Auschwitz, Bombing of

In the spring and early summer of 1944, some 435,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz. By that time, the Allied governments knew a lot about the mass annihilation going on at Auschwitz, the largest of the Nazi extermination camps. In fact, in mid-April, two men had escaped Auschwitz and brought specific information about the camp, including detailed maps, to the leaders of the Working Group, a Jewish rescue organization in Slovakia (see also Auschwitz Protocols). In the wake of the Hungarian deportations, those Jewish leaders and others begged the Allies to bomb the camp, including the gas chambers and the railroad tracks leading up to it, but their requests were not fulfilled.

The first of the requests made to the United States War Department was turned down in June 1944. War Department officials claimed that they would not allow the bombing of Auschwitz because it could only be done by using air support that was needed elsewhere for the war effort. Their decision, however, was not based on war strategies or analyses. The department never thoroughly investigated the possibility of bombing the camp, and never even consulted their air force commanders based in Italy, who were in the best possible position to strike. Instead, when the War Department authorities were first asked to consider bombing Auschwitz, they fell back on the secret policy their department had established months before: a policy of noninvolvement in rescue actions. This policy was created in January 1944, after President Roosevelt had instituted the War Refugee Board. At the time, the President charged the US State, Treasury, and War departments with doing their utmost to further the rescue efforts. War Department officials feared this meant that military forces necessary elsewhere in the war would be taken away for the rescue effort. At a crucial point in the pursuit of victory, the War Department developed a blanket policy of noninvolvement, in direct defiance of the president's order—and when requests were made to bomb, the War Department kept rejecting them with the statement that it would "divert military power from essential war operations."

In Great Britain, Prime Minister Winston Churchill supported a proposal made by the Jewish Agency to bomb Auschwitz and the railroad tracks leading up to it. However, the British Air Ministry and the Foreign Office kept stalling in order to avoid bombing operations. The British government's official reply to the Jewish Agency employed the phrase that "technical difficulties" made carrying out the operations impossible, meaning perhaps, that Auschwitz was not in the range of Allied bombers.

In fact, by mid-1944, the Allied forces controlled European skies and definitely had the range to bomb Auschwitz and its railroad lines. The United States Air Force could even have carried out the operation in conjunction with other war operations. The Auschwitz complex, which included a major industrial zone and armaments factories, was itself a military target. A specific military goal was to destroy the synthetic oil refinery in Auschwitz. The Germans had seven other such plants in the area, all within 45 miles of Auschwitz. From July–November 1944, more than 2,800 American planes bombed the oil factories—on their way, flying right over or along the railways leading up to Auschwitz. On August 20 and September 13, American bombers hit the industrial zone at Auschwitz itself, just five miles from the camp's four gas chambers. The killing installations at Birkenau, however, were never bombed. Post-war experts on bombing disagree as to how feasible it would have been to bomb only the gas chambers. Some also point to fears at the time that such a raid would have been accompanied by the killing of many persons. Real and imagined obstacles not withstanding, the fact that Auschwitz was not bombed to save Jewish lives shows that the Allies' desire to help Jews was not nearly as strong as the Nazis' desire to murder them.