Pehle and the board decided to press the military on the question. But a careful plan to do so apparently went awry, for no formal approach took place, though Pehle and McCloy did discuss the issue sometime during the summer of 1944. That conversation must have dampened Pehle's interest in the project, because he informed Morgenthau in September that the board had decided not to refer the proposal to the War Department.²⁶

Late in July, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe wrote President Roosevelt calling for bombing the deportation railways and the gas chambers. The letter emphasized that the railroads were also used for military traffic and that an attack on Auschwitz could open the way for inmates to escape and join the resistance forces. Both proposed actions would thus assist, not hamper, the war effort. Nothing at all came of this overture.^{*27}

The next proposal issued from the World Jewish Congress in New York and went directly to the War Department. On August 9, A. Leon Kubowitzki sent McCloy a message recently received from Ernest Frischer, a member of the Czech government-in-exile. It called for bombing the Auschwitz gas chambers and crematoria to halt the mass killings. It also proposed bombing the railways.²⁹

The reply, drawn up in McCloy's office and approved by Gerhardt, was dated August 14. It followed a familiar pattern:

* At the same time, the Emergency Committee pointed to the use of poison gas at Auschwitz and stressed the President's earlier threat that "full and swift retaliation in kind" would follow "any use of gas by any Axis power." The committee called on Roosevelt to warn the Nazis that the continued use of gas to kill Jews would bring poison-gas attacks on the German people. This appeal was relayed to the State Department, then to the WRB, which answered that it was a military matter and thus outside its jurisdiction. In September, the proposal reached the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who ruled that it was not "within their cognizance."²⁸

Dear Mr. Kubowitzki:

I refer to your letter of August 9 in which you request consideration of a proposal made by Mr. Ernest Frischer that certain installations and railroad centers be bombed.

The War Department has been approached by the War Refugee Board, which raised the question of the practicability of this suggestion. After a study it became apparent that such an operation could be executed only by the 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. There has been considerable opinion to the effect that such an effort, even if practicable, might provoke even more vindictive action by the Germans.

The War Department fully appreciates the humanitarian motives which prompted the suggested operation, but for the reasons stated above, it has not been felt that it can or should be undertaken, at least at this time.

Sincerely,
John J. McCloy³⁰

In early September, pressure built once more for bombing the railroads, this time the lines between Auschwitz and Budapest, where the last large enclave of Hungarian Jews was threatened with deportation. Entreaties came from Vaad Hahatzala, the Orthodox rescue committee. Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz, anxious for the appeal to reach the WRB as soon as possible, telephoned Benjamin Akzin, even though it was the Sabbath. Kalmanowitz offered to travel to Washington immediately. When Akzin relayed the plea to Pehle, he took the opportunity to spell out, in polite terms, his dissatisfaction with the War Department's inaction regarding the bombing requests. He maintained that the WRB had been "created precisely in order to overcome the inertia and—in some cases—the insufficient interest of the old-established agencies" concerning the rescue of Jews. Pointing to the Allies' current air superiority, he pressed for a direct approach to the President to seek orders for immediate bombing of the deportation rail lines. But the board did not move on the appeal.³¹

On the other crucial bombing issue, the question of air strikes on Auschwitz, the WRB did act, but with hesitation. Near the end of September, members of the Polish exile government and British Jewish groups came to James Mann, the WRB representative in London, with information that the Nazis were increasing the pace of extermination. They urged the board to explore again the possibility of bombing the

killing chambers. Mann cabled their plea to Washington. Other messages then reaching the board were reporting Nazi threats to exterminate thousands of camp inmates as the Germans were forced back across Poland by the Red Army. Pehle decided to raise the issue once more, though not forcibly. He transmitted the substance of Mann's dispatch to McCloy "for such consideration as it may be worth."³²

McCloy's office thought it worth too little consideration to trouble the Operations Division with it, or even to write a reply to the WRB. Gerhardt recommended that "no action be taken on this, since the matter has been fully presented several times previously."³³

McCloy let the recommendation stand, and the matter was dropped. Meanwhile, Mann's dispatch had independently caught the attention of the Operations Division, which discussed it briefly with the Air Force Operational Plans Division. The Air Force radioed a message to England to General Carl Spaatz, commander in chief of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe. It asked him to consult Mann's original dispatch and informed him that "this is entirely your affair," but pointedly advised that military necessity was the basic requirement. The next day, Spaatz's headquarters turned the proposal down.³⁴

The last attempt to persuade the War Department to bomb Auschwitz came in November. The full text of the Auschwitz escapees' reports finally reached Washington on November 1. The detailed chronicle of horror jolted the board. Shocked, Pehle wrote a strong letter to McCloy urging destruction of the killing installations. He also pointed out the military advantages in simultaneously bombing industrial sites at Auschwitz.³⁵

Pehle's appeal went from McCloy's office to the Operations Division. It rejected the proposal on the grounds that air power should not be diverted from vital "industrial target systems" and Auschwitz was "not a part of these target systems." In reality, Auschwitz was definitely a part of those target systems. OPD was either uninformed or untruthful.³⁶

OPD also explained that destruction of the killing facilities would require heavy bombers, or medium bombers, or low-flying or dive-bombing airplanes. It then made two misleading statements which indicated that the mission was either technically impossible or inordinately risky:

The target [Auschwitz] is beyond the maximum range of medium bombardment, dive bombers and fighter bombers located in United Kingdom, France or Italy.