

Why Wasn't Auschwitz Bombed?

On August 9, 1944, U.S. Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy was sent a message from Ernst Frischer, a Jewish member of the London-exiled Czechoslovak State Council. Frischer wanted Auschwitz bombed. In Allied and Jewish circles alike, opinion was divided about the feasibility of such action, but Frischer's plea was neither the first nor the last of its kind.

McCloy acknowledged the request's "humanitarian motives" but rejected it nonetheless. "A study," McCloy claimed, showed that bombing Auschwitz would require "the diversion of considerable air support." Bombing would be of "doubtful efficacy" and "might provoke even more vindictive action by the Germans."

McCloy's less than straightforward arguments camouflaged the confidential policy prepared by the War Department in January: American military forces would not be "employed for the purpose of rescuing victims of enemy oppression unless such rescues are the direct result of military operations conducted with the objective of defeating the armed forces of the enemy."

In June 1944 the Allies began to consider bombing the synthetic-oil and rubber factories connected to Auschwitz. Subsequent aerial reconnaissance photographs show the Auschwitz complex. During a raid on August 20, American planes dropped 1336 500-pound bombs on factory areas less than five miles from the camp's gas chambers.

Controversy remains about the reluctance to bomb Auschwitz. It now seems clear, however, that bombing in the spring and summer of 1944 would have saved many lives.