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**AMERICA'S FAILURE
TO
BOMB AUSCHWITZ:**

A New Consensus Among Historians

by

Dr. Rafael Medoff
&
Prof. Bat-Ami Zucker

The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies

1200 G. St. NW, Suite 800
Washington, D.C. 20005
202-434-8994 / www.WymanInstitute.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the Holocaust, more than two dozen Jewish leaders called on the Allies to bomb the Auschwitz death camp. The Roosevelt administration rejected the requests because it opposed using any military resources for humanitarian objectives. In the 1970s, historians brought the details about the failure to bomb Auschwitz to public attention, and the information was included in the exhibits of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum when it opened in 1993. Several years later, however, the museum agreed to a demand by supporters of President Roosevelt to alter a panel in its exhibit, so that it asserts only “a few” Jewish leaders supported bombing and that a similar number opposed it. Museum spokesmen claimed David Ben-Gurion was one of the opponents, and in the years to follow, FDR defenders frequently cited Ben-Gurion’s alleged position. Research by the Wyman Institute and other scholars challenged the claims about Ben-Gurion. A study conducted by the museum from 2009 to 2012 has concluded that Ben-Gurion supported bombing, and agrees with the Wyman Institute that the overwhelming majority of Jewish leaders supported bombing.

About the Authors

Dr. Rafael Medoff is founding director of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies. He is author or editor of 14 books about American Jewish history, Zionism, and the Holocaust.

Prof. Bat-Ami Zucker teaches history at Bar Ilan University. She is the author of *In Search of Refuge: Jews and U.S. Consuls in Nazi Germany 1933-1941*, and *Cecilia Razovsky and American Jewish Women’s Rescue Operations in the Second World War*.

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I. A President Faces Up to America's Past

President Bill Clinton delivered the keynote address at the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C., on April 22, 1993. Built on federal land and with the majority of its funds provided by the federal government, the museum represents the U.S. government's recognition that the lessons to be learned from the Holocaust are vitally important to the American public. Moreover, President Clinton made clear that the response of America and the rest of the Free World to news of the Holocaust was an important part of the events to be commemorated and taught. He said the construction of the museum would "redeem in some small measure the deaths of millions whom our nations did not, or would not, or could not save." He referred to America's lethargic response to the Holocaust as constituting "complicity" in what happened. "For those of us here today representing the nations of the West, we must live forever with this knowledge--even as our fragmentary awareness of crimes grew into indisputable facts, far too little was done," the president said. "Before the war even started, doors to liberty were shut and even after the United States and the Allies attacked Germany, rail lines in the camps within miles of militarily significant targets were left undisturbed."¹

It was the first time an American president had ever explicitly criticized the response of the United States government to the Holocaust, or singled out the refusal of the U.S. to take military action to disrupt the mass murder process as an example of America's failure. President Clinton's perspective was reflected in the text of the museum's permanent exhibition. A panel on "Why Auschwitz Was Not Bombed" noted that "American Jewish organizations repeatedly asked the War Department to bomb Auschwitz. Their requests were denied."

About two years later, however, the text of this panel was radically revised. The new text stated: "A few Jewish leaders called for the bombing of the Auschwitz gas

¹ http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2889/is_n16_v29/ai_13930216/pg_3/?tag=content;col1; Comment by John Morton Blum in Verne W. Newton, *FDR and the Holocaust* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 25; "All Things Considered," National Public Radio, 22 April 1993.

chambers; others opposed it. Like some Allied officials, both sides feared the death toll or the German propaganda that might exploit any bombing of the camp's prisoners."

The new text marked an almost complete reversal of the meaning of the original text. It also in effect repudiated President Clinton's view. The original text stated clearly that Jewish organizations wanted Auschwitz to be bombed but the Roosevelt administration rejected their requests. That formulation placed a united Jewish community on one side of the issue, and an unreasonable Roosevelt administration on the other. The new text, however, alleged that, in fact, only "a few" Jewish leaders requested bombing; "others" --the implication was that the number of "others" was comparable to the number of supporters-- "opposed" bombing; and fear of civilian casualties or German propaganda were among the Allies' reasons for rejecting the requests. The new text thus makes the Roosevelt administration's refusal seem reasonable, since --in this version-- the Jewish leaders themselves were divided and U.S. officials seemingly had good reasons to oppose bombing.

Why did the Museum change the panel from one in which the Roosevelt administration was presented in an essentially negative light, to one in which FDR was to a significant extent absolved of culpability?

An effort to have the panel changed was undertaken by two sources. One was a retired nuclear engineer in Seattle, Mr. Richard Levy, who in the autumn of 1994 sent the Museum an essay in which he claimed there was no evidence that "any Jewish organizations asked the War Department to bomb Auschwitz." Some months later, Levy learned of a document that he believed showed that David Ben-Gurion, then chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive in British Mandatory Palestine, opposed bombing Auschwitz. Ben-Gurion then became the centerpiece of speeches and articles by Levy and other Roosevelt supporters claiming that Jewish leaders were against bombing.²

² Richard H. Levy, "The Bombing of Auschwitz Revisited: A Critical Analysis," 11 October 1994, 67. Dr. David Cesarani, director of the Wiener Library, writing in the journal *Patterns in Prejudice*, put it this way: "Levy...[is] claiming that, if [Jewish leaders] seemed against the bombing project, why should Churchill or FDR think differently?" (David Cesarani, "Paralysed by prejudice?," *Patterns of Prejudice* 32:1 [1998] 80.)

In November 1994, Dr. Michael Berenbaum, research director for the Holocaust museum, sent Levy's essay to Prof. David S. Wyman, the foremost expert on America's response to the Holocaust, for his opinion. Dr. Berenbaum wrote that Levy's essay "calls upon the Museum to make some changes in its permanent exhibition, changes I am not inclined to make." Prof. Wyman's detailed analysis of the essay, sent to Dr. Berenbaum in January 1995, concluded that Levy's work was "not scholarship, [but rather] a verbose attempt to prove a preconceived set of conclusions," was rife with "speculation and wild claims," and "doctors quotations." Oddly, Museum officials did not respond to Prof. Wyman's memo.³

The second source seeking a change in the panel text was William J. vanden Heuvel, president of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute in Hyde Park, New York. Vanden Heuvel circulated Levy's essay and cited it in numerous lectures he delivered and articles he wrote. Vanden Heuvel became particularly enamored of the allegation regarding David Ben-Gurion and began featuring it prominently in his public defenses of FDR.⁴

In May 1996, the text of the panel was quietly changed. The Museum did not announce or explain the change. In July, a museum official informed Prof. Wyman that the panel had been changed, with no explanation as to why Wyman's critique of Levy had been disregarded. Dr. Berenbaum, who left the Museum staff in 1997, later said that "there was no pressure" on him from any source to change the panel. However, in a (posthumously published) diary entry, the New Deal historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a

³ Berenbaum to Wyman, 29 November 1994; Wyman to Berenbaum, 12 January 1995; Luckert to Wyman, 1 July 1996, in the files of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, Washington, D.C.; Marcia Kay, "Museum head marks one year," *Washington Jewish Week*, 25 July 1996, 1, 8.

⁴ William J. Vanden Heuvel, "The Holocaust Was No Secret," *New York Times Magazine*, 22 December 1996, 31; *American Heritage*, July-August 1999, 50; "FDR did not abandon European Jewry," *Washington Jewish Week*, 27 February 1997, 21, "Guilt in America," *The Forward*, 27 January 1995, 15]; "Comments on Michael Beschloss' The Conquerors," *The SHAFR Newsletter*, March 2003, 32; "What the Allies Knew and When They Knew It," *The Forward*, 16 February 2001, 15; William J. Vanden Heuvel, "America, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust," lecture at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 24 October 1996, 13-14; "America, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust," keynote address of the fifth annual Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Distinguished Lecture, 17 October, 1996 at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

close associate of vanden Heuvel, wrote that a “campaign” carried out by vanden Heuvel was what persuaded the Museum to change the panel text.⁵

Whatever went on behind the scenes, the peculiar fact remains that the Holocaust museum changed the text from one that was accurate to one that is fundamentally inaccurate and, in effect, accepts the claims by Roosevelt’s supporters regarding Jewish leaders, especially David Ben-Gurion. It would take more than 15 years for the Holocaust museum to finally acknowledge its error regarding Ben-Gurion.

II. The Campaign for Allied Military Action Against Auschwitz

Beginning in the late spring of 1944, representatives of Jewish organizations in the United States, Europe, and British Mandatory Palestine began urging Allied officials to take military action to interrupt the mass murder of Jews in Auschwitz. About thirty different Jewish officials were involved, at one time or another, in advocating such Allied intervention. Generally, these requests were made in private meetings with Allied officials, and only rarely in public.⁶

Jewish requests for Allied military action put forward three possible avenues: bombing the railway tracks over which Hungarian Jews were being deported to Auschwitz; bombing the gas chambers and crematoria within Auschwitz; and sending Allied ground troops or Polish underground forces to directly attack the camp. The

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Journals: 1952-2000* (New York: Penguin), 799.

⁶ The timing of this effort was not a matter of happenstance. It began at that point for several reasons. First, President Franklin Roosevelt had in late January 1944 established a new U.S. government agency, the War Refugee Board. This gave Jewish organizations a specific address to which they could bring requests for rescue. Moreover, the Board’s director, John Pehle, specifically invited Jewish groups to submit ideas for rescue action. Second, changes in the military situation in Europe in 1943-1944 made Allied action to aid the Jews more feasible than previously. By the spring of 1944, the Allies controlled the skies over Europe, which made bombing Auschwitz or the railway lines leading to it more realistic than previously. And the Normandy landings in June brought Allied troops closer to Auschwitz than ever before. Third, the German occupation of Hungary in March, and the start of mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz in May--in full view of the international community--made Allied intervention especially urgent. Finally, the fact that the war seemed to be in its final stages and Allied victory imminent made American Jewish leaders more willing to advocate Allied actions that they would have hesitated to raise when the war’s outcome was uncertain.

Jewish leaders were not military experts and had no way of knowing which of the Allies would be most capable, or most willing, to act; so they addressed their appeals to America, British, and Soviet diplomats alike, as well as to the Polish and Czech governments in exile. Likewise, since they were not military experts, the Jewish leaders had no way of knowing which method of military action was militarily feasible or would be the most effective. Hence, in many of their meetings with Allied officials, Jewish leaders proposed two or even three of these methods at the same time. Only one official of one organization specifically opposed one of these methods; A. Leon Kubowitzki of the World Jewish Congress urged the use of ground troops, and opposed bombing Auschwitz from the air, because of the danger of civilian casualties in the camp. Other Jewish officials weighed the risk of casualties and concluded that bombing was nevertheless justified, because the camp inmates were doomed to be murdered imminently.

Each of the three proposed methods of military intervention had its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of bombing the railway tracks was that it involved relatively little risk to Allied servicemen. On the other hand, the effectiveness of bombing the tracks depended upon the ability of the bombers to hit their targets--something impossible to determine in advance--and the ability of the Germans to repair damaged track lines. Likewise, with regard to a possible bombing of the gas chambers and crematoria, it was impossible to predict how successful Allied bombers would be in carrying out precision attacks on those targets. Also, some inmates could be harmed in such bombings. The proposal to send ground troops was the most radical. It would almost certainly involve casualties to the attacking forces, and for that reason was the proposal least likely to be accepted by Allied military commanders and political leaders. Moreover, requesting an attack by ground troops invoked one of American Jewish leaders' worst fears: the accusation that Jews were willing to risk the lives of Allied soldiers for their own narrow interests.

III. The Roosevelt Administration's Position

Jewish advocates of Allied military intervention did not know that their requests, especially the requests that were made to the Roosevelt administration, were virtually doomed from the start. This was because the president and his administration were strongly opposed, as a matter of principle, to taking any special action to aid Jewish refugees. The administration's declared policy, until early 1944, was "rescue through victory," that is, rescue of Jews could be accomplished only through victory over the Germans on the battlefield. In early 1944, the president established a new government agency, the War Refugee Board, which in theory represented a new U.S. policy of aiding refugees even before the end of the war. But in reality, the Board was established against the administration's wishes. FDR created the WRB in response to intense pressure from members of Congress, Jewish activists, and his own Treasury Department. The administration gave the Board only minimal funding, and the State Department and War Department, which officially were required to cooperate with the Board, did so only infrequently at best.

Long before the first Jewish request for military intervention was made, senior officials of the War Department had already decided that they would have nothing to do with aiding refugees. In response to the creation of the War Refugee Board, the War Department assured the British government (which was opposed to Allied intervention on behalf of the Jews): "It is not contemplated that units of the armed forces will 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." Internal War Department memoranda the following month stated unequivocally that "the most effective relief which can be given victims of enemy persecution is to insure the speedy defeat of the Axis." This attitude would govern the War Department's response to Jewish requests in the months to follow.⁷

On June 18, 1944, Jacob Rosenheim, president of a New York-based Orthodox Jewish organization, Agudath Israel, wrote to the War Refugee Board, urging bombing

⁷ David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 291-292.

of the railways. The request was based on a bombing appeal that had reached him from Slovakian rescue activist Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel. WRB director John Pehle relayed Rosenheim's request to Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy.⁸

Before McCloy responded, a second, similar request reached Washington. On June 24, the U.S. Minister to Switzerland, Leland Harrison, sent a telegram to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, recommending the bombing of railways leading to Auschwitz and giving precise locations of desired bombing targets. On June 29, John Pehle relayed Harrison's request to Assistant Secretary McCloy. (That same day, War Refugee Board staff member Benjamin Akzin authored an internal memo to his WRB colleagues, urging bombing of the railways.)⁹

On July 4, McCloy responded to the two requests. In a note to Pehle, he wrote that bombing the railways was "impracticable" because it would require "the diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations..." In fact, the Allies were already operating in the skies above Auschwitz and did not have to be "diverted" from elsewhere in order to reach the death camp. Since April 4, Allied planes had been carrying out photo reconnaissance missions in the area around Auschwitz, in preparation for attacking German oil factories and other industrial sites in the region, some of which were situated just a few miles from the gas chambers and crematoria.

IV. The Jewish Agency's Position

Meanwhile, some Jewish leaders in British Mandatory Palestine were discussing the bombing idea as well. On June 2, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, chairman of the Rescue Committee of the Jewish Agency--the governing authority for the Jewish community in Palestine--met with the U.S. consul-general in Jerusalem, Lowell C. Pinkerton.

⁸ John W. Pehle, "Memorandum for the Files, 24 June 1944, War Refugee Board Papers [hereafter WRB], Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

⁹ Wyman, 294.

Gruenbaum explained the rationale for bombing Auschwitz and the railways leading to it, and asked to send a telegram to that effect to the War Refugee Board.¹⁰

On June 11, Gruenbaum described his conversation with Pinkerton to a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive (JAE), in Jerusalem. The meeting was chaired by David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the JAE and future prime minister of Israel. Although some internal Jewish Agency documents prior to June 1944 had mentioned mass murder in Auschwitz, it is evident that the information was not fully understood or absorbed by all the members of the executive. Ben-Gurion said he opposed asking the Allies to bomb it because "we do not know what the actual situation is in Poland." Another JAE member, Emil Schmorak, opposed requesting bombing because "It is said that in Oswiecim [the Polish name for Auschwitz] there is a large labor camp. We cannot take on the responsibility for a bombing that could cause the death of even one Jew." Ben-Gurion concluded the discussion by summarizing the consensus of the participants that "it is the position of the Executive not to propose to the Allies the bombing of places where Jews are located." Three other participants in the meeting expressed agreement with Ben-Gurion. The remaining members did not comment. The transcript of the meeting concluded: "Chairman Ben-Gurion summarizes: It is the position of the Executive not to propose to the Allies the bombing of places where Jews are located." No actual vote was taken.¹¹

The Jewish Agency's position soon changed, however. On June 19, the head of the Jewish Agency's office in Geneva, Richard Lichtheim, wrote a five-page letter to Gruenbaum summarizing detailed information about Auschwitz that had been provided by two recent escapees from the camp, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler. Lichtheim explained that the information revealed that the Agency's previous belief about Auschwitz being a labor camp was wrong:

"We now know exactly what has happened and where it has happened. There IS [emphasis in original] a labour camp in [the] Birkenau [section of Auschwitz] just as in

¹⁰ Dina Porat, *The Blue and the Yellow Stars of David: The Zionist Leadership in Palestine and the Holocaust, 1939-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 212-213.

¹¹ Minutes of the Jewish Agency Executive, 11 June 1944, 4-7, Central Zionist Archives [hereafter CZA], Jerusalem.

many other places of Upper Silesia, and there ARE [emphasis in original] still many thousands of Jews working there and in the neighbouring places (Jawischowitz etc). But apart from the labour-camps proper [there are] specially constructed buildings with gas-chambers and crematoriums....The total number of Jews killed in or near Birkenau is estimated at over one and a half million....12,000 Jews are now deported from Hungary every day. They are also sent to Birkenau. It is estimated that of a total of one million 800,000 Jews or more so far sent to Upper-Silesia 90% of the men and 95% of the women have been killed immediately..."¹²

Lichtheim's letter, together with the Vrba-Wetzler report, reached Gruenbaum during the last week of June, and reached Jewish leaders in New York City shortly afterwards. A. Leon Kubowitzki, head of the Rescue Department of the World Jewish Congress, had, like his colleagues in Palestine, apparently not fully understood the nature of Auschwitz-Birkenau. "Shocked by Birkenau extermination," Kubowitzki cabled a colleague in London on July 5. "Were convinced Birkenau only labor camp."¹³ During the weeks following receipt of the report, Jewish Agency officials in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States began actively promoting the bombing proposal.

The president of the Jewish Agency and World Zionist Organization, Chaim Weizmann, together with the head of the Agency's Political Department (and future Israeli prime minister), Moshe Shertok, met on June 30 with British Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs George Hall and urged that "death camps should be bombed." On July 6, Weizmann and Shertok met with British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, and urged the bombing of both the railways and "the death-camps at Birkenau and other places." Afterwards, Shertok sent Ben-Gurion a telegram reporting that Eden was "very sympathetic" to idea of bombing "death camps and railway lines leading to Birkenau."¹⁴

¹² Lichtheim to Gruenbaum, 19 June 1944, A127/1856, Yitzhak Gruenbaum Papers [hereafter YGP], CZA.

¹³ Kubowitzki to Pehle, 5 July 1944, WJC: I, Box 22, WRB.

¹⁴ Shertok to Ben-Gurion, 30 June 1944, A127/1856, Gruenbaum Papers, CZA; "Record of an Interview granted by Mr Hall to Dr Weizmann and Mr Shertok," 30 June 1944, FO371/42807, British Foreign Office Records, Public Record Office, London; Weizmann-Shertok meeting with Eden, July 6, 1944, Z4/14870, and Shertok to Ben-Gurion, July 6, 1944, Z4/14870, CZA.

At the same time, Jewish Agency representatives in Washington (Nahum Goldmann), London (Joseph Linton and Berl Locker), Geneva (Richard Lichtheim and Chaim Pozner), Cairo (Eliahu Epstein), Budapest (Moshe Krausz) and Istanbul (Chaim Barlas) met with Allied diplomats and others to make the case for Allied air strikes on Auschwitz or the rail lines leading to the camp. A number of officials of local Jewish organizations in London (such as Anselm Reiss of the World Jewish Congress, and A.G. Brotman of the Board of Deputies of British Jews) and Geneva (such as Gehart Riegner of the World Jewish Congress) worked closely with Jewish Agency representatives in promoting the bombing idea.¹⁵

Several Agency representatives reported to Ben-Gurion on the issue. In a letter to Ben-Gurion in July, Lichtheim described the latest deportations to Auschwitz and urged "bombing of railways in line leading from Hungary to Birkenau" and "precision bombing of death camp installations." Epstein reported to Ben-Gurion about his meeting in Cairo, in July, with a Soviet diplomat to whom he advocated a Soviet bombing of the death camps. The diplomat rejected the request on the grounds that showing favoritism to the Jews would conflict with the Soviet ideology of not distinguishing between ethnic groups.¹⁶

Although Ben-Gurion and his JAE colleagues had decided at their June 11 meeting against bombing, there was no subsequent meeting or vote at which the JAE went on record as reversing its earlier decision. Two later incidents help explain this mystery.

Although minutes of the Jewish Agency meetings reveal no follow-up discussion or vote on the bombing issue, the fact that its president and senior representatives on three continents were promoting bombing strongly suggests that at least a verbal

¹⁵ Gruenbaum to Barlas, June 20, 1944, A127/544, CZA; Lichtheim to Jewish Agency, June 26, 1944, L22/56, CZA; Krausz to JAE, 27 June 1944, S26/1251A, CZA; Wyman, 290 (regarding Riegner); Monty N. Penkower, *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1983), 191 (regarding Pozner and Barlas); Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, 326 (regarding Brotman); and A. Leon Kubowitzki, "Survey on the Rescue Activities of the World Jewish Congress, 1940-1944," World Jewish Congress Papers [hereafter WJC], American Jewish Archives [hereafter AJA], Cincinnati, 42 (regarding Reiss).

¹⁶ Chief Secretary, Govt of Palestine, Jerusalem, to Ben-Gurion, 12 July 1944, S25/5209 CZA; Epstein to Ben-Gurion, September 3, 1944, S25/486, CZA.

consensus was reached within the Jewish Agency Executive in favor of bombing. Two incidents in the autumn strengthen this supposition.

On September 5, members of the World Zionist Organization's Smaller Zionist Actions Committee, as it was known, convened in Jerusalem. The session included a discussion of the Allies' failure to aid European Jewry. Yitzhak Gruenbaum of the Jewish Agency, who was a member of the committee, remarked that "bombing Oswiecim, destroying Oswiecim, bombing transportation lines" was the only way to save the Jews, "but it is impossible to say such things explicitly and openly in a resolution passed by the Actions Committee." Gruenbaum did not say why "such things" could not be included in a resolution; it was as if there was an understanding among the members that this was the case.¹⁷

On October 3, Gruenbaum addressed the Jewish Agency's Rescue Committee (which he chaired) and reported in detail on the Agency's various lobbying efforts for bombing during the preceding months:

Since June we have sent emergency telegrams to all the countries regarding the fate of the Jews remaining in Poland in labor camps and we made a number of demands. We demanded, first of all, that they bomb Oswiecim, that they should destroy the death camps. This is because the death factories facilitate the destruction of large numbers of Jews every day, whereas if they could not destroy them in this sophisticated industrial manner, it would require a long time and a large number of people, and in the situation which Germany now finds itself this would be very difficult for it. Therefore, if they would destroy the death factories it would be possible to save Jews. In the beginning, many months ago, when we made this proposal, the reply was completely negative. They asked if it was acceptable to us that when they bombed the death camps, Jews would be killed. Suddenly these people are worried about the Jews, that they would kill them in the bombings. At the time they bombed Budapest, they were not worried about that. They said: "Won't the Jews raise a cry that not only the Germans are killing them but also the British?" I said to them, the Jews in the death camps face only extermination, Jews do not reside there. Even among us there were people who thought this was impossible, who had

¹⁷ Minutes of the Smaller Zionist Actions Committee, 5 September 1944, p.4663, CZA.

similar reservations. Ultimately, these matters were brought to London, placed before the government and reached the High Command. And the High Command decided that it is not practicable. There are reports from London from our colleagues who are in contact with the Polish government, that this is not correct.¹⁸

None of the committee members expressed any concerns or objections. If the June 11 decision against bombing had never been changed, surely members of the Agency's Rescue Committee would have complained about Gruenbaum's flagrant violations of Agency policy. Second, Gruenbaum referred to the opposition by some Agency figures as something which manifested itself "in the beginning, many months ago," characterizing the opposition as a phenomenon of the past, not as something that continued or still existed.

V. The World Jewish Congress's Position

Nahum Goldmann, who served as both the Jewish Agency's Washington, D.C. representative and co-chairman of the World Jewish Congress, repeatedly contacted U.S., British, Soviet, and other diplomats to "look for a way to destroy these camps by bombing or any other means." He also wrote to Czech foreign minister in exile Jan Masaryk, asking him to urge Czech president in exile Eduard Benes to "discuss this idea with the Russians." On July 21, Maurice Perlzweig of the World Jewish Congress, in New York City, acting at Goldmann's request, wrote to War Refugee Board director Pehle, sharing with him a telegram that was sent from Lichtheim to Goldmann, urging "precision bombing of death camp installations" in "the death camp of Birkenau near Oswiecim," and "railway in line leading from Hungary to Birkenau"; and a telegram that was sent from Shertok to Goldmann, telling him that he (Shertok) and Weizmann had

¹⁸ Protocols of Jewish Agency Rescue Committee meeting, 3 October 1944, p.4, S26/1240, CZA.

urged Eden that "death camps and railway line leading to Birkenau should be bombed."¹⁹

One of Goldmann's subordinates disagreed. A. Leon Kubowitzki, chairman of the Rescue Department of the World Jewish Congress, wrote John Pehle of the War Refugee Board on July 1 to urge an attack on Auschwitz by Soviet paratroopers and Polish underground forces rather than aerial bombardments, for fear that bombing might harm the inmates. He reiterated this position in an August 2 letter to Ernest Frischer of the Czech Government in Exile, in London. Nonetheless, on August 9, Kubowitzki forward to McCloy a letter from Frischer, supporting bombing of "gas chambers and crematoria in Oswiecim" and the railways in the area. Kubowitzki did so even though Frischer himself had not asked him to forward it to anyone. On August 29, Kubowitzki forward to Pehle a letter from Ignacy Schwarzbart of the Polish Government in Exile, urging the bombing of Auschwitz, together with a note from Kubowitzki urging the use of ground troops instead.²⁰ Kubowitzki was the only representative of a Jewish organization known to have taken this position in contacts with Allied officials.

VI. Additional Proponents of Bombing

A number of other individual Jewish organizations or officials also contacted Allied representatives to promote bombing. Swiss Jewish businessman Robert Goldschmidt wrote to the U.S. ambassador in Berne, Switzerland, on July 17, urging the U.S. to "bomb the crematoria and these damned places."²¹ On July 24, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe (better known as the Bergson Group) wrote to President Roosevelt, urging bombing of the railways "and the extermination

¹⁹ Goldmann to Masaryk, July 3, 1944, WJC; Masaryk to Goldmann, July 17, 1944, WJC; Perlzweig to Pehle, July 21, 1944, WJC.

²⁰ Kubowitzki to Pehle, July 1, 1944, Box 29, WRB; Kubowitzki to Frischer, 2 August 1944, Box 29, WRB; Pehle to Kubowitzki, 3 August 1944, Box 29, WRB; Kubowitzki to McCloy, 9 August 1944, WRB; Kubowitzki to Pehle, August 29, 1944, Box 29, WRB.

²¹ Goldschmidt to the American Ambassador in Berne, July 17, 1944, in Box 55 of the McClelland Correspondence, WRB.

camps themselves." Roosevelt did not respond. The Group's representative in Geneva, Reuben Hecht, also spoke with Allied officials to press the bombing idea.²²

Labor Zionists, including Golda Meir, also took an interest in the issue. Mrs. Meir, then known as Goldie Myerson, was a senior official of the Histadrut, the powerful Jewish labor federation in Palestine. In July 1944, she forwarded a report from Europe about the mass murder to the Histadrut's U.S. representative, Israel Mereminski, together with an appeal to ask U.S. officials to undertake "the bombing of Oswienzim [sic] and railway transporting Jews" to the death camp. Meir's appeal was cosigned by another Histadrut official, Heschel Frumkin. Mereminski replied that he contacted the War Refugee Board, which in turn submitted "to competent authorities" the Meir-Frumkin request for "destruction gas chambers, crematories, and so forth." Shortly afterwards, the August 1944 issue of *Jewish Frontier*, a U.S. Labor Zionist journal with which Mereminski was associated, published an unsigned editorial calling for "Allied bombings of the death camps and the roads leading to them..."

The *Jewish Frontier* editorial was the first instance in which a U.S. Jewish organization went public with its demand for the bombing of the death camps. In the case of the Labor Zionists, the Meir-Mereminski contacts probably prompted the editorial. But more broadly speaking, frustration in the American Jewish community over the Allies' meager response to the plight of Hungarian Jewry was, by late July, pushing other groups to go public with calls for military intervention. On July 31, the American Jewish Conference, a coalition of major Jewish organizations, held a rally at Madison Square Garden to appeal for Allied intervention on behalf of Hungarian Jewry. The organizers adopted an eight-point plan for rescue, which had been formulated primarily by officials of the World Jewish Congress. Point number eight read: "All measures should be taken by the military authorities, with the help of the underground forces, to destroy the implements, facilities, and places where the Nazis have carried out their mass executions." The WJCongress announced on August 14 that it had sent a

²² Smertenko to Roosevelt, 24 July 1944, File: Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, Palestine Statehood Groups Collection, Yale University; Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton, eds., *Archives of the Holocaust: An International Collection of Selected Documents*, vol. 12 (Garland Publishing Inc., New York and London, 1990), 426 (regarding Hecht).

similar, 11-point rescue plan to its London office to present to Allied officials at an upcoming session of the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees. Point #11 stated: "That immediate measures be adopted to destroy the murder installations and facilities of the extermination camps." Again, there was no suggestion of ruling out bombing.²³

VII. U.S. Planes Bomb the Auschwitz Area

Meanwhile, despite the War Department's claim that reaching Auschwitz would require diverting planes from elsewhere in Europe, U.S. bombers repeatedly attacked German oil factories close to the death camp throughout the summer. On July 7, American bombers began attacks on the Blechhammer oil factories, forty-seven miles from Auschwitz. Nine more such raids took place between July and November. On August 7, U.S. bombers attacked the Trzebinia oil refineries, just thirteen miles from Auschwitz. Between August 7 and August 29, there were additional U.S. bombing raids on oil refineries within forty-five miles of Auschwitz. On August 20, a squadron of 127 U.S. bombers, accompanied by 100 Mustangs piloted by the all-African American unit known as the Tuskegee Airmen, struck oil factories less than five miles from the gas chambers. Auschwitz prisoner Elie Wiesel, age 16, witnessed the attack and later wrote about it in his best-selling memoir, *Night*.

Other Allied planes overflew Auschwitz for a different reason that summer. On August 8, Britain's Royal Air Force began air-dropping supplies to the Polish rebels in Warsaw. The flight route between the Allied air base in Italy and Warsaw took the planes within a few miles of Auschwitz. They flew that route twenty-two times during the two weeks to follow. In September, President Roosevelt ordered U.S. planes to take part in the Warsaw airlift mission. The last and largest air-drop took place on September 18, when a fleet of 107 U.S. bombers dropped more than 1,200 containers of weapons

²³ "Huge Open-Air Demonstration in New York Demands Rescue of Jews from Europe," Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily Bulletin [hereafter JTA], 1 August 1944, 1-2; "Jewish Congress Submits Rescue Program to Intergovernmental Committee Session," JTA, 15 August 1944, 3.

and supplies into Warsaw. Less than 300 of the containers reached the Polish fighters; the Germans intercepted the rest.

Yet on August 14, in response to the continued bombing requests, Assistant Secretary McCloy wrote to Kubowitzki that "after a study," the War Department found bombing the camp or railways "could be executed only by the diversion of considerable air support necessary to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations elsewhere." McCloy also asserted that such bombing "might provoke even more vindictive action by the Germans." Kubowitzki replied, to no avail, that "it is difficult to imagine any vindictive action by the Germans which could still deteriorate the present desperate plight of the Jewish population in occupied Europe." He also scaled down the request for ground forces, suggesting that the paratroopers "should be members of the Allied forces who would volunteer for this task" rather than be required to participate; McCloy replied that Kubowitzki should contact Allied military commanders in Europe. As for the claim that the War Department carried out a "study" of the feasibility of bombing, repeated attempts by researchers have never turned up any evidence that it was ever undertaken.²⁴

²⁴ Kubowitzki to McCloy, 9 August 1944, and McCloy to Kubowitzki, 14 August 1944, Folder D/107, WJC; Kubowitzki to Pehle, 29 August 1944 (WJC-I, Box 29, WRB); Kubowitzki to McCloy, 30 August 1944, D109/1, WJC; McCloy to Kubowitzki, 14 August 1944, and McCloy to Kubowitzki, 3 September 1944, Folder D/107, WJC.

After the Allies' air raid on the Amiens Prison in German-occupied France, which freed some imprisoned French underground fighters but killed others, Kubowitzki sent McCloy a newspaper clipping about the attack and described it as "exactly the kind of assault which we have been asking for in order to free the doomed inmates of the German slaughter camps." (Kubowitzki to McCloy, 30 October 1944, D109/1, WJC)

Kubowitzki, together with his WJC colleague Dr. Lev Zelmanovits, met in London on January 2, 1945 with James Mann, the War Refugee Board's representative in England. Mann expressed himself in favor of bombing the "death camp installations" and said --as the WJC stenographer put it-- that if asked by British officials, "he would express his favourable opinion and support our suggestions." (Aide Memoire of a conversation held between Mr. James M. Mann of the War Refugee Board, Dr. A.L. Kubowitzki and Dr. L. Zelmanovits on Tuesday, January 2nd 1945," January 4th 1945, Folder D112/8, WJC)

VIII. The War Refugee Board's Position

Officials of the War Refugee Board themselves had mixed feelings about the proposals for Allied military intervention. When director John Pehle forwarded the very first request for bombing the railways to the War Department, in June, he emphasized to Assistant Secretary McCloy that he was not endorsing the request, but merely asking the War Department to “explore” it. Pehle had “several doubts” about whether the proposal was feasible and whether it was “appropriate to use military planes and personnel for this purpose.” He likewise forwarded subsequent bombing requests to the War Department without specifically endorsing them.

Pehle was especially unenthusiastic about Kubowitzki's proposal for an attack by ground troops, and in fact refused to forward such requests to the War Department. He felt it was “not proper” to ask the War Department even to consider “a measure which involved the sacrifice of American troops.”²⁵

One WRB staffer who strongly favored bombing both the railways and the camps was Benjamin Akzin, formerly a senior Revisionist Zionist activist. In a June 29 inter-office memo, Akzin acknowledged that the bombings would cause casualties among the inmates, “but such Jews are doomed to death anyhow.”²⁶

Despite his misgivings, Pehle met in mid-July with Undersecretary of State Edward Stettinius to discuss the possibility of a presidential endorsement of military intervention. After the meeting, the WRB staff drafted a proposed memo from Secretary of State Hull to President Roosevelt, asking him to order military commanders to give “serious consideration” to “some sort of military operations” to stop the mass murder. The memo was evidently blocked in the State Department, although it is not clear by whom.²⁷

²⁵ Pehle to Morgenthau, 6 September 1944, File: Hungary - No. 1, Box 34, WRB.

²⁶ Akzin to Lesser, 29 June 1944, File: Hungary - No. 1, Box 34, WRB.

²⁷ Pehle to Stettinius, 13 July 1944, and draft memorandum, File: Hungary No. 1, Box 34, WRB.

By August, however, Pehle seems to have again soured on the idea of military action. He remarked at a meeting of American Jewish leaders on August 16 that “Jewish organizations” themselves had objected to the idea of bombing the death camps because of civilian casualties. Since there is no record of any such objections made to Pehle except by Kubowitzki, it seems likely that either Pehle was conflating Kubowitzki’s multiple letters, or the stenographer recording the meeting erred. Pehle also poured cold water on Kubowitzki’s idea for the Polish underground to stage an attack, saying he “doubt[ed] that the Poles could muster the strength for such engagements.” The Jewish participants then raised a new suggestion--that the Allies supply airplanes to fly Jewish children out of Hungary. Pehle said he doubted the military would be willing to entertain such a diversion of resources, and warned that “public reaction would not be favorable.”²⁸ Ultimately, Pehle changed his mind about bombing, although too late to have any impact. In early November, he belatedly received the full text of the Vrba-Wetzler report. Deeply troubled by the details of the mass murder process, he sent the report to McCloy with an appeal of his own for U.S. military intervention. “Until now, despite pressure from many sources, I have been hesitant to urge the destruction of these camps by direct, military action,” he wrote. “But I am convinced that the point has now been reached where such action is justifiable...” He specifically recommended bombing the camp from the air, and as evidence that some inmates might escape, he cited an article about an Allied air raid to free French prisoners, which Kubowitzki had sent him.²⁹

²⁸ “Report of Meeting with John W. Pehle, executive director, and Messrs Lesser and Friedman of the War Refugee Board, August 16, 1944,” Box 6 - File: Hungary, 1944, 1949-50, American Jewish Committee Papers, YIVO Institute, New York City.

²⁹ Pehle to McCloy, 8 November 1944, Box 6, German Extermination Camps, WRB.

IX. The Final Requests for Allied Military Action

The autumn saw no let-up in the Jewish leadership's interest in Allied military intervention against Auschwitz. They may have been encouraged by a September 15 letter from Ernest Frischer of the Czech government in exile that "fuel factories" in the vicinity of Auschwitz had been "repeatedly bombed" recently. Indeed, in a U.S. bombing raid just two days earlier, stray bombs accidentally hit an SS barracks, killing fifteen Germans, and a slave labor workshop, killing forty prisoners, and damaging a railroad track leading to the camp.³⁰

In late September, Kubowitzki sent letters to McCloy and Czech minister Jan Masaryk, again asking for "operational and underground forces" to attack "Oswiecim, Buchenwalde, and Birkenau concentration camps." Kubowitzki made the same request in a meeting with a Soviet diplomat in Washington on September 28, adding a proposal that the Soviets bomb a number of "railroad hubs" in Hungary in order to "paralyze the deportation movements by railroad."³¹ Nahum Goldman also tried once more. In October, he met with General John Dill of the Allied High Command to urge bombing of the camps. Dill replied that the Allies "had to save bombs for military targets."³²

Unaware that the mass murder at Auschwitz had ceased by early November, Jewish leaders continued pressing the bombing idea. On January 18, 1945, Yitzhak Gruenbaum sent a telegram to Soviet leader Josef Stalin, urging the Soviets to bomb Auschwitz. On January 25, Jewish Agency official Berl Locker, in London, informed Gruenbaum that he had given a local Soviet diplomat a copy of Gruenbaum's appeal to

³⁰ Frischer to World Jewish Congress, 15 September 1944, Folder D107/13, WJC.

³¹ Kubowitzki to McCloy, 25 September 1944, Kubowitzki to Masaryk, 26 September 1944, Kubowitzki to Pehle, 1 October 1944, and Kubowitzki to Kapsutin, 1 October 1944, all in Folder D107/13, WJC.

³² Laurence Jarvik interview with Nahum Goldmann, 11 February 1979, transcript in the possession of the author. Goldmann repeated the anecdote in a letter to Martin Gilbert which was reprinted in Gilbert's *Auschwitz and the Allies* (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston), 321. It is not clear if Goldmann's meeting with Dill was prompted by a suggestion to that effect by Rabbi Irving Miller, chairman of the American Jewish Conference's Rescue Committee. At a meeting of the World Jewish Congress Office Committee on October 8, a discussion was held "concerning the bombing of the installations in the concentration camps," according the minutes. "Rabbi Miller asks whether Dr. Perlzweig should not see Sir John Dill of the Joint Chiefs of Staff." ("Minutes of Office Committee Meeting, Sunday, October 8th 1944, at 1 P.M.," WJC.

Stalin. The Soviets did not respond. In the meantime, the Allies, including the Soviets, were still bombing the Auschwitz region. On December 18 and 26, there were additional U.S. bombing raids on oil refineries in the area. On December 23, the Soviets bombed the Auschwitz area; thirty percent of the SS barracks at Birkenau were destroyed, and the railway link between Auschwitz and Birkenau was severed. On January 16, 1945, the Soviets bombed oil refineries next to Auschwitz. On January 19, there were additional U.S. and Soviet bombing raids on oil refineries in the area. The next day, an Allied bombing raid on the Blechhammer oil refinery, forty-seven miles from the Auschwitz gas chambers, enabled forty two slave laborers to escape. One week later, Soviet troops liberated the camp.³³

X. The New Consensus

The subject of the Allies' failure to attack the death camps surfaced only sporadically in the first decades after the war. Memoirs by survivors, such as Olga Lengyel (*Five Chimneys*, 1947), Charlie Coward (*The Password is Courage*, 1954), Primo Levi (*If This is a Man*, 1959), and the then little-known Elie Wiesel (*Night*, 1960) mentioned Allied bombing raids in and around Auschwitz. But such works did not attain sufficient prominence to generate substantial public interest in the bombing question. Several documents concerning the British refusal to bomb Auschwitz surfaced during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, setting off a flurry of discussion about the issue in the British press during 1961 and 1962, and even a brief airing in parliament. Assistant Secretary McCloy's aforementioned August 14 letter rejecting bombing and speculating about "more vindictive action" also made its first postwar public appearance at that time, in the pages of the *New York Herald Tribune*. Also in 1961, Rabbi Weissmandl's aforementioned appeal for bombing was reprinted in Ben Hecht's book *Perfidy*, a sharp attack on the Zionist leadership's response to the Holocaust. The first major scholarly

³³ Gruenbaum to Locker, 18 January 1945, and Locker to Gruenbaum, 25 January 1945, S26/130, CZA; J.R. White, "Target Auschwitz: Historical and Hypothetical German Responses to Allied Attack," *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 16:1 (Spring 2002), 59.

history of the Holocaust, Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961), briefly mentioned Chaim Weizmann's appeals to the British to bomb Auschwitz.³⁴

As books and essays dealing specifically with the Allies' response to the Holocaust began appearing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the bombing question began to attract more public attention. These included brief references in *While Six Million Died*, by Arthur Morse (1968), *The Politics of Rescue*, by Henry Feingold (1970), and *No Haven for the Oppressed*, by Saul Friedman (1973), as well as journals such as *Patterns of Prejudice*, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, and *Judaism*. The visit by U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to Yad Vashem in 1977 stirred some discussion of the topic, when officials of Yad Vashem told the news media that Vance "showed particular interest" in a reproduction of one of the John McCloy letters, and remarked, "Even my country didn't act."³⁵

The turning point in public awareness of the bombing issue came with the publication, in *Commentary* in 1978, of Prof. David S. Wyman's essay, "Why Auschwitz Was Not Bombed." Wyman's essay presented the public with new and detailed information that completely changed the public's understanding of the issue. First, he exposed the real reason for the War Department's refusal to seriously consider bombing Auschwitz: its predetermined policy to refrain from aiding humanitarian objectives. Second, Wyman showed that both American and British planes had sufficient range to strike Auschwitz and return to their bases. Third, he revealed the scope of American and British bombing of German targets in and around Auschwitz, including some less than five miles from the gas chambers, thus shattering the "diversion" argument that had been put forth in 1944 by the War Department.

³⁴ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 1947; John Castle, *The Password is Courage*, 1954, p. 147; Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, 1959, pp. 136-139; Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York, 1960), 57-58; *New York Herald Tribune*, 5 June 1961; "The Controversy About the Bombing of Auschwitz," *Wiener Library Bulletin* 27 (April 1964), 20; Ben Hecht, *Perfidy* (New York: Julian Messner, 1961) 142-143, 264.

³⁵ Arthur Morse, *While Six Million Died* (New York: Random House, 1968), 288, 290; Henry Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 256-257, 305; Saul Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 228; Helen Fein, "Toleration of Genocide," *Patterns of Prejudice* (September-October 1973), 24; Henry L. Feingold, review of *While Six Million Died*, in *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 58 (1968), 154; and Henry L. Feingold, "Roosevelt and the Holocaust: Reflections on New Deal Humanitarianism," *Judaism* 18 (1969), 259-276; "State Secretary at Yad Vashem," *Jerusalem Post*, 22 February 1977, 5.

Finally, Wyman revealed the names of a number of the Jewish leaders and organizations that called for bombing the camp: Isaac Sternbuch, a leading Orthodox rescue activist in Switzerland; Slovak Jewish activists Gisi Fleischmann and Rabbi Michael Weissmandl; Gerhart Riegner, of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva; the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe; Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz, of the Va'ad Ha-Hatzala rescue committee in New York City; Ernest Frischer of the Czech government in exile and London office of the World Jewish Congress; British Jewish groups (he was referring to representatives of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the London office of the World Jewish Congress); and Yitzhak Gruenbaum of the Jewish Agency. He also noted that A. Leon Kubowitzki of the World Jewish Congress opposed bombing from the air. If one includes the name of Chaim Weizmann, whose efforts on behalf of bombing were cited by earlier historians, that meant a count of 11 Jewish leaders identified as having been in favor, and 1 opposed, as of mid-1978.

The following year, Bernard Wasserstein, in *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945*, documented the unsuccessful attempts by Jewish leaders to convince the Churchill administration to bomb Auschwitz. In addition to providing new details about the lobbying undertaken by Weizmann and Shertok in London, Wasserstein for the first time named a number of other proponents of bombing: the Jewish Agency's representatives in Geneva (Lichtheim), Budapest (Krausz) and London (Linton), and A.G. Brotman of the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Martin Gilbert's *Auschwitz and the Allies* (1981) added several more: Nahum Goldmann, the Washington, D.C. representative of the Jewish Agency and cochair of the World Jewish Congress; Chaim Pozner, of the Agency's Geneva office; and Benjamin Akzin, Revisionist Zionist activist and War Refugee Board staff member. And Monty N. Penkower's *The Jews Were Expendable* (1983) lengthened the list of bombing advocates to include Ignacy Schwartzbart, of the World Jewish Congress (and Polish National Council), and Reuben Hecht, the Bergson Group's representative in Switzerland.

Thus by 1983--ten years before the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum--the tally of bombing advocates and opponents, as determined by the leading historians in the field, stood at 20 to 1, respectively.³⁶

At that point, the last major outstanding question was the position of David Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Agency Executive. Prof. Dina Porat of Tel Aviv University was the first scholar to tackle that issue, in her 1990 book, *The Blue and the Yellow Stars of David*. (The Hebrew-language edition, published in 1986, won the Yad Ben Zvi prize, one of Israel's most prestigious scholarly awards.) Porat described the crucial June 11 meeting of the JAE and quoted from its minutes, noting that the opposition of Ben-Gurion and others was based on their ignorance of the true nature of Auschwitz. The information that JAE members had received about Auschwitz at that point was fragmentary and inconclusive, in part "because none of it came from someone who had actually been there." Until June, "the real nature of Auschwitz...was not understood in Palestine or anywhere else." The arrival of the Vrba-Wetzler report, in late June, was "the turning point," Porat wrote. "In the wake of this new information," she concluded, "the JAE reversed its decision" and Agency officials around the world began lobbying for bombing. Among them, she noted, was Eliahu Epstein, who lobbied a Soviet diplomat in Cairo. She did not, however, mention that Epstein reported his discussion to Ben-Gurion, a fact which further indicated that there had been a reversal. Porat did not address the absence of a written reversal by the Jewish Agency Executive; her conclusion was based on what JA officials actually did after receiving the Vrba-Wetzler report.³⁷

This, then, was where scholarship on the bombing issue stood in 1994, when the staff of the U.S. Holocaust Museum began reviewing the demand to revise the text of their bombing exhibit: the American and British historians who had studied the bombing controversy found 20 Jewish leaders in favor, 1 against; and the leading Israeli scholar of Palestine Jewry's stance on bombing had concluded that Ben-Gurion and the

³⁶ Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 309, 315, 318; Gilbert, 245-247, 321; Penkower, 197.

³⁷ Porat, 213-219.

Jewish Agency Executive only briefly opposed bombing, before reversing themselves and supporting bombing.

It is not clear what led the museum's staff to change the bombing text to read "A few Jewish leaders called for the bombing of the Auschwitz gas chambers; others opposed it." Museum spokesmen never offered a public explanation for their reasoning. When asked about the change, several months after the fact, Prof. Richard Breitman, senior historian at the museum and editor of its journal, told the *Washington Jewish Week*: "My own perception is that there were some people in the American Jewish community and the Jewish community in what was then Palestine, who favored the bombing of Auschwitz. There were a number of people and organizations opposed it." He did not say how many he thought were in either camp.³⁸

Two major studies of Ben-Gurion's response to the Holocaust which came out in the years to follow, by the Israeli scholars Shabtai Teveth, of Tel Aviv University, and Tuvia Friling, of Ben-Gurion University, agreed with Porat and disagreed with Breitman. Like Dina Porat, Professors Teveth and Friling examined the relevant Hebrew-language correspondence and minutes of Jewish Agency meetings, and they came to the same conclusion as Porat.

Teveth concluded, in his 1996 book *Ben-Gurion and the Holocaust*, that the JAE's June 11 decision against asking for bombing was rooted in the fact that information about Auschwitz "reached the JAE piecemeal, accumulating gradually." During the last week of June, the JAE leadership received more details about Auschwitz. "It then changed its mind," but did not put the reversal in writing, for fear of being blamed if bombings resulted in casualties among the inmates. He cited Yitzhak Gruenbaum's September 5 comment about refraining from publicly urging bombing, and his October 3 remarks, speaking openly to the JA rescue committee members about the lobbying effort.³⁹

³⁸ Marcia Kay, op.cit.

³⁹ Shabtai Teveth, *Ben-Gurion and the Holocaust* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 193-194.

Friling's book, *Arrows in the Dark: David Ben-Gurion, the Yishuv Leadership, and Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust*, was published in English in 2005. He found that the JAE's initial opposition to asking for bombing was "influenced by a general lack of knowledge of the true situation...[the JAE leaders] had no real idea of the destination of the deportees or the type of installations that required bombing...no one really knew for sure the location of the major extermination center or what Auschwitz really was." But as a result of the arrival of the Vrba-Wetzler report, Ben-Gurion "experienced a change in position" from opposing asking for bombing to "tacitly approving" such requests, "the JAE did an about-face in terms of its position" on bombing, and JA officials in various countries lobbied for bombing.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent publication of documents from Soviet archives brought to public attention crucial information relevant to the Ben Gurion-bombing discussion. Roosevelt Institute president William vanden Heuvel had written hopefully, in 1997, that with regard to the bombing issue, "there are areas of research that are now possible and deserve intense examination, particularly as the Soviet archives become available." But when the Israeli and Russian governments, in early 2000, jointly published a two-volume collection of documents from their respective archives pertaining to relations between the USSR and the Zionist movement, it did not assist vanden Heuvel's case. Included was a report by Jewish Agency official Eliahu Epstein about his attempt to persuade a Soviet diplomat in Cairo that the Soviets should bomb Auschwitz--and he was reporting to Ben-Gurion. It seems highly unlikely that Epstein would report to Ben-Gurion if he had been acting in defiance of Ben-Gurion and the JAE. Despite this revelation from the Soviet archives whose opening he had said

⁴⁰ Tuvia Friling, *Arrows in the Dark: David Ben-Gurion, the Yishuv Leadership, and Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 78-83.

would yield important new information, vanden Heuvel continued to publicly claim Ben-Gurion opposed bombing Auschwitz.⁴¹

In July 2005, the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies formally asked the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to correct the text about only “a few” Jewish leaders calling for bombing. The appeal pointed to the evidence of 20 Jewish leaders who called for bombing and only one opposed, as well as the new scholarship on the position of David Ben-Gurion and the Jewish Agency Executive. Six weeks later, Museum curator Steven Luckert informed the Wyman Institute that the request was being rejected because he believed “only a few Jewish organizations” requested bombing, and it was still “unclear” to him if the Jewish Agency ever changed its position.

Thus a significant chasm had been opened between the staff of the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the leaders of the Roosevelt Institute, on one side, and the American, British, and Israeli historians who had researched and written on the issue, on the other. With the museum’s “only a few Jewish leaders” text still intact, Roosevelt Institute spokesmen and supporters were able to continue citing David Ben-Gurion as an opponent of bombing.

In 2009, Wyman Institute researchers undertook research in the newly-reopened Yitzhak Gruenbaum Papers, at the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, as well as other Israeli scholarly institutions. They located documents which revealed additional details about the JAE’s knowledge about Auschwitz; Gruenbaum’s lobbying for bombing; the JAE’s awareness of that lobbying; the involvement of Golda Meir (then Myerson), her colleague Heschel Frumkin, and U.S. Histadrut representative Israel Mereminski, in lobbying for bombing; and attempts by Berl Locker, of the Jewish Agency office in London, to interest the Soviets in bombing Auschwitz. The documents

⁴¹ William J. vanden Heuvel, “FDR did not abandon European Jewry,” *Washington Jewish Week*, 27 February 1997, 21. Examples of vanden Heuvel and other FDR supporters continuing to cite Ben-Gurion’s alleged opposition, despite the Epstein document revelation, include William J. vanden Heuvel, “What the Allies Knew and When They Knew It,” *Forward*, 16 February 2001, 1, 15; William J. vanden Heuvel, “Comments on Michael Beschloss’ *The Conquerors*,” SHAFR Newsletter 34 (March 2003), 27-38; and Richard H. Levy, “Did Ben-Gurion reverse his position on bombing Auschwitz?,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 3 (2001), 89-96.

were provided to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, with a renewed request to correct the “few Jewish leaders” text panel.

At that point, the Museum agreed, for the first time, to undertake a comprehensive study of the relevant documents, the Wyman Institute’s findings, and other recent scholarship on the subject. The study began in September 2009. Over the course of the next two years and four months, Dr. Luckert and his colleagues “reviewed thousands of pages of documents from the National Archives, the Library of Congress, as well as the Museum’s immense holdings of microfilm or scanned materials from Europe and Israel,” as well as “the relevant scholarly monographs and articles on the topic.” Their findings were issued in the form of a ten-page memorandum dated January 10, 2012. The memo disagreed with the Wyman Institute on some minor points, but found substantial common grounds on the major issues:

-- The Museum’s study found that as a result of the arrival of more details about Auschwitz in June 1944, David Ben-Gurion changed his position on asking for bombing the death camp “from opposition to passive support” and “tacit support.” (p. 4) This represents a complete reversal of the position that the Museum took in its 2005 letter to the Wyman Institute.

-- Of the 29 Jewish leaders whom the Wyman Institute listed as supporting bombing, the Museum’s study challenged the veracity of only 3 (pp.7-9). The Wyman Institute and U.S. Holocaust Museum are now in agreement that at least 26 Jewish leaders called for bombing.

-- The Museum’s study cited six additional Jewish leaders (aside from A. Leon Kubowitzki) who opposed bombing. Although the Wyman Institute disputes that number, even so it means that while the Wyman Institute’s tally is 29 to 1, the U.S. Holocaust Museum’s tally is 26 to 7. Both sides now agree that the overwhelming

majority of Jewish leaders who took a stance on the issue were in favor of bombing Auschwitz.⁴²

A historic consensus at last has been achieved. The rift in the community of Holocaust scholars has been healed, as scholars who previously found themselves in opposing camps are now in agreement. Partisans who have been using David Ben-Gurion as a means of shielding the Roosevelt administration from criticism will now have to come to grips with the fact that there is no scholarly support for the claim that Ben-Gurion opposed bombing Auschwitz, and there is a broad and unimpeachable scholarly consensus that more than two dozen Jewish leaders called for bombing, while only a very small number opposed it.

⁴² Four of the six are members of the JAE who spoke against asking for bombing at the June 11 meeting. The Museum says they should be considered opponents because there is no written decision of a reversal; the Wyman Institute maintains that the other available documents demonstrate there was a verbal decision by the JAE to reverse its position. The fifth “opponent” that the Museum counts is Koppel Schwarz, a member of the Mapai (Labor Zionist) Central Committee, in Tel Aviv, who wrote a private letter in 1944 against bombing; the Wyman Institute maintains that since Schwarz was not a member of a policymaking organization that had anything to do with these issues, he cannot be considered a “Jewish leader” in this context. The sixth “opponent,” according to the Museum, is World Jewish Congress official Arieh Tartakower, who in a 1944 meeting with a Polish diplomat asked for a Polish underground attack on Auschwitz since the War Refugee Board had told him air attacks were not feasible. The Wyman Institute maintains that Tartakower was simply reporting the WRB’s position, not necessarily endorsing it.