How Responsible were the Bystanders?

In 1978 David Wyman published an article entitled “Why Auschwitz Was Never Bombed” in the journal Commentary arguing that the Allies in 1944 could and should have bombed Auschwitz and/or the rail lines leading to it. Well-received initially, this article prompted a sporadic but long running and often heated debate. In their newly published volume, Michael Neufeld and Michael Berenbaum have collected a number of the essays that have marked the exchange, added papers presented at a conference addressing the issue and reprinted a number of the key documents germane to the question. The essays and especially the documents provide a useful way to acquaint oneself with the issues involved, and there are fascinating insights sprinkled throughout the book. Although the book never really escapes the counterfactual nature of the debate and is probably unsuited for undergraduates, it may be profitably read by military historians, Holocaust scholars and those interested in the politics of Holocaust memory.

Mixing articles and conference papers together successfully is something of a challenge, one that the editors by and large meet. The quality of the essays in the work is surprisingly uniform, and almost every essay offers some insight. However, the sheer weight of the published material does offer something of a challenge, for the conference papers, short and relatively sparse on documentary support, often seem unjustifiably to pale alongside the meatier reprinted pieces. Nevertheless, all belong and all can be profitably read. Additionally, the documents offer the reader a chance to follow the pleas for intervention and the American and British responses through the summer and fall of 1944. While more ample annotation would have been helpful for the non-specialist, the documents themselves, with their mix of eloquence and banality, offer a powerful window into the concerns (or lack thereof) of the time.

Several of the essays address contextual issues involving Allied capabilities, the course of the war, and the degree of knowledge the Allies possessed. Both Gerhard Weinburg and Richard Breitman suggest Allied knowledge of German intentions and actions was more detailed than we used to believe.[1] Breitman argues that the Allies could have understood the dimensions of Germany’s attempt at genocide by late 1943 at the latest. Dino Brugioni’s essay focuses more specifically on Auschwitz, examining the photos produced as part of photo reconnaissance missions flown over targets near the camp. Brugioni concludes such images did exist, but photo interpreters did not examine them for evidence of mass killing. Indeed, he suggests, their working procedures would have given them no reason to look for such evidence.

Although there are no startling revelations, these essays suggest how the recent concentration on the role of intelligence has changed and will continue to change our understanding of the war and the Holocaust. A number of essays examine the broader military context in 1944.
Weinburg examines the nature of the German commitment to the Holocaust, arguing that by 1944 the ideological commitment to the Holocaust, combined with the fact that the Holocaust had become an avenue to professional advancement for many of the perpetrators, meant that bombing Auschwitz would merely have led the Germans to find another way to kill the Jews. Moreover, he stresses that, given the number of Jews killed in the final days of the war, ending the war one or two days sooner did indeed save thousands of lives. In a similar vein, Tami Davis Biddle briefly reviews the Allied strategic bombing offensive, stressing the belief among Allied military leaders that the war could be won in 1944 if they employed all assets toward that objective, a point Williamson Murray’s contribution emphasizes as well. Both authors believe this hope made calls for redirecting military assets away from the front line unrealistic.

But the heart of the book lies in the essays asking whether the Allies could have bombed Auschwitz effectively. Seven contributions deal, at greater or lesser length, with this question. Two, Martin Gilbert’s summary of the arguments he has made previously in longer publications and the short contribution of Gerhart Riegner, a leader during the war in the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, are limited by their length to more general statements about the issue (which does not imply that they are unimportant or unmoving—Riegner’s powerful essay expressing his anger over the lies he believes the Allies told him reminds readers of the urgency this issue still has). The other five, drawn evenly from each side of the debate, are detailed, thoroughly documented analyses of the potential for a successful bombing mission.

Reading these essays at one sitting, I was struck by the broad areas of agreement between both sides. Each of the authors accepts that bombing Auschwitz was impossible before the early summer of 1944, when the 15th Air Force became combat ready (or, alternatively, when the possibility of shuttle bombing missions became a reality). Each agrees that more, and more precise, intelligence was needed before any bombing mission could have been undertaken (although they disagree on how precise that intelligence could have been and how long gathering it would have taken). They agree that any bombing raid would have killed inmates and risked casualties to the bombing forces. And, most fundamentally, they implicitly accept the basic premise that intervention in some form in an attempt to disrupt the killings was morally desirable. This seems an obvious point until one remembers the debates over the bombing of Kosovo or over intervention in Rwanda in the past decade.

Nevertheless, on the key question of practicality they disagree intensely. They disagree on whether medium-range bombers such as the B-25 or versatile planes like the P-38 or the Mosquito could have reached Auschwitz and bombed it successfully. They disagree about whether bombing could have destroyed the German capability of killing Jews in one or a few missions, whether a sustained campaign would have been necessary, or even whether destroying the gas chambers or crematoria would have stopped the killing at all. And, perhaps most importantly, they disagree on how many Jewish prisoners and Allied airmen would have been killed in any attempt.

This discussion is especially interesting for, submerged in the details of circular error probable, range and bomb load, most of the authors fail to address the political and moral questions systematically. Levy’s is the only exception, addressing seriously the Jewish reaction to the proposal. While several of the authors do offer a chronology of the bombing proposals, the essays come alive only when they discuss whether such an operation could have worked. Stuart Erdheim, for instance, is the only author to suggest that the scale of the killing at Auschwitz may well have made even large numbers of Allied (and Jewish) casualties acceptable. Kitchens dismisses the question itself, arguing simply ”Would it be moral to kill a minimum of several hundred internees in trying to save others” with no assurance of success, and if so, ”what tragic ratio would have been acceptable? Ultimately, this is a philosophical or theological dilemma, not a historical one, and it is not the historian’s duty to resolve” (p. 99) One can understand Kitchens’s hesitation, yet historians, especially military historians, make such judgments frequently.

One of the startling characteristics of this argument is how truly counterfactual it is. Counterfactual history is not always a bad thing, of course, and it is unfair to criticize editors for not producing the book the reviewer wanted. Indeed, Walter Laquer points out correctly that all historians employ it routinely (in an essay taking the Allies to task for not saving Jews in other ways besides bombing Auschwitz). However, in this case, the essays devoted to the bombing shed little light on how history might have turned out differently or, Levy’s essay excepted, why the decision-makers acted as they did. From a historian’s perspective, the real question lies in why these proposals never landed on Roosevelt’s desk, not in whether bombing could have worked. As such, these essays are intellectually satisfying, perfectly fulfilling A. J. P. Taylor’s old dictum that history, at its heart, should be fun, but do not further our understanding of the war or
of the Holocaust.

Not all readers will find it fun, though, for an important reason. These essays are crammed full of technical information. Arguments about the real range of the P-38 or the accuracy of bombing from 15,000 feet as opposed to 25,000 dominate this debate. This style of writing is necessary, but difficult for non-specialists to penetrate. On the one hand, this is a warning to those unwilling to pore through such prose. But, at the same time, these essays make very apparent the need for all historians to be willing and able to grapple with these issues in order to have a coherent and reasonable discussion about such questions.

The real division between military and non-military historians lies at the center of this debate, for Kitchens and Levy question precisely the ability and willingness of Wyman to understand and utilize complex technical data regarding the military. Perhaps, in addition to its many other virtues, this volume will remind us that military history is not, or should not be, divorced from the rest of history.

While the debate may not shed new light on the options facing the Allied leaders, it does lead to speculation about the proper place of the Holocaust in the politics and memory of our own time. Put another way, if the material at the heart of the debate does not add to our store of historical knowledge, what about the existence of the debate itself? Deborah Lipstadt reminds us that such questions have encouraged people to think about the behavior of bystanders rather than of victims or perpetrators. Moreover, there is merit to Berenbaum’s assertion that the debate will occur anyway and it is incumbent upon historians to ensure that the debate is as grounded in historical accuracy and possibilities as possible. But, as Weinburg points out, such a debate, by focusing attention on the bystanders exactly as Lipstadt suggests, in fact allows us to forget or ignore the fact that many, both Germans and not, worked very hard to kill the Jews. These are difficult and important questions. Hopefully this book will lead to more and to more careful consideration of the answers.

In a very practical way, the book offers a glimpse into the politics involved in thinking about the Holocaust. Deborah Lipstadt’s explanation of the reasons the controversy has resonated so fiercely is compelling reading. She argues that the bombing of Auschwitz has come to stand for broader questions such as Allied unconcern for Jewish suffering and the need for Jews to stand up for themselves politically. These issues became important to American Jews in the context of shifting Jewish political attitudes and expectations in the United States beginning in the late 1960s. During this period, a widening perception that liberal democrats had betrayed the Jews of America despite their political support of liberal causes converged with a belief that the results of the 1967 war demonstrated the utility of a new Jewish assertiveness. Together, these ideas led American Jews to examine Allied behavior during the Holocaust critically and publicly.[2]

One wishes the editors had found it possible to include an essay addressing the reception and use of the debate in America outside of the Jewish community. I fundamentally accept the editors’ contention that it has drawn significant interest, although I wonder if the magnitude of this interest might be somewhat overestimated. (In my informal survey of a dozen or so students at Bethany College, none had ever considered the possibility of bombing Auschwitz.) The provenance of the volume itself suggests the politically charged nature of the debate, with the National Air and Space Museum declining to support the publication of the book (despite having cosponsored the original conference) in the wake of the controversy over the exhibit about the bombing of Hiroshima. However, we are left to wonder about the exact role of the debate in the broader politics of the Holocaust.

Nevertheless, Neufeld and Berenbaum do what they set out to do effectively. The narrow focus, detailed nature and expectations about prior knowledge of the essays make the book unsuited for undergraduates. And people hoping to learn about the Holocaust and the war through these essays will be disappointed. But specialists, graduate students and non-professionals interested in the debate and willing to read carefully will find the book rewards their effort.

Notes

[1]. For instance, Weinburg points out that the Germans, needing a random number to use in calibrating the Enigma machine each day, settled on the number of prisoners who perished in concentration camps the previous day. They distributed this number in a medium-grade code already broken by the Allies, giving Britain and the United States access to this number on a near-daily basis for much of the war.

[2]. That the issue is intensely political in Israel as well is drilled home by Richard Davis’s citation of Benjamin Netanyahu’s comment at Auschwitz in 1998, “All that was needed was to bomb the train tracks. The Allies
bombed the targets nearby. The pilots only had to nudge their crosshairs. You think they didn’t know? They knew. They didn’t bomb because at that time the Jews didn’t have a state, nor the political force to protect themselves” (p. 214). For a more extended discussion of the politics of the Holocaust, see Peter Novick’s recent *The Holocaust in American Life*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

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