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Mass Bombing

Some Moral and Historical Perspectives

Donald M. Schurman

Introduction

This paper was originally delivered at and published by an International Peace Conference in Fiji in January 1985. It was written long before the Canadian War Museum was forced to debate the question of the most appropriate manner in which the contribution of Canadians in Bomber Command should be addressed. My interest in the subject was not to pronounce on the morals of the bombing of civilians, but to try to pinpoint some of the thinking that characterized the attitude of the Royal Air Force and Englishmen and Canadians and their governments towards the campaign. As the paper shows, the Canadians were a part of the Royal Air Force. Quite apart from integration of the Royal Canadian Air Force into the British service, the Canadian air force had not the means or capacity to deliver, by itself, a blow that would have crippled anything significant in Germany. I think that crews were surprised by the now very controversial Dresden Raid of February 1945, but they did not object to doing it. My reference to Kurt Vonnegut's account of the Dresden raid is not an endorsement of him, but a deliberate use of his novelistic skill to focus attention when I was in Fiji as a lecturer among an unknown audience.

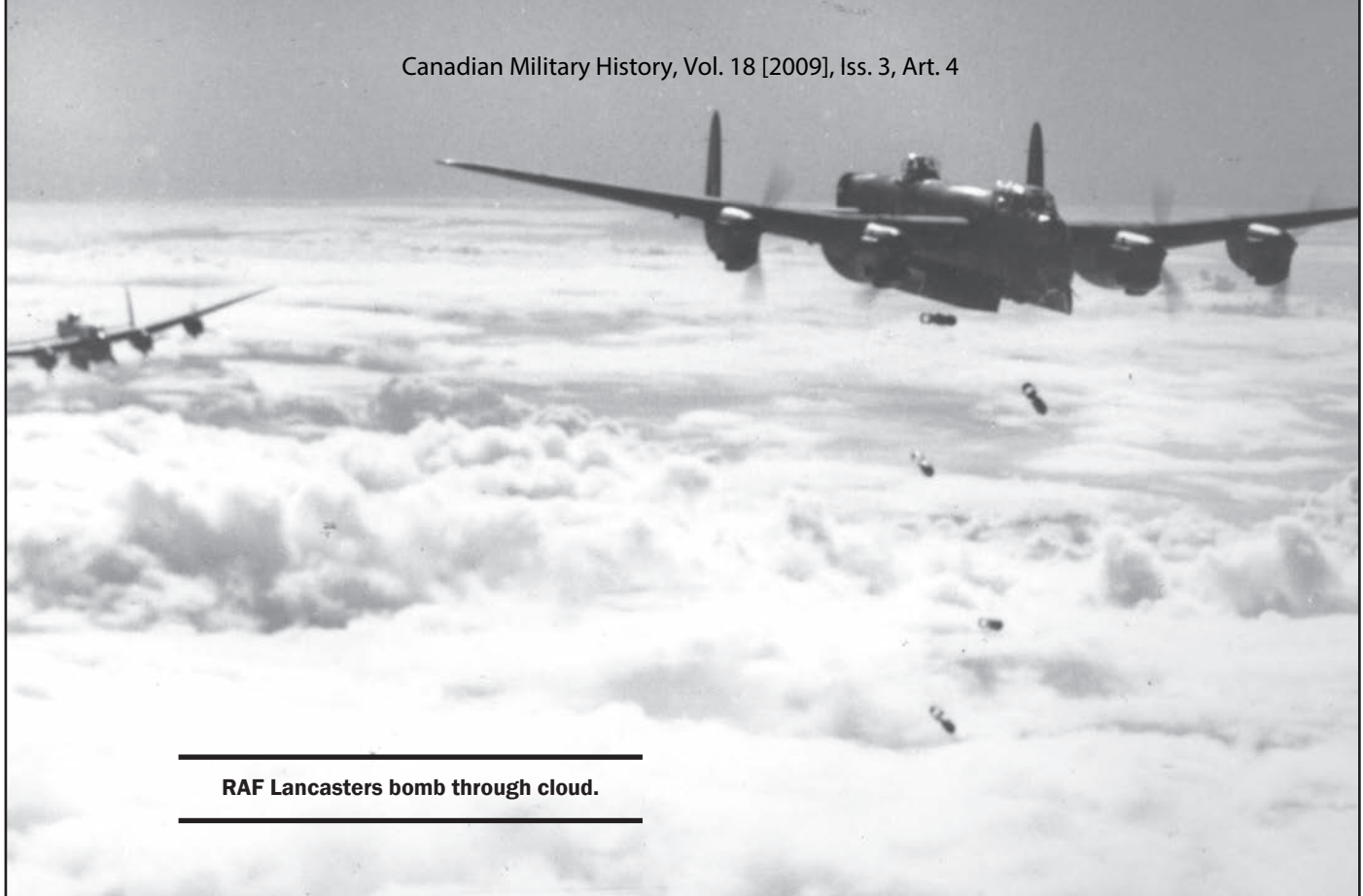
Abstract: This paper is an account by a historian, who participated in the bombing of Germany (1944-45), of attitudes towards the campaign on the part of military personnel at the time and since. It examines the attitudes of the British Government and their military, and comments on the way historians have responded to the evidence since 1945. The problem of responsibility and justification is presented in some of its aspects. The treatment is a mixture of the personal and the professional.

When I began the paper I saw it as an attempt to ask where the bomber offensive had come from, aside from the obvious one of tit for tat. The paper traces the development of the strategic bombing idea through references to the First World War, British air operations in the Middle East in the 1920s, and the Spanish war of 1936-9, and especially by reference to the French airman and author Antoine de St. Exupéry. I do ask the question "what for," but that does not imply any scholarly endorsement of "Don't let's be beastly to the Germans" as Noel Coward wittily put it as some sort of theological point. That was not my idea then, nor is it now.

The fact is that any debate over how much force should be applied at any time, in the middle of a war,

especially the Second World War, implies a luxury of means that we (Sir Arthur Harris) did not have. My paper shows that. Harris, that determined figure, kept himself and his force just ahead of the Luftwaffe and its ground support. My paper, dealing so much with attitude, just manages to include that fact. It could, perhaps, be argued that more resources ought to have gone to the navy. I do not argue it but as a naval historian the idea has attractions for me. On the other hand the idea that the invasion of France would have been successful, or that it could even have been undertaken without Bomber Command seems wrong to me. My opinion is that without Harris's successes the war would have had a much more wearing conclusion, to put it mildly. Harris said, as I note in the paper, that bombers won it. Surely they did. However the moralists raise important questions. The problem is that war is, as James Wolfe put it, "an option of difficulties." To debate those difficulties is possible, it is not possible to ignore them. Moral high ground is a hard place to find in war. However, Richard Overly's careful book *Why the Allies Won*, comes closest to supplying the fine print for my generalizations.

* * * * *



RAF Lancasters bomb through cloud.

Certainly the most provocative book about mass bombing in the Second World War was written by the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut. It was about Dresden, and entitled *Slaughterhouse Five*.¹ In it he quotes two military men commenting on the raid on Dresden as presented in the book by David Irving on the same subject.² They were Lieutenant-General Ira C. Eaker, USAF retired and Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, KCB, KBE, DFC, AFC. He begins with Eaker:

I find it difficult to understand Englishmen or Americans who weep about enemy civilians who were killed but who have not shed a tear for our gallant crews lost in combat with a cruel enemy...I think it would have been well for Mr. Irving to have remembered, when he was drawing the frightful picture of the civilians killed at Dresden, that V-1s and V-2s were at that very time falling on England, killing civilian men, women and children indiscriminately, as they were designed and launched

to do. It might be well to remember Buchenwald and Coventry too.

As Vonnegut repeatedly says, 'So it goes.'

What Air Marshal Saundby said, among other things, was this:

That the bombing of Dresden was a great tragedy none can deny. That it really was a military necessity, few, after reading this book, will believe. It was one of those terrible things that sometimes happen in wartime, brought about by an unfortunate combination of circumstances. Those who approved it were neither wicked nor cruel, though it may well be that they were too remote from the harsh realities of war to understand fully the appalling destructive power of air bombardment in the spring of 1945.

'So it goes.'³

Vonnegut later introduces this dialogue:

'Americans have finally heard about Dresden,' said Rumfoord [a would-be military historian] twenty-three years after the raid. 'A lot of them know now how much worse it was than Hiroshima. So I've got to put something about it in my book. From the official Air Force standpoint, it'll all be new.' 'Why would they keep it a secret so long?' said Lily.

'For fear that a lot of bleeding hearts,' said Rumfoord, 'might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do.'

It was now that Billy Pilgrim spoke up intelligently.

'I was there,' he said.⁴

I was there too.

A subject that is cross-disciplinary and one that takes an historian outside his accustomed accumulative and clinical or analytical roles invites caution. However, it is my view that it may be wise to let emotional overtones ply more freely than is customary with historical papers if we are to get more balanced assessments

from our consultations with the past. Furthermore, it may be wise to look at the consequences of having great technological capacities lying ready to hand in times of desperation. What military men, politicians, and indeed populations do in these circumstances seems to me to be eminently worthy of discussion in this nuclear age. Indeed, it may be that the history of a non-nuclear age may have something to teach this present time. Finally, it should be said that this paper does not search for scapegoats. It is not a rush to judgment. Questioning the effects of the bomber campaign, and the origins of its programmes, ought not to be construed as an attack on the participants, certainly not on the motives of my surviving friends or those of our dead comrades. Hitler's Reich seemed to me then, as it does now, to have been an infamous political horror. I did not regard my own country or the United Kingdom,

or even the United States in this light then, nor do I now. However, as for old veterans who look at any attempt to discuss their past as an attack on some sort of Holy Grail, and who regard criticism as some sort of treason, I have nothing to say except that it is 40 years on, and a new generation must be served.

On the other hand I have some right to speak. I was a member of the mass bombing forces in the war against Hitler. I was at Dresden, overhead on its night of terror.⁵ I have had my face slapped by a German woman who was a victim of bombing when she learned what I had done. My daughter-in-law was born of German parents. I have had German students. I have also taught the history of the so-called "Strategic Bombing Offensive" to graduate and undergraduate since 1962. I was also a friend of one of the few British people with the courage

to denounce mass bombing when it took place. Both during the war and after it Captain (later Sir) Basil Liddell Hart denounced this, what he regarded as a retrograde method of warfare.⁶ I have remembered with some sense of frustrated misgiving my own part in it. On the other hand I still remember my own comrades with affection, and I attended a reunion of my own bomber "crew" in 1984. I do differ from supporters of the bombing offensive in that I do not resent present day attacks on it because some of my friends were killed carrying it out. Finally, I have made some attempt to keep up with the burgeoning historical literature on the subject. After all I am an historian by profession.

But I would not undervalue the usefulness of having a participant trained, as an historian, consider this matter. On a topic like this one is inclined to get views on air war

US Army Air Force heavy bombers drop high explosive and incendiary bombs on Dresden, 15 February 1945.



US Air Force Photo 56330 AC



Air Vice-Marshal C.M. "Black Mike" McEwen (right), the commander of 6 Group RCAF, prepares for a flight in a Lancaster.

from life.⁷ We were not mindful of those ghosts, whom our ground crews had known personally, when we set out on trips.⁸ Furthermore, there was the fact that the opposition was still there, even in the winter of 1945, with real anti-aircraft fire and real night-fighters to greet those who thought the war was over. Finally, I freely admit to strong feelings of satisfaction with the intelligently deployed techniques of Bomber Command generally, and with the personal and practical performance of my own crew in particular.

When it ended and we got on the boat for Canada, Bomber Harris came to say good-bye. He said to us in the mess on the *Empress of Something* or other, that "when we came to dandle our children on our knee, and they asked 'what did you do in the last war, daddy?' you can tell them that you won it, because you did."

In my case, for the moment, the war ended there. The university that was to be my life gobbled up my time. I did think about the war from time to time. A "sincere" but juvenile essay on the bombing of Dresden got me a well-deserved D+ from my English professor. I took the hint and majored in history. Later I went to England again, in a new capacity, that of a research student in history. During my time in Cambridge I read the reports of the Nazi atrocities written up for the Nuremberg trials until I was too disgusted to read more. It did, then, occur to me more strongly that bombing women and children was not too civilized an occupation. I noticed also that Bomber Command did not seem to be receiving the accolades that a successful and decisive campaign seemed to demand. What was the matter with us? As I began to think

from people who have had no direct connection with it, except that they have developed, in these tense times, a sense of immediacy about the need to control war from the air; or conversely, one gets talks from those who want to justify the use of air threat as a deterrent, and who are associated in some way with the development of public military policy. Both kinds of activists have laudable objectives. I am different only in that my present sense of immediacy comes from my memory of past involvement as a very ordinary participant and this experience is filtered through subsequent professional study as the facts have become more generally available.

Let us go back in time. During the war, of course, every airman who

could think had some idea of what we were doing. Nobody was much fooled by talk concerning military targets around which civilian houses "just happened" to be grouped making it unavoidable that some of them would get the odd stray bomb. I sometimes thought about that, as did most of us. However, we were very young and we thought it a good idea at the time to kill Germans. We also had it in mind that the British had had a good dose of bombing in 1940-41. Some people knew about the German bombing of Warsaw and Rotterdam. It was retaliation. We also knew that on our squadron (in 1945) there lingered the ghosts of those who had perfected the system back in 1943, and they were not simply retired from operations, they were retired

Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre (CFJIC) PC 2479

about it, it seemed that there were three central questions. Who ordered it? Was it right? What good did it do for the war effort? These are still very difficult questions. At one level, of course, Harris ordered it, but a little reflection makes it clear that he did not rule the British Cabinet. Generally speaking the moral question, then as now, was sluffed off on the basis of the notion that it was total war, and after all, it was comfortably but uncritically held, the Germans began the bombing. This was denied by Liddell Hart.⁹ Practically speaking it was held to have been essential for eventual victory. Many intelligent people believed this then, and they believe it still. The question of my own responsibility I have lived with, as have all the surviving members of the Bomber Force then and now, some more successfully than others.¹⁰ Some of us are not such passionate devotees of pursuing every "war criminal" as others have been.

I got down to reading the evidence. What was the evidence? There was F.J.P. Vale's *Advance to Barbarism*,¹¹ in which the whole concept of unrestricted warfare against civilians was presented as a return to the days before war had any rules at all, any code, or any of what might be called the Red Cross mentality. The whole thing was indicated as a policy which the British and the Americans had been perfectly willing to execute, and did, despite the fact that it was a barbarous way to make war. Another book that became available then was Hans Rumpf's *The Bombing of Germany*.¹² Rumpf had been a German urban survival expert, who, as

professionally and dispassionately as he could, chronicled what happened to Germany from the underneath person's point of view. When I finished reading Rumpf I could no longer be horrified by tales of frying flesh. As I had discovered before in reading the Nuremberg trials documents, the human mind can only take in so much horror reading. Many people seem to have had a similar reaction to such compulsive and detailed fact-finding.¹³

However, help was at hand for confused airmen like me. Books on the

bomber offensive began to surface. As mentioned, Hans Rumpf's book came on the market giving the picture from the enemy on the ground. The four-volume official history, entitled *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany* was published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, over the signatures of Noble Frankland and Sir Charles Webster.¹⁴ Also, in 1962 R.H.S. Crossman, the British Labour M.P., wrote in *Esquire* of his horror at what had happened at Dresden - of how an innocent, non-industrial town was flattened and treated to



CFJIC PL 40683

The pilot and bomb-aimer of a 428 Squadron Lancaster stand beneath the open bomb bay of their aircraft prior to an attack on an oil refinery in the Ruhr in late 1944. The short range to the target allowed a full load to be carried, in this case 500-pound, high explosive, general purpose bombs.

round the clock bombing by both the Americans and us, and how a firestorm had made the old historic city one vast flaming coffin.¹⁵ It had, it turned out, happened before at Hamburg.¹⁶ However, Hamburg was an important port. Crossman was an indignant man, and he was interested in assigning responsibility. Perhaps this Labour politician was aiming at Churchill?

In any event I had some idea of what the issues were, and of what the recipients on the ground thought of it all. When David Irving's book on Dresden came out, I was advanced enough in knowledge that he did not tell me anything significant that I had not known before. The exact casualty figures are still disputed. Estimates of the Dresden dead have been put up to over 200,000, and down to about 30,000.¹⁷ Every dead man counts in Heaven's scheme of things, but the numbers game does not alter the moral problem, does it? In all the war Bomber Command lost some 50,000 men.

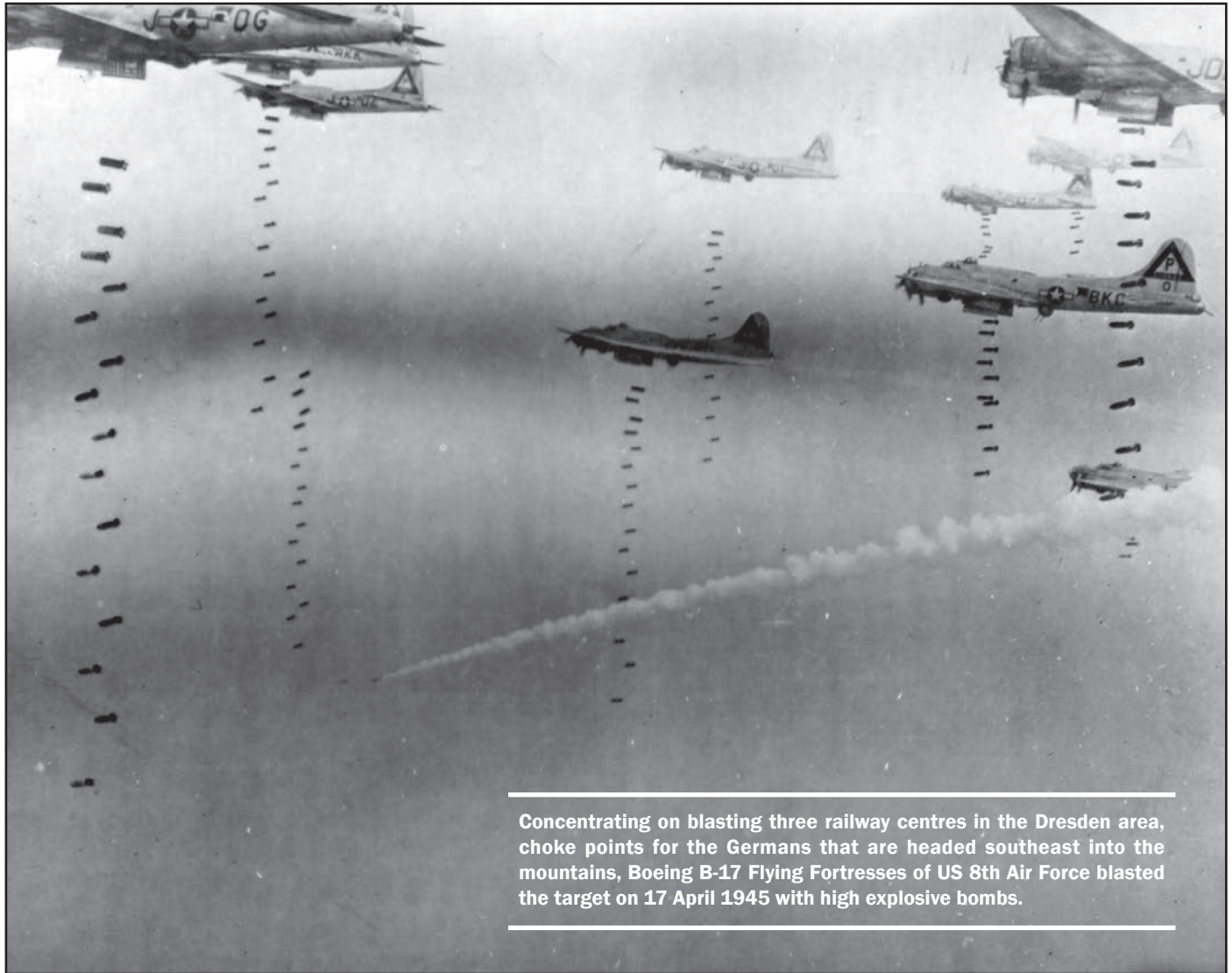
Almost immediately after the war in 1945 the Americans conducted and published most of the results of a survey of strategic bombing.¹⁸ It has since been expanded and amplified with comment by David MacIsaac.¹⁹ As Middlebrook and Everitt indicate, it is surprising that with the full and intact records available nothing similar has ever been attempted for Bomber Command.²⁰ Whatever the reason for this, it had the result that as Chester Wilmot's 1952 book, *The Struggle for Europe*²¹ set the boundaries for the general European strategic debate for the next 30 years, so the American bombing survey established American credentials as specialized bombing experts almost by default. Recently, the Ultra part of that body of information has become available²² and from this source it can be seen that the dominant power of American "strategic" bombing is founded largely on the immediate speculations of American

air propagandists. The idea that its precision capacities were highly developed seems to have been meekly accepted by many Americans. English and other air historians have not strongly questioned this idea.²³ It is important to note that this does not involve an argument between advocates of precision bombing and area bombing at the core. It is really an argument that American air forces flying to targets that the Germans perceived as vital or strategic, invited air combat, and from *that* would flow "command of the air" consequent on the decimation of the fighter section of the Luftwaffe. Referring to the "Ultra" report²⁴ it is extraordinary how arguments about command of the air over Germany are interspersed with arguments about how this fight over Germany took air command away from the Luftwaffe on the Russian Front. Furthermore, German speculation about the effect of particular raids is meshed with American speculations about the same things: that is to say, if a raid was supposed to achieve such and such an effect is proven to have occurred.²⁵ Harris, with his photographs of night bombing, did better than that - he provided evidence of his own Command's limitations as a strike force. The United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) had the opposite object and achieved what it set out to do. Of course the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) played a large part in stretching the Luftwaffe, but so did the Russians, the Royal Navy, the Mediterranean Front, the Scandinavian Front and, of course, the persistent attacks of Bomber Command. Quite apart from questions of morality and target utility it is difficult to determine whether the interdiction of parts and fuel moving to Luftwaffe squadrons was more due to attacks on communications centres (cities) than it was to direct attacks on refineries and oil fields. Cumulatively there can be no doubt but that Germany's pressing need to

defend its cities contributed to the total stretching of German resources which was the best help that could be given the Russians who were, after all, the ones who defeated the Wehrmacht. This paragraph is merely to show that the argument between "precision" and "area" bombing is mostly a sham. The only question that any moralist or indeed realist can ask, once air war and bombing has begun is, what determined target selection, terror, or military purposes (with communications, strategic supplies, and the attempt to secure "command of the air" over Germany) is included in the term 'military'? The choice was not, as will be shown, clear cut. But it was largely determined by past thinking about bombing policy.

Who said anything against the bombing of Germany during the war? I discovered that George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, had asked, in the House of Lords, what the Government thought they were doing at this mass bombing game. He was supported by Lord Lang, the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury in the House of Lords.²⁶ Bell also carefully distanced himself from any idea of attacking the bombing of military targets, or of the airmen who were the agents of the government. But he thought the idea that to strike an industry justified the obliteration of a city somewhat out of proportion. He asked whether or not "old German towns" might not be next attacked. Archbishop Lord Lang supported Bell and argued against the tendency to "gloat" over the capacity for retaliation, which he said, showed "real moral deterioration." Viscount Cranborne, replying for the government, denied deliberate terror, and promised no abatement due to the duty to "our own people, their allies, and to the world. (Cheers)."²⁷ British member of Parliament Richard Stokes also spoke out in 1943. He said, among other things, "we have forgotten our aim, the preservation of civilization."²⁸ Similarly, Captain Basil Liddell

US Air Force Photo 57193 AC



Concentrating on blasting three railway centres in the Dresden area, choke points for the Germans that are headed southeast into the mountains, Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses of US 8th Air Force blasted the target on 17 April 1945 with high explosive bombs.

Hart questioned the wisdom of the Government's policy. He thought that Churchill should consider that bombing (and blockade) "tend to leave a deeper scar, and have a more degrading effect, on civilized life, than what has been experienced in any modern war."²⁹ He thought blitzkrieg, conceived as an army-air military support system, was humane by comparison. This was not his only assault on such methods. Writing after the war, Liddell Hart stated that the mass bombing "inevitably produced a deepening danger to the relatively shallow foundations of civilized life."³⁰ Neither Bell nor Liddell Hart were then popular for their views, but both are remembered for them now with honour – in some quarters.

All that the proponents of air power had to offer was that bombing shortened the war by smashing industrial targets and specialized industries; that the invasion would have been impossible without it; and by some it was argued that the war would have been over if the bombing had been supported as a priority weapon and Harris had been allowed to go all out.³¹

Frankland and Webster came down on the side of the idea that the invasion needed the air support, but they refrained from estimating its total effect, cautiously stating that the bombers produced "indispensable military advantages" for the invading armies.³² Like Harris himself they seem to have been unhappy with estimating army support effects. The

fact was that the bombers were never entirely moved from a strategic to an army support role. The USSBS, which had become available shortly after the war, claimed that terror bombing was, and had proved to be, much more overvalued and that specialized target bombing did the most to cripple German industry, and bring on the final victory.³³ Frankland and Webster partially agreed with this, but claimed that the capability of both British and American bombing forces precluded pinpoint accuracy before 1944, when the invasion was made a priority for support bombing by the Supreme Command and when the Norden bombsight became generally available to the RAF. Their argument was that bombing competence was a product of developing skill and



German cities were hard hit from the air, as these postwar photos of Cologne attest.

CFJIC PL 42536



CFJIC PL 42542

technology. Certainly an argument that bombers were all that the British had to offer in 1942 had strength. Heavy bombers had begun to roll off the production lines in numbers at the precise moment when the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan was producing crews in numbers, and when Churchill felt the greatest pressure due to the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. Furthermore the British felt the need to offer their new allies something in the way of offensive capability. At that precise time Harris, not yet chief of Bomber Command, was in the United States. He was there at the same time as the Prime Minister, and he did have a plan of attack!³⁴ War is, as General Wolfe once put it, an option of difficulties. It was not an open option of clear *available* choices. No matter what the consequences, and to the very last days of the war, Harris stuck to his terror bombing plan.³⁵ He was a hard man to convince.

Harris did have his engaging side. This was revealed in his unshakeable conviction that in total war all means were necessary, and that if the Germans had won he would have been hanged as a war criminal. No doubt! And his crews would have been condemned as the equivalent of the SS. In a way the crews sensed this. It is possible that the solidarity of his Command in the face of exceptionally heavy losses had something to do with a sort of complicity in unpleasant work. That is a speculation that will be unpalatable to many, and nothing more than a speculation.³⁶

There has been no attempt here to dwell on the fact that when targets were selected in the last months of the war it meant devastation on

a vast scale. It was the *scale* of the destruction in the final months of the war that made even Churchill recoil somewhat.³⁷ The photos of the German cities bombed provide clear examples of this. I am not attempting to state that the Germans as a people did not invite much of what they received. Their own methods do not bear much close scrutiny. Revenge was not, however, the avowed purpose of the Allied governments. The purpose was to win the war, notwithstanding Richard Stokes' remark about "civilization."³⁸ It is more interesting to reflect that for almost 15 years *after* the war the number of commentators who even *raised* moral or practical question concerning mass bombing in the Second World War could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Why?

Partly, no doubt, it was because the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (by the very power of destruction in relation to the size of the bombs) had obliterated the memory of previous methods. Also it was due to the fact that, both from the point of view of the effectiveness, and from the point of view of bomber casualties to our own crews, it raised unpleasant questions. Winston Churchill, no stranger to bearing responsibility, felt it necessary to duck this burden though privately he recognized Harris' contribution to the war effort.³⁹ Yet the restraint in public recognition was marked by many. Churchill shunned Harris, and he avoided a real appraisal of the subject in his books. It was clear that he was not over-anxious to give emphasis to the bombing campaign as the war concluded. He stopped the official survey from going forward.⁴⁰ This is surely not surprising! The effect was debatable. Bomber crew casualties were in high - 55,000 killed; 8,403 wounded and 9,838 prisoners of war.⁴¹ The destructive results were horrendous. This was not encouraging material for a political apologist to work with!

In this context it must be noted that for many years after the war, the moral question of whether it was right to terror-bomb whole cities was not seriously raised. When Harry Truman had to make the decision about destroying Japanese cities with nuclear weapons, he at least had the ability to state that he would be able to save lives on both sides, even if they were American military lives at the expense and deaths of Japanese, both civilian and military. Churchill agreed with Truman. Even Leonard Cheshire, the distinguished British airman who flew with the Americans as an observer, did not object *at the time*.⁴² Churchill's use of the bomber weapon, although it caused as much destruction, did not even have the luxury of that clear cut choice. At any rate the morality of bombing cities in a mass way was never the premier question, but I say this in the belief that Churchill, if I read him at all correctly, must have found the choice agonizing. Liddell Hart would doubtless have questioned this judgment as other historians may, on the grounds that it ascribes too much in the way of humanist scruple to Churchill. This is a subject too complex for easy judgment and I simply record that this view is controversial. What else could he wage war with before the Americans were invasion-capable?

Let us pause and go back before the war. When the Second World War broke out what was to have been expected? The Germans had used population bombing against London in 1916-17 and the results were unpleasant. The population was nervous.⁴³ The "experts" interpreted this to mean that weight of attack would smash morale. After the First World War it was widely believed by air power exponents in the United Kingdom that "the bomber would always get through" and that the terror resulting would swiftly break an urban people's will to resist. This, with the Italian Giulio Douhet's

theoretical backing, became Royal Air Force doctrine.⁴⁴ The British tried it for Imperial policing. If peoples in the Arabian Desert, or on the North-West frontier of India, resisted a call for an apology for some "outrage," then the airmen bombed their tents, flocks and waterholes. This had an effect that tremendously encouraged submission to the forces of "civilization." Airmen remembered how effective this had been! Arthur Harris was involved in developing this technique, which offered financial and practical advantages, in Mesopotamia in 1922.⁴⁵ It has been suggested in a recent and most perceptive study that this testing ground was partly responsible for not only the survival of the RAF as an independent entity, but also for its tendency to identify offensive capability with the bomber and not with a more balanced force.⁴⁶ It is even more remarkable that it was Winston Churchill, in his capacity as a colonial secretary in the Lloyd George coalition government, who supported the use of air forces in such a way, *and* that he supported it mainly on the grounds of saving money and sparing British men. Based on this criteria, it was effective. It is also interesting to note that when reports reached Churchill of women and children being strafed in a lake where they had withdrawn for safety, he condemned the brutality without stifling the method.⁴⁷ The first Labour Government did not change this money-saving situation, although that redoubtable MP George Lansbury acted as the conscience of the nation when he stated that the Air Minister and his department were "the lineal descendents of the Huns," and Cox went on to say:

I know there is a sort of feeling that a coloured person is of less value than a white person, but I do not think so. I think you are baby killers, and inhuman baby killers, whether you kill a black baby or a white baby. I

do not see any difference. I think that one is a crime and the other is a crime.⁴⁸

The point was that terror bombing was perceived to work. Charles Portal, who was to play a major role in the Second World War bombing, told the Disarmament Conference at Geneva in 1932 that "criticism of police bombing was 'well meaning, but ill-informed.'" ⁴⁹

When the rearmament campaign began after 1935 it was immediately apparent that air would get a substantial slice of the defence budget. In fact it got a healthy 40 percent, a procurement ratio it maintained until 1945!⁵⁰ It is interesting to note that when a joint services

committee was set up in 1936 to study defensive measures against enemy attack, they credited the German air planners with a horrendous ruthlessness in respect to air bombing. In Manfred Messerschmidt's yet unpublished paper, "Industrialisierte Krieg und Völkerrecht in den beiden Weltkriege," he states that the British were programmed to use mass bombing in such a way that is not accurate to state that it was merely a response to an enemy that was National Socialist.⁵¹ They estimated 400 tons of bombs a day for two weeks would be dumped on the United Kingdom in either attempts at interdiction of food supplies or terror, and on balance they leaned to the notion that Germans would favour

the latter, due to their supposed temperament. In 1936 the Joint Planning Committee, chaired by Arthur Harris, outlined measures to defend the UK in event of war with Germany, but it refused to assign priorities. It opined that without the threat of bomber retaliation for both terror and interdiction, other

Meanwhile, as Donald Cameron Watt says, trenchantly, "For nearly twenty years the Air Force High Command had been preaching a strategy of the Emperor's clothes being preferred to one of cutting one's coat to fit the available cloth."⁵⁴

Airmen, in fact, believed what they wanted. In Spain the horrors of



A group of cluster bombs falling towards Hanover, Germany, 25 March 1945.

defence measures would prove to be inadequate.⁵² Three things are to be noted here. The first is the evidence that if terror was available a foe would use it; second, that the best antidote was counter-terror, and third the underlying assumption was that terror would work.

Of course when the war began, in the days before France fell, Bomber Command was not able to deliver accurate counter-terror attacks, nor was the Luftwaffe able to initiate them. The bomber argument was largely frustrated, to the chagrin of the Air leaders, by civilian officials.⁵³ The priority was switched to the marriage of fighters with radar in time to allow the "Few" to work effectively in the Battle of Britain.

Guernica were remembered, but the fact that the Republicans did not submit easily to air terror was not. The point was made in the Paris papers by the most famous French aviator of the time, Antoine de St. Exupéry, but it was not digested. His biographer writes:

Years before the analysts, the statisticians, and the autopsists of

the Second World War were to proclaim what the Goerings and the Bomber Harrisers were too obtuse to understand, what the Curtis Lemays and their ilk have never been able to fathom. Saint Exupéry had put his finger on the pathetic futility of mass bombardments. "A moral role? But a bombardment is self-thwarting. It defeats its very purpose. Each shellburst in Madrid provokes a gradual hardening. What was wobbly indifference stiffens. A dead child matters when it is yours. A bombardment, it seemed to me, does not disperse; it unifies. Horror induces a clenching of the fists, a closing of ranks in the same shared shudder.... Madrid is there, taking its blows in silence. But so it is with

man: hardships slowly fortify their virtues."⁵⁵

We now look back at Warsaw and Rotterdam as moral outrages. No doubt; and the Germans were capable of much more than that. Nevertheless, militarily speaking, it was the defeat of the Polish Army, not the bombing of Warsaw, that defeated the Poles. Rotterdam was bombed as part of the military offensive and, it was claimed, as a "mistake" after the city had surrendered, and had no real campaign significance. The Battle of Britain was *militarily* important in the war; the Battle of London was not. There was moral outrage against the Germans for the Blitz, but it was accepted as St. Exupéry had predicted it would be. The British certainly had no doubt about what they wanted to do to Germany. Despite the scale of their effort they failed to conquer by terror and achieved a debatable success in the strategic or military sense, and any reader of Albert Speer's diary knows.⁵⁶ To be sure Speer thought that concentrated simultaneous attacks on all ball-bearing factories would have brought German industry to its knees. He was ambivalent towards the effect of area bombardment. I am not suggesting here that the Germans would have hesitated to obliterate London if they had had the power. I am not advocating German morality as opposed to British. I am simply saying that the moral indifference to mass bombing was international, and also that, until Hiroshima, it was based on the questionable premise of efficiency.

Two other aspects remain. The first is the fact that the British Government was more concerned to give an impression of reasonable behaviour than it was to carefully delineate important targets. Perhaps the nature of the weapons available, and the slow progress towards their most efficient use, dictated strategy, but Churchill considered the

ramifications of terror bombing and deliberately chose it. It was discussed many times in British decision-making circles. On 30 October 1940, in the War Cabinet and Churchill argued that, "whilst we should adhere to the rule that our objective should be military targets, at the same time the civilian population around target areas must be made to feel the weight of the war."⁵⁷ The War Cabinet approved what they specifically termed "the Prime Minister's Proposal." To say the least, Harris did not try to dissuade him. It was only the shock waves of Dresden that caused Churchill to cringe a little. Harris did not cringe.⁵⁸ I think, however, that enough has been said here so that one can see that it was a whole background of theory and practice that developed the mind-set with which the air war was fought. In this sense Harris was a proponent and agent of an accepted way of waging air war, and it is manifestly unfair to saddle him with special moral opprobrium, when manifestly he was merely carrying out the wish of his country men, both in Whitehall and in the streets, when the subject is looked at from a national point of view.

For it cannot be too strongly emphasized that very few objected in public. I have named them in England. In Canada, Prime Minister Mackenzie King thought that more airmen waging war by terror would have saved many lives and money for Canada.⁵⁹ The Minister of State for Air, C.G. "Chubby" Power, stated that the matter had never been discussed in Canada's wartime cabinet.⁶⁰ There was a consensus. No Canadian churchmen objected.⁶¹ When Cologne got its 1,000 bomber raid in 1942 the *Globe & Mail* stated that it was a good way to deal with that "Hunnish hive." It also said that of the 1,000 Canadians thought to have assisted in that precedent-making operation, none, "we may be sure, shirked their duty!"⁶² No doubt!

To quote Vonnegut:

'It had to be done,' Rumfoord told Billy, speaking of the destruction of Dresden.
'I know,' said Billy.
'That's war.'
'I know. I'm not complaining.'
'It must have been hell on the ground.'
'It was,' said Billy Pilgrim.
'Pity the poor men who had to do it.'
'I do.'
'You must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground.'
'It was all right,' said Billy.
'Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does...'
So it goes.⁶³

Notes

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1. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (New York: Dell, 1971).
2. David Irving, *The Bombing of Dresden* (London: W. Kimber, 1963).
3. Vonnegut, pp.187-88.
4. Vonnegut, p.191
5. My aircraft did not actually bomb Dresden, but used the cover of the Main Force to come in range of our target, which was Böhlen. Nevertheless we could see the colouration of the sky clearly, and we know what was going on in Dresden. The night was distinguished by the fact that the weather path across Germany offered limited scope for height movement, so we went out and returned with the Main Force. I remembered the red sky after the war, long before it all became a general subject of public controversy and remark.
6. Liddell Hart thought the bombing campaign a logical extension of Britain's naval blockade methods; a cheap but ruthless way of dealing with continental nations. (B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Revolution in Warfare* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), pp.90-91.
7. My unit was 429 (Bison) Squadron, latterly of Leeming, Yorks. The Squadron was formed in 4 Group, and transferred, on 1 April 1943 to 6 Canadian Group

- which had been formed in January 1943. Air Vice-Marshal C.M. McEwen, RCAF, was Officer Commanding from February 1944. See Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries* (London: Viking, 1985). Note that Bison squadron suffered the heaviest losses in Wellington aircraft in 6 Group; mostly in the Ruhr valley attacks of 1943.
8. Bombing operations were called "trips" by us. They were not "missions," a word used by the United States Army Air Forces, which, for all we knew, might have referred to converting heathen in Flying Fortresses.
 9. Liddell Hart, *The Revolution in Warfare*.
 10. No doubt the backlash from the strain of operations has been imperfectly understood by the general public and even the medical profession, then and now. In the same way it would be quite wrong to think that because bomber crews do not talk about their past activities and the results of them, that they do not think of them. Canada's young airmen were not all naïve by any means.
 11. F.J.P. Veale, *Advance to Barbarism* (Appleton, Wisconsin: C. Nelson Pub., 1953).
 12. Hans Rumpf, *The Bombing of Germany*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (London: F. Muller, 1963).
 13. A good example of overexposure on an author's part is A.I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-56* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957). Three volumes are too much despite the obvious need for information!
 14. Noble Frankland and Charles Webster, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945*, 4 vols. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1961).
 15. R.H.S. Crossman, "Apocalypse at Dresden," *Esquire*, November 1963.
 16. Martin Middlebrook, *The Battle of Hamburg: Allied Bomber Forces Against a German City in 1943* (London: Allen Lane, 1980).
 17. Irving, *The Bombing of Dresden*. David Irving himself wrote to *The Times* (7 July 1966) to confirm the figure of 35,000. As late as 7 March 1985 the 35,000 figure was quoted in a letter from Arsene Okun to the *New York Times*. In that letter Mr. Okun also mentioned the book by Gotz Bergander, *Dresden in Luftkrieg* (Cologne, 1977), and in paper (Verlag, Munich, 1979), which provided much information on the raid from the German viewpoint.
 18. Overall Report for the European War, September 30, 1945. *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey* (Washington, DC: United States Printing Office, 1945).
 19. David MacIsaac, ed., *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, 10 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976).
 20. Middlebrook and Everitt, p.12.
 21. Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (London, Collins, 1952).
 22. Paul Kesaris, ed., *ULTRA and the history of the United States Strategic Air Force in Europe vs. the German Air Force* (Lanham, MD: University Publications of America, 1980).
 23. In volume 4 of Frankland and Webster (1962), (annex 1 of *Annex and Appendices*, entitled "*The British and United States Surveys of the Strategic Bombing Offensive*," pp.40-56, the authors give a complicated account of the British and American evaluation techniques. They do not come to strong conclusions, but do reveal that Churchill was averse to the Royal Air Force producing a comparable document to the US survey. On the other hand MacIsaac frankly states that controversy "has subsequently evolved on the question of the degree of accuracy attained by 'precision bombing.' Looking back, it would appear that the term precision bombing represented an unhappy choice of words for the level of capability attainable in 1940's..." The "choice of words offered more than could be delivered in the event, thereby contributing to both controversy and – in this case unnecessary – confusion." See USSBS, preface to vol. III, p.viii-ix.
 24. Kesaris.
 25. Kesaris gives an example of how flights over Rumania were supposed to have produced massive effects. This report is, in fact, replete with examples of the optimistic reading of evidence. MacIsaac carefully states that the lack of competent historians hampered the ability of the Survey's authors to assess 'evidence.'
 26. *UK Parliamentary Debates*, House of Lords, 5th series, volume 130, 9 February 1944, cc.737-55.
 27. Ibid.
 28. Richard Stokes, Letter to the Editor, *London Daily Herald*, 16 March 1943.
 29. B.H. Liddell Hart, *This Expanding War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942).
 30. B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Revolution in Warfare*.
 31. Dudley Seward, *Bomber Harris: The Authorized Biography* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1984).
 32. Frankland and Webster, vol.III.
 33. Overall Report for the European War, USSBS.
 34. Seward.
 35. Kesaris.
 36. Suggested by John Keegan, Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, on a public occasion.
 37. Seward.
 38. Stokes, Letter to the Editor, *London Daily Herald*, 16 March 1943.
 39. Seward.
 40. Frankland & Webster.
 41. Middlebrook & Everitt.
 42. Andrew Boyle, *No Passing Glory* (London: Collins, 1955).
 43. Raymond C. Fredette, *The First Battle of Britain* (London: Cassell, 1966).
 44. Ibid.
 45. Seward
 46. Jafna Cox, "A Splendid Training Ground: The Importance to the Royal Air Force of its Role in Iraq, 1919-32," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 13, no.2 (January 1985), p.176.
 47. Ibid.
 48. Ibid.
 49. Ibid.
 50. Alan S. Millward, "British Strategy in the Second World War in Comparative Economic Perspective," Unpublished paper, International Committee for the History of the Second World War, at the 16th International Congress of Historical Sciences, Stuttgart Conference, August 1985.
 51. Manfred Messerschmidt, "Industrialisierte Krieg und Völkerrecht in den beiden Weltkriegen," unpublished, quoted with permission.
 52. Captain T.S.V. Phillips, Colonel Sir R.F. Adam Bart and Group Captain A.T. Harris, "Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War Against Germany in 1939," Appendix 6. Joint Planning Committee (COS (JP)), 26 October 1936, The National Archives, United Kingdom (Public Record Office), Cabinet Records Office, 54/3; see also RAF Narrative, *The Growth of Fighter Command, June 1936 – June 1940: The Air Defence of Great Britain* (First Draft), Vol.1, (London: Air Historical Branch, Air Ministry, 1936).
 53. Donald Cameron Watt, *Personalities and Policies* (London: Longmans, 1965).
 54. Ibid.
 55. Curtis Cate, *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry* (New York: Putnam, 1970).
 56. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: MacMillan, 1970).
 57. Quoted in Richard Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), p.49.
 58. Seward.
 59. W.L. Mackenzie King, "The Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King," 6 & 7 September 1942, available online at <www.collectionscanada.gc.ca>.
 60. Personal conversation with Mr. Power.
 61. Based on information provided by Ben Greenhouse, of the Directorate of History, Department of National Defence, Canada, who has looked for it.
 62. Editorial entitled "City by City," *Toronto Globe & Mail*, 1 June 1942.
 63. Vonnegut, p.198.

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