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reviews



Book documents Allied paralysis about the Holocaust

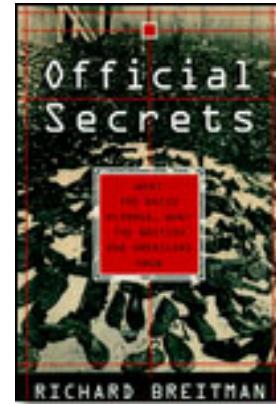
'Official Secrets: What the Nazi's Planned, What the British and Americans Knew'

by Richard Breitman

Hill & Wang, \$25

Review by [Emily Soares](#)

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(CNN) -- Perhaps more than any event in modern history, the Holocaust has broadened the darkest portions of the collective imagination, forcing those who believed their world to be civilized to wrestle with a grimmer reality. Now to the horror of war could be added something else: a precedent that painted us all as potential victims or perpetrators of mass murder. And we have lived with the ugly possibilities ever since.

In the wake of this nightmare, much has been written about how equally monstrous is the fact that the Allies knew -- and took no serious steps -- to rescue Jews. To this body of work, Richard Breitman's new book, "Official Secrets: What the Nazi's Planned, What the British and Americans Knew", brings recently declassified documents and well-considered arguments about what kept those who uncovered the Holocaust from doing something about it.

For Breitman, Allied paralysis comes down to three main circumstances that often worked in concert: First, information about the nature of the "final solution" was not well shared among the British and Americans, or between the

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wartime bureaucracies within each country. In fact, Breitman argues, British intelligence hoarded years' worth of intercepted German radio messages that were desperately needed by those trying to galvanize rescue efforts.

Second, Churchill and FDR were both loath to conduct what they termed "humanitarian missions" in the midst of war; a strategy, they argued, that was on the one hand impractical and on the other, would confirm Nazi propaganda that the Allies were fighting on behalf of the Jews. Along with these "policy" decisions was a reticence to divert resources or loosen immigration policies to allow large numbers of Jews to be given refuge in safe countries.

Then there were those in-the-know who simply chose not to believe what, early in the war, became evident. But noting that bureaucratic idiosyncrasies, state pragmatism, and individual shortcomings helped create the force of inertia that ensured no effective action was ever taken, doesn't fully answer the "why?" Breitman's project begs.

To all of these circumstances, Breitman posits, though he searches for a more righteous answer, one element seems to correspond: a basic anti-Semitism that bought the Nazi position that Jews were an undesirable group with which to align oneself.

Certain aspects of the Allied handling of gathered intelligence are particularly shocking. There was the consistent determination to keep denouncement of Nazi atrocities void of specific reference to Jews. The Moscow declaration, Breitman explains, a document that would have far-reaching effect on how war crimes were prosecuted, made no mention of crimes against Jews. Nor, except in the most cryptic way, did any of the speeches Churchill and FDR made against German mass executions. Most radio reports to America and Germany and newspaper articles were similarly silent about the fact that Jews were being singled out by a grisly Nazi policy.

And most difficult of all is the understanding that it became U.S. and British policy not to push the Nazis and their satellites too hard for release of Jews for fear they really would hand them over, and the Allies would have to provide for them. "...We could not take the risk of the Germans calling our bluff," wrote Richard Law, Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office, when urged to pressure for the release of some Jews.

Breitman points out that those on either side of the Atlantic were not of one mind when it came to how to respond to the Holocaust, but as the war dragged on, bureaucracy and cross purposes, aided by intentional misrepresentation of known facts, assured that no concrete action materialized. Declarations were made and

retreated from, policy changes approved and stalled on, and opportunities for rescue were let go.

Most importantly, "Official Secrets" thoroughly dismisses the argument that the evidence just wasn't there at the time. The statesmen who lacked moral fortitude, the decoders who decided that intelligence was to be hoarded but not used, and those, the greatest number, who thought the whole question was just too indelicate are all given a share in the blame. Breitman shows that blame is not easily assigned, but maddeningly intermingled, as scattered as the many who knew and said nothing and those who didn't say it loud enough. And, he suggests the complete answer to Allied failure in the Holocaust is a subject for much more study. Hundreds of thousands of WWII documents are still classified in Britain and the United States, Breitman tells us. Perhaps the biggest question, then, is why are these documents official secrets after all these years?

Emily Soares is a writer at CNN Interactive. She has written for publications in San Francisco, Hungary, and Russia.

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