

The Nazi Extermination Camps and the Ally to the East: Could the Red Army and Air Force Have Stopped or Slowed the Final Solution.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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[Figures]

In her now standard work on the history of the Holocaust, the Israeli historian Leni Yahil asked why official recognition of the ongoing mass murder did not lead to rescue and cessation of the killings. "Why," she asked, "were the Nazis able to continue the implementation of the final solution of the problem of European Jewry until the end of the war almost without impediment?"¹ During the war and in Anglo-American scholarly and public discourse about it afterward, the phrase "the Allies" came to be understood to mean only the Western two-thirds of the anti-Hitler coalition. The debate about what "the Allies" could have done to stop or hinder the murder of the Jews also remained a solely "Anglo-American" discussion.² Hence it has neglected the Soviet Union, the wartime ally with the largest military forces on land and in the air and nearest to the Nazi extermination camps and killing fields. Leading historians of the Soviet military in World War II or of the Holocaust have not discussed what the Soviet armed forces could have done to stop the Holocaust.³ This **[End Page 913]** gap, which has only become more glaring in light of recent scholarly developments, needs to be closed.

Historians of German policy and strategy have demonstrated that the history of World War II and of the Holocaust must be understood in close connection with each other.⁴ Furthermore, historians in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany have pointed out the Eastern Front's centrality to the war as a whole, thereby displacing earlier, more provincial Anglo-American narratives.⁵ This deepened focus both on the intersection of the war and the Holocaust and on the Eastern Front impels us to address the same questions regarding "Auschwitz and the Allies" to the Soviet military that have been addressed to the policies of the United States and Britain. Lastly, research of the past two decades has shown that the Allies, in particular the intelligence services of Britain and the United States, were better informed about many details of the Holocaust than was previously thought.

Discussion about what the Soviet Union could have done to stop the Holocaust should begin with the recognition of the following facts about the Eastern Front in World War II. As Gerhard Weinberg succinctly puts it, from 22 June 1941 to May 1945, "the majority of the fighting of the whole war took place on the Eastern Front: more people fought and died there than on all the other fronts of the war around the globe put together."⁶ As a result of **[End Page 914]** the racial "war of extermination" that Hitler waged against what the Nazis called the *Untermenschen* of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, historians now believe that 25 million citizens of the Soviet Union were killed; at most one-third were military personnel.⁷ Yet this inclusion of the Eastern dimensions of the war has not yet extended to research on the Soviet military and the Holocaust. Martin Gilbert's 1982 book, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, examined the policies of the United States and Great Britain and set the pattern for the subsequent debate. This Western-centric view has become increasingly difficult to sustain in light of the above-mentioned work on the importance of the Eastern Front. Even now, in 2003, there is no scholarly debate or extensive literature about what the Soviet armed forces could have done to stop the Holocaust.

Though we do not have a book devoted solely to what the Soviet leadership knew about the Final Solution, there is good reason to assume that they knew quite a bit. First, Richard Breitman and Walter Laqueur have shown that British...

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¹ Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 404.

² See Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981), but also the use of the term "Allies" in Robert Rozett's excellent "Bibliographical Essay" in *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, ed. Walter Laqueur, assoc. ed. Judith Tydor Baumel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 730–31; Michael J. Neufeld and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *The Bombing of Auschwitz: Should the Allies Have Attempted It?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Richard Levy, "The Bombing of Auschwitz: A Critical Analysis," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 10, 3 (1996): 267–98; and Robert Herzstein, "Is It Time to Stop Asking Why the West Failed to Save More Jews?" *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 12, 2 (Fall 1998): 326–38.

³ On the Soviet war effort, see John Erickson, *Stalin's War with Germany: The Road to Stalingrad* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); and *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, 4 (Fall 2003): 913–30.



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