The Allies and the Holocaust

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The Allies and the Holocaust

By Mark Granicke

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Abstract:

During World War II, Nazi Germany carried out one of the most atrocious crimes in human history, the Holocaust. This systematic extermination of approximately 6 million Jews, along with other groups between 1941-1945, has become a focal point of modern human history. It is difficult to grasp the sheer magnitude of the undertaking by the Nazis. One question often asked is why the Allies did not do more to prevent this massacre. Were they simply ignorant of the entire event during the war? Knowing today the sheer magnitude of the Holocaust, it is difficult to believe knowledge of it would not have reached the Allies. Were the extermination camps deemed a low priority? One could argue that winning the entire war was vital to stopping any further suffering. Did those in command of Allied armies share some anti-Semitic beliefs? Perhaps leaders viewed the plight of the Jews differently than we do today. In any case, this project will examine exactly what the Allies, specifically the United States and the United Kingdom, knew of the Holocaust during World War II and what they did with the information, both on the home front and on the battlefield.
What the Allies Knew

- Roosevelt received information about the Holocaust as early as 1942 but said nothing publicly because of lack of evidence.
- November 1942, British decoded messages about prisoners building and working at the factory at Buna, a subcamp of Auschwitz. Also decoded references to the chimneys.
- 1942, British intercepted daily reports of prisoner counts, and death counts at Auschwitz. Only counted those admitted to camps, not Jews and others gassed upon arrival.
- 1942, British decoded railroad reports about prisoners, learned about the high number of Jewish prisoners headed to Auschwitz.
- Vrba-Wetzler report: two prisoners escaped from Auschwitz on April 11, 1944. Interviewed about their experiences, information eventually passed to the Allies in June 1944.

What the Allies Did

- Allied Declaration of December 17th, 1942. First denunciation of Holocaust but did not mention gas chambers or crematoria.
- War Refugee Board established by U.S. January 1944 to take in Jewish refugees. Also encouraged Nazi “satellite” states to resist the Holocaust.
- March 24, 1944, Roosevelt publicly issued statement urging Europeans to resist the Nazis and the Holocaust, warned that participants would be punished.

What the Allies Didn’t Do

- Proposed bombing of Auschwitz. Aerial bombing was not precise at the time, difficult to hit specific targets. Did not want to risk hitting the prisoners. Any damage inflicted might have been easily repaired and/or replaced.
- Officials wanted to focus on the war effort. Diverting troops to liberate camps during the war may have drawn out the war longer. Felt winning the war as soon as possible would prevent the most suffering.
- Allies may have felt focusing on the suffering of Jews early on would have strengthened Hitler’s claims of World War II as a “Jew war,” giving him more support.

What the Allied Homefront Thought

- Due to the rampant false propaganda from World War I, the media was hesitant to publish information on the Holocaust, feeling it was too extreme to be true. If published, information was downplayed.
- Due to this skepticism, British and American censorship of the news on Auschwitz and Holocaust, either by the government or media self-censoring. Vrba-Wetzler report lumped together with other news to limit impact.
- Early on, many U.S. citizens concerned with the Pacific theatre and less receptive to news regarding the Nazis and Europe.
- Jewish suffering often lumped together with other group persecution by Nazis, even by Jewish leaders. People were hesitant to emphasize Jewish suffering for fear of igniting anti-Semites.
- Late 1944 to early 1945, many in the U.S. still ignorant of scope of Holocaust. Underestimated death counts and didn’t believe reports on Auschwitz.

Works Cited: