

criticisms that are accorded to other political conflicts and disagreements. The Europeans' enmity towards Israel cannot be detached from the Europeans' thousand-year hatred of the Jews and their shorter and much less lethal, but still palpable antipathy towards America. And thus we are back to the three standard pillars of classical antisemitism and anti-Americanism: Jews, America, and modernity.

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THE (NON) BOMBING OF AUSCHWITZ: PERKS AND PERILS IN COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORY

On April 6, 1994, just hours after a plane carrying Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down, ethnic Hutu militias initiated a meticulously planned assault on supporters of the Hutu-Tutsi peace process. Assisted by victim lists prepared in advance and radio broadcasts of the names, addresses, and license plate numbers of Tutsi and moderate Hutu, the killings quickly and deliberately escalated into an all-out extermination of Rwanda's Tutsi people. Genocide was taking place yet again in the 20th century.

The American government, however, was loathe to call it that, since doing so, an internal Defense Department paper warned, could "commit [the government] to actually 'do something.'" Instead the United States joined other nations in evacuating its citizens, leaving Rwandan embassy staffers behind to be massacred. On April 10 the United Nations commander in Rwanda, Major General Romeo Dallaire, beseeched New York for more troops and a mandate to send his peacekeepers to intervene in the killings. The U.N., under pressure from the United States, then made the decision that sealed the Tutsis' fate: On April 21, amid press reports of some 100,000 already dead, it drastically cut the force size of its Rwandan aid mission.¹

The Rwandan genocide lasted 100 days and took some 800,000 lives, an ethnic slaughter of innocents unmatched in speed, organization, and thoroughness, except once: during the Hungarian deportations to Auschwitz-Birkenau in the spring-summer of 1944.

Exactly half a century before the highly predictable and, many have argued, preventable genocide in Rwanda,² and long before the phrase "never again" had parsed any well-meaning lips, President Roosevelt addressed the American people:

In one of the blackest crimes of all history...the wholesale systematic murder of the Jews of Europe goes on unabated every hour...[the Jews of Hungary] are now threatened with annihilation...³

1 S. Power, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (New York, 2002), p. 359.

2 Ibid., pp. 329-89. See also, for example, P. Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York, 1998); R. Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (New York, 2005); L. Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (London, 2000).

3 Cited in M. Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (New York, 1984), 184.

The date was March 24, 1944. Five days earlier Germany had occupied its erstwhile ally Hungary, and shortly thereafter Adolf Eichmann took up residence in Budapest. Thus, what would happen next was no secret to anyone but the 800,000 Hungarian Jews. From May 15 through July 8, 437,000 of them were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The cold, hard, and excruciatingly impersonal facts are this: an average of 8,200 Jewish men, women, and children were deported from Hungary every day for 54 days, and then the deportations stopped. Most of the 400,000 Jews left behind survived. Over 92% of those deported did not.⁴

Of the many examples of American indifference to the plight of European Jewry before and during the Second World War, none seem to resonate as loudly and persistently as the failure to bomb the killing machinery at Auschwitz-Birkenau, particularly during the Hungarian deportations late in the war. Although in truth just one part of the ongoing debate over the Allied response to the fate of European Jews during the Second World War (and one short chapter of David S. Wyman's classic 1984 work *The Abandonment of the Jews*), this notorious non-event has become the central symbol of the Allies' response to the Holocaust. The contemporary public debate over the (non) bombing of Auschwitz began in earnest with Wyman's 1978 article in *Commentary*, which revealed how government leaders rejected proposals to bomb the death camp by dissembling about such issues as target complexity and priority.⁵ While William Rubinstein has attempted to paint Wyman as the originator of the entire Auschwitz bombing idea, Roosevelt administration officials confronted it directly during the summer and fall of 1944.⁶ The American press even took up the issue at this time.

After the war, references to a potential bombing mission appeared in several survivor memoirs (including those of Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, first published in the 1940s and 1950s), prominent Jewish periodicals, and even a British parliamentary debate in June 1961. Raul Hilberg explicitly mentioned the issue in his classic 1961 work *The Destruction of the European Jewry*, and U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance brought it up when he visited Yad Vashem in 1977.⁷

Despite the fact that the bombing question goes back to the war itself and has not let up since, critics often dismiss the controversy as the historian's equivalent of "Monday-morning quarterbacking." Speculating on

how the past might otherwise have turned out is, of course, a tempting if treacherous undertaking.⁸ What is less colloquially known as counterfactual, alternative, or "what if" history has long hovered near the margins of respectable historical scholarship. While "what if" books are published regularly by "name" historians (recent examples include Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, and Antony Beever and Robert Cowley, eds., *What Ifs? of American History: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*), they usually constitute intellectual exercises by senior professors aimed at a popular audience, rather than serious academic research. That is because this type of history, though grounded in facts, permits us to imagine alternative versions of the past in which we exercise a certain control over those facts. Thus the preference for a happier historical trajectory if Hitler had died in the Munich beer hall bombing of November 8, 1939, assumes that the Third Reich and its Führer were codependent, when in fact the nature of Hitler's rule is the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Regarding the bombing of Auschwitz, Michael Marrus warns of the "great danger that the historian will apply to [his or her] subjects the standards, value systems, and vantage point of the present, rather than those of the period being discussed."⁹ "What if...?" in other words can easily become "If only..."

Navigating the narrow moral space between decrying World War II leaders for not living up to our own expectations, and objectively delineating their knowledge, options, and actions at the time, is one of the major challenges faced by critics of the American response to the Holocaust. According to military historian Williamson Murray, it is also the major reason to be dubious about arguments in support of bombing Auschwitz. Murray contends that these arguments ignore the complexity of the war and the Herculean daily stresses faced by those who led it. Yet should the Auschwitz bombing question be dismissed, as Murray argues, simply because contemporary historians were not in the trenches with the generals and politicians working fifteen-hour days, seven days a week, for the duration of the hostilities?¹⁰ Far too much important research already undermines this contention. Moreover, as Walter Laqueur points out, whenever historians ask why a certain decision was taken or why a certain outcome ensued, they must also consider the alternative scenarios that fell by the wayside.¹¹ Indeed our understanding of the past is enriched by this process, since it helps us better evaluate the contingent factors that moved history in a certain direction. The only caveat to this approbation of

4 R. Brahm, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (Detroit, 2000).

5 D. S. Wyman, 'Why Auschwitz Was Never Bombed,' *Commentary* 65 (May 1978). See also id., *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York, 1984), pp. 288-307.

6 W. D. Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis* (New York, 1997), p. 3.

7 For numerous examples of public references to the bombing idea after 1945, see the letter from D. S. Wyman in *American Jewish History* 86:1 (March 1998), pp. 211-2, and the letter from S. Erdheim in *American Jewish History* 86:2 (June 1998), pp. 219-20.

8 W. Murray, 'Monday-Morning Quarterbacking and the Bombing of Auschwitz,' in *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, ed. M. J. Neufeld and M. Berenbaum (New York, 2000), pp. 204-13.

9 Ibid., pp. 8-9.

10 Ibid., p. 204.

11 W. Laqueur, 'Auschwitz,' in *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, ed. M. J. Neufeld and M. Berenbaum (New York, 2000), p. 186.

counterfactual inquiry is the need to be exceedingly careful about the questions posed and, what is more, how one goes about answering them.

The bombing of Auschwitz debate essentially comprises three interrelated questions: From a military standpoint, could the Allies have destroyed the killing facilities from the air? Should they have (i.e. would it have helped or hindered the Holocaust)? Why didn't they? The order is important here. In arguing that impeding the Holocaust by bombing the death camp was illusory, as most bombing critics do, they have already answered the last question and rendered the "could have" issue meaningless. But as Stuart Erdheim, director of the first documentary film on the bombing question. (*They Looked Away*) points out in a scholarly article, Allied leaders themselves exchanged memos emphasizing the need to follow standard target study procedures before determining whether or not to bomb Auschwitz.¹² "Should have" considerations of target priority, in short, were not independent of "could have" questions about target feasibility

Since the late 1970s and in his subsequent book and the documentary film *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference* (PBS, April 1994), Wyman has consistently argued that "could have" considerations of military capability were not the issue; the unwillingness of political leaders to act was. But as articles that continue to appear in prominent journals (including *American Heritage*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Forward*, the *Journal of Military History*, and *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*) to this day reveal, many scholars prefer hypothesizing about bomber precision and target defences to discussing the pertinent issue of political resolve. According to these researchers, Auschwitz was not bombed for the following reasons: (1) allied leaders feared killing innocent people and, in any case, the Nazis would easily have found other means to continue their genocide; (2) the target was just too complex from a military standpoint; and (3) bombing Auschwitz would have constituted an unprecedented diversion of military resources essential to winning the war.

Although this paper will address each of these explanations for the non-bombing of Auschwitz, my purpose is not simply to argue that the bombing pessimists are wrong. Rather, I am above all interested in exploring the limits of scholarly analysis in questions of counterfactual history. If one reads James Kitchens' article in the *Journal of Military History* on why the Birkenau crematoria presented an impossible military target for the Allies, it sounds convincing. Yet aside from the flaws in much of Kitchens' actual data, the problem is that if the Allies had gone to such great lengths to scrutinize every potential target, they never would have bombed anything in the war.¹³ How

¹² S. G. Erdheim, 'Could the Allies Have Bombed Auschwitz-Birkenau,' *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11:2 (Fall 1997), pp. 129-70; S. G. Erdheim, director, *They Looked Away* (2003). This film is narrated by CBS News correspondent Mike Wallace. The author of this paper is the film's executive producer.

¹³ J. H. Kitchens III, 'The Bombing of Auschwitz Re-Examined,' *Journal of Military History* 58 (April 1994), pp. 233-66.

can historians assess counterfactual questions like the bombing of Auschwitz without overreaching the bounds of objective, or pragmatic, scholarly methodology? Moreover, why should they?

In making a documentary film on the bombing of Auschwitz controversy, my co-producers and I approached this challenge in part by not focusing on the tempting, though historically untenable question of how events might have turned out if the Allies had bombed Auschwitz. What source could ever shed light on this counterfactual question? As bombing critics claim, innocent people almost certainly would have been killed. Yet some likely would have been saved, not because the Nazis would have stopped killing Jews, but because their highly evolved and efficient system for doing so would have been disrupted. All that we filmmakers could say is that every survivor we spoke to wished then and still wishes today that the Allies had bombed the camp.

In the three paragraphs of *The Abandonment of the Jews* that Wyman devoted to speculating on the efficacy of bombing Auschwitz during the spring-summer of 1944, he argued, as does Professor Richard Breitman in *They Looked Away*, that at this late stage of the war the Germans would have been hard-pressed to rebuild the killing installations, the express purpose of which were to quicken the pace of murder and body disposal.¹⁴ In other words: Halt the Hungarian deportations on July 7 rather than July 8 because of a backup in what is widely referred to as the Nazis' "industrial killing" process, and some 10,000 lives are saved. One might add to Wyman's argument the fact that numerous survivors wished (even prayed) then and still wish today that the Allies had bombed the camp. In his memoir *Night*, Elie Wiesel recalled experiencing a raid on the Buna camp at Auschwitz III (Monowitz), five miles from Birkenau: "We were not afraid. And yet, if a bomb had fallen on the blocks, it alone would have claimed hundreds of victims on the spot. But we were no longer afraid of death; at any rate, not of that death. Every bomb that exploded filled us with joy and gave us new confidence in life."¹⁵

Some historians, however, insist on taking the ultimately moot question of "what if" the Allies had bombed the camp one step further. In a recent article in the academic journal *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Joseph

¹⁴ Wyman, *The Abandonment*, pp. 304-5. Benjamin Akzin of the War Refugee Board made the same argument in June 1944: "In view of the preeminent part evidently played by these two extermination camps in the massacre of Jews...it would seem that the destruction of their physical installations might appreciably slow down the systematic slaughter at least temporarily...Though no exaggerated hopes should be entertained, this saving of lives might even be quite appreciable, since, in the present stage of the war, with German manpower and material resources gravely depleted, German authorities might not be in a position to devote themselves to the task of equipping new large-scale extermination centers" ('Documents,' in *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, ed. M. J. Neufeld and M. Berenbaum [New York, 2000], pp. 258-9).

¹⁵ E. Wiesel, *Night* (New York, 1969), p. 71.

Robert White argues that even if the Birkenau killing machinery had been destroyed, the Nazis would have energetically improvised their murderous task.¹⁶ I have no disagreements with Dr. White, who based his argument on the Nazis' hasty efforts in 1944-45 to repair bombing damage to the IG Farben plant at Auschwitz III. In fact I have never for a moment doubted that the Nazis were passionately committed to the genocide of the Jews; or as Elie Wiesel famously put it: "Hitler was the only one who kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people."¹⁷ But the argument only makes sense as long as you do not consider why the gas chambers and crematoria were built in the first place.

The fact of the matter, and thus the true starting point for the film, is that the Allies did nothing about Auschwitz at all. Despite plentiful evidence since mid-1942 of exactly what was going on there, and despite numerous requests from a variety of sources both in Europe and in the U.S. to do something about it, Allied leaders chose not to act. Among countless options, like dropping leaflets threatening retribution, Allied leaders never seriously weighed a bombing mission. The thirty-some aerial images of the death camp that could have been used for a target study, including the one now displayed in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, were only discovered in 1978, when a photographic interpreter went looking for them. In 1944, when the pictures were inadvertently taken, the Allies were interested in other targets. *What* WW II leaders would have found *if* they had planned a bombing mission is, therefore, a relevant counterfactual query, since it relies upon evidence that could have been consulted during the war.

Before tackling the issue of military feasibility, however, it merits reviewing the facts on the ground, and in the air. In the midst of the Hungarian deportations, as the trains were going back and forth between Hungary and Auschwitz, Allied planes from the Fifteenth Air Force, now based in southern Italy, were waging a fierce campaign against Central European oil plants. The IG Farben plant five miles from Birkenau now came under heavy surveillance. In June, the Auschwitz escapees Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler provided Western leaders with even more detailed information on the killing complex than they had been receiving from underground sources since 1942. Various Jewish and other groups were imploring the Allies to bomb Auschwitz.

So why didn't they? Why didn't the Allies attempt to impede the Hungarian Holocaust, or the deportation to Auschwitz of tens of thousands of Jews from as far away as France and Greece through the summer and fall of 1944, by bombing the killing facilities? Despite the fact that Allied leaders never ordered a target study of the camp, most bombing critics respond with at least some recourse to "could have" arguments about target

16 R. J. White, 'Target Auschwitz: Historical and Hypothetical German Responses to Allied Attack,' *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 16:1 (Spring 2002).

17 Wiesel, *Night*, p. 77.

complexity, if not impossibility. In articles going back to Richard Foregger's 1987 analysis in *Aerospace Historian*, bombing critics have insisted that the military impediments to destroying the killing complex were legion, including intelligence, German defenses, aircraft ranges and accuracies, and the crematoria's narrow profile.¹⁸ Kitchens wrote of the "dispersed, dauntingly complex" target, and proceeded to dismiss every imaginable bombing scenario from high altitude B-17 and B-24 raids to low-level strikes with British Mosquitoes. According to Kitchens "flying over 620 miles in radio silence, crossing the Alps in some semblance of cohesion at low altitude, then sneaking through German air defenses with enough fuel to make a coordinated precision attack on five targets and return home beggars belief."¹⁹

Another critic, Richard Levy, devoted unnecessary attention to the problems associated with night bombing from England, when the real debate centers on the newly operative air base in southern Italy. When he did acknowledge the feasibility (or plausibility) of destroying the killing installations with American heavy bombers flying out of Italy, he made extensive speculative calculations of the collateral damage such a mission would cause.²⁰ Even more hypothetically, Joseph Robert White refers to the crematoria as "hard targets" and estimates that they could have withstood 500 lb bombs. After all, he writes with unconcealed awe, it took the Nazis "at least nine explosive charges set with meticulous care" to demolish Crematory V in late 1944. Yet White contradicts himself a page later by not explaining how it was that a handful of untrained *Sonderkommando* managed, with some smuggled dynamite, to destroy Crematory IV in October 1944. "Hard targets" compared to what?²¹

Before any of these alleged obstacles could be overcome and even evaluated, however, there is the crucial question of photo intelligence. Since the Allies never considered Birkenau a potential target, they never ordered aerial reconnaissance of the camp or even tasked their photo interpreters (PIs) to look for it on existing images taken in preparation for the August 20 raid on the Auschwitz IG Farben plant. Such action was standard operating procedure for any bombing mission. The debate, in short, should end right there. Nonetheless, bombing critics also argue that it would have been exceedingly difficult for PIs to locate the gas chambers and crematoria on the reconnaissance maps. Stuart Erdheim has responded with several comparative rebuttals. For example, if PIs could locate V-1 launching sites in the vastness of northern France, all the while distinguishing them from decoys,

18 R. Foregger, 'The Bombing of Auschwitz,' *Aerospace Historian* 34 (Summer 1987), pp. 98-110.

19 Kitchens, 'The Bombing of Auschwitz Re-Examined,' pp. 91, 95, 97.

20 R. H. Levy, 'The Bombing of Auschwitz Revisited: A Critical Analysis,' in *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, ed. M. J. Neufeld and M. Berenbaum (New York, 2000), pp. 101-26.

21 White, 'Target Auschwitz,' pp. 61-2.

surely they could have done the same for "separately secured" buildings with "lofty chimneys." In fact they would have done so more easily, according to several PIs interviewed in *They Looked Away*, and in any case, by July 4 Allied leaders knew the precise location of Birkenau from the Vrba-Wetzler report.²²

No one should have known this better than the Chairman of the British Joint Intelligence Committee, William Cavendish-Bentinck. Yet in an August 1944 memo acknowledging the need for a target study of the Birkenau killing installations, a memo following up on Winston Churchill's personal authorization to look into the matter, Cavendish-Bentinck wrote: "Unless the Air Staff can be given an exact pinpoint of this camp, the air-men will experience difficulty in finding it."²³ This statement flies in the face of everything that is known, and that Cavendish-Bentinck knew, about the camp at that time. The World War II photo interpreter Dino Brugioni, who actually discovered the aerial photos of Birkenau in the archives, wrote that PIs supplied with the proper photographs and intelligence reports could easily have spotted the concentration camps and "quickly" picked out the gas chambers and crematoria.²⁴ Today anyone can clearly see the killing complex on the May 31, 1944, aerial image of Birkenau, an enlarged copy of which is prominently displayed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Yet bombing critics are still not to be deterred. William J. vanden Heuvel, president of the Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt Institute and one of the most prolific bombing detractors, continues to claim, against all evidence and expert testimony, that finding the crematoria in these reconnaissance photos is only possible with today's high resolution technology.²⁵

Beseched with requests to bomb Auschwitz-Birkenau, Allied leaders focused their justifications against such action less on the target than on the need to concentrate all military efforts on winning the war. In June 1944, the same month U.S. War Department officials received a detailed report on Birkenau's killing operations from the two Auschwitz escapees, the Operations Division of the War Department (OPD) judged bombing the camp "impracticable, [because] it could be executed only by diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations." On August 14, 1944, U.S. Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy went one further, writing that bombing Auschwitz would be a diversion of air support "now engaged in decisive operations

22 Erdheim, 'Could the Allies Have Bombed Auschwitz-Birkenau?', pp. 133-6.

23 Quoted in Erdheim, *ibid.*, p. 134.

24 D. A. Brugioni, 'The Aerial Photos of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Complex,' in *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, ed. M. J. Neufeld and M. Berenbaum (New York, 2000), pp. 52-7. Also see interview with Brugioni in Stuart Erdheim, director, *They Looked Away*.

25 W. J. vanden Heuvel, 'What the Allies Knew and When They Knew It,' *Forward* (February 16, 2001), p. 1.

elsewhere." Winning the war, Roosevelt said repeatedly, was the only way to stop the killing.²⁶

I stated at the outset of this paper that my purpose was not so much to disprove Auschwitz bombing critics, as to probe the limits of scholarly analysis in questions of counterfactual history. Nonetheless, the arguments made by historians and contemporaries alike that the crematoria presented either too complex a target, or that bombing them would have constituted a costly diversion from the war effort, warrant a response.

At the very moment McCloy wrote that Allied air power was "now engaged in decisive operations elsewhere," the Allies were involved in an intense bombing campaign in and around the Auschwitz area. "It would be no exaggeration," wrote Wyman, "to characterize the area around Auschwitz, including Auschwitz itself, as a hotbed of American bombing activity from August 7 to August 29."²⁷ On August 20, 1944, the Allies bombed the IG Farben plant at Auschwitz for the first of what would be four times. "Elsewhere," in short, was five miles from *anus mundi*, the asshole of the world, as both survivors and perpetrators have called Auschwitz-Birkenau.

While Wyman's research shattered the military diversion argument by showing the disingenuousness of Allied leaders, some scholarly efforts to consider the bombing issue in the wider context of the world war still fall back on this reasoning. The prominent military historians Gerhard L. Weinberg and Tami Davis Biddle have pointed to what Biddle calls the "swirling vortex of competing wartime priorities" the Allies faced in this "voracious and omnivorous war."²⁸ For the Nazis, however, the war and the Holocaust were not so disconnected. Weinberg even goes so far as to ponder how many thousands more Jews would have died in the Holocaust had the war lasted an additional week or ten days. His answer: far more than the Allies rescued in 1943-1945. Considering that the War Refugee Board alone saved an estimated 200,000 Jews in the last sixteen months of the war, this argument seems as debatable as it is immaterial.²⁹

Speculations on this score will always abound and, eventually, test the limits of scholarly rigor and relevance. Who could possibly judge whether an Auschwitz bombing mission, even if a complete failure, would have lengthened the war? Perhaps it would have drawn military resources away from the front to defend the death camp, thus hastening the Red Army's advance? After all, the Nazis had no qualms about shipping Jews to the camps

26 Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, pp. 292-6.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 300. In a June 1944 memorandum, Benjamin Akzin of the War Refugee Board also pointed out that "the destruction of these camps could be achieved without deflecting aerial strength from an important zone of military objectives" ('Documents,' *The Bombing of Auschwitz*, ed. Neufeld and Berenbaum, p. 258).

28 T. Davis Biddle, 'Allied Air Power: Objectives and Capabilities,' in *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, ed. M. J. Neufeld and M. Berenbaum (New York, 2000), p. 51.

29 G. L. Weinberg, 'The Allies and the Holocaust,' in *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, ed. M. J. Neufeld and M. Berenbaum (New York, 2000), p. 26.

when supplies were desperately needed at the front. While such hypothetical deliberation can never be satisfactorily resolved, one can not say the same for Stuart Erdheim's calculation of the cost of sending 100 bombers to Birkenau: about 13 percent of all sorties for *one day* in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations.³⁰ In the scheme of all operational theatres for the duration of the war, this can hardly be regarded as a significant diversion of military resources.

The methodological perils of overinterpreting a past that did not happen are clear. Asking "what if" the Allies had ordered a target study of Auschwitz-Birkenau is more methodologically acceptable than questioning "what if" Auschwitz had been bombed. For one, the former query would have to be asked before the latter could even be considered. But more obviously is that there are simply no sources for the latter. This is not meant to de-legitimize the entire question, but merely to reign in farfetched speculations and encourage scholars to focus on the questions that can truly advance the debate.

As for whether or not the crematoria represented a viable military target, historians have yet to uncover any evidence that Birkenau was more heavily defended than the thousands of targets the Allies did bomb during the war. On the contrary, the evidence points to the likelihood that it was more lightly defended than the IG Farben plant, which the Allies bombed several times with full knowledge of the 79 heavy (88mm) anti-aircraft guns that surrounded it. Even the editors of a recent collection of articles from the controversy (*The Bombing of Auschwitz. Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*) agree that the military feasibility debate "may well be nearing a dead end in its arcane discussion of aircraft specifications and hypothetical scenarios."³¹ As Wyman long ago pointed out, if the Fifteenth Air Force could accidentally drop bombs on Birkenau, as they did on September 13, 1944, then there is no good reason they could not have tried to do so on purpose.

This comparative reality has, unsurprisingly, not fazed all bombing critics. When Joseph Robert White discovers that small-caliber (37mm) flak guns also defended IG Farben, he deems it "most likely" that some protected Birkenau as well, and then criticizes Stuart Erdheim for not mentioning them. But Erdheim, like all bombing proponents, was not interested in German defenses at a target five miles from Birkenau unless they directly affected the death camp. White makes the same extrapolation for the barrage balloons ringing Farben, though no source has ever confirmed balloons at Birkenau.³² When survivor Liana Millu sees them rise "in the sky over Auschwitz," she has just completed a nearly two-hour march away from the death camp, to which she always refers in her memoir as Birkenau.³³

³⁰ Erdheim, 'Could the Allies Have Bombed Auschwitz-Birkenau?', pp. 154-5.

³¹ *The Bombing of Auschwitz*, ed. Neufeld and Berenbaum, p. 7.

³² White, 'Target Auschwitz,' 54-76.

³³ L. Millu, *Smoke Over Birkenau* (Evanston, 1998), pp. 133-4.

Perhaps the best evidence that Birkenau was not high up on the Nazis' strategic defense list is the stunning aerial photograph of 500-pound bombs dropping toward the Farben plant on September 13, 1944. Because the bombing run happened to begin well to the west of the plant, directly over Birkenau, the crematoria are clearly visible below. Yet there is another reason we can see crematoria II and III so clearly: unlike many targets that were bombed, no smoke screens obscured Auschwitz-Birkenau.³⁴

The entire debate over bombing Auschwitz has been obscured by smoke - the smoke of those who would have us believe that this was not a missed opportunity, but an opportunity that never existed because this particular target was just too difficult, too risky, and far too superfluous to the war. However, looking back on World War II, indeed looking back on the whole 20th century, Auschwitz simply looms too large for us not to ask why nothing was done about it.

The film that I have recently completed work on with Stuart Erdheim, entitled *They Looked Away*, attempts to resolve the issue through comparative analysis, the meeting point of counterfactual inquiry and good historical methodology. If, it asks, the Allies could accurately bomb the V-1 weapons plant at Buchenwald and not hurt inmates in the adjacent concentration camp, why not Birkenau? If they could destroy a narrow submarine in heavily defended Toulon harbour; or pinpoint a cracking plant inside the third-best defended target in Europe - the Ploesti oil fields of Romania - could they not have done the same for four large crematoria with protruding smokestacks?

To answer those questions, the director interviewed hitherto silent sources. World War II photographic interpreters, including Dino Brugioni, insisted that they could easily have picked out the crematoria on the maps available. Pilots and bombardiers asked to analyze the layout and defenses of Birkenau and compare them to their actual missions all concluded that a raid was possible and its chances for success would have been high. Of course the perils of using testimony given half a century after the fact and filtered through Holocaust representations like *Schindler's List* could be the topic of an article by itself. But the point here is that until now a debate has raged with little consultation of its expert witnesses. Why not?

The major reason, I would argue, is that bombing critics largely avoid comparative history. Instead they draw their conclusions concerning target complexity on the basis of what Allied leaders themselves said, or by stretching the limits of objectivity and methodological practicality to suit the argument they have already decided upon. Thus Birkenau has become perhaps the most studied target in post-WW II history. With this much attention, one can surely find a good explanation for why the Allies did not bomb it.

³⁴ This photograph is used on the back of the jacket of *The Bombing of Auschwitz*, ed. Neufeld and Berenbaum.

Comparative historical methodology is also crucial in evaluating the argument that bombing Auschwitz would have constituted an "unprecedented military diversion" from the all-consuming war effort. This is clearly a more sensitive issue, since it seems to undermine the heroism and sacrifice of the Allied forces. World War II was a long, hard slog both for the Western and Soviet Allies, and as late as the winter of 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge, the outcome was hardly assured. Nothing could be spared that was not aimed at the ultimate military victory. As one author writes: "The Allied bombing strategy was totally directed toward destroying Nazi fuel supplies, their synthetic oil industries,...and their communication and transport lines wherever possible."³⁵

Yet when put to the test of comparative history, this argument too fails miserably. As David Wyman showed a quarter century ago and we show in *They Looked Away*, airdrops to Polish insurgents during the fall 1944 Warsaw Uprising were merely a symbolic means for the Allies to demonstrate support for the Poles, whom Allied leaders knew had no chance of defeating the Nazis. They nonetheless cost the lives of several pilots, destroyed bombers, and kept significant airpower out of regular operation for days on end. Similarly, the Roberts Commission established in 1943 to prevent airmen from destroying cultural artefacts was hardly conducive to winning the war as quickly as possible; and it put many pilots at greater risk. As proof that the Allies did make diversions when they wanted to, Wyman cited Assistant Secretary of War McCloy's unilateral removal of the medieval German town of Rothenburg from the target list.³⁶ One could argue too that the U.S. government's belated establishment of the War Refugee Board in January 1944, which saved some 200,000 Jews, belies the contention that the only way to stop the Holocaust was to win the war. And as our documentary film shows, if the British could spare a fleet of Wellington bombers to save starving nomadic Bedouins in southern Arabia six weeks before D-Day, why could they not have done something about Birkenau?

Genocide is a complicated business - it always seems to run up against perceived political and strategic interests. Yet doing something about it, as this paper has in part tried to show, is not a futile business. In central Africa where it began, 25,000 people were protected by the mere 500 U.N. personnel who remained in Rwanda. Evidently the Hutu militias were reluctant to massacre Tutsi if foreigners - armed or unarmed - were present. Raoul Wallenberg's safe houses in Budapest operated similarly. And in Iraq Saddam Hussein stopped gassing Kurds once American leaders finally began speaking out against it.³⁷ In all these cases, as would have been the case with the bombing of Auschwitz, political will, not lack of knowledge, mili-

tary wherewithal, or fear of diverting important resources, made the difference between life and death for millions of innocent people.

Such an argument, of course, will always be subject to criticism since it ultimately concerns what could have happened rather than what actually did. Yet as this paper has tried to show, comparative history represents a sound methodological compromise to problems of counterfactual inquiry. As long as one is dealing with an event that never happened, there is always the possibility of asking about a similar event that did. In the case of *They Looked Away*, these questions not only served to undermine arguments against the bombing of Auschwitz, but they also introduced new sources into the debate. The filmmakers knew, for example, that having the squadron leader of the highly successful Buchenwald raid explain how he destroyed the weapons plant and avoided the camp would be far more compelling than scholarly deliberation over whether the term "precision bombing" even applies to WW II.³⁸ In the visual medium, how ideas are communicated is crucial. But the idea itself of comparing the Buchenwald attack to a potential Birkenau one seems not to have occurred to most bombing critics.

Instead the bombing of Auschwitz debate continues to swirl around operational issues and intractable questions about efficacy, despite the fact that Allied leaders never responded to the many requests to bomb the camp in the manner they did for everything that was bombed in World War II: by ordering a target study. The only explanation that I have been able to find for this has to do with the perilous freedom of counterfactual inquiry. Whenever you ask a question about something that never took place, you have to analyze all possible reasons why it did not take place, including those given by the very people who had the power to make history turn out differently. By choosing among the various contingencies we risk turning historical research into a process of elimination rather than discovery. In the end, the most we filmmakers could allow ourselves to say about why Auschwitz was not bombed was that the political mentality was not there to make it happen, just as it was not there for Rwandan Tutsis fifty years later.

Of course, conventional history is hardly unfaultable either. Nevertheless, it seems more acceptable to criticize the flaws and prejudices in explanations of historical outcomes, than to gauge why one factor is more likely to have obstructed a certain ending than another. So despite the promise of comparative methodology in broaching "what if" questions, I do not expect such queries to gain full academic respectability any time soon. But our understanding of the past, and consequently our ability to draw moral lessons from it, would be gravely impoverished without counterfactual inquiry. The history of genocide in the world since the Allies turned their backs on Auschwitz seems pretty clear confirmation of that.

35 W. J. vanden Heuvel, 'Comments on Michael Beschloss' *The Conquerors*, *The Newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* (March 2003), p. 33.

36 Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, p. 305.

37 Power, "A Problem from Hell," p. 507.

38 On this debate see, for example, Tami Davis Biddle's contribution to *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?*, ed. M. J. Neufeld and M. Berenbaum (New York, 2000), pp. 35-51.