

The Lesson From Pope Francis and Queen Elizabeth II

During the last year, Pope Francis has spoken out on a number of controversial political issues, including poverty, the environment, immigration, the fate of Christian communities in Arab countries, and the need for peace in the world. He has issued formal statements, most notably his encyclical letter concerning global warming, pollution, and family planning.

More surprisingly, in impromptu remarks while in Turin, Italy, on June 21, 2015, he entered the thorny historical arena with a challenging question. Why didn't the Allied powers bomb the Nazi extermination camps? Those in power at the time, the pope said, had intelligence information that minorities were being transported to concentration camps across Europe. The great powers had photographs of the railroad routes that trains took to the concentration camps, such as Auschwitz, to kill Jews and also Christians, Roma (gypsies), and homosexuals. Why, he asked, did not those powers bomb those railroad routes?

The pope raised a moral and historical question that has troubled many others. The Allied powers were indeed well-informed and had known about the issue since the Polish resistance fighter Jan Karski reported on it in November 1942 to the exiled Polish government in London, and then to Allied leaders including the British government and President Roosevelt. His message concerned the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto and the mass extermination of Jews that was occurring in German-occupied Poland. In spite of the consequent calls in the U.S. and the U.K. for the death camps, especially the three camps of Auschwitz, to be bombed by the U.S. forces, no action was taken.

Three arguments were given for this refusal. The first

argument, one that was relevant for only a few weeks, was made by David Ben-Gurion, then head of the Jewish Agency. He thought it undesirable to bomb places where there were Jews.

However, in a few weeks, he changed his mind when he realized that Auschwitz was a death camp, and he then supported a strike.

The second argument, prevalent in Washington, D.C., was that total concentration should be on winning the war, not on the fate of the Jews. Therefore, resources should not be diverted from that overriding priority of attacking military targets to win the war as quickly as possible.

The third argument, overlapping the second, was that U.S. aircraft did not have the capacity to make air raids on the camps, and in any case, it was difficult to do so, and there was little likelihood of success. The main person making this argument was John J. McCloy, U.S. assistant secretary of war, who held that bombings were impracticable, could be done only by diversion of considerable air support, and would have doubtful success. His responsibility for the refusal to bomb is recognized, but more senior officials including Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and even President Roosevelt, were involved in the decision.

The McCloy argument is at best specious reasoning. The U.S. Fifteenth Air Force was engaged in a bombing campaign in the area near Auschwitz. From June to November 1944, more than 2,800 U.S. bombers were active in the area. On June 26, 1944, B-17 heavy bombers flew close to three rail lines to Auschwitz, and the next day, the Fifteenth bombers flew along those lines to bomb an oil refinery, the I.G. Farben works, not far from the extermination camp of Auschwitz. George McGovern, the brave pilot of a B-24 Liberator, bombed the oil facilities and later thought, "We should have gone after Auschwitz."

American forces did not bomb the camp of Auschwitz, and most

of it was destroyed by the Germans a day or so before retreating. The Soviet Army liberated it on January 27, 1945.

American forces liberated other concentration and death camps, including Buchenwald on April 11, 1945; Dachau; and Mauthausen.

On April 15, 1945 the British 11th Armored Division liberated the Bergen-Belsen camp, near Hanover, the camp where the 15-year-old Anne Frank and her sister Margot had died a month before. It was not an extermination camp, but 50,000 had died there as a result of dysentery, starvation, or medical experiments conducted on them. The inmates had no food, water, or basic sanitation. About 20,000 Russian prisoners of war there were killed. The British Medical Corps burned the camp to the ground to contain the spread of typhus, from which Anne Frank had died, and nothing remains. Yet, even in 2015, new mass graves have been discovered in the area.

It was an important meaningful gesture that a ceremonial visit on June 26, 2015 was made to Belsen by Queen Elizabeth II and the duke of Edinburgh. She laid a wreath on the monument there and stopped at the stone honoring Anne Frank. The queen did not speak at the place, resembling the behavior of General Eisenhower, unable to describe the horrors he was witnessing when he visited the liberated Ohrdruf camp on April 12, 1945.

The queen's visit is symbolically important not only in itself, but also implicitly to refute and rebuke the atrocious fabrications of Holocaust deniers, such as Mark Weber, director of the Institute for Historical Review, who have argued that the image of Belsen is essentially a product of hateful wartime propaganda.

The remarks made and the question posed by Pope Francis, and the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Belsen, remind the world today of the hatred and intolerance of extremist forces in the past. Today, there are echoes of the past Nazi brutalities in the actions and rhetoric of Islamist terrorists. The pattern

in past and present is similar: mass graves, indiscriminate murders, villages and towns burned, historic sites destroyed, barbarism at the gates of civilization, the misuse of children to commit war crimes, the extent of human evil and depravity.

In his speech on June 4, 2009 at the camp of Buchenwald, where 56,000 had been murdered, President Barack Obama was conscious of the Nazi crimes and of the need to be vigilant about the spread of evil in our own time. At a moment when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is expanding its control of territory and when European and American youngsters are joining IS and becoming jihadists, the Western world must recall the results of evil. The lesson must be learned. The Western democracies must act decisively to counter Islamist terrorism and overcome those who exhibit and are eager to implement their capacity for evil and anti-Semitism.

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