

Lesson 15: Handout 1, Reading 9

Upstanders and Bystanders during the Holocaust

The Response of the Allies

(Excerpt from pp. 402–6 in *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*)

Soon after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, rumors of mass murders began to circulate in the United States. To many, the stories were too incredible to be true. On the front page of its June 14, 1942, edition, the *Chicago Tribune* ran this headline: HITLER GUARDS STAGE NEW POGROM, KILL 258 MASSACRED BY BERLIN GESTAPO IN “BOMB PLOT.” On November 26, 1942, the following appeared on page 16 of the *New York Times*: SLAIN POLISH JEWS PUT AT A MILLION. By the end of 1942, the CBS radio network had picked up the story. In a broadcast from London on December 13, Edward R. Murrow bluntly reported, “What is happening is this. Millions of human beings, most of them Jews, are being gathered up with ruthless efficiency and murdered. The phrase ‘concentration camps’ is . . . out of date. . . . It is now possible only to speak of extermination camps.” Four days later, the governments of the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union issued a statement acknowledging the mass murders for the first time. Yet they continued to do nothing.⁴¹

Then on January 13, 1944, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau received a report which described how the Nazis were killing millions of Jews. He sent this report to President Roosevelt. Within days of receiving it, the president set up the War Refugee Board, under Morgenthau’s supervision. It saved about two hundred thousand Jews. John Pehle, Jr., the man who headed the group, later remarked that “what we did was little enough. It was late. Late and little, I would say.”⁴²

There was another way that the Allies could have helped the Jews and other victims dying in concentration camps. As word of the deportations reached the outside world, Jewish organizations asked the United States to bomb the railroad lines that led to Auschwitz or to bomb the camp itself. Officials dismissed the idea as “impractical” because the bombing would use planes needed for the war effort. McCloy also argued that bombing the train tracks leading to Auschwitz might provoke the Germans to take even harsher action against the Jews and against the Allies. U.S. government officials insisted that winning the war against the Germans was the best thing that the Americans could do for the victims held in concentration camps.

Yet, between July 7 and November 20, American planes dropped bombs near Auschwitz on ten different occasions. On August 20, 1,336 bombs were released just five miles from the gas chambers. On three occasions, American pilots hit areas near the camp.⁴³

Glossary

Allies: The nations fighting against the Germans including the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain.