

The War Department on Bombing Railway Lines to Auschwitz, 1944

The Roosevelt administration knew early on of the plight of Jews in the Holocaust, but believed there was little it could do. In 1944 the War Department rejected the request of the director of the War Refugee Board to bomb rail lines to the concentration camp in Auschwitz in Poland because the D Day invasion in June 1944 required the massive deployment of aircraft over specific areas in France and Germany.

Document 23.4

July 4, 1944

Dear Mr. John W. Pehle [Director War Refugee Board]

I refer to your letter of June 29, inclosing a cable from your representative in Bern, Switzerland, proposing that certain sections of railway lines between Hungary and Poland to be bombed to interrupt the transportation of Jews from Hungary.

The War Department is of the opinion that the suggested air operation is impracticable. It could be executed only by the diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations and would in any case be of such very doubtful efficacy that it would not amount to a practical project.

The War Department fully appreciates the humanitarian motives which prompted the suggested operation but for the reasons stated above the operation suggested does not appear justified.

Sincerely,

John J. McCloy [Assistant Secretary, War Department]

Source: War Refugee Board Records; Projects and Documents File; Measures Directed Toward Halting Persecutions; Hungary No. 5, Box 42, FDR Library.

Interpret the Evidence

1. Why does the War Department consider it impractical to bomb rail lines to stop transports to concentration camps?
2. What role did humanitarian concerns play in the War Department decision?

Put It in Context

How much did knowledge of the Holocaust affect Allied military strategy?

**EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
WAR REFUGEE BOARD
INTER-OFFICE COMMUNICATION**

September 2, 1944

**To: J.W. Pehle
From: B. Akzin**

Subject: Urgent message from the Rabbi Kalmanowitz

Last night, Rabbi Kalmanowitz called me at home from New York and asked me to deliver to you the following message:

A cable from Sternbuch, transmitted through the Polish embassy, contains the information that on August 26 deportations of Jews from Budapest have begun. Twelve thousand Jews have already been deported to Oswiecim, in Upper Silesia. Sternbuch, in his own name and on the suggestion of the Rabbi of Neutra suggests that further deportations be interfered with the immediate bombing of the railroad junctions between Budapest and Silesia, viz: Kaschen Presow – Zilina- Galanta – Leopoldorf – Caca – Rudki, as well as the railroad junction at Graz (Austria).

The Polish charge d'affaires, M. Kwapiszewski, has promised to Rabbi Kalmanowitz to transmit a copy of the cable to WRB, but in view of possible delays, the Rabbi wanted my assurance that this matter will be placed before the Board at yesterday's conference.

While supporting Sternbuch's and the Rabbi of Neutra's request regarding this matter and, is ready, despite the Sabbath, to take a train today to Washington, if this should appear necessary in the interest of insuring immediate action.

To the above, I should like respectfully to add the following:

The thought of bombing the railroad junctions between Hungary and Silesia to interrupt the flow of deportations is indeed elementary. You will recall that the thought has been clearly hinted at by McClelland, in 4041 from Bern, dated June 24.

I am aware of the fact that a somewhat similar idea was rejected some time ago by the Department of War – a rejection which quite likely stems from the habitual reluctance of the military to act upon civilian suggestions.

It is submitted, however, that the WRB was created precisely in order to overcome the inertia and – in some cases – the insufficient interests of the old-established agencies in regard to the saving of Jewish victims of Nazi Germany. Repeatedly we refused to take a “no” for an answer when it came from the Department of State. There is nothing in the officials of the Department of War that would make them more sacrosanct or freer from error than the officials of the Department of State.

In the matter of the “Free Port” which, whatever its merits, was certainly not a matter of life and death, Mr. Pehle went to the President.

To be faithful to our task, it would appear most appropriate if the Board took the identical course in connection with the Hungarian emergency.

In the light of the present air superiority of the United Nations, I am certain that the President, once acquainted with the facts, would realize the values involved and, cutting through the inertia-motivated objections of the War Department, would order the immediate bombings of the objectives suggested.

[Signed] B. Akzin

P.S. I have promised the Rabbi to see to it that you get this message without delay. I therefore take this unconventional way of sending it straight to your office, not through channels. A copy of the memo goes to my chief, Mr. Lesser.

הסוכנות היהודית לארץ ישראל

Encl 31

THE JEWISH AGENCY FOR PALESTINE.

TELEPHONE: MUSEUM 3815 (6 LINES).
TELEGRAMS: "ZIONIBURO. LONDON."
CODES: BENTLEY'S AND MOSSE'S.

77. GREAT RUSSELL STREET.
LONDON. W.C.1

WR. 0823

18th August, 1944.

In reply please address the Secretary:

and quote the following Reference No.:

SECRET

G.E. Millard, Esq.,
Foreign Office,
Whitehall, S.W.1.

22 (2) Refusing
Sept.
19/8

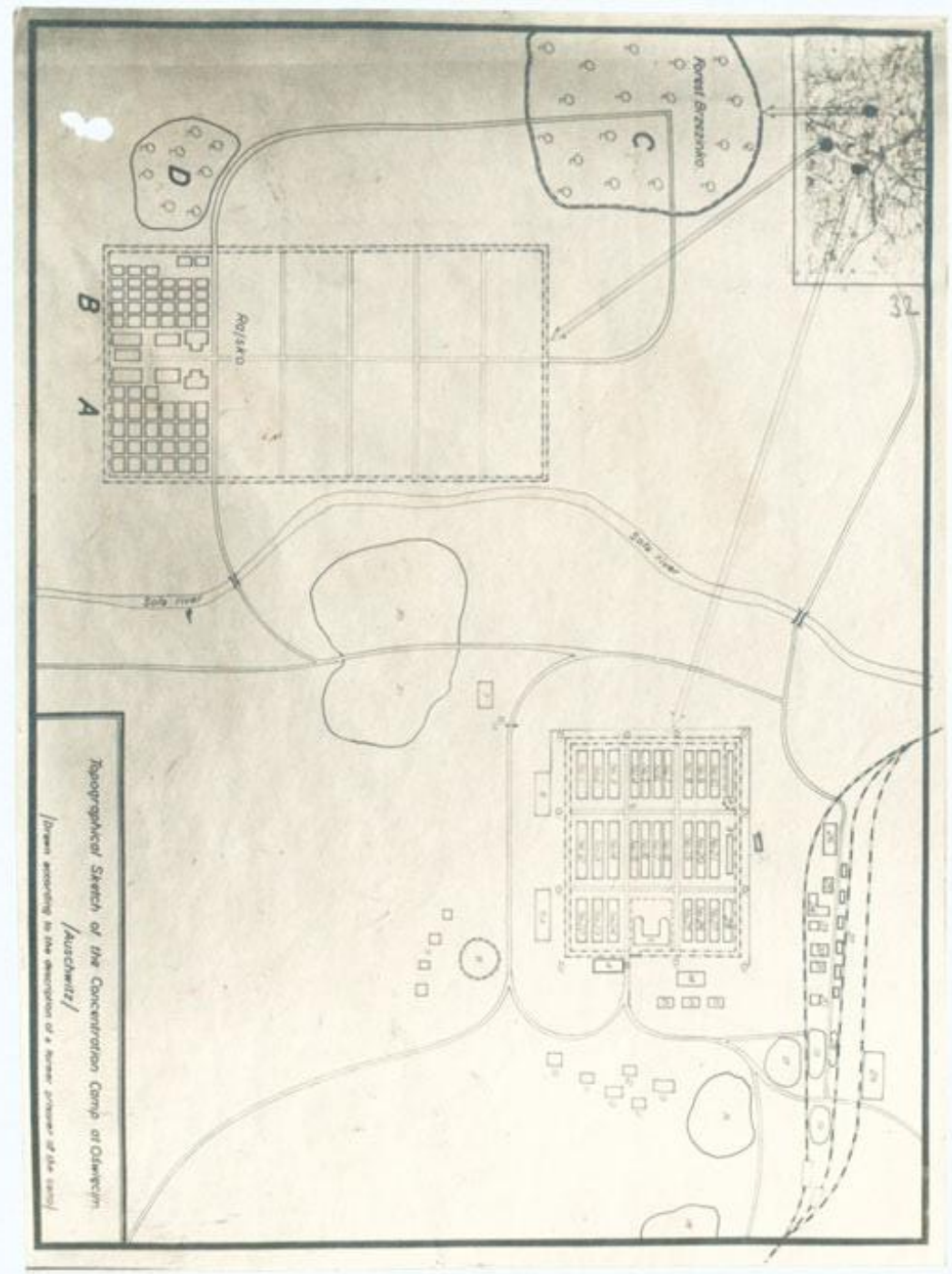
Dear Mr. Millard,

As arranged on the telephone this afternoon I enclose herewith plans and descriptions of the two death-camps - at Auschwitz (Oswiecim) and Treblinka (Trzebinia), which I have just received from the Polish Ministry of the Interior.

Yours sincerely,

J. Linton.

Enclosures.



--- Map of the Auschwitz camp

THE CONCENTRATION CAMP AT OSWIECIM /AUSCHWITZ /

Explanations to the attached plan:

1. Towers, sentries with machine guns /12/
- 1a. Sentry, road gate
2. Amunition damp
3. Canteen
4. Room of the block commander with his little tower for a sentry.
~~Block N.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28~~
- Block N.1. - rooms for internees
- Block N.2. - " " " and washrooms
- Block N.3,4,5, -- Rooms for internees
- Block N.6. --- Museum
- Block N.7,8,9,10,-- lodgings
- Block N.11.---- penal company
- Block N.12 -- lodgings and arrest /bukkers /
- Block N.13 -- N.19 ---- lodgings
- Block N.20 -- special lodging for weak persons and persons unable to work
- Block N.21 -- hospital and surgery
- Block N.22, 23, 24 -- lodgings nr. 24 ground floor -- office
- Block N.25 -- lodgings; on the 1-st floor store-room.
- Block N.26-- safe and magazine
- Block N.27 -- clothing depts and baths
- Block N.28 -- general hospital

5. Kitchen
6. Lodgings for S.S. N.C.O's
- 6a. " " " " and political dept.,
7. lodgings for commandant of the camp.
8. Crematorium
9. ~~houses~~ administrative buildings
10. slaughter house
11. dairy
12. joinery
13. concrete work shop
14. machine laundry
15. administrative buildings
16. timber warehouse
17. building materials warehouse
18. camp for civilian workers who are not interned at the camp
19. military workshops
20. stores of belongings taken away from the prisoners
21. ~~magazines~~ stores of the SS
22. Barrack rooms for the SS
23. offices /
24. SS barack rooms, stores on the ground floor
25. SS kitchen
26. Stores
27. dwelling houses for officers
28. Stables

August 9, 1944

Hon. John J. McCloy
Under Secretary of War
War Department
Washington, D.C.

My dear Mr. Secretary:

I beg to submit to your consideration the following excerpt from a message which we received under date of July 29 from Mr. Ernest Frischer of the Czechoslovak State Council through the [War Refugee Board](#):

"I believe that destruction of gas chambers and crematoria in [Oswiecim](#) by bombing would have a certain effect now. Germans are now exhuming and burning corpses in an effort to conceal their crimes. This could be prevented by destruction of crematoria and then Germans might possibly stop further mass exterminations especially since so little time is left to them. Bombing of railway communications in this same area would also be of importance and of military interest."

Sincerely yours,

A. Leon Kubowitzki
Head, Rescue Department

14 August 1944

Dear Mr. Kubowitski:

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 had 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 promoted 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. McCloy
Assistant Secretary of War