

British Strategic Bombing

Benjamin Joyner

Benjamin Joyner, from Equality, Illinois, earned his BA in History in 2010 with a minor in Political Science. The former homeschooler is entering graduate school in fall 2010 to pursue a MA in History. This paper was written as a sophomore in fall 2008 for HIS 3420 (World War II) for Dr. Anita Shelton.

The British strategic bombing campaigns against Germany during the Second World War have been a topic of much discussion and debate over the years. Initially seen as a way to minimize the loss of Allied lives while putting great pressure on the Germans, some historians see the British bombing as merely vindictive retribution for the London Blitz. This change occurred over several decades. For the purposes of this paper we will examine the view during and immediately following the war as well as the present day viewpoints. From the end of WWI proponents of the newly developing "air power" insisted that, if used properly, air power could win a war without the need for ground forces. Central to the development of this new military ideology were the figures of Hugh Trenchard and Giulio Douhet. Douhet, the famed Italian general, was especially influential in the development of the strategic bombing theory. According to Douhet the goal of successful strategic bombing was the destruction of what he termed "vital centers". These vital centers comprised the governmental, military, and industrial hubs of the enemy, the destruction of which would break the enemy's will to fight, or as Douhet put it, the "peacetime industrial and commercial establishments; important buildings, private and public; and certain designated areas of civilian population as well."¹ Hugh Trenchard of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) was quick to pick up on the ideas of Douhet. It was Trenchard who was instrumental in the establishment of the RAF. In Britain, the RAF's "War Manual" stated that a nation was defeated when its people or government no longer retained the will to prosecute their war aim by concentrating on the enemy's industrial and economic infrastructure, which included such things as public utilities, food and fuel supplies, transportation networks, and communications, clearly a Douhetian concept.² The British tested the strategic bombing theory before the Second World War on civilians and rebels in what is now Iraq.

¹ Meilinger, Phillip S. "A History of Effects-Based Air Operations." *The Journal of Military History* 71 (2007): 142

² Ibid.,142.

Ironically, Britain would soon pass through the crucible of modern strategic bombing herself.

British experience in the Blitz

The German strategic bombing campaign against the British was the first massive application of Douhet's ideas in a modern war involving western nations. The "Battle of Britain" lasted from July 10th 1940 through December 31st of the same year. The first part of this massive bombardment focused on destroying the RAF, but on September 9th the focus shifted to major cities and urban centers. The goal of the Germans was to remove the British from the war by breaking the civilian will to fight. This change in targets and objectives came to be known as the Blitz. During this time English cities such as Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Clydebank, Coventry, Greenock, Sheffield, Swansea, Liverpool, Hull, Manchester, Portsmouth, Plymouth, Nottingham and Southampton were all targeted by the Luftwaffe and suffered heavy casualties. The town of Coventry was particularly hard hit by the German use of incendiary bombs which created a firestorm killing at least 568 civilians and destroyed 65,000 buildings.³ This event highlights the physical devastation of strategic bombing on civilian targets, but what were the psychological effects? The goal of this type of bombing is to break the civilian will to fight, yet the bombing (particularly the use of incendiaries) of the English cities backfired on the Germans. Rather than convincing the English to surrender, the attacks only further strengthened their resolve to defeat Nazi Germany. Winston Churchill sums up the sentiment of the British people in one of his famous radio addresses,

We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire...
Neither the sudden shock of battle nor the long-drawn trials
of vigilance and exertion will wear us down. Give us the tools
and we will finish the job⁴.

As Germany began to prepare for "Operation Barbarossa," the bombings on Britain began to lessen and Britain began to plan its response. After the entry of the United States into the war in December 1941, Britain issued *Directive No. 22* which officially commanded RAF bombers that "the primary objective of your operations should be focused on the morale of the enemy civil population and in particular the industrial workers."⁵ The head of the RAF Bomber Command was Sir Arthur Travers Harris, a

³ Taylor, Frederick. *Dresden Tuesday 13 February 1945*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005.

⁴ *The Churchill War Papers: 1941* (1993), ed. Gilbert, W.W. Norton, pp. 199-200

⁵ Ministry, British Air. *Bomber Command*. November 14, 2008. <http://raf-lincolnshire.info/bombercmd/bombercmd.htm> (accessed 2008).

distinguished and long-serving British officer. Harris earned the nickname “Bomber” from the British press due to his belief in the effectiveness of strategic bombing. Ironically, his men in the RAF called him “Butcher” Harris for the same reason. Under Harris’s leadership “the British...set out to do in Germany what British ground forces couldn’t accomplish –destroy industrial capacity and undermine civilian morale.”⁶

The destructive physical and psychological impact of the bombing of German industrial and civilian centers was assumed to have been great. However, this belief was shaken when first the Butt Report and later reports showed the inaccuracy of “precision” bombing. As Meilinger states, “The inaccuracy of early bombing efforts was detailed in the Butt Report of 1941. Essentially, researchers discovered that only 33 percent of the bombs dropped by the RAF landed within *five miles* of their intended target. On moonless nights accuracy was far less.”⁷ Utilizing the same tactics for which they had denounced the Luftwaffe, the RAF began carpet bombing German cities. Furthermore, there was little concern for the morality of intentionally targeting civilians. As Robert Moeller states, “Both British and American military leaders – with approval from the highest levels of the civilian political order – agreed that bombing to undermine domestic morale was legitimate. The destruction of housing – or ‘dehousing’ as the British called it – achieved by using incendiary bombs, was, they reasoned, potentially as disruptive to industrial production as the levelling of factories.”⁸ “Bomber” Harris minced no words about the true nature of the British strategic bombing, stating that,

The aim of the Combined Bomber Offensive...should be unambiguously stated [as] the destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers, and the disruption of civilized life throughout Germany. It should be emphasized that the destruction of houses, public utilities, transport and lives, the creation of a refugee problem on an unprecedented scale, and the breakdown of morale both at home and at the battle fronts by fear of extended and intensified bombing, are accepted and intended aims of our bombing policy. They are not by-products of attempts to hit factories.⁹

⁶ Moeller, Robert G. "On the History of Man-made Destruction: Loss, Death, Memory, and Germany in the Bombing War." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 61 (2006): 107.

⁷ Meilinger, Phillip S. , 148.

⁸ Moeller, Robert G. , 107.

⁹ Ministry, British Air..

The bombing of Dresden, Germany in 1945 sparked a re-evaluation of their tactics as Churchill himself expressed in a memo to Chief of the British Air Staff,

It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed. Otherwise we shall come into control of an utterly ruined land. The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing. I am of the opinion that military objectives must henceforward be more strictly studied in our own interests than that of the enemy. The Foreign Secretary has spoken to me on this subject, and I feel the need for more precise concentration upon military objectives such as oil and communications behind the immediate battle-zone, rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction, however impressive.¹⁰

What can be clearly seen by these documents is that, at least inside Bomber Command, there were no misunderstandings about the nature of these attacks. These were terror attacks that were intended to demoralize the German civilians. Still the practice was popular until the end of the war, with civilian and military leaders alike preaching of the successful nature of the attacks in destroying enemy factories and the like. The firebombing of Dresden in early 1945 began a serious look at this practice.

Strategic Bombing Today

Looking back on the issue of the British strategic bombing campaign with the benefit of over fifty years of hindsight, historians today are much more critical of the British motivation as well as the military value of the campaigns. Robert Moeller comments on the indecisive nature of the Allied strategic bombing, “Extensive post-war surveys by the British and Americans yielded anything but unequivocal evidence.”¹¹ As the Allies, Britain in particular, began to question the effectiveness of their bombing campaigns against Germany, it should come as no surprise that they also began to question the morality of such actions. It’s telling that at Nuremberg there was no mention of German bomb attacks as ‘crimes of war,’ an indication that the Allies were uncertain about what was and was not a crime according to international rules of warfare, and of their concern that any mention of Coventry and Rotterdam would be met with mentions of Pforzheim, Hamburg, Berlin, Essen, Düsseldorf, Munich, Nuremberg,

¹⁰ Ministry, British Air.

¹¹ Moeller, , 108.

Dresden, and many other German cities.¹² Both sides were guilty of strategic bombing against civilians regardless of who dropped the first bombs. Jörg Friedrich, author of *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*, is one of the many historians that have begun telling the story of the German citizens during the British bombing campaigns. Along with this change in focus, comes the inevitable questioning of the morality of the decision to firebomb and carpet-bomb whole cities. Historians now tend to emphasize the ineffectual nature of the campaigns as well as the high cost in RAF lives and planes in executing these attacks. Although they are few in number, some even go as far as to claim that this was pure retribution visited upon the Germans for their attacks on the British cities. Another explanation for the early destruction of civilian areas lies in the inaccuracies of the bombs themselves. However, it must be remembered that later the British would authorize the systematic destruction of cities by utilizing a gridiron approach. The practice is now strictly forbidden by the Geneva Conventions, another sign that the moral issue of the bombing is of importance. Many consider the British bombing of Dresden and the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as war crimes, on par with the Nazi holocaust.

Not all of the new historians agree that the use of strategic bombing was unnecessary and ineffectual. Melden E. Smith, Jr. asks this question, "If, then, strategic bombing is both immoral and militarily ineffective, why did Great Britain and the United States persist in their ever-increasing bombing offensive against Germany during the second world war?"¹³ Smith goes on to discuss the enormous amount of war materiel that went into the effort; something he insists is proof that the campaigns were successful. He also suggests that the continued emphasis on strategic bombing into the late 1970's reinforces its effectiveness. Speaking about strategic bombing advocates during WWII he says, "This dogma has, moreover, a subtle advantage over direct confrontation. Your own men are relatively safe. If they do die, death is clean. Most important, you never see the real results of their work until the enemy has surrendered. A reconnaissance photograph is impersonal, dehumanized; the scale is too small to show, say, a dismembered child. Warfare becomes almost an intellectual exercise."¹⁴ This disconnect is important because it allows the job to be done with minimal emotional distress on the soldiers. Tami Biddle, another historian, adds to this justification by emphasizing the British failure to field long-range bomber escorts or develop more accurate bombing on par with that of the Americans. Because of this the British decided to carpet bomb entire cities, their bombing was so inaccurate that the only way to assure

¹² Moeller, 108.

¹³ Smith, Melden E. Jr. "The Strategic Bombing Debate: The Second World War and Vietnam." *Journal of Contemporary History* 12, no. 1 (January 1977): 175.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

destruction of targets was to level everything. Furthermore she points out that Churchill himself did not believe in the effectiveness of terror bombings, "Nothing that we have learned of the capacity of the German population to endure suffering justifies us in assuming that they could be cowed into submission by such methods, or, indeed that they would not be rendered more desperately resolved by them."¹⁵

Conclusion

The trend in examining the British Strategic Bombing campaigns has indeed changed over the years. From the unquestioning necessity and success of the war years to the careful examination after WWII and still today, both the effectiveness of the campaigns as well as their moral ambiguity are in the forefront of historical discussions. Many factors have been examined: inaccuracy of the bombs, terror effects, and questionable successes. War is a messy business and decisions are often made that to a peacetime mindset are distasteful at best. In conclusion, from Churchill, "The day may dawn when fair play, love for one's fellow men, respect for justice and freedom, will enable tormented generations to march forth triumphant from the hideous epoch in which we have to dwell. Meanwhile, never flinch, never weary, never despair"¹⁶.

¹⁵ Biddle, Tami Davis. "Dresden 1945: Reality, History, and Memory." *The Journal of Military History* 72 (April 2008): 445.

¹⁶ *The Churchill Centre and Museum at the Cabinet War Rooms, London.* <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/102-never-despair> (accessed October 23, 2008).