

EASTERN EUROPE 1939-1945: CAMPS

An exchange of notes between Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his Private Secretary about the decision not to bomb the camps 18th & 20th September 1944

Catalogue ref: FO 371/42806

Extract a

Private Secretary. 30

Please see minutes on WR 823 attached.

So far as I can discover these plans never were in fact communicated to Air Ministry.

The Minister of State on Sep. 1 (on behalf of S/S) agreed in writing to the S/S for Air that in view of the difficulties of the operation of bombing the camps, represented by the Air Ministry (they said they had no detailed info of the topography) the idea of bombing them might be dropped.

We are therefore technically guilty of allowing the Air Ministry to get away with it without having given them (tho' we had it) the info they asked for as a prerequisite.

In all the circumstances, I think perhaps (tho' I feel a little uneasy about it) we had better let this go by. P.M. 18/9. I think

Extract b

Know enough
about this to
form a view.
Surely this
information was
taken into
consideration when
the decision was
taken not to pursue
the matter? ^{That's the} ^{whole point:} ^{from it, however} ^{if it doesn't.} ^{Pr. 12/19}
Perhaps Service
Liaison Dept could
advise as to
whether this inf.
could make
any difference to the
A.M. attitude. ^{Pr. 12/19}
20/12

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What is this source?

This source is a private exchange of notes between the Prime Minister and his private secretary.

Churchill wrote the first part of this note. His Private Secretary (possibly here Jock Colville) wrote the second part.

What's the background to this source?

In 1942 Hitler's armies had carved out a huge empire in Eastern Europe. During their invasions German forces had taken large number of European Jews as prisoners. At first they were forced into ghettos, used in slave labour or simply shot.

There were many demands for the government to take action on the Jewish issue. Some called for an evacuation programme. Others wanted the RAF to bomb the camps (see the opener source to this investigation).

It's worth knowing that...

The decision not to bomb the camps proved highly controversial then and now. There were major difficulties. The location of the camps meant that bombers would have to fly long distances across well-defended German territory. Losses among bomber crews were very high and this mission would probably have resulted in high casualty rates. Another problem was the difficulty of locating the camps and actually hitting them. Wartime bombing was extremely difficult and bombs were often many miles off target.

How will you use this source?

1. What information did the Air Ministry ask for in this source?
2. Why did they not get it?
3. Would it be an unfair judgement to say that this source shows that the British government did not care about what was happening to the Jews?
4. Can you use this source to support any part of your presentation?