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## American Media and Perspectives on the Firebombing of Tokyo

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When it comes to the bombing of cities during the course of World War II, there are three locations which seem to stick out in the minds of people: Dresden, Germany, the city known for its artistic beauty and forever memorialized in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, or Hiroshima or Nagasaki, the two cities which, in August of 1945, became the only casualties of atomic weaponry to date. Interestingly, not Dresden, nor Hiroshima, nor Nagasaki were the deadliest bombing in the course of the Second World War. That infamous honor belongs to the aerial assault on Tokyo over the course of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of March, in which an estimated 100,000 were killed, and another million were left without homes. Why then, is this not being debated or discussed? The answer is a result of several combining factors. At the time of the event, the American press, a major influence and metaphorical barometer of the feelings of Americans, expressed that the bombing in question was justified and, despite the fact that it was the largest bombardment to date, it received roughly the same coverage as other bombings. If anything, the coverage of the bombing of Tokyo was toned down when compared to other events such as the bombing of Dresden. This lack of attention may, in turn, have something to do with racism stirred up by American propaganda. To a lesser extent, despite the somewhat controversial nature of the bombing, it has remained somewhat ignored as a point of discussion in the media since.

It is important to note that there is some distinction between the use of standard explosive bombs and the firebombs which were dropped on Tokyo. Both were dropped from bombers, with the B-29 Superfortress being heavily mentioned in the papers at this time, at altitudes of around 7,000 feet. It is there that the similarities between the two end. Fire bombings typically took place at night, presumably so bombers had less of a chance of being seen and could better tell when they were hitting their targets, as opposed to standard bombing which the Americans preferred doing during the day in what they claimed were attempts to minimize civilian casualties, but was no more effective at this than night flying. In addition, while standard bombing could be used to hit specific targets within a more urban setting, they could also be used to hit isolated targets like airbases and military installations. Firebombing was used primarily with the intent to destroy indiscriminately and usually only worked in dense urban settings. Proof of this unquenchable destruction can be seen in firsthand accounts of the bombings. Many know of the 1988 film *Grave of the Fireflies* which depicts the horrific nature of these attacks and the damage which they wrought to both property and people, and which it does fairly accurately. Further proof may be found in the accounts of people who lived through the events. A housewife living in Tokyo during the war wrote in her diary two months after the bombing, "no gas, no electricity, and our faucet is without water. Life in the city is miserable. However, our surroundings may look palatial to those people who are victims of bombing."<sup>1</sup>

Even in regards to the bombing of other Japanese cities, the American press was less than favorable in their approach. Most articles did not seek to trivialize what was happening across the

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<sup>1</sup> David Lu, *Japan, A Documentary History: The Late Tokugawa Period to the Present*, vol. 2 (Amonk, New York: East Gate, 1997) 449.

Pacific Ocean. There was no doubt about the sheer level of destruction being used again the various Japanese cities. Instead, these articles sought in large part to legitimize the attacks as necessary in stopping the war. An article published in the *New York Times* on June 3, 1945, titled “1,000-Plane Blows Daily is Prospect for Japan,” stated simply, “What the tremendous air attacks... will do to Japan no one can yet say.”<sup>2</sup> When an explanation was given, it tended to focus on the fact that Japan had “tiny piece-work factories”<sup>3</sup> throughout cities which were difficult to target individually. This trend can be further seen in lack of solid numbers in regards to a death count from each bombing. Though numbers of people left homeless were common enough, the word “death” fails to even make an appearance (except in the case of bombers who were shot down, which also filled up the pages). Even on the day of the Japanese surrender, August 15, 1945, articles were still being run which describe how much damage and how vital of a role the B-29 played in winning the war. In a bizarre case, the *Chicago Tribune* actually ran an article which attempted to take a humorous approach to what was happening. On March 18, 1945 a group of Irish bombardiers were attempting to celebrate Saint Patrick’s Day in the middle of the mission but their cans of beer slipped out of their plane and “are presumed in the hands of the enemy.”<sup>4</sup>

It is important to understand exactly what the United States press was not reacting to in their coverage of the bombing of Tokyo. In the night between March 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 1945, a massive attack was conducted against the capital of Japan. Over 300 B-29 Superfortresses took part in dropping napalm and other flammable bombs on the city, destroying approximately 15 square miles in a single night. As a result of this, around 100,000 men, women, and children were killed, and another million were left without homes.

Everything which applied to the bombing of other cities also applies to the way in which the press described and dealt with the bombing of Tokyo. Justification of the single deadliest attack was expressed primarily as a need to end the war quickly. The day after the bombing had ended, United States Air Force General Curtis Le May was quoted by the *Chicago Tribune* as saying, “I believe that if there has been a cut from its [the war’s] duration only one day, or one hour, my officers and men have served a high purpose.”<sup>5</sup> The following day, a writer for the same paper added a religious twist to the message stating, “A Christian people cannot rejoice over such facts as come from Tokyo... no matter how much the enemy has offended. But war cannot be humane. The objective is to destroy the enemy and the most destructive methods are likely to be the best in effecting that end.”<sup>6</sup> Lauris Norstad, another American Air Force General, stated on the 26 of March that firebombing was simply the cheaper option for their mission: “the mission of the B-29 air force is to reduce Japanese production “by any means” and that “incendiary attacks are the economic method.”<sup>7</sup> If further proof is needed about the less than pleasant feelings felt between Americans and the Japanese at the time, look no further than Lt. Leland Rudiger of Peoria, Illinois, who was quoted in *The Chicago Tribune* as describing the site of burning Tokyo as “wonderful” in a word, and adding, “I

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<sup>2</sup> Hanson Baldwin, “1,000-Plane Blows Daily Is Prospect for Japan: Vast Intensification of Bombardment Will Be Developed From Okinawa Comparison With Europe Plane Production Slashed Shift to Tactical Targets Seen To Turn Cities to Ashes,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1945.

<http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/107294058/74EF4CD32AF544B9PQ/47?accountid=10705>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Kobe Burns For 7 Hours After Record B-29 Raid: 12 Square Miles of Big Jap City Damaged,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 1945.

<http://search.proquest.com/hnpchicagotribune/docview/176990109/DFFE222ED7564078PQ/19?accountid=107>.

<sup>5</sup> “15 Sq. Miles of Tokyo Laid Waste in Raid: 15 Square Miles In Tokyo Heart Razed By Bombs ‘Greatest Damage Ever Done in One Raid,’” *Chicago Tribune*, March 11, 1945.

<http://search.proquest.com/hnpchicagotribune/docview/177050588/7F7FF3EFAE2D48A1PQ/54?accountid=10705>.

<sup>6</sup> “Protecting America,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 12, 1945.

<http://search.proquest.com/hnpchicagotribune/docview/177122302/7F7FF3EFAE2D48A1PQ/78?accountid=10705>.

<sup>7</sup> “200,000 Tokyo Buildings Left In Ruins by B-29s: 3,000 Plants, Shops Destroyed,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 24, 1945.

<http://search.proquest.com/hnpchicagotribune/docview/176988627/1E9BBD0E2F1A4FA5PQ/134?accountid=10705>.

was repaid over and over for my 2 ½ years of waiting.”<sup>8</sup> The strange thing is, these articles are about as frequent and descriptive as they are for other bombings. In the remaining twenty-one days of March, five articles are published in the *Chicago Tribune* which mention the bombing. Four of those are within the first week after its occurrence, and the last appears more than two weeks later following a statement made by an Air Force General. In the *New York Times* only three mentions are made of the bombing in March of 1945 and those are all on the same day: March 11<sup>th</sup>. There are other references to bombings of Tokyo after this point, but it is also important to keep in mind that Americans kept bombing Japan as a whole up until the very end of the war and Tokyo was no exception. Any future attacks or references to Tokyo could be lumped in with the news of other bombings, but my research seemed to point to the same type of language used in the various cases of the Pacific bombings.

There is an incredibly sharp contrast to be made between the coverage of the European and Pacific theatres by the American press. Looking at the language used in the bombing of German cities, specifically the most infamous bombing, Dresden, one can easily see the difference. Though information would continue to appear in the papers for some time after the war had ended, some of the most horrific articles came during the war. These tended to be detailed in their descriptions, used a fair amount of negative imagery, and, even over two months after the bombing had occurred, continued to use gross overestimates of the death count. A single article in the *Chicago Times* titled “Dresden Raid Killed 300,000 Say Ex-Captives,” published on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1945, states that British soldiers were informed by local police that the death count was near 300,000, as opposed to the now estimate of between 25,000 and 35,000, and that the number was more than believable given the city’s being packed with refugees fleeing from the collapsing eastern front.<sup>9</sup> It goes on to describe the methods of dealing with the masses of bodies: “The most effective way was to take flamethrowers and burn the dead as they lay in the ruins for sanitary reasons. They would just turn flamethrowers into houses, burn the dead, and then close off the entire area.”<sup>10</sup> When compared to the much more neutral tones used to describe Tokyo, it is easy to understand why the bombing of Dresden may have stuck in people’s minds.

Part of the reason for this change in tone may have had something to do with racism against the Japanese spun up by propaganda. Arguably some of the most well remembered propaganda from the Second World War was in the forms of comics and cartoons, especially the works of Theodor Geisel, Walt Disney, and Tex Avery, as well as Marvel and DC comic books. To be fair, the Germans are depicted in a poor light as well. They are always unintelligent, everything they own has a swastika on it, and they are constantly giving the Nazi salute. Perhaps nowhere are the stereotypes better exemplified than in the 1943 Disney cartoon “Der Fuehrer’s Face”, which stars Donald Duck and shows him living in Germany, in a house with swastika wallpaper and clocks, surrounded by a swastika fence and swastika hedges, while working in a factory that makes shells as a loudspeaker extolls the glory of the Fuhrer.<sup>11</sup> Other depictions of the Germans share these traits, including on the cover of the very first Captain America comic, and in the Popeye the Sailor cartoon *Seein’ Red, White, and Blue*. While these may sound or look bad, the depiction of the Japanese is much worse. Though the Japanese are also depicted as being significantly less intelligent than the Americans they’re pitted against, the racism goes a step further. The Japanese are generally shown

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<sup>8</sup> “15 Sq. Miles of Tokyo Laid Waste in Raid: 15 Square Miles In Tokyo Heart Razed By Bombs ‘Greated Damage Ever Done in One Raid.’”

<sup>9</sup> “Dresden Raid Killed 300,000, Say Ex-Captives,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 3, 1945.

<http://search.proquest.com/hnpchicagotribune/docview/177148371/9EAF2ABB88E4D24PQ/1?accountid=10705>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Donald Duck, “Der Fuehrer’s Face,” (originally aired January 1, 1943) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn20oXFrxxg> (accessed February 9, 2016).

to be short, with squinty eyes, buck teeth, glasses, abnormally large ears, and, when they spoke, they did so in very poor, broken English. Slurs were another thing which were thrown around with impudence in these cartoons. In the 1944 Looney Tunes cartoon “Nip the Nips,” Bugs Bunny refers to individuals in a group of Japanese as “bow legs,” monkey face,” and “slant eyes,” all within a matter of seconds.<sup>12</sup> In the 1942 Popeye cartoon “Scrap the Japs,” Popeye states, “I ain’t never met a Jap who wasn’t Yella.”<sup>13</sup> Physically, the Japanese in this cartoon match the description already given, though worse is the cover of Marvel’s Mystery Comic #32, which depicts the Japanese with razor sharp teeth along with the other physical stereotypes. Perhaps nowhere is the difference between the Germans and Japanese better shown than in a Dr. Seuss comic from 1942. Though Hitler appears weak, he is nothing compared to the ugly Japanese woman or their child.

The firebombing of Tokyo has one other thing going against it. In the time of its occurrence and afterwards, it has failed to be discussed at the same level and in the same earnest as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were and still are. Put into the larger narrative of World War II, its elimination from history is somewhat understandable. It was not the only firebombing done by the Allies, just the most destructive. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, are singular in their identity as the first and only times in which nuclear weapons have been actively used as a part of a war. In addition, they horrified people in the level of destruction caused by a single weapon as opposed to fire bombings which took literal tons of bombs to complete. Both of these facts play into the atomic bombing’s more noteworthy place in history than the firebombing of Tokyo. American textbooks really do not discuss the bombing either. In a sampling of five American History textbooks from varying years and levels of education, all five mentioned the atomic bombing to some length, three specifically mention *the* bombing of Tokyo, and only one mentions Dresden at all. There is no connection between them in regards to date published, with one book from 1999, and the oldest in the selection, mentioning it, and one as new as 2009 not doing so.<sup>14</sup> On top of this is the continued fascination which is associated with atomic weapons and their after effects, as expressed in popular media. Most notably, this idea was portrayed in the 1954 film *Godzilla* and its more than thirty sequels and spin-offs, starring the titular monster with the ability to literally breathe atomic energy and leave pockets of radiation in its footsteps. While there is certainly academic debate going on surrounding the ethics of the firebombing of Tokyo, and there are some pieces of fiction which deal with the effects of firebombings, such as the already mentioned *Grave of the Fireflies*, neither is anywhere near the same level as what exists for the atomic bombings.

The firebombing of Tokyo was horrific and deserves to be remembered. American press at the time may have given it a pass, but that was seventy years ago. The events of March 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 1945, needs to be subject to scrutiny and discussed in their ethics and, while a film based upon it may never reach the stature of *Godzilla*, it may be enough to get people talking.

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<sup>12</sup> Looney Tunes, Bugs Bunny, “Nip the Nips,” (originally aired 1944) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCNw4Nahmhg> (accessed February 9, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Popeye the Sailor, “Scrap the Japs,” (originally aired November 20, 1942) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCFZ6nh9djY> (accessed February 9, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Joyce Appleby, *The American Journey* (Columbus, Ohio: McGraw Hill Glencoe, 2009); Daniel Boorstin, *A History of the United States*, Annotated Teacher’s Edition (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1999); Emma Lapsansky-Werner, *United States History: Reconstruction to the Present* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2010); Edward Ayers, *American Anthem* (Orlando: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2007); Joy Hakim, *A History of US: War, Peace, and All That Jazz*, vol. Nine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).