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Michael Fleming

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

At the beginning of the 1980s two books were published that have shaped both scholarly and popular understandings of the Holocaust ever since. Walter Laqueur's *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's 'Final Solution'* in 1980 was followed by Martin Gilbert's *Auschwitz and the Allies* in 1981. Laqueur demonstrated that 'news of the "final solution" had been received in 1942 all over Europe', and sought to explain why this information was 'frequently misunderstood' (Laqueur 1998: 197). The reasons advanced by Laqueur have proven invaluable, as scholars have attempted to understand contemporary responses to the Holocaust. Gilbert's text covered similar ground to Laqueur, and there is a frequent overlap of source material and similar understandings of this material.

Gilbert's study focused specifically on Allied knowledge of Auschwitz, and claimed that '[i]t was not until the summer of 1944 that the Allies knew that Jews were being deported to Auschwitz from throughout Europe, and were being murdered there' (Gilbert 2001b: viii). Gilbert situates his study within the wider context of Nazi racial policy, and Allied knowledge of, and responses to, this policy, providing arguments that continue to exert influence on how the history of knowledge of the camp is understood. The plausibility of his contention that the fact that Auschwitz also functioned as a death camp for Jews was unknown in the West until the summer of 1944 is echoed within scholarly discourse on contemporary Western knowledge of the Holocaust in general. The characteristics of this discourse, popularized by Laqueur, have been examined by Kalb (2003: 7) in his discussion of journalism and the Holocaust. Kalb argued that publicising news of the Holocaust was constrained by the following issues:

1. The Nazis attempted to conceal their actions.
2. The Allies were intent on winning the war (consideration of the destruction of Europe's Jews was a 'side' issue).
3. Anti-Semitism in the West undermined efforts to publicize Nazi atrocities against Jews and respond supportively.

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4. The crime was so enormous that it was ‘unbelievable’.
5. The story of the Holocaust was an inside story (both in that it was ‘inside’ information, and in that news of the Holocaust was published inside newspapers, rather than in prominent front-page positions). Kalb (2003: 9) suggested that for journalists with inside knowledge ‘it feels uncomfortable leading the parade – much more comfortable simply covering it objectively’.

Laqueur (1998: 201–2) also drew attention to the fact that ‘neither the United States Government, nor Britain, nor Stalin showed any pronounced interest in the fate of the Jews’, and argued that ‘even after it had been accepted in London and Washington that the information about mass slaughter was correct, the British and US governments showed much concern that it should not be given too much publicity’.

Since Gilbert wrote in 1981, subsequent scholars such as Bauer (1997),¹ Conway (1997), Van Pelt (2002), Linn (2004) and Medoff (2011) have endorsed Gilbert’s argument that the West first knew of Auschwitz in June 1944 with the dissemination of a report on the camp transmitted by two Jewish escapees, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler; a further report from two later Jewish escapees, Czesław Mordowicz and Arnošt Rosin; and a report written in December 1943 and January 1944 by a Polish escapee, Jerzy Tabeau.² Linn (2004: 4) writes, ‘The Vrba/Wetzler report is the first document about the Auschwitz death camp to reach the free world and to be accepted as credible. Its authenticity broke the barrier of scepticism and apathy that had existed up to that point.’ In noting a ‘barrier of scepticism’, Linn must be referring to information about the camp that did reach the West, but was not fully appreciated. Gilbert (2001) records that the Allies received information about Auschwitz as a death camp for Jews from 1942, but argues that, at the time, the patchwork of data did not create a general understanding of what was happening at the camp. Gilbert (2001: 340–1) concedes, however, that ‘even with the hindsight available in June 1944’ the references to Auschwitz-Birkenau ‘do add up to a definite and detailed picture’, and explains the failure of the Allies to recognize the truth about the camp as being due to failures ‘of imagination, of response, of Intelligence, of piecing together and evaluating what was known, of co-ordination, of initiative, and even at times of sympathy’.

Gilbert’s main argument that the Allies remained unaware of the function of Auschwitz is based on the claim that just seven significant pieces of information had reached the West prior to the Vrba–Wetzler report of June 1944, none of which, ‘for different reasons, made any impact’ (Gilbert 2001: 340).³ They are:

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1. A report from a lady from Sosnowiec, 25 November 1942.⁴
2. A report composed in London by a Polish courier, 18 April 1943.
3. A report in *The Times*, 26 May 1943 (does not mention Auschwitz – but Kraków, ‘where all trace of them [deported Jews] has been lost’).
4. A report in *The Times*, 1 June 1943.
5. A letter from Będzin, 17 July 1943.
6. A report from Bratislava, 1 September 1943.
7. A report printed by the Polish Consulate General in Istanbul in a bulletin entitled *Polska pod okupacją niemiecką*, 15 March 1944.

These seven pieces of information are categorically different. The report from the lady from Sosnowiec, the letter from Będzin and the report from a Polish courier, for example, are source data; that is, they are based on eyewitness testimony. Gilbert does not fully elaborate on how this information was distributed. The reports in *The Times*, in *Polska pod okupacją niemiecką* and in the report from Bratislava are distributed data; that is, they draw on information from prior reports, but Gilbert does not discuss these prior reports, or whether those original data were distributed through other channels. Furthermore, Gilbert’s argument rests, in part, on the belief that the Nazis attempted to conceal the true function of Auschwitz from 1942 when the mass gassing of Jews began. Such an assumption would help support Gilbert’s contention that very little information reached the West.

In fact, Auschwitz, and what was happening there, was well known in the districts surrounding the camp. As Mary Fulbrook (2012: 234) has pointed out, ‘the factory of death at Auschwitz was not hidden away from public visibility in the manner of the ‘Operation Reinhard’ death camps of the east – Bełżec, Treblinka, and Sobibór’. Fulbrook (2012: 230) cites testimony from the Nuremberg trials stating that flames from the camp ‘could be seen as far away as the Upper Silesian city of Kattowitz, some thirty kilometres distant’, and that there was a ‘drifting smell of burning flesh from the area of the camp’. Information about the murder of Jews at Auschwitz was delivered to the Jewish Agency in the autumn of 1942 by the lady from Sosnowiec, as noted by Gilbert. Information about the camp was also delivered to the Polish Underground in Warsaw and forwarded to London during 1942.⁵

Following Gilbert’s *Auschwitz and the Allies*, Van Pelt (2002: 145), in his book *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial*, argues that ‘in 1943, when the four crematoria came into operation in Birkenau, the name “Birkenau” occasionally surfaced in relation to the Holocaust, but no one connected it with Auschwitz.’ Even if its veracity remains highly questionable, such a statement only makes sense if the nature of

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Auschwitz is thought to have remained unknown until the dissemination of the Vrba–Wetzler report in June 1944.⁶ Van Pelt continues this line of argument, contending that

[t]here remained a kind of interpretative ‘gap’ between the few accounts of the camp at Auschwitz as a particularly violent concentration camp meant mainly for Polish resisters, Birkenau as a destination for Jews of unknown geographical location, the Holocaust in general, and the town of Auschwitz as a site of massive industrial activity.

These claims can only be made if one ignores the information forwarded to the Polish Government in Exile by the Polish Underground (or presumes that it stalled with that government), the BBC broadcasts and articles published in Western newspapers on the camp (starting in November 1942), and gives no consideration to the impact of British censorship.

Gilbert’s argument that representatives of the US and the UK governments were not informed about the true nature of the camp was also adopted by David Engel in his pioneering two-volume study of the Polish Government in Exile and Jews (1987 and 1993), in which he claimed that the Polish government was in possession of information about Jews at Auschwitz, but chose not to publicise it.⁷ In contrast, however, Richard Breitman (1996: 177–9) shows that the Polish Government in Exile *did* pass on information about the camp and Jews during 1943 and 1944. Breitman refers to four pieces of data – a report from the head of the Directorate of Civilian Resistance (Kierownictwo Walki Cywilnej) in Poland from 23 March 1943; a document written in London on 18 April 1943 by a Polish courier, which was passed to Dr Ignacy Schwarzbart of the Polish National Council and of the World Jewish Congress; a report that was handed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (United States) in June 1943; and a Polish military intelligence report from summer 1943 that was passed to the US Office of Strategic Services – to argue that ‘Gilbert’s claim that the Allies could not have responded to Auschwitz-Birkenau for the first two years of its existence because of a lack of knowledge will not stand in the light of new evidence’ (Breitman 1996: 180).⁸ In more recent research on German police and German railway communications intercepted by analysts at Bletchley Park, Breitman has argued that such data could have helped construct a picture of what was happening at the camp (Breitman 1999). He shows that through these intercepts the British were able to calculate the death toll of registered prisoners at the camp on 26 September 1942. Unregistered prisoners – that is, the vast majority of Jews killed – were not reported by radio.⁹

Further evidence of Allied knowledge of the camp was revealed in 1999 by Barbara Rogers, who located, at the British National Archives

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in Kew, the memorandum handed by Jewish representatives to President Roosevelt on 8 December 1942, which mentions the slaughter of Jews at the camp. The document was subsequently forwarded by Rabbi Maurice Perlzweig to the British Embassy in Washington and from there to the British Foreign Office. Rogers also highlighted several other pieces of evidence that support the view that the Allies knew what was happening at Auschwitz well before the arrival of the Vrba–Wetzler report in June 1944.

Despite this research, the narrative that the true function of the camp was unknown in the West until June 1944 remains dominant. Tony Kushner (2005: 196) is especially critical of assertions of Auschwitz's 'elusive nature', and contends that 'Anglo-American knowledge of Auschwitz particularly has been subject to ahistorical and incomplete research, overstating its role in the "Final Solution" at the expense of camps such as Treblinka, Sobibór, Bełżec and Chełmno in 1942 and ignoring what was known about it through Polish and other sources'. In raising these issues, Kushner highlights the urgent need for a more thorough and holistic approach to the question of Allied knowledge of Auschwitz, in the wider context of Nazi extermination policy. A further important issue is the significant mismatch between Polish scholarship on Polish knowledge of the camp, which points to the fact that the mass killing of Jews at the camp was well known in Poland, and the narrative that maintains that such knowledge did not penetrate to the West. This mismatch implies either that the Polish Underground (Home Army – *Armia Krajowa*, and its civilian counterpart) failed to forward information, or that the Polish Government in Exile failed to pass it on to its Western allies. If this were the case, as maintained most forcibly by David Engel (1987; 1993) in the context of a broader argument about Jews falling outside Poles' 'universe of obligation', it would have profound implications for understandings of Polish–Jewish relations and the debate on the nature of the Polish Government in Exile.

The hegemony of such a discourse narrows the questions that can be asked; frames understandings of the relationship between Poles, Jews and the Polish Government in Exile; and influences the way in which research is actually conducted. For example, if it is accepted that the Polish Government in Exile and/or the Polish Underground tended to conceal data about the annihilation of Jews, then the search for, and interpretation of, documents that may indicate that the Polish government passed on information may not be undertaken at the same intensity. There are some notable exceptions. Adam Puławski (2009), for instance, has completed some painstaking research tracking the flow of information from Poland to the Polish Government in Exile, and

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argued that news about Jews was marginalized in messages sent to London by the Polish Underground.

Dariusz Stola (1997: 10) has noted that the distribution of news about the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1942 was restricted by Polish Deputy Defence Minister General Modelski. Such findings, however, need to be historicised. Stola (1997: 2–3) has made several important points on Polish information gathering and distribution (see below), including recognising that data passed through several hands before it was considered for dispatch. He also maintains that any judgement about the restriction of the distribution of news about Jews received via secret channels in London in the summer of 1942 has to be understood in the context of the arrest of Swedes and Poles involved in couriering reports out of Poland via Sweden.¹⁰ As Stola argues, this breach in intelligence security has to be taken into consideration when assessing the decision made in London to restrict news distribution. The security of compromised intelligence cells has to be re-established, and normal practice in such circumstances usually includes limiting information distribution until this has been achieved.

In addition, scholarship on knowledge of the camp, and on the Holocaust more generally, has not fully explored the impact of British and American censorship policy, and how this policy impacted on a key gatekeeper of information – the Polish Government in Exile. The assumption to date has been that the Polish Government in Exile was not constrained by its Western allies in reporting what was happening to Jews in Poland. However, I will show in Chapters 2 and 3 of this study that this assumption is faulty. Both the US and the UK governments were concerned that stories about Jews could provoke anti-Semitism on the one hand, and stimulate demands from civil-society activists for rescue and refuge on the other.¹¹

Furthermore, the Polish Government in Exile based in London had to respond to frequent accusations of anti-Semitism from the British press and British parliamentarians, while negotiating the liberal politics of both Britain and the United States, which formally condemned anti-Semitism, though neither country seriously tackled widespread domestic anti-Semitism and anti-alienism.

Any news which the Polish Government in Exile forwarded, or wished to forward and distribute, confronted British and American administrations sensitive to indigenous anti-Semitic sentiment. Consequently, before the claim can be made that the Polish Government in Exile did not forward, or delayed, the forwarding of information about atrocities and the mass killing of Jews to the Allies, it has to be established precisely how information could be received by Poland's British and American

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allies, how it could then be disseminated, and the scope of independence of 'official' Polish publications within a Britain marred by pervasive anti-Semitism and controlled by a 'voluntary' censorship regime. It is also important to assess the kind of information the British and later the Americans actually wanted. In the context of war, the Allies focused on gaining data of military and strategic value.¹² There was, therefore, little demand from the Allies for information about the fate of Poland's and Europe's Jews and, when this sort of information was supplied, it was generally unwanted.¹³

In Chapter 5 I discuss an intelligence report which was extremely widely distributed and formed the basis of a Polish Ministry of Information and Documentation press release in March 1944. Juxtaposing the evidence from the United States and Britain indicates that the specific information it contained about the killing of Jews at Auschwitz was censored, and the British mainstream press reported only a portion of the data that the press release contained. Crucially, it did not publish the main information that the Polish press release sought to publicise: 'It is not possible to estimate the exact figure of people put to death in gas chambers attached to crematoria but it certainly exceeds half a million, mostly Jews, both Polish and from other countries'.¹⁴

The issue of Polish press freedom is especially important given that it is not only serious scholars such as Gilbert (2001) and Rogers (1999b) who highlight that the official English-language publication of the Polish Government in Exile – the *Polish Fortnightly Review* – does not mention the systematic killing of Jews in Auschwitz; Holocaust deniers do also. For Gilbert (2001), the lack of data in the *Polish Fortnightly Review* is to be explained by the lack of knowledge about the camp, while for Rogers (1999b: 94) the *Polish Fortnightly Review* 'is a useful source in establishing what was known by the British government regarding Auschwitz-Birkenau'. But for Holocaust deniers such as Aynat (1991), this silence is used as evidence for the spurious and, in many jurisdictions, criminal claim that the gas chambers did not exist.

The argument developed in Chapter 3 contends that the *Polish Fortnightly Review*, for which the British government (Ministry of Information) 'vetted and approved the source material to be published before it went on sale to the public in Britain' (Rogers, 1999b: 94), is an unsuitable source for trying to establish either Polish or Western knowledge of the systematic killing of Jews at Auschwitz. Instead, the *Polish Fortnightly Review* and the Polish government's Polish-language daily *Dziennik Polski* (*Polish Daily*) should be read with a deep understanding of British censorship policy, of British concerns about publishing news of atrocities and about Jews and of the Polish government's adherence to

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the British censorship regime. Such an approach historicises these two publications, and helps reveal the political context and the constraints under which they were published. Such readings encourage more sensitive thinking about the Polish Government in Exile's policy towards Jews without relying on explanations based on social distance, Polish anti-Semitism and victim competition alone.

The output of the *Polish Fortnightly Review* and *Dziennik Polski* during the war has been repeatedly discussed by scholars. Analysis of these two papers allows an assessment of the information, including about the Holocaust, presented to the general public in Britain by the Polish government. In addition to the *Polish Fortnightly Review* and *Dziennik Polski*, the Polish government also distributed news from Poland through the Polish Telegraphic Agency (PAT). PAT reported on the Holocaust and occasionally on Auschwitz. The news disseminated by PAT was guided, in the main, towards other news agencies (i.e. the press) rather than the general public. Analysis of the existing PAT bulletins released in London and through the Polish Information Center in New York allows a fuller assessment of the kind of data that the Polish government released into various public domains. It also reveals that the press on both sides of the Atlantic had access to more information about the Holocaust, and about Auschwitz, than was printed in newspapers. This discrepancy highlights the degree to which specific news of the Holocaust was marginalised or censored in the mainstream press in Britain and in the United States at various points in time.¹⁵

A further consideration of some importance is the way in which the Polish Government in Exile and its representatives were evaluated and treated by their British allies. It is telling of the climate in Britain in 1941 that Alexander Cadogan, the permanent under-secretary for foreign affairs, was moved to write to other British ministries, advising them that it was

of the highest importance from the point of view of the foreign policy of His Majesty's Government that the status of these Governments [i.e. the various Governments in Exile] should be fully recognised and protected, and their representatives should be treated not merely as the representatives of Foreign Governments, but as Allies.¹⁶

The prior discussion in the Foreign Office on the treatment of these governments was even more frank, and demanded that 'Allied governments and their representatives must be treated with full consideration as Allies and not simply as "damned foreigners"'.¹⁷

Appreciating the British and American contexts in which the Polish Government in Exile and its representatives operated is crucial to

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assessing official Polish responses to information concerning Jews which came from Poland. These contexts cannot, as it is frequently claimed and implied they can, be understood as simply encouraging the Poles to respond to demands for Jewish equality. Nor can Polish revelations about the Jewish tragedy be solely understood as ploys to enhance Polish diplomatic standing in Britain and the US, though both are important considerations. It is vital to take into account the American and British roles in marshalling, choreographing and, indeed, limiting the distribution of information about the destruction of European Jews. I discuss this issue in Chapter 2.

This book, therefore, seeks to fill some major gaps in our understanding of Western knowledge of Auschwitz as a Nazi death camp for Jews, by tracking Polish and other reports about the camp from their source, through intermediaries, to their final dissemination to Western governmental agencies/departments, the pages of newspapers and the airwaves. Most of the reports that Gilbert mentions are far more significant and were distributed more widely, and in different forms, than Gilbert acknowledges. To take one example, the report of a lady from Sosnowiec is the most probable source for an article in the *New York Times* on 25 November 1942, and for the paragraph on the slaughter of Jews at Oświęcim in the memorandum handed to President Roosevelt on 8 December 1942 (see Chapter 4). In addition, a far greater number of reports about the killing of Jews at the camp were available to the public during the war than Gilbert recognises, and these reports featured in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Jewish Chronicle*, the BBC, *Dziennik Polski* and elsewhere. The subscription-only supplement to the *East London Observer* – the *Polish Jewish Observer*, which was first published in February 1942 – provided the most detailed coverage of the plight of Jews in Poland available in Britain. Surprisingly, this newspaper seems to have been overlooked by scholars analysing Western knowledge of the Holocaust and Auschwitz in particular. Since Gilbert and Laqueur wrote, the National Archives in Britain and in the United States have released additional data, and archives in Poland have become more easily accessible, allowing the tracking of some reports from Auschwitz to London and beyond.

In addition, charting the trajectories of specific intelligence reports clarifies and corrects existing knowledge on key documents, and links disconnected Polish- and English-language scholarship. The best example is a report, first cited by Hilberg (1985: 1127), and subsequently referred to by Richard Breitman (1996: 179), which revealed that 468,000 non-registered Jews had been killed at Auschwitz through to September 1942. Drawing on the covering note of Paul Birkland, the

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assistant US military attaché in London, describing the report to his superiors, both Hilberg and Breitman contend that this report was compiled in December 1943 by a Polish intelligence agent, a woman, whom Breitman identifies as Wanda. The date of the report's compilation and the sex of the agent is information which the Poles supplied to the Americans when passing over the document. However, as I show in Chapter 5, it is not true. Polish documents reveal a surprising source, one which the Polish Underground was very keen to conceal. Furthermore, Western scholarship on this report to date has only tracked its distribution to the offices of various US agencies and departments, but in reality it was far more widely distributed. Polish scholarship, in turn, has discussed the source of the document, but has not examined its path to the United States, via Britain.

In the chapters that follow I track, as far as possible, forty-five reports.¹⁸ There is documentary evidence that Western decision makers had the opportunity to become familiar with what was happening at the camp as early as December 1942 and January 1943, and circumstantial evidence that information was handed to the Western Allies earlier, in November 1942. Information about the camp flowed throughout 1943 and into 1944, and there are solid bases for the claim that British and American decision makers were well aware of what was happening at the camp through 1943.

The key argument made in Chapters 4 and 5 is that news of Auschwitz flowed steadily into London from the opening of the camp, and that three phases of information management about the camp can be identified prior to the distribution of the Vrba–Wetzler report (beginning in June 1944). In the first period – from late 1940 to the summer of 1942, knowledge of the camp in the West largely reflected knowledge in Warsaw – it was understood as a harsh concentration camp, primarily for Poles.¹⁹ In the second period, from August 1942 to March 1943, there was a disjuncture between what was known in the West and what was known in Warsaw. News of the mass gassing of Jews had reached London by November 1942, but this information was suppressed by the Polish and, in all probability, the British governments. In the third period running from late March 1943 through to the dissemination of the Vrba–Wetzler report in June–July 1944, the Polish government can be documented as having distributed the reports it received from Poland about the camp. The Western Allies were continuously advised of what was happening at Auschwitz through 1943 and 1944. These reports were suppressed by the British government (and the American government).

The argument that the Polish Government in Exile in London (or the Polish Underground in Poland) withheld information about Auschwitz