
Dresden 1945: Reality, History, and Memory



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Abstract

The Anglo-American air attack on the city of Dresden, in February 1945, has become one of the most famous events of the Second World War. The word “Dresden” is typically one of the first uttered whenever the topic of strategic bombing is raised. And yet, like many other high-profile historical events, the Dresden raid is encrusted with myth and misunderstanding. This essay is an effort to make sense of a complicated and much misunderstood episode in the history of modern warfare—and to make sense of it in the context in which it occurred. The essay draws upon the rich recent literature on Dresden, earlier histories, and a wide array of primary sources in an effort to provide – for teachers, scholars, and general readers – a comprehensive but still concise overview of the air raid that has won such a central place in the history of the Second World War.

On the night of 13-14 February 1945 Britain’s Bomber Command commenced an air attack against the German city of Dresden. In the first phase, 244 Lancaster bombers dropped high explosive and incendiary bombs in a tight pattern around the aiming point in the center of the city, producing an intense fire that

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escaped the control of German authorities. Several hours later, a larger group of Lancaster bombers arrived over Dresden, hammering the city and further extending the fires.¹ The next morning, B-17 bombers of the U.S. Army Air Forces' 1st Air Division appeared over Dresden to bomb its railroad marshaling yards. The Americans had been scheduled to lead off the Anglo-American raid, but weather had delayed the start of their mission. One day later (February 15th), 210 more American B-17 bombers that had failed to reach their designated target—a synthetic oil plant—bombed Dresden as a “secondary” target.²

In its operational execution, the February 1945 attack on Dresden was no different than other Anglo-American air attacks carried out in the same time period during World War II. Dresden met the fate that had befallen other German cities—like Cologne and Hamburg—and that would befall more before war's end. No one who planned the operation expected that it would be particularly unusual since it utilized standard techniques and routines. Indeed, of the fourteen heavy air attacks on towns and cities waged by Bomber Command in February 1945, Dresden ranked only 10th in the percentage of incendiary bombs carried to the target relative to high explosive bombs.³ In terms of lives lost and damage done, the Dresden raid was less destructive than the firestorm imposed by Bomber Command on the city of Hamburg in late July 1943, or the American air attack on Tokyo of March 9-10, 1945, which would kill over 100,000 in a single night.⁴

And yet, in certain respects – some contingent and some not – the Dresden raid was unusual. It was one of a series of raids on cities in the eastern part of Germany waged for the specific purpose of aiding the westward advance of the Red Army at a moment when that advance seemed particularly urgent to the Allied cause. A combination of factors, including unusually precise bomb aiming by the first wave of attackers, successful feints, and errors by the defender helped

1. For an accessible and accurate description of the raid, see Frederick Taylor's *Dresden: Tuesday February 13, 1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

2. Headquarters, Eighth Air Force, INTOPS Summary no. 290 (14 February 1945) in RG 243, section 4, 2A (5), f-h, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md. On American bomber participation generally, see Richard G. Davis, *Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), esp. 556-558; Taylor, 316-332.

3. Bombers typically carried a mix of incendiary and high explosive bombs. Bombers attacking Bonn and Chemnitz, for instance, carried 61.8 % incendiaries; bombers attacking Dresden carried 44.4%. See Air Historical Branch (AHB), Analysis of Bomber Command attacks on 'Town Area' Targets, February 1945, prepared by AHB (RAF) based on statistics in the Air Ministry War Room Monthly Summary of Bomber Command Operations, February 1945. Air Historical Branch, Bentley Priory, Stanmore, UK.

4. The Tokyo raid killed over 100,000 people, and burned out 16 square miles of the city. For excellent and detailed descriptions, see Conrad C. Crane, *Bombs, Cities, and Civilians* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 132-136; or Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American*

to exacerbate the impact of an air attack that would become all the more notorious for being launched against a city swollen with refugees fleeing the fighting on the Eastern Front.

In the realm of public memory, the Dresden raid has eclipsed other, more destructive raids of the Second World War. It is referenced and discussed constantly; indeed, whenever the topic of strategic bombing is raised, the word “Dresden” is, inevitably, soon to follow. But like many “well-known” events in history, Dresden has become encrusted with myth: over time, the original catalyst of the air attack and the immediate reaction to it have been forgotten—or imperfectly remembered. Public memory of the raid has been influenced by a complicated historiography that has served a variety of different agendas. Frequently, the Dresden raid is portrayed, incorrectly, as a wholly atypical episode—a one-off event wherein the British employed new and unusual firebombing tactics. Rarely is there any discussion of the context of the event or the specific motivation for it. Often, the February 1945 attack on Dresden is used as a metaphor for *all* Anglo-American bombing carried out in the Second World War: it is the test case tried repeatedly in the court of world opinion.

Kurt Vonnegut’s perceptive novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, motivated by the author’s experience as an American prisoner of war in Dresden during the air attack, helped to raise the profile of the raid in the United States. Appearing in 1969, at the height of the tumultuous Vietnam years, the book resonated in a nation feeling a need for self-examination. In the book’s first chapter, Vonnegut explained that he had written to the Air Force after the war ended, seeking details about the raid, including, “who ordered it, how many planes did it, why they did it, what desirable results there had been and so on.” But he was told such details were still secret.⁵

This essay is an effort to provide answers to the questions Vonnegut posed long ago. Though the questions are simple, the answers to them are not. It has taken historians many years to bring together *all* the puzzle pieces that allow for a rigorous and sophisticated interpretation of the Dresden raid. In this essay I have drawn upon the recent literature on Dresden (including my own contributions to it), earlier works, and a wide array of primary sources in an effort to provide – for teachers, scholars, and general readers – a comprehensive but still concise overview of the air raid that has won such a central place in the history of the Second World

Air Power (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), 273-282. Also, generally, Kenneth P. Werrell, *Blankets of Fire* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

5. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (New York: Dell, paperback reprint of the original 1969 book), 13-14.

War.⁶ This is not a work of historiography, rather, it is an effort to make sense of a complicated and much misunderstood episode in the history of modern warfare—and to make sense of it in the context in which it occurred. The story that reveals itself makes clear why Dresden is in fact an unusually disturbing event in the history of the war-torn 20th century—one that deserves to be fully understood, accurately remembered, and repeated to future generations as a cautionary tale about the brutalizing effects of modern war.

The essay will unfold in four main parts. First, I shall examine the history of the air attacks in tactical and technical detail. Here I shall include, as well, a description of the impact of the raids on those who experienced them, and a discussion of the long debate over the death toll at Dresden. Second, I shall explain the catalyst for the 1945 air campaign of which the February 13–15 Dresden raids were a part. Third, I shall examine the Allied and German reaction to the raids in the days and weeks after they occurred. And finally I shall examine the longer legacy of Dresden, the persistence of myth about it, and its meaning some 60 years after it took place.

I. The Raids, 13–15 February 1945

On the afternoon of 13 February 1945, Bomber Command bases in eastern England began receiving instructions for nighttime attacks on two targets: the German oil refinery at Boehlen, and the city of Dresden. The detailed instructions,

6. Interest in neither strategic bombing nor Dresden in particular has waned with time. See, especially, Taylor's fine book, *Dresden*; and Jeremy Crang and Paul Addison, eds., *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2006). The latter is a collection of essays that were delivered, initially, as papers at a conference on Dresden held by the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Second World War Studies in 2003. Also, Tami Davis Biddle, "Sifting Dresden's Ashes," *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 2005): 60–80. Other recent books discussing strategic bombing more generally have included: A.C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan* (New York: Walker and Walker, 2006); Marshall De Bruhl, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden* (New York: Random House, 2006). Though it has the same title as the Addison and Crang volume, the De Bruhl volume appeared several months later, in November 2006. Joerg Friedrich's 2002 book, *Der Brand*, was translated into English and published by the Columbia University Press in 2006 (*The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945*). Of interest to American readers because of its detailed descriptions of the impact of Allied air attacks, the book must be read and used with caution. Friedrich's attention to scholarly standards is haphazard, his research is sometimes thin, and he makes little attempt to place the history of Anglo-American bombing into the wider context of the Second World War, or the legacy of the First World War. W.G. Sebald's final book, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (New York: Random House, 2003), contains much that will stir the historian of air warfare. Readers should see, also: the University of Chicago's 2004 translation of Hans Erich Nossack's book, *The End*, on the bombing of Hamburg, 1943; Hermann Knell (a German survivor of Allied air attacks), *To Destroy a City: Strategic Bombing and its Human Consequences in World War II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 2003).

reflecting a military force of remarkable sophistication and power, not only indicated the precise timing and sequencing of the raids, but also the specific aircraft to be involved, the types of bombs they would carry, their fuel loads, the route to the target, the amount of “window” (metal strips used to confuse enemy radar) to be released, and the rate at which it would be dropped. The attack on Boehlen was intended—in addition to denuding precious German fuel supplies—to increase the confusion and dispersion of fighter aircraft trying to protect German air space. The Bomber Command order for the attack on Dresden listed the intention simply: “to destroy built-up areas and associated rail and industrial facilities.”⁷

Over Dresden, a two-part, staggered raid was designed to exploit the city’s vulnerabilities and overwhelm municipal services. At 10:15 pm on the night of February 13th, “Blind Illuminator” aircraft used H2S navigational aids to find and mark the contours of the city with flares, preparing it for the Mosquito “Visual Marker” aircraft that would swarm down in shallow dives, enabling pilots to use visual sighting to drop bright red target indicator bombs fused to explode at low altitude (500 to 1,000 feet). Above the fray, a “Master Bomber” orchestrated the attack by evaluating the accuracy of the target indicators and adjusting the strikes of the subsequent bombers in order to maximize their effectiveness. The precision of the visual markers on this first wave was striking: they produced a heavily concentrated, blazing red “bull’s-eye” at the aiming point, the city’s football stadium. Despite some cloud cover, follow-on attackers were able to identify the aiming point and keep their own bombing patterns tight, thus seeding fires that would merge into a maelstrom. This unusually effective concentration by the Mosquitoes was an essential element in what followed: without it, it is unlikely that a fire of such intensity and duration would have developed.⁸

A large second wave of more than 500 bombers, due to arrive shortly after 1:30 am, was preceded by 20 Lancaster bombers carrying high explosive weapons. These aircraft were intended to draw defenders away from the Blind Illuminator and Visual Marker aircraft that would follow immediately. The latter would not be Mosquitoes in this instance, but rather Lancasters of the No. 8 Group “Pathfinder Force” (PFF) which marked targets from medium altitude. Once again, a Master

7. For a detailed and authoritative examination of the Bomber Command attack, see an essay by the current chief historian of the Royal Air Force, Sebastian Cox, “The Dresden Raids: Why and How,” in Crang and Addison, eds., *Firestorm*, 18-61.

8. The flares used by the “Visual Markers” had a barometric fuse that set off an explosion above the ground so that the markers would cascade to the ground. The high volume of these flares made it very difficult for German civil defenders to extinguish them quickly. See Cox, “The Dresden Raids,” 39-40.

Bomber circled the sky, adjusting the bombing and sometimes calling for supplementary marking to guide the long stream of incoming attackers.⁹

The intricate nature of this plan and its precise timing were designed to maximize the surprise, concentration, and impact of the attack on the city. By the time the second wave arrived, the Master Bomber—one of Bomber Command's most experienced operators—noted laconically that the city was already “well ablaze.” The combination of high explosive and incendiary bombs had a deadly effect: buildings and homes were smashed and splintered, making them vulnerable to the incendiaries. The many fires that started merged quickly and uncontrollably, due in part to steady westerly winds. The Germans started a decoy fire to the west of Dresden, but the Master Bomber warned the second wave crews about it, and they stayed fixed on the city.¹⁰

Bomber Command also planned the route to the target very carefully. The Allied landings in France and subsequent movement eastward had greatly simplified the situation: the Germans' western radar chain had been pushed back on to their home territory, diminishing the warning time of Allied aerial attacks. In addition, German fighter strength had been badly denuded by this point in time—so much so, in fact, that Bomber Command pilots were able to keep their navigation lights on as far as Luxemburg. Spoofs and feints were worked into aerial plans so as to further confuse the defenders: aircraft equipped with “Mandrel” radar jamming devices flew ahead of lead aircraft, producing a kind of electronic curtain from which bombers would emerge (on to German radar) at the last moment. Decoy raids would emerge from the Mandrel screen at set times, and proceed to diversionary targets.¹¹

To protect the initial wave of bombers, a spoof force pulled away from the Boehlen-bound force to sow “window” from Mainz to Mannheim. The ruse worked, and the Germans tracked what they believed was a large bomber force. Other feints drew defenders towards Magdeburg, Dortmund, and Nuremberg,

9. Bomber Command Summary of Operations, 13-14 February 1945, Air Historical Branch, RAF. Cox has written: “Such was the sophistication of Bomber Command's planning and techniques by this stage of the war that provision was also made to provide for ‘blind sky marking,’ that is to say, cascades of slow-burning parachute-borne flares designed to hang above any cloud layers, which would allow the following bomb aimers to aim at them and continue with an attack even when no ground detail was visible to either the bombers or the ‘Master Bombers.’” See Cox, “The Dresden Raids”, 33.

10. Cox, “The Dresden Raids,” 41, 44, and 46, with quoted material on 44. In *The Bomber Command War Diaries*, Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt assess the first wave attack as “only moderately successful”; they argue that the second wave was responsible for the firestorm. But this interpretation under-appreciates the tight bomb-fall pattern of the first wave, and the essential role this played in sowing intense fires across the city. See Middlebrook and Everitt, *The Bomber Command War Diaries* (Hinkley: Midland Publishing, 1995 [reprint of 1985 Viking edition]), 663.

11. Taylor also writes in accurate detail about the dual Bomber Command raids. See *Dresden*, 207-224 and 274-283.

enabling the real attackers to fly to their targets largely untouched. The second phase of the Dresden raid was similarly protected by spoofs and a Mandrel screen; only after the second raid was winding down did the German defenders discern that Dresden was again the target of the main attack force. All this meant that only a handful of fighter aircraft were in the skies over Dresden on the night of the 13th-14th.¹²

Smoke from the developing firestorm prevented the marking for the second phase from being tight and concentrated; indeed, the Master Bomber called for the target to be re-marked, and gave adjustment instructions to the large force of incoming Lancasters. But the more scattered nature of this follow-on attack tended to extend and intensify the devastating band of fires in the city.¹³

At this stage in the war, the attackers were able to use weather for their own ends as well, timing their entry over the Ruhr to coincide with cloud cover and thus preventing accurate air defense fire. In general, German flak (an acronym from the German term *Fliegerabwehrkanonen*) was stretched thin; indeed, the flak was so light at Dresden that the Master Bomber for the first wave ordered his Lancasters to drop down to 15,000 feet, enabling maximum concentration on their aim point.¹⁴ While flying deep into German air space still posed real danger, it was far less risky than it had been earlier in the war.

Because military operations are so inherently complex and thus present so many opportunities for failure at many levels, it is rare for all pieces of a detailed plan to work exactly as anticipated. But on this particular night everything seemed to come together for Bomber Command in the skies over Dresden: crews were able to fully exploit the capabilities they had developed, slowly and painstakingly, over the long years of war. The Dresden raid is not normally associated with highly-concentrated, accurate bombing, and yet it was the precision of the target marking in the initial wave that enabled the intense accretion of small fires needed to create a firestorm.

Achieving this level of technical mastery had taken years of trial and error. Sir Arthur Harris had taken the helm of Bomber Command in late February 1942, one week after that force had formally switched its focus to the nighttime attack of cities. The change had been an expedient, necessary after German defenses had forced the British to fly at night—and after the British had discovered that the only target they could find and hit reliably at night was a city center.¹⁵ Over the next three years, Harris would push his crews to constantly improve their tactics and techniques. The British force that attacked Dresden was operating at the peak of

12. See Cox, "The Dresden Raids," esp. 33-39, and 43.

13. Taylor, *Dresden*, 276-277.

14. Cox, "The Dresden Raids," 40. "Fliegerabwehrkanonen" means air defense artillery.

15. For a summary of this evolution, see Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 176-206.

its wartime efficiency and effectiveness. Despite its proficiency, however, it could never fully escape the impact of contingent events, especially weather. Due to less favorable local conditions, the attack on Boehlen (carried out on the same night as the Dresden raid) was not nearly so successful in terms of accuracy and effectiveness. And the attack on Chemnitz, waged the night after Dresden, did not produce a firestorm despite the use of thousands more incendiaries in the ordnance mix of the attacking bombers.¹⁶

Just before 2 a.m. the last of the British bombers would depart the Dresden area, leaving behind fires that could be spotted from 100 miles away. Coming in the next morning on the heels of a massive conflagration, the American bombers found their target obscured by smoke and fire. The attack on Dresden was one of three American air attacks in the region that day: targets in Magdeburg and Chemnitz were also hit. Nine of twelve 1st Air Division Groups reached Dresden; the other three bombed the city of Prague by mistake. Some crews were able to bomb the Dresden railway marshaling yards while most others, inhibited by smoke, bombed non-visually and scattered their bombs widely across the city. All told, 311 B-17s of the 1st Air Division dropped 771 tons of bombs, including 294 tons of incendiaries, on Dresden. On the 15th, American bombers using Dresden as a “secondary” target, dropped another 461 tons of bombs on what was left of the formerly elegant city, once known as “Florence on the Elbe.”¹⁷

The Victims

The city of Dresden lay directly in the path of a great swell of refugees that was, in January and February of 1945, fleeing the hard fighting on the Eastern Front. Trying to accommodate more than 100,000 extra souls had strained the city’s resources to the breaking point; indeed, Dresden’s hospitals were so overcrowded that the Germans had to use schools and other public buildings to house the sick and injured.¹⁸ The scenes were wrenching: children searched for parents, and parents searched for children in a heartbreaking cacophony of desperate voices. The faces of wearied youth were blank and numb with despair. Most of the children,

16. The figure comes from *The Times* (London), 15 and 16 February 1945 (“Smashing Blows at Dresden” and “14,000 Tons on Germany”), 1.

17. The figures are from Davis, *Carl A. Spaatz*, 556-558.

18. The number of refugees in Dresden in February 1945 will never be precisely known. German historian Goetz Bergander has estimated the number at no more than 200,000. See Bergander, *Dresden im Luftkrieg* (Weimar Böhlag, 1994 [1977]), 210-215. Frederick Taylor argues that while millions of people probably moved through the city in early 1945, they were not all there at the same time. He postulates that some 100,000 refugees were in the city on the night of the 13th-14th February 1945. See 231-232.

lacking trust in an adult world that had brought so much suffering and despair, could muster little more than an instinct for survival.¹⁹

Even though the Royal Air Force's first wave of attackers numbered just over 250 aircraft in all, the concentration of the bomb fall created an intense and horrifying impact on the ground, relentlessly pummeling those in the city center. The combination of high explosive and incendiary bombs had its intended effect, splintering buildings into kindling that was readily ignited by hundreds of thousands of fire-starters falling to the earth below. The intensity of the explosions drove people underground or into the best shelter they could find; this, in turn, prevented them from taking part in tamping out the many fires that were still in early stages. And the frail, elderly, and young persons in the city had little ability to contribute to fire-fighting in any event.

The effectiveness of the RAF over Dresden was aided and abetted by several failings on the part of the Germans. First, little civil defense money had been spent in Dresden, and when funds finally were put towards this purpose late in the war, they were used mainly to create corridors between the cellars that already existed under buildings (to allow people to move from one to another if necessary). As German historian Sonke Neitzel has explained: "In the event, these openings exacerbated the effects of the firestorm on the night of 13-14 February by channeling smoke and fumes from one basement to the next and sucking out the oxygen from a network of inter-connected cellars."²⁰ Most of the few adequate air raid shelters than did exist were reserved for Nazi officials; ironically, a large personal bunker had been built for the Gauleiter of Saxony, Martin Mutschmann, the individual ultimately responsible for civil defense in Dresden.²¹

Another consequential disadvantage was the fact that the city's air defenses—already spare compared to other German cities—had been denuded in order to bolster the Nazi fight against the Red Army to the east: by mid-January 1945, the last heavy flak battery left the city, bound for the eastern front. What was left behind was inadequate for defending the city against British or American attacks. The German night fighter forces, already handicapped by the drain on pilots caused by the American offensive against the Luftwaffe in 1944, were short on fuel. In addition, the RAF had pulled ahead in the measure-countermeasure contest over radar, dealing yet another blow to the wholly inadequate German air defenses.²²

A wide range of factors—weather and cloud cover, atmospheric conditions, wide boulevards that acted as firebreaks—had insured that, in Germany, firestorms were relatively rare events, despite Bomber Command's heavy use of incendiary

19. See Alexander McKee, *Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinderbox* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1982), 44.

20. Neitzel, "The City Under Attack," in Crang and Addison, *Firestorm*, 60.

21. Neitzel, "City Under Attack," 69.

22. Neitzel points out that in the first days of 1945, 456 heavy and 186 light-medium flak batteries were moved east from all part of Germany. See op. cit., 67.

bombs. When firestorms did occur, as in Hamburg in July 1943, the results were devastating. The combination of circumstances in Dresden on the night of 13 February—including the accuracy of the first wave’s attack, steady westerly winds, inadequate civil defenses, the narrow streets of the *Altstadt* (old city), and the size and timing of the second wave—proved conducive to the dramatic result. The fires started by the first wave had merged and set the city ablaze before the heavy second wave arrived to seal the city’s fate. Once the individual flames merged into a colossal, all-consuming inferno, the self-feeding fire pulled oxygen in from all directions, creating the fierce winds that characterize a firestorm. Material around the center of the conflagration was subject to spontaneous combustion; indeed, the heat was so intense that actual contact with flame was unnecessary. Carbon monoxide seeped into shelters, poisoning many of those who sought refuge beneath the ground.

One’s best hope of survival lay in fleeing to an area that had not been overtaken by the flames, but efforts to escape were immensely complicated by the lack of oxygen and presence of poisonous gases, by winds so strong that they could pull shingles off of roofs and uproot trees, and by roadways that melted into sticky asphalt traps. Flying embers rained down everywhere—singeing those who fled and igniting new fires along their path. Many of the elderly and infirm simply gave up in the midst of the frantic journey, allowing the catastrophe to overtake them.²³

At the time of the raid, Dresden had several concrete reservoirs. Built in 1944 by prisoners of war, they were designed to provide alternative sources of water to fire-fighting teams; they failed in this purpose ultimately because the paths to them were quickly blocked by collapsing buildings and streams of human beings. The largest of the reservoirs, some 130 feet long, was located in an open area of the *Altmarkt* (old market). As the firestorm developed, many city-dwellers made their way to this reservoir, believing that the water would protect them from the flames. As the night progressed, however, the air above this apparent refuge became increasingly unbreathable, and the water increasingly hot. In their attempt to escape, the panicked survivors—many of them injured and weary—discovered that the smooth concrete walls had no handles or ladders. Frenzied scrambling allowed only a few of the fittest to liberate themselves and contend, once again, with the fires.²⁴

In the days following the raids, survivors searched for their families. One such survivor, Eva Beyer, recalled that on the 14th she made her way to the centre of town: “When I turned into Chemnitzerstrasse, I didn’t know whether to go on or go back. There were people there who in their desperate need had clawed themselves on to the metal fence. They were burnt and charred; and they were not only adults, there were children of different ages hanging there.”²⁵

23. On this point, see Taylor, *Dresden*, 290.

24. Taylor describes the reservoirs on 294–295 in *ibid.*

25. Beyer quoted in McKee, *Dresden 1945*, 240. See also 246.

The Death Toll

Due to the demographics of the war at that point in time, most of the Dresden victims—dead, wounded, and homeless—were women, children, and old people. The death toll at Dresden has been, over the years, a source of extensive and emotional debate. Estimates of the death toll have ranged widely, from 20,000 to 250,000. The uncertainty over the number of refugees in the city complicated the accounting. The highest figures were promulgated most consistently by David Irving, author of the widely-read 1963 book *The Destruction of Dresden*. Irving's figures varied over the years as he produced new editions of his book, and his numbers deeply influenced subsequent writing on Dresden, and public debates about it. His highest figure, 250,000, was shown subsequently to have been based on a report fabricated by the German propaganda ministry right after the raid occurred.²⁶ While Irving backed away from that claim in 1966, he continued to publish a six-figure death toll in later editions of the book, which also continued to re-produce the erroneous document on which the flawed figures were based. But academic historians have abandoned high figures in recent years, replacing them with more accurate ones. This has been due not only to the discrediting of Irving in a high profile trial in Britain, but also to the publication of the results of a very careful accounting of the Dresden death toll undertaken in support of that trial.²⁷

Hans Voigt, a local official at the time of the raids, claimed that he reported 35,000 dead to authorities after the air attack. Georg Feydt, who wrote a thoughtful account of the air attack in 1953, placed the figure at 39,773.²⁸ In considering the stories of eyewitnesses who recalled the center of Dresden covered with bodies,

26. The figures cited by Irving varied in different editions of his book, *The Destruction of Dresden*, first published in London in 1963 by William Kimber. For a thoughtful, analytical, and well-documented accounting of the numbers, and an examination of Irving's claims, see Richard J. Evans, *Telling Lies About Hitler* (London: Verso, 2002), 157-192; on this point in particular, see, especially, 160-161, and 165-166. Frederick Taylor has taken up the topic recently as well in *Dresden*, 369-372 and 443-448. For an earlier analysis of the casualty figures, particularly with respect to the postwar politics of East and West Germany, see Elizabeth Corwin, "The Bombing of Dresden as Portrayed in German Accounts, East and West," *UCLA Historical Journal*, 8, (1987): esp. 90-91.

27. In 2000 Irving faced, and subsequently was found guilty of, a charge of libel in a case brought by the American historian Deborah Lipstadt, and her publisher, Penguin Books. Later, Irving was arrested in Austria and imprisoned as a Holocaust denier. British historian Richard J. Evans, who served as an expert witness at the Irving trial, undertook a painstaking investigation of Irving's research, including research into the death toll at Dresden. See Evans, *Telling Lies About Hitler*, 157-192. In a letter to the *Times* (London) of 7 July 1966, Irving abandoned his highest claims, saying he had no wish to promote or perpetuate "false legends." But a 1971 edition of his book offered a "most probable" figure of 135,000 deaths. And in speeches and interviews in the 1980s and 1990s, Irving still claimed figures of 100,000 and 125,000. See Evans, *Telling Lies*, 178, 188-189.

28. *Ibid.*, 159 and 185.

it must be borne in mind that the city center is a relatively compact area of no more than eight square miles; even 10,000 bodies in such a space would have been an appalling and unforgettable sight.²⁹ Based on the most reliable numbers available from the sources, it is reasonable to claim that the final death toll was in the vicinity of 25,000 to 35,000 dead. Though there will never be an absolutely precise figure, we know now that local documentation was careful: there were 21,271 registered burials following the air attacks; these included the ashes of 6,865 victims cremated in a funeral pyre at the *Altmarkt* after their bodies had been collected by the few rickety trucks and horse-drawn wagons available to workers in the city.³⁰ Other unfortunate souls, also numbering in the tens of thousands, were wounded or made homeless by the raid.

On one level, the specific death toll matters not at all: it does not change the circumstances of the raid, nor the grave suffering that took place as a result of it. On the other hand, grossly inflated figures remove the history from the documented record and place it, instead, in the realm of propaganda and politics.

II. Why Dresden?

During the war, rumors circulated in Germany about the sanctity of the city due to its art and architecture; Dresdeners themselves did not seem to think that the city would draw the full wrath of the Anglo-American air forces.³¹ But there was a certain degree of self-delusion in this faith in immunity; it overlooked, for instance, the fact that much of Dresden's consumer-related industry had been converted to war-related industry. Dresden's biggest manufacturer, the lens and camera maker Zeiss-Ikon, made instruments vital to the war effort, including Luftwaffe bombsights. Seidel and Naumann, which had manufactured typewriters and sewing machines, switched in wartime to the manufacture of armaments. These are two examples among many others.³² And Dresden had not been spared up to that point: the Americans had waged two relatively light raids on targets in and around the city, in October 1944 and again in January 1945.

Some of the recent literature on the Dresden raid has highlighted the fact that Dresden contained a significant amount of war-related industry. This has been useful in countering false claims that Dresden contained little war manufacturing, or none at all. But the observation about war industry in the city must be used carefully because that industry was not the central reason why Bomber Command

29. See Evans, *Telling Lies*, 174, who cites Theo Miller, a member of the Dresden Clearing Staff in 1945, who later wrote (in imperfect English) about his own estimates: "The inner district of Dresden has only a dimension of 2 times 4 miles! So the streets of Dresden looked to the frightened population like overflowed with corpses, and as a normal human reaction the survivors reported gigantic figures out of their phantasy."

30. The figures quoted here are from 183 of Evans, *Telling Lies*.

31. On the rumors, see Neitzel, "City Under Attack," 69.

32. See Taylor, *Dresden*, 148-165; Cox, "The Dresden Raids," 53-56.

attacked the city on 13-14 February, or the why the Americans attacked the city's marshaling yards on the 14th. Instead, Dresden's *location* was determining.

The city of Dresden is located due west of what was then called "Breslau" (Poland), seventy-one miles east-southeast of Leipzig, and 111 miles south of Berlin. The seventh largest city in Germany at the start of World War II, it sat in the middle of important east-west and north-south traffic routes, and was at the junction of three trunk routes of the Reich's railway system.³³ Those facts in themselves were enough to put Dresden in the crosshairs in 1945, but the story of why Dresden was targeted—and targeted in mid-February—deserves further explanation.

Following the Normandy breakout and the battle at the Falaise Gap, the late summer of 1944 had been heady with momentum and optimism for the Anglo-Americans. The Nazi tiger, it seemed, had been caged. But this sense of imminent victory flagged in the autumn as forward momentum bogged down or was badly punished, as at Arnhem. New German weapons—including V-2 rockets and Messerschmitt 262 jet fighters—made it seem that Anglo-American optimism had been premature. Poor weather tormented Allied bomber crews and lifted the effective summertime pressure they had placed on waning German oil supplies. The V-2s, in particular, seemed to be a sinister manifestation of the long-dreaded "secret weapons" that the Allies had feared might emerge from Germany during the course of the war. Indeed, the V-2 was the world's first ballistic missile; unlike the slower V-1, it could not be shot down in flight.³⁴ Raining down on London from September 1944 onward, it placed further pressure on the war-weary British homefront.

In December, Hitler launched a counter-attack in the west—a Houdini-like feat that had seemed so unlikely it left the frustrated Allies in a scramble of surprise, embarrassment, and deep concern. Allied casualties soared; the U.S. Army alone suffered 74,788 casualties on the western front in December, and would suffer a further 61,692 the following month.³⁵ And, as is so often the case in the course of human events, dismay followed in the wake of dashed optimism.

33. "Historical Analysis of the 14-15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden" by Joseph W. Angell, USAF Historical Division, Research Studies Institute, Air University, Maxwell AFB [1953], 4-5; see also map, "The East Wall" in CAB 81/127, The National Archive, London (hereinafter TNA), Kew, London.

34. For a notable expression of Allied concern about "secret weapons" in Germany, see Hanson Baldwin, "How Long Will the War Last?" *The New York Times Magazine*, 23 July 1944, 3 & 38-39. On the V-2 generally, see Michael Neufeld, *The Rocket and the Reich* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

35. *Time* magazine described the counteroffensive: "Then, savagely, the full force of the German blow was unleashed. Its suddenness, its underrated force, sent the Americans reeling like a boxer who has taken a terrific punch to the solar plexus." See "World Battlefronts: Western Front," *Time*, 1 January 1945, 18. The western front U.S. casualty figures are from "U.S. Toll is 425,007 on Western Front," *The New York Times*, 16 March 1945, 3.

Anglo-American intelligence estimates reflected the air of crisis. In Britain, the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee (known as the "JIC") reported on 16 January 1945 that the "probable worst case scenario" is that the Russian winter offensive and Allied spring offensive in the West might achieve "no decisive success", thus forcing upon the Allies a renewal of the offensive in the West "in about mid-August 1945" coordinated with a major Russian summer offensive.³⁶ In light of concerns about homefront war weariness—heightened in the United States by the burdens of a brutal war in the Far East—this was hardly a welcome prospect. On the same day, the Deputy Chief of Air Staff (Intelligence) proposed that the JIC prepare a report evaluating the potential impact of heavy air attacks on Berlin in conjunction with the Soviet offensive.

Several days later, on 21st January, the U.S. Strategic Air Forces Intelligence Office argued that Anglo-American armies had lost the initiative in the West, and that the Luftwaffe had been able to rebound "to a degree not considered possible by Allied intelligence some eight months ago."³⁷ On that same day the JIC reported that the Germans might be able to send substantial reinforcements to the Eastern Front by February, and that these would grow through the month of March. They concluded that the progress of the Russian winter offensive would turn on "the result of a race between the arrival of German reserves ... and the loss of the Russian advance owing to logistic difficulties and the distraction of forces on the flanks."³⁸

On January 25th the JIC suggested an urgent review of the utilization of the strategic bomber forces, insisting that: "The degree of success achieved by the present Russian offensive is likely to have a decisive effect on the length of the war." Well-timed attacks against Berlin would assist the Russians, especially if these could be coordinated with the isolation of East Prussia and the fall of Breslau. Significantly, the report stated that: "a heavy flow of refugees from Berlin in the depth of winter coinciding with the trekking westwards of a population fleeing from Eastern Germany would be bound to *create great confusion, interfere with the orderly movement of troops to the front, and hamper the German military and administrative machine.*"³⁹

In a discussion of strategy held the same day the report appeared, Command-in-Chief of Bomber Command Sir Arthur Harris suggested to Deputy Chief of

36. War Cabinet Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee, Draft Report, "German Will and Capacity to Resist as at Mid-April and Mid-August 1945", 16 January 1945, CAB 81/127, TNA, Kew, London, 1.

37. Julian Allen (Asst. to Director of Intelligence) to Brig. Gen. G.C. McDonald, memo, 21 January 1945, in the Papers of Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, Box 23, Diary, Washington, D.C., Library of Congress Manuscript Room (hereinafter SP).

38. Cited in Taylor, *Dresden*, 180.

39. Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee, 'Strategic Bombing in Relation to the Present Russian Offensive', 25 January 1945, pp. 1-2, CAB 81/127, TNA. Italics added.

Air Staff Sir Norman Bottomley that Leipzig, Chemnitz, and Dresden—in addition to Berlin—might be profitable targets for aiding the Russian advance.⁴⁰ An aggressive intervention by Prime Minister Winston Churchill—made on the eve of the Yalta discussions—pushed the process along. Churchill inquired what plans the RAF had for “basting the Germans in their retreat from Breslau.”⁴¹ The Prime Minister had read the intelligence reports, and was anxious that the war effort not be allowed to stall. In addition, he had wanted for some time to prove to the Russians that the Anglo-American Combined Bomber Offensive (C.B.O.) had served as a kind of second front, aiding them in their pitched battle with the Wehrmacht. Air attacks on cities in eastern Germany would not only coordinate inter-Allied efforts and thus help to advance the Red Army, but would re-emphasize the contribution of strategic bombing to Allied victory, and help, perhaps, to impress upon the Soviets the might of Anglo-American air power in 1945.⁴²

Sir Arthur Harris was told promptly that Chief of Air Staff Sir Charles Portal was amenable to attacks on Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz, and “any other cities where a severe blitz will not only cause confusion in the evacuation from the East but will also hamper the movement of troops from the West.” (In his letter to Harris, Sir Norman Bottomley directed: “...you will undertake such attacks with the particular object of exploiting the confused conditions which are likely to exist in the above mentioned cities during the successful Russian advance.”)⁴³ Portal discussed the plan with the commander of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces (U.S.S.T.A.F.), Lieutenant General Carl A. Spaatz, who conferred with Bottomley and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander. On 31 January Bottomley informed Portal of the agreement he had worked out with Spaatz in order to “meet the present situation.” The next day, 1st February, Spaatz articulated the same plan to those gathered at the Allied Air Commanders’ Conference at Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces (S.H.A.E.F.). Attacks on synthetic oil would remain the first priority, but the second priority would now be Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, “and associated cities where heavy attack will cause great confusion in civilian evacuation from the East and hamper movement of reinforcements from other fronts.”⁴⁴ Subsequently, the

40. Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945* (London: HMSO, 1961), III:100. (Hereinafter SAOG, and volume number.)

41. Churchill quoted in SAOG, III:101.

42. Churchill’s role is made clear in SAOG, III:98-104.

43. Bottomley quoted in SAOG, III:103.

44. Quoted in SAOG, III:104. See also the summary of the plan, included in the “Notes of the Allied Air Commanders’ Conference held at S.H.A.E.F. on 1st February 1945, at 1130 Hours,” in Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, decimal file: K239.046-38 (hereinafter AFHRA).

Vice-Chiefs of Staff approved these priorities, and by the 6th of February they had been approved as well by the British Chiefs of Staff, then in Yalta.⁴⁵

The way in which Gen. Spaatz understood this guidance—what he agreed to as a result of his consultations with the British—is important. Spaatz had heard the specific language of the plan—indeed he had read it aloud to his fellow commanders—and had agreed to it without requesting a change. Raids in the second priority category had a particular purpose: to aid the Soviet advance by causing disruption and confusion behind German lines. Spaatz would not have thought of these *simply* as further attacks on communications targets since “communications” were the third, distinct, target category listed in the guidance.⁴⁶ While Spaatz did not intend to change his long range bombers’ tactics of operation, he nonetheless would have understood that his agreement with the British created a separate category with a specific rationale: to hinder the German Army’s ability to fight a war of maneuver by causing chaos behind their lines.

These decisions were rendered in unemotional, bureaucratic tones; there appears to have been little debate over them. This absence of debate reflected the degree to which the long war had hardened attitudes that, in 1939, were still sensitive and hopeful. In September 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had issued an appeal for every government engaged in war to affirm publicly that it would not be the first to bomb civilians or “unfortified cities.” In response, the French and British had jointly declared that they would spare civilian populations and govern-

45. SAOG, III:104-105; Action Memorandum, N.H. Bottomley to Air Officer Commanding, Malta; Headquarters, USSTAF; Air Ministry, Whitehall [nd] Box 20, Diary, Library of Congress Manuscript Room, SP. During the Yalta discussions, the Russians specifically requested raids against Berlin and Leipzig to help block German movement of troops to the east. In general, though, they were cautious, arguing for a bombing line that would run from Berlin to Dresden, and Vienna to Zagreb. Though these cities could be included in Anglo-American strike plans, the Russians wanted everything eastward of the line kept off limits. On this point, see also Henry Probert, *Bomber Harris: His Life and Times* (London: Greenhill Books, 2001), 319, who argues that while the formal record cites only Berlin and Leipzig as the specific requests, Hugh Lunghi, the Russian language interpreter for the British Chiefs of Staff, was certain that the Russians had also requested the bombing of Dresden. Probert interviewed Lunghi on this point in 2000, and cites as well Lunghi’s letter to the British journal, *The Spectator*, of 6 August 1994, arguing that Stalin himself had requested the bombing of the city. Lunghi wrote: “I was present at the meeting of the British, United States and Soviet Chiefs of Staff on 5 February in the Yusupov Palace, Stalin’s headquarters... when the Soviet Chiefs requested the Allies to deliver massive attacks on German communications in the Berlin-Leipzig-Dresden area and specifically to bomb those cities urgently.” Finally, see Taylor, *Dresden*, 190-192.

46. See SAOG, III:104. Jet aircraft factories were specified as the fourth priority. “Communications targets”, as interpreted by the Americans during World War II, covered a wide range of possibilities. Generally, though, these referred to main railway lines, bridges, and other assets that enabled the *Wehrmacht* to move men, supplies, and information, and to engage in coherent maneuver warfare. Virtually all German cities contained a few notable communications targets. See also, “Notes of the Allied Air Commander’s Conference”, 1 February 1945, AFHRA.

ment property. The Germans asserted that they welcomed the president's appeal, and that they had issued orders that only military targets were to be bombed.⁴⁷ Over the years of war, the constraints on aerial targeting, such as they were, had fallen away gradually and incrementally in response to the problems of finding and hitting targets accurately, and as a consequence of the downward pull of the vortex of total war.⁴⁸

The absence of debate reflected, as well, the urgency and anxiety that colored Anglo-American deliberations at that moment in the war. The shocks and setbacks of the late fall and early winter 1944-45 had demolished the optimistic hopes held by many in the late summer and early autumn of 1944, following the Normandy breakout. Indeed, so many American military officers had speculated about the imminent end of war in 1944 that it had become an embarrassment to the War Department, prompting—in the aftermath of the German counteroffensive—a decree prohibiting predictions or speculations of any kind regarding the likely date of war's end.⁴⁹

On 30 December 1944, the Washington-based, four-star commander-in-chief of the U.S. Army Air Forces, Gen. Henry 'Hap' Arnold, had informed Gen. Spaatz that he was concerned about the Germans reviving their fighter production, and thus posing a significant threat to the Allies. On the same day, Arnold pointed out that his superior, General George C. Marshall, "has been pressing in Washington for any and every plan to bring increased effort against the German forces for the purpose of quickly ending the war." Arnold told Spaatz, "I want to impress upon all of your people that we will accept with satisfaction any increase in tonnage, no matter how small, provided you will drop it where it will hurt." Responding to Arnold's letters, Spaatz asserted that, "If we are not able to cross the Rhine prior to 1 April 1945, and the Russian lines are stabilized at that time along prepared lines of defense in western Poland, the German may become extremely difficult." He added, "By using defensive troops to the maximum in the line and holding out his crack units for maneuver and offense, he may be able to operate throughout the

47. The text of Roosevelt's appeal can be found in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1939, I (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1956), 541-542.

48. On targeting and the law of war, see Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 216-285, and *War and Law Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 199-206; Tami Davis Biddle, "Air Power" in Michael Howard et al, eds., *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 140-159; and Hew Strachan, "Strategic Bombing and the Question of Civilian Casualties up to 1945," in Crang and Addison, eds., *Firestorm*, 1-17.

49. Letter, Brig. Gen. Lauris Norstad to Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, 17 April 1945, Box B11, Papers of Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. Norstad wrote: "there is a War Department policy stemming from last year's orgy of predictions that the war would end before Christmas, which prohibits any predictions or speculations of any kind by general officers."

summer. Also, we must not discount the possibility of his introducing an effective secret weapon.”⁵⁰

At the same time Robert Lovett, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of War for Air, had drawn up a detailed memorandum arguing for an expanded air effort, in particular, the spreading of air attacks all across Germany’s smaller cities and towns. He commenced with the statement: “If we are to end the war with Germany this year we have to make a choice very soon. Either we expand our effort in Europe, or we dig in and watch the casualty lists grow.”⁵¹

On the 12th of February, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that things looked grim from the perspective of S.H.A.E.F.: “Both on the Eastern and Western Fronts—but especially in the West—the Allies faced a stern prospect, not just of a few weeks, but of several months of hard, costly fighting before final victory is achieved.” In the weeks following the Battle of the Bulge, sharp criticism of Allied military strategy had erupted from several quarters. A frequent complaint was that Anglo-American planning had not been adequately coordinated with Russian planning.⁵²

It may be argued that February 1945 was the darkest month in the most violent and deadly year of the twentieth century. In the U.S., Secretary of War Henry Stimson announced American casualty figures on February 8th: they had climbed by 27,242 in the space of one week. On the 22nd of February, the week-long increase was another 18,982. The battle of Iwo Jima raged in the Pacific, and the battle of Okinawa lay just ahead. On the 5th of March, *Time* magazine listed U.S. casualties on all fronts for the month of February: 49,689 killed, 153,076 wounded, 31,101 missing, 3,403 taken prisoner.⁵³ Shortly thereafter, American strategic bombers, operating out of the Marianas, would strike Tokyo in a massive

50. Letter, Arnold to Spaatz, 30 December 1944; (second) letter, Arnold to Spaatz, 30 December 1944; letter, Spaatz to Arnold, 7 January 1945, Box 20 (Diary), SP.

51. Following a pessimistic assessment of the existing situation, Lovett argued: “even assuming a full out coordinated offensive on the part of the Russians against Northeastern Germany, it seems reasonable to assume that the war may develop into a type of dug-in, trench warfare which will be slow, costly in lives and increasingly difficult to synchronize with the increased demands of accelerated Pacific operations.” See “Personal Memorandum for General Arnold” by Robert S. Lovett, 9 January 1945; and letter, Arnold to Spaatz (enclosed with the memorandum), 14 January 1945, Box 20 (Diary), SP.

52. “Siegfried Line Anchor Falls; SHAEF Sees Stiff Fight Ahead,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 February 1945, 4; “Knockout Drive By Russia?” *U.S. News*, 5 January 1945, 11; “World Battlefronts,” *Time*, 1 January 1945, 20.

53. “Casualties,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 February 1945, 2; “Army, Navy Casualties Pass 800,000 Mark,” *Washington Star*, 22 February 1945, 1; “U.S. War Casualties,” *Time*, 5 March 1945, 19. The casualty figures for January and December 1944 had been even higher. At the Combined Chiefs of Staff Meeting on 1 February 1945, the likely date for the conclusion of the war was postulated to be 18 months after the conclusion of the war in Europe. See Letter, Anderson to Spaatz, 2 February 1945, Box 20 (Diary), SP.

nighttime raid that signaled the beginning of a dramatic departure from the effort to hit specific factories and military installations, in daylight, in Japan.⁵⁴

The Allied war effort had been derailed by daunting, unwelcome developments. The pace of war now seemed to be accelerating, rather than winding down. The spectre of the First World War's stalemated western front began to loom large. The only remedy, it seemed, was to fight even more ferociously to avert an unwanted extension of the long, costly, and wearisome battle in Europe. Scrambling for troops, neither the British nor the Americans were in a position to re-double their efforts on the ground. The tool available to them was the one they had embraced years earlier: bombers. Determined to avoid a replay of the Somme and Passchendaele, Anglo-American planners and politicians had grasped at an expedient form of weaponry that seemed a natural follow-on to the great naval fleets of an earlier age. Now they would use it, in its most unbounded and unconstrained form, in a bid to keep the European war from dragging on into 1946.

These decisions were grave in their implications; they signaled a stripping away of those last boundaries remaining around the use of strategic bombers. The language of the instructions that would guide the Dresden raid—"where heavy attack will cause great confusion in civilian evacuation from the East and hamper movement of reinforcements from other fronts"—was vague and impersonal. Enjoining bombers to "cause great confusion" and "hamper movement of reinforcements" allowed planners to avoid the true meaning of those phrases: the blurring effect of euphemistic language seemed to create an environment in which moral dilemmas could be sidestepped. What this language really meant, however, was that the Allies would use aerial bombing to create an obstruction between advancing Russian troops and *Wehrmacht* supplies and reinforcements—and that obstruction would be comprised, in part, by human beings. It meant that the Allies were prepared to use the presence of large numbers of refugees on the eastern front as a lever against the *Wehrmacht*—as a means of hindering Germany's ability to conduct efficient maneuver warfare.⁵⁵

54. The best recent essay on the air war in Japan is William W. Ralph, "Improvised Destruction: Arnold, LeMay and the Firebombing of Japan," *War in History*, 13, 4 (October 2006): 495-522.

55. On February 1st Vice Chief of Air Staff Sir Douglas Evill lent additional detail to the guidance. Even here though, one sees language that does not wholly come to terms with the human impact of what was being contemplated. He wrote: "Evacuees from German and German-Occupied Provinces to the east of Berlin are streaming westward through Berlin itself and through Leipzig, Dresden, and other cities in the East of Germany. The administrative problems involved in receiving the refugees and re-distributing them are likely to be immense. The strain on the administration and upon the communications must be considerably increased by the need for handling military reinforcements on their way to the Eastern Front. A series of heavy attacks by day and night . . . is likely to create considerable delays in the deployment of troops at the Front, and may well result in establishing a state of chaos in some or all of these centres." Evill note to the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 1 February 1945, quoted in Taylor, *Dresden*, 187.

The Failure of Constraint and the Coming of Wrath

Throughout the month of February the operating tempo of the strategic air forces was high. Years of experience had insured that, by 1944, Bomber Command was the most powerful, accurate, and devastating bomber force ever assembled.⁵⁶ But Bomber Command remained a night bombing force principally, and north European weather conditions insured that opportunities for striking specific military targets remained the exception rather than the rule. Bombers dropped a mix of high explosive (HE) and incendiary bombs, and in February 1945 the latter typically comprised from 40-60 percent of total bomb load.⁵⁷ Sir Arthur Harris drove his crews to perfect the techniques of nighttime incendiary bombing: every time he sent them to a city he was seeking to bring about the kind of devastation that could be caused by mixing HE and incendiaries in concentrated urban areas. Though he sent his crews to other targets when directed to do so, he believed that his city campaign—designed to devastate more than sixty of Germany's principal urban areas—was the heart of the strategic bomber offensive. Raising fires in German cities did not trouble him: he was convinced that the alternative would be a vast increase in the casualty figures for Allied armies, and a likely repetition of the terrible, prolonged battles of 1914-1918.⁵⁸

In February 1945 the American aerial target list was wide and varied; it reflected a desperate attempt to put some final nails into the coffin of the Third Reich. Indeed, despite poor weather, American bombers would expend their greatest effort since June 1944.⁵⁹ The Americans had entered the war convinced that they would bomb specific industrial targets visually, from high altitude bombers flying in self-defending groups. But like the British, the Americans found themselves making significant wartime modifications to their prewar bombing doctrine.

56. On comparative accuracy rates between Bomber Command and the US Army Air Forces, see W. Hays Parks, "Precision and Area Bombing: Who Did Which, and When?" *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 18, 1 (September 1995): 145-174. On Bomber Command, see, Tami Davis Biddle, "Bombing by the Square Yard: Sir Arthur Harris at War, 1942-1945" in *The International History Review*, XXI, 3 (September 1999): 626-664.

57. See "War Room Summary of Bomber Command Operations: Month of February, 1945", Air Ministry War Room, Statistical Section, 1945, copy courtesy of Air Historical Branch, Royal Air Force, Stanmore, Middlesex, U.K..

58. Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, 245-253. Also, Biddle, "Bombing by the Square Yard," 635-637.

59. As poor weather was common, eighty percent of the bombs (of the 8th and 15th Air Forces) were dropped blind. See Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, III (Office of Air Force History reprint [1983] of original copyright, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 728. Anthony Verrier has commented that, "the winter of 1944-1945 was compounded chiefly of cold, gales, fog, and mud," *The Bomber Offensive* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1968), 277.

Cloudy north European weather often negated the aid of the much-hyped Norden bombsight, preventing the Americans from being able to deliver the kind of precision strikes they had counted on making. A conference on bombing accuracy held in March 1945 would reveal that when the Eighth Air Force bombed through the omnipresent heavy cloud cover in the winter of 1944-45, 42 per cent of bombs fell more than five miles from their target.⁶⁰

In order to maintain a reasonable operating tempo the Americans had taken to frequent attacks on railway marshaling yards—large, visible targets either inside of, or on the outskirts of major cities. Though such raids were designated and recorded as attacks on “communications” or “transportation” targets, they were often—in their effects—hard to distinguish from area raids. The Americans included incendiary bombs in the ordnance mix for bombers flying these raids since they could cause widespread collateral damage and raise the likelihood of broad destruction and disruption for targets shrouded in cloud. The target category “marshaling yards” received more of the Eighth’s bomb tonnage than any other; indeed, more than a quarter of all the Eighth Air Force bombs dropped over Europe fell on marshaling yards. As historian Richard Davis has pointed out, “Large numbers of planes scattering their bombs around their mostly unseen and unverifiable aiming points surely would cause great collateral damage to any soft structures located nearby.”⁶¹

Even though the Americans strongly *preferred* to strike specific industrial sites (and flew to those whenever weather permitted), the bulk of their raids through cloud were, in essence, area raids. In order to distinguish their efforts from those of the British, however, the Americans continued to use language that depicted them as “precision” bombing of specific military targets.⁶² The insistence on this particular language reflected ongoing American sensitivities about the ethical questions raised by strategic bombing. But the limited impact of aerial bombing had caused the Americans no end of frustration during the war. In January 1945 Gen. Arnold had openly expressed his dismay over the failure of bombing to halt Germany in its tracks. He told Gen. Spaatz that despite a five-to-one superiority in the air, and “in spite of all our hopes, anticipations, dreams and plans, we have as yet not been able to capitalize to the extent which we should.”⁶³

60. Gross errors (bombs falling more than 3,000 feet from the aim point) and mission failures (less than 5 percent of total bombs falling within the 1,000 feet around the target) were also common. See Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 227-229 and 243-245.

61. See Richard G. Davis, *Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe*, 569-571.

62. See Richard G. Davis, “German Railyards and Cities: U.S. Bombing Policy, 1944-1945,” *Air Power History*, 42, 2 (Summer 1995): 46-63.

63. Letter, Arnold to Spaatz, 14 January 1945, Box 20 (Diary), SP. On U.S.A.A.F. attitudes at the time generally, see Craven and Cate, *Army Air Forces*, III: 715-722.

This frustration with the length of the war eventually caused the Americans to become more amenable to waging air attacks designed, at least in part, for their psychological effect on the enemy. On 3 February 1945 the Americans launched a major raid against the Berlin city center. The attack, unusual among American attacks in Europe because it specifically designated a “city center” as the target, was undertaken to test German morale and governmental coherence, and to offer assistance to the Russians by causing disruption and confusion on a vast scale.⁶⁴

Lieutenant General James Doolittle, commander of the Eighth Air Force and committed proponent of the selective targeting of industry, raised objections to the February 3rd raid—in large part because he felt it would violate “the American principle of precision bombing of targets of strictly military significance.”⁶⁵ But Gen. Spaatz, who did not lack sympathy for Doolittle’s argument, insisted that the raid go forward. The previous autumn Spaatz had protested to Eisenhower about any drift away from precision targeting of military-industrial sites, but had been told by the Supreme Allied Commander that he should be “prepared to take part in anything that gives real promise to ending the war quickly.”⁶⁶ Since February 3rd proved to be a clear weather day, Doolittle did his best to direct his crews to military targets inside the city.⁶⁷ Spaatz ordered extensive press coverage of the Berlin raid to highlight the Anglo-American effort to aid the Soviet advance. So that visual imagery would be available, combat cameramen were assigned to cover the event from the ground and from the air.⁶⁸

III. Reaction to the Dresden Raid

The large-print, all-caps *New York Times* headline announced: “8,000 Planes Batter Nazis Close to 2 Fronts; Dresden Hit Thrice as Russians Move On It.” This text, appearing on page 1 of the February 15th edition of 1945, sat above a map of north central Europe that marked the progress of both the Russian and Anglo-American armies, and identified the cities suffering under the latter’s relentless bombing raids. In text next to the map, reporter Gladwin Hill told his readers that, “Ten enemy cities shuddered to the roar of Allied bombs. The weight of the attacks was against Dresden, refugee-jammed industrial and communications center of Saxony in the path of Marshal Ivan S. Koneff’s First Ukrainian Army, now a scant seventy miles to the East.”⁶⁹

64. This raid on Berlin had remaining echoes of the Thunderclap plan that had been discussed by the British and the Americans in the summer of 1944. Though never carried out, it was a plan to hasten the German surrender through heavy air attacks. On the origins of Thunderclap, see SAOG, III: 98-103.

65. Davis, *Carl A. Spaatz*, 550.

66. Eisenhower to Spaatz, 28 August 1944, Box 18, “Diary,” SP.

67. See Conrad C. Crane, *Bombs, Cities, and Civilians*, 118.

68. Davis details this story in *Carl A. Spaatz*, 549-551.

69. Gladwin Hill, “Ten Cities Bombed” *New York Times*, 15 February 1945, 1. In this section I draw on my essay, “Wartime Reactions,” in Addison and Crang, eds. *Firestorm*, 96-122.

On the same day, *The Times* (London) ran an unsigned lead article that explained, "At the moment Dresden is a place of vital importance to the enemy. As the centre of a railway network and a great industrial town, it has become of the greatest value for controlling the German defense against Marshal Konev."⁷⁰

The newspaper accounts of February 15, 1945 emphasized that the Dresden raid was conceived of and designed for the purpose of aiding the advance of the Red Army at a moment when the advance of that Army appeared to be of signal importance for a timely conclusion to the war in Europe. *New York Times* readers who pored over Gladwin Hill's February 15th story were told that American bombers had come in on the heels of a devastating British attack: "Smoke surged up three miles in the sky and flames were seen by returning flyers 200 miles away." The American raids on Dresden, Chemnitz, and Magdeburg were linked directly to the advance of the Red Army.⁷¹

An editorial in the *Times* of February 16th acknowledged that the air campaign had entered a new phase: "Attacks mounting to such a scale as that of last Wednesday, when 10,000 British and American aircraft attacked within twenty-four hours, and dropped 11,000 tons of bombs on Germany, constitute a new and terrifying prodigy of air power."⁷² The observation was made without fanfare, but media coverage of the air war was full and detailed. Also on the 16th, the *New York Times* coverage pointed out that Dresden had received its fourth pounding in two days; quoting Swedish sources, Gladwin Hill told readers that "huge oceans of fire" still raged in the city, and that fire brigades had been "absolutely powerless." He estimated that 20-35,000 people had died, and that some 200,000 had fled in panic. Hill also argued that the Germans had "pulled out all the stops on sympathy propaganda."⁷³

German Propaganda

Hill's allegation referred to German efforts to convey the story of Dresden to the neutral press, and to present it in terms that would attach moral opprobrium to the decisions of the Allied high command. In general, German propagandists had walked a fine line with respect to the Allied air raids: they sought to brand them as acts of terror and thus arouse domestic and international opinion; at the same time, though, they had to downplay the disruption so as to preserve domestic morale.⁷⁴

Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels did not present the full story of Dresden to his domestic audience right away, but he began passing information—

70. "Smashing Blows at Dresden," *Times* (London), 15 February 1945, 1.

71. Gladwin Hill, "Ten Cities," *New York Times*, 15 February 1945, 3.

72. "The Air Assault," *Times* (London), 16 February 1945, 5.

73. Gladwin Hill, "Rail City Blasted," *New York Times*, 16 February 1945, 1 & 6.

74. On Goebbels' dilemma and his reaction, see Frederick Taylor, *Dresden*, 360-361, 366-367.

including high casualty estimates—to the neutral press immediately. As Frederick Taylor has pointed out, “Goebbels knew how to use what he had from the Anglo-American attacks on Dresden. Within a short while, wild and terrifying estimates of the numbers of dead were in circulation. Neutral newspapers...were fed by German diplomats with details of the raid, including a photograph of a child from Dresden bearing terrible ‘phosphor’ burns.”⁷⁵

In its first printing after the raid (16 February), the Dresden daily, *Der Freiheitskampf*, took an infuriated, indignant tone toward Allied terror.⁷⁶ Later, in March, a long article on Dresden by Rudolf Sparing appeared in the German daily, *Das Reich*. It was partly a eulogy for the destroyed city, and partly a call for continued resistance.⁷⁷ *Time* magazine reported that Sparing claimed Dresden was “catastrophe without parallel”: not a single building in the city remains “intact or even capable of reconstruction.”⁷⁸ In this portrayal, Dresden was held up as an example of Allied obtuseness and disregard for German culture: the air campaign was evidence that the Allies were bent on laying waste to Germany and reducing the nation to a wholly neutered, agrarian state as suggested in the Morgenthau Plan that was discussed—but ultimately rejected—in Washington.

Far from encouraging resistance, however, the Dresden raid probably undermined it. German historian Goetz Bergander argued that “the shockwave triggered by Dresden swept away what was left of the will to resist, as the Germans now feared that the catastrophe could be repeated daily.” Awareness of inevitable defeat grew, Bergander explained, and faith in miracles disappeared.⁷⁹

The Allies: Wrestling with Consequences

On its editorial page of February 16 the *New York Times* acknowledged the terrible damage to Dresden and other cities caught in the air campaign, but did not apologize. Under the title “Doom over Germany,” the editorial staff pointed out that, “The Allied triumph is being achieved with the very weapon [air power] that was to win the world for Hitler.” They observed that the Allied armies and air forces were bringing home to the German people “that they are merely making the cost of their defeat heavier to themselves by continuing a hopeless resistance. If in that resistance more landmarks of European culture and Germany’s own better

75. See Taylor, *Dresden*, 368. Also, Richard Evans, *Telling Lies*, 165; and “Historical Analysis of the 14-15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden,” 25-26.

76. John Andrew Spencer, “Of Literature and Legend: German Writers and the Bombing of Dresden,” doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 1992, 42-43.

77. Sparing is cited in Spencer, “Of Literature,” p. 43. Frederick Taylor has argued that the essay was “remarkable in its frank portrayal of what the enemy air forces could do to a German city.” See Taylor, *Dresden*, 371.

78. Sparing quoted in *Time*, 12 March 1945, 38.

79. Goetz Bergander, *Dresden im Luftkrieg* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1978), 349. See chap. XVII, generally, on the psychological impact of the Allied air raids.

past must be wiped out, the Germans may, as they were drilled to do, thank their Fuehrer for the result.”⁸⁰

At the Allied Air Commanders’ Conference at S.H.A.E.F., held on February 15, Gen. Doolittle explained that the Eighth Air Force had re-kindled fires that the RAF had set earlier; he acknowledged “with the greatest reticence” that the smoke had risen to 15,000 feet.⁸¹ At the Air Commander’s meeting of March 1, Sir Arthur Harris highlighted instead the Pforzheim raid of February 23-24, pointing out that the entire town had been burned out and that “Bomber Command had now destroyed 63 German towns in this fashion.”⁸²

Between the two air commanders’ meetings, the nature of the Combined Bomber Offensive became the focus of attention and controversy. On February 16 Air Commodore C.M. Grierson of the S.H.A.E.F. Air Staff Section held a press conference in which he tried to explain how attacks on cities created logistical and administrative difficulties for the Germans, and burdened the functioning of their economic system. In what one historian has called an “ill-advised” briefing, Grierson addressed the issue of the attacks on cities close to the eastern front.⁸³ He stated: “Another matter which has been given a lot of thought and... careful consideration, is the employment of the Heavies against the centres of population. The effect of the Heavy raids on population centres has always been first of all to cause the Germans to bring in train loads of supplies of extra comforts and to take away the population which have been rendered homeless.” Such an effect, he argued, burdened the German transport and economic systems.⁸⁴

80. “Doom Over Germany” *New York Times* (editorial), 16 February 1945, 22.

81. “Notes of the Allied Air Commander’s Conference,” Thursday 15 February 1945, decimal file K239.046-38, AFHRA.

82. “Notes of the Allied Air Commanders’ Conference,” Thursday 1 March 1945, 3, decimal file K239.046-38, AFHRA. Harris’s insistence that cities remained the most profitable targets had led him into ongoing debates with his colleagues, not only over targeting specifically, but also over the way in which British bombing ought to be portrayed in the press. He insisted, unflinchingly, that his aim was the destruction of the German economic system—which included workers, houses, and public utilities. His refusal to embrace more guarded language to describe the work of his command meant that he was, at times, an uncomfortable figure for those who daily had to consider public perception and opinion—including religious and humanitarian sentiment—in Britain. See Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 220-221.

83. Probert, *Bomber Harris: His Life and Times*, 321.

84. He added: “Now that form of relief relies very, very much to a pretty great extent on rapid and sound communications between the big cities and the whole of the interior of Germany itself, so that the destruction of not only communications centres, but also of the towns where the relief comes from and where the evacuees go to, are very definitely operations which contributes [sic] greatly towards the breakup of the German economic system.” Grierson’s text quoted in Message UA-64471, Anderson to Arnold, 19 February 1945, in decimal file K239.046-38, AFHRA.

Asked about attacks on Dresden and other “points ahead of the Russian front,” Grierson explained that “...they are centres of communications through which traffic is moving across to the Russian Front, and from the Western Front to the East, and they are sufficiently close to the Russian Front for the Russians to continue the successful prosecution of their battle.” Grierson must have realized, by this point, that he was on difficult ground. Asked if the “principal aim of such bombing of Dresden would be to cause confusion among the refugees or to blast communications carrying military supplies?” he replied: “Primarily communications to prevent them [the Germans] moving military supplies. To stop movement in all directions if possible—movement of everything.”⁸⁵

In the wake of the Grierson statement, an Associated Press war correspondent named Howard Cowan issued a dispatch (which inexplicably cleared the censors) stating that “the Allied air commanders have made the long-awaited decision to adopt deliberate terror bombing of German population centres as a ruthless expedient to hastening Hitler's doom.” It was widely circulated in the United States, producing an uncomfortable situation.⁸⁶ Among other things, Cowan's phrase “the Allied air chiefs” linked the British and American air campaigns in ways that the Americans found uncongenial. And one can imagine how Cowan might have concluded that a change had occurred in Allied policy: whatever way the issue was framed, it had to include the refugees.

In the dark days of 1945, the war's vast toll of death and destruction may have obscured the significance of further death and destruction in the cause of an expedited victory, but the human face of these particular deaths—so many non-combatants among them—was hard to reconcile with the principles the Allies claimed to be fighting for.

On February 18th the Cowan story appeared in the *Washington Star*, among other newspapers in the U.S. In addition to arguing that the Allies had adopted a deliberate terror bombing policy, Cowan asserted that: “The all out air war in Germany became obvious with the unprecedented daylight assault on the refugee-crowded capital 2 weeks ago and subsequent attacks on other cities jammed with civilians fleeing from the Russian advance in the east.”⁸⁷ He added, “The decision may revive protests from some allied quarters against ‘uncivilized warfare’, but they

85. Message UA-64471, Anderson to Arnold, 2. Davis also covers the Grierson conference in some detail in *Spaatz*, see 558-559. See also, Taylor, *Dresden*, 360-363.

86. Documents pertaining to this affair can be found in the collections of the USAFHRA, dec. file no. K239.046-38. See also Davis, *Spaatz*, 543-564; Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 95-103; Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power*, 261-263; and Crane, *Bombs, Cities, and Civilians*, 115-119.

87. He explained: “The Allied view is that bombardment of large German cities creates immediate need for relief. This is moved into the bombed areas both by rail and road and not only creates a traffic problem but draws transport away from the battle front. Evacuation of the homeless has the same result.” See Howard Cowan, “Terror Bombing Gets Allied Approval as Step to Speed Victory,” *Washington Star*, 18 February 1945, 1.

are likely to be balanced by satisfaction in those sections of Europe where the German Air Force and the Nazi V-weapons have been responsible for the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians by tens of thousands.”⁸⁸

The Cowan story did not adequately link the attacks on eastern German cities to the objective of advancing Soviet forces, but it nonetheless captured some essence of the air campaign then being waged by Anglo-American strategic bombers. In their masterful account published in 1961, the British official historians of the bombing campaign claimed that the Cowan story, “accurately, though, perhaps, injudiciously, described the aims of the attacks on Dresden and the other towns which it mentioned.”⁸⁹ More recently Frederick Taylor has argued, “Cowan’s dispatch essentially interpreted Air Commodore Grierson’s slightly woolly remarks at the press briefing in such a way as to draw radical and therefore newsworthy implications.”⁹⁰ But if Grierson’s remarks sounded “woolly” to those listening, it probably was because the speaker may have realized, mid-course, that his own words had begun to sound waffling and unsatisfactory.

In the lead-up to Dresden, Allied planners had managed to sidestep the real, human consequences of their decisions. Through word choice and careful parsing, they had erected cognitive defenses that kept them from fully countenancing the consequences of their planning choices. By launching himself into the topic, Grierson wandered into the very territory that planners had avoided considering rigorously. His comments triggered a series of queries that revealed the ways in which weary and alarmed Allied leaders had devised a plan for intensifying the war, but had not forced themselves to fully acknowledge its likely human toll.

Just before the Cowan story appeared, S.H.A.E.F. denied reports that the Allied air chiefs had adopted the deliberate terror bombing of German centers of power. The *Times* (London) reported, in a brief article titled “Bombing Policy Stated,” that Allied Supreme Headquarters claimed there had been no change in policy—that German towns were bombed according to the dictates of military expediency, and that those towns recently attacked were “principally communication or oil centres.” The article noted in its final sentence: “The fact that the city was crowded with refugees at the time of the attack was a coincidence.”⁹¹ But it had not been a coincidence.

A day after the Cowan story ran, the *Washington Star* editors wrestled with the implications of the unsettling article. They asked: “Does the dispatch from Paris mean that the Allies, now that our own day of victory is in sight, have taken up where the Germans left off?” The newspaper asserted that if this was indeed

88. Cowan, “Terror Bombing Gets Allied Approval as Step to Speed Victory,” *Washington Star*, 4.

89. SAOG, III: 113. The authors also claimed, carefully, that Dresden might “not inaccurately” [be] described as “terror bombing.” See 116.

90. Taylor, *Dresden*, 362.

91. “Bombing Policy Stated,” *The Times* (London), 18 February 1945, 1.

the case then, “we cannot complain if history indicts us as co-defendants with the Luftwaffe commanders who broke the ground for this dismaying product of twentieth century civilization.” But the editorial rejected this interpretation, suggesting instead that the primary purpose of the bombings was to “hamper German transport and to force the diversion of the enemy’s scarce supplies from the battle fronts to the civilian centers.” This, the authors concluded, is a “harsh but legitimate objective of war.”⁹²

In the meantime, a nervous Gen. Arnold had called Gen. Spaatz to account, asking him to transmit the text of the U.S.S.T.A.F.’s current operating directive, and add any commentary he wished to make.⁹³ Gen. Frederick Anderson answered for Spaatz, who was then meeting with subordinates in the Mediterranean. He defended the existing bombing directive, arguing that it made strategic sense to support the Russian advance, subject to the first priority of continued attacks on oil: “I believe that the power of the Russian advance is the greatest strategic factor at the present time in this war and...I believe it should be strongly supported.” He insisted that there had been no change in the American policy of “precision bombing” directed at “military objectives.” In a lengthy letter to Arnold on February 19th, Anderson pointed out: “We have been attacking transportation centers in the Rhine, Ruhr, and Sarr [sic] Valleys, and other transportation feeding the Western Front, consistently. ... These attacks were not hailed as terror attacks against populations.” Anderson explained that Cowan’s story had been passed by the S.H.A.E.F. censor “without reference to this Headquarters for approval”; he added that it was “an exaggeration of Grierson’s statements, although Grierson did imply that attacks were to be directed against civilian populations.”⁹⁴

While this took place, Anderson worked with reporters, public relations officers, and the European manager of the United Press to contain the debate stirred up by Grierson and Cowan. Acknowledging that air attacks would always endanger civilian lives, U.S.S.T.A.F. emphasized that American bombers would continue to refine their methods, concentrating the maximum number of bombs on intended military targets.⁹⁵ Secretary of War Henry Stimson adopted this line in a further effort to restore public confidence about bombing policy. In an editorial of February 24th, the *Washington Star* readily embraced Stimson’s explanation

92. “Terror Bombing,” *The Washington Star*, 19 February 1945, 8.

93. See WAR 39722 (18 February 1945), from Smith (signed Arnold) to Spaatz; UA 64462 (18 February 1945) from Spaatz to Arnold; WAR 39730 (18 February 1945) from Arnold to Spaatz, all in K239.046-38, AFHRA, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

94. UA 64470 (18 February 1945) from Anderson (signed Spaatz) to Arnold; and UA 64471 (19 February 1945) from Anderson (signed Spaatz) to Arnold in K239.046-38, AFHRA.

95. Davis, *Carl A. Spaatz*, 562; UA 64471 (19 February 1945), from Anderson (signed Spaatz) to Arnold; and UA64603 (20 February 1945) to Arnold (signed Spaatz) from Anderson, in K239.046-38, AFHRA.

that the Cowan story had been “an excusable but incorrect” interpretation of some presumably ambiguous remarks made by a briefing officer at Supreme Allied Headquarters.⁹⁶

In early March, however, Stimson requested an investigation of the Dresden raid. He had been unsettled by some of the claims in the news media that had filtered in from the neutral press. Arnold was angry about the second guessing, and scrawled on a message about Stimson’s request, “We must not get soft. War must be destructive and to a certain extent inhuman and ruthless.” The report to Stimson from Arnold’s staff pointed out that the RAF had caused most of the damage; it argued, too, that Dresden had been bombed because it was a communications center of great importance.⁹⁷ Stimson, who was of advanced age and who was often a step behind events when it came to air warfare, let the matter drop.

On the one hand, the Americans were right to claim that there had been no change in their own policy and that their attack on Dresden—a codicil to the much larger Bomber Command attack—had not varied tactically from other U.S.S.T.A.F. raids undertaken at the same time. The American air attacks on Dresden were aimed at the marshaling yards and were thus considered raids on military targets. And, indeed, such attacks had been waged extensively in support of the Western Front; the Dresden raid (and others like it) had simply shifted the aiming points eastward.

On the other hand, the Americans had erected a kind of cognitive self-defense that linked intention and outcome in problematical ways: the *actual* effect of the late-war, large-scale raids on marshaling yards, was devastating and often indiscriminate. Certainly Bomber Command *had been* responsible for the great bulk of the damage done to Dresden, and the Americans *had* launched raids that were intended to be more discriminate in nature than the British attacks. Nonetheless, the Americans had followed on Harris’s heels and launched two raids intended to disrupt transport, cause confusion, and burden relief efforts in a city swollen with the desperate and the displaced. Even if the Allies did not conceive of this as terror bombing, it did not take a leap of imagination to envision the devastating impact that these raids would have on the souls who lined the streets and crowded the public buildings.

Many things might have influenced Spaatz and inclined him to refrain from fully countenancing the likely consequences of the guidance he was given. These included the USAAF’s tendency to focus more on the language of intention than consequence, the fear and uncertainty that was thick in the air in January and early February, and the sense of urgency about speeding war’s end. Spaatz would

96. “A Matter of Conscience,” *Washington Star*, 24 February 1945, 8.

97. Crane, *Bombs, Cities, and Civilians*, 117; “Historical Analysis of the 14-15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden,” 27-28.

have been as anxious as other Anglo-American leaders to coordinate the efforts of his military forces with the Russian Army. And he would have been well aware of the attitudes of his superiors, both at S.H.A.E.F. and in Washington. Spaatz had been informed on February 1 that Gen. Marshall believed that, in conjunction with attacks on Berlin and associated cities, attacks on Munich “would probably be of great benefit because it would show the people that are being evacuated to Munich that there is no hope.”⁹⁸ And, as noted above, Spaatz’s objections to Eisenhower the previous summer had met with a clear response: the U.S.S.T.A.F. commander should be prepared (just as the Supreme Allied Commander was) to “take part in anything that gives real promise to ending the war quickly.”⁹⁹

In general, the American reluctance to deviate from their original “precision bombing” plans had been considerably eroded by this point in time. It was at this point, for instance, that American bombers operating in the Pacific theatre were shifting from industrial-target bombing to low-level, nighttime incendiary bombing of Japanese cities. In addition, vigorous discussions continued over a plan to fly remote-controlled and explosive-laden “war-weary” B-17 bombers into European industrial areas—a plan for which Gen. Arnold had been a particular devotee.¹⁰⁰ And, in the immediate wake of the Dresden attack the Americans took the lead in Operation Clarion, designed to use all available Anglo-American air power against a wide range of transportation and communication targets. In an emotional letter of January 1, 1945, Gen. Ira Eaker, former commander of the Eighth Air Force, then commanding the Mediterranean Air Forces, urged Gen. Spaatz to reconsider Clarion: “It [Clarion] will absolutely convince the Germans that we are the barbarians they say we are, for it would be perfectly obvious to them that this is primarily a large-scale attack on civilians as, in fact, it of course will be. Of all the people killed in this attack over 95% of them can be expected to be civilians.”¹⁰¹

The drift away from any attempt to rigorously distinguish between combatants and non-combatants had taken place over time, incrementally, and in response to the technological constraints of the day and the spiral of prolonged warfare. As the war moved into its latter stages, the issue of non-combatant immunity was never re-evaluated in a serious institutional way by either the Americans or the British. This meant that every step from the ideal seemed relatively short, and was justified in terms that had been applied to each of the previous steps. This iterative progression tended to mask the distances involved, and, in the end, decisions that ought to have raised ethical red flags were perceived as variants on, or continuations of, decisions that already had been implemented and explained in the language of military necessity.

98. Unnumbered message, Anderson to Spaatz, 1 February 1945, K239.046-38, AFHRA.

99. Eisenhower to Spaatz, 28 August 1944, SP, Box 18, Diary.

100. The American official historians point out these parallels. See Craven and Cate, *Army Air Forces*, III: 727. On war-weary bombers, see Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 240-241.

101. Letter, Gen. Ira Eaker to Spaatz, 1 January 1945, Box 20 (diary), SP.

Members of the American press, who generally took a pro-air power stance and were comfortable with the “precision bombing” language fed to them by the USAAF, rarely challenged the official interpretation of events. And the American people, convinced perhaps that strategic bombing was the best substitute for costly ground battles of attrition, were disinclined to demand more rigorous analysis from their reporters and correspondents. As it turned out, the Dresden story did not generate great public interest in the United States; headlines in those weeks concentrated instead on the Yalta Conference, the big battles being waged in the Pacific, and the advance of ground armies in hard fighting in Germany and the Philippines.¹⁰² Reaction in magazines and journals was muted. *Newsweek* magazine, for instance, referenced the Cowan story briefly, declining to comment on it. Acknowledging Dresden’s beauty and cultural bounty, the article pointed out laconically, “Unfortunately, it lay in the path of Marshal Ivan S. Koneff’s First Ukrainian Army.”¹⁰³

In Britain, where Dresden was closer to home, the debate was affected by the fact that the Cowan despatch was suppressed.¹⁰⁴ But stories of the Dresden raid made their way into Britain via the neutral press. In general, most Britons were disinclined to question Allied bombing policy—and, unsurprisingly, the V-2 attacks had only bolstered that trend. However a few determined critics—including Bishop Bell, the Marquess of Salisbury, and Vera Brittain—had kept a debate over bombing in the public view. Brittain’s 1944 pamphlet *Massacre by Bombing* had aroused support among clergy in both Britain and the U.S., although its public reception was rather more hostile in both countries. In the U.S., the liberal journal *The Nation* questioned Brittain’s central premise, even as it found “deep sympathy” with many of her arguments: “we still cannot accept Miss Brittain’s proposition that ‘nothing less than absolute certainty’ that mass bombing will shorten the war justifies its employment as a weapon. To order the kind of warfare we are waging is, indeed, a dreadful responsibility. But who is ready to take the responsibility of ordering its abandonment?”¹⁰⁵

On March 6, 1945 longtime critic of Bomber Command, Member of Parliament Richard Stokes raised questions about the Dresden raid in the House of Commons. The answer, delivered later by a deputy of the Secretary of State for Air, stated: “We are not wasting bombers or time on purely terror tactics. It does not do the Hon. Member justice to come here to this House and suggest that there are a lot of Air Marshals or pilots or anyone else sitting in a room trying to think how many German women and children they can kill.”¹⁰⁶ On its own terms

102. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power*, 263.

103. *Newsweek*, 26 February 1945, 37.

104. SAOG, III: 113.

105. “A Revolting Necessity,” *The Nation*, 18 March 1944, 323-324.

106. Quoted in Alexander McKee, *Dresden 1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), 266. The debate provoked by Stokes is also covered in some detail by Taylor, *Dresden*, 363-365.

the response was true enough, but it begged the question of why the Allies, rather than seeking to avoid a vulnerable, non-combatant population, had instead taken advantage of it.

The exchange drew attention to the Cowan story, causing headaches for the Air Staff, and for the British high command more generally. Dresden's history and cultural heritage, well-known to educated Britons, exacerbated concerns about whether the city was an appropriate target for such destructive bombing at what, increasingly, seemed to be a late hour in the war.

It is in this context that Prime Minister Churchill imposed himself, once again, into the history of the Dresden raid. By late March it was clear that the crisis atmosphere had passed, and that the fate of Hitler's Reich was finally sealed. With Yalta behind him as well, Churchill now had second thoughts. These surfaced in a minute he wrote on March 28th to General Ismay (for the Chiefs of Staff Committee) and the Chief of the Air Staff (Portal). "It seems to me," he began, "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." After stating that "the destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing," he insisted there was a need for "more precise concentration on military objectives, such as oil and communications behind the immediate battle zone, rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction, however impressive."¹⁰⁷

The British official historians would later describe this as "among the least felicitous of the Prime Minister's long series of wartime minutes." To the Air Staff, the language of the final sentence seemed particularly galling; no one in Bomber Command was prepared to accept the idea that the air campaign had been "wanton."¹⁰⁸ Harris was outraged and Portal was, unsurprisingly, taken aback by what seemed a sanctimonious display. Believing that the Prime Minister's behavior may have been influenced by "haste or tiredness," Portal insisted that the statement be withdrawn and replaced by a version the Air Staff could more readily stomach. It concluded: "We must see to it that our attacks do not do more harm to ourselves in the long run than they do to the enemy's immediate war effort."¹⁰⁹

Because Churchill had helped to catalyze the Dresden raid, his subsequent actions may seem curious. But they are not particularly out of character if one considers the Prime Minister's ambivalent attitude towards bombing through

107. Churchill's minute of 28 March 1945 is reprinted in SAOG, III: 112.

108. SAOG, III: 112. On page 117 the official historians refute Churchill's term, "wanton." (They were not, however, entirely opposed to the phrase 'terror bombing'—a phrase that Harris rejected. See III: 116.)

109. Denis Richards, *Portal of Hungerford* (London: William Heinemann, 1977), 191-193; Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Road to Victory, 1941-1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 1257-1258. See also Max Hastings's interpretation of this episode in *Bomber Command* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), 400-402. Churchill's (revised) minute of 1 April 1945, is reprinted in SAOG, III: 117.

the course of the war. Churchill was, without question, perceptive, insightful, and energetic; he was, in his ability to inspire others, an irreplaceable asset to the Allies. But he was, too, mercurial, and unpredictable—prone to bouts of moroseness and rapid mood swings. Those around him, most notably Portal and Field Marshal Alanbrooke, had to oversee him carefully to insure that a steady hand guided British grand strategy.

A long-time aerial enthusiast and a proponent of aerial bombing since the First World War, Churchill had used arguments about the prospect of bombing Germany to win the day in the heated debates over British wartime strategy in May of 1940. Subsequently, though, he had grown despondent over the limited impact of air attacks on Germany. Though Portal had convinced him to stay the course, he had never parted company with concerns over its effectiveness. By the summer of 1941 the Prime Minister had realized—more presciently than anyone else at the time—that bombing inaccuracy and the inability of the British to field a long range fighter escort would put severe constraints on what Bomber Command might achieve in the war.¹¹⁰

These concerns about effectiveness compounded the worries Churchill had about the morality of any aerial bombardment that was not aimed at specific military targets. The roots of his ambivalence could be found in a memo he wrote in 1917, while serving as Minister of Munitions, giving voice to concerns he had about the ability of bombers to break civil will:

It is improbable that any terrorization of the civil population which could be achieved by air attack would compel the Government of a great nation to surrender. Familiarity with bombardment, a good system of dug-outs or shelters, a strong control by police and military authorities, should be sufficient to preserve the national fighting power unimpaired. In our case we have seen the combative spirit of the people roused, and not quelled, by the German air raids. 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. Therefore our air offensive should consistently be directed at striking at the bases and communications upon whose structure the fighting power of his armies and his fleets of the sea and of the air depends. Any injury which comes to the civil population from this process of attack must be regarded as incidental and inevitable.¹¹¹

110. These points are explained in Tami Davis Biddle, “Winston Churchill and Sir Charles Portal: Their Wartime Relationship, 1940-1945,” in Peter W. Gray and Sebastian Cox, eds., *Air Power Leadership: Theory and Practice* (London: HMSO, 2002), 181-187.

111. Winston Churchill, “Munitions Possibilities of 1918”, 21 October 1917, reprinted as Appendix IV in the Appendices volume of H.A. Jones, *The War in the Air* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 18-21 (quote is on 19).

Though it is unlikely that he linked the two in his own mind, the arguments he made in his March 28th minute on Dresden reflected this position, determined nearly thirty years earlier.¹¹²

Throughout the war, Churchill had been affected each time the public debates on morality came into view; though he tried to suppress his internal conflicts, they sometimes came to a head. At Chequers in late June 1943 the Prime Minister was shown a film made from footage taken during Bomber Command's attacks on Ruhr towns. Suddenly, he sat bolt upright, asking, "Are we beasts? Are we taking this too far?"¹¹³

The war had posed a stark choice: use the blunt instrument of aerial bombing or face a likely repetition of the First World War's bloody ground battles. Churchill chose the former, embracing it as a crucial and indispensable instrument in the fight for survival against the Nazi beast. But unlike Sir Arthur Harris, Churchill had never been able to dismiss from his own mind questions about the ethics of bombing—questions that imposed themselves forcefully as a result of the inaccuracy of 1940s bomber technology. In the end, his worries and ruminations would cause him to be erratic in his attitudes during the war. He would, as well, erect roadblocks to a substantial British postwar survey of aerial bombing, and remain remarkably quiet on the topic of bombing in his six-volume history of the war.¹¹⁴ His March 28th minute, which revealed a heavy conscience about Dresden, may have been an attempt to transfer to others some of the personal responsibility he felt, either consciously or unconsciously, for the Dresden raid, and to note for the record and for posterity (with which he concerned himself a great deal) his own position on its outcome.

In Germany the attack on Dresden was met with outrage. In Britain and the United States, newspapers gave the event plenty of attention but did not adopt any tone of apology. But subsequent reaction to the Cowan story revealed uneasiness, concern, and—in Churchill's case—regret for decisions taken.

As the philosopher of war Carl von Clausewitz explained so powerfully in his magisterial volume, *On War*, the vicious politics of warfare will follow their own imperatives, once unleashed. The Dresden air attack speaks directly to what can become possible in wartime, even among those who had—only short years earlier—pledged themselves to protecting civilian populations to the greatest extent possible.

112. In a House of Commons debate on 16 November 1937, Churchill had argued: "I believe there is no doubt that if one side in an equal war endeavors to cow and kill the civil population, and the other attacks steadily the military objectives, the focal points on which the opponents war-making capacity depends, victory will come to the side, all other things being equal, which avoids the horror of making war on the helpless and weak." See House of Commons Debates, 16 November 1937, 3rd Session, 37th Parliament, vol. 329, columns 246 & 247.

113. This episode is described in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: The Road to Victory, 1941–1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 437.

114. On the differences between Churchill's wartime views and the way he portrayed events in his six-volume history of the war, see David Reynold's masterful book, *In Command of History: Churchill Writing and Fighting the Second World War* (New York: Random House, 2005), esp. 484–485; also Biddle, "Portal and Churchill," 194–197.

IV. Legacy

As the story of Dresden came to light, it was—and has remained—deeply uncomfortable for the Anglo-Americans. Churchill, in seeking to distance himself from the event, chastised his own Air Staff for an outcome that he personally had done much to foster. And the Americans, in their scramble to control and contain the way the Dresden raid was interpreted and discussed at the time, persuaded themselves that they had operated within previous boundaries. But this required interpretations that prevented them from coming fully to terms with the language that had been used to authorize and justify the raid, and with its consequences.

Ironically, perhaps, all the machinations, clarifications, and imperfect explanations in the years since have revealed that Anglo-American sensibilities were not eroded into obtuseness. In their compulsion to explain, to shape interpretations, to embrace Stimson's easy answer, or to simply distance themselves from the story and its implications, they exposed a collective conscience that was not entirely unburdened by what had been done—and could not be undone. Whatever nervousness American policymakers may have felt about Dresden, however, was not reflected in the Far Eastern theater of war. The Americans firebombed Japanese cities until that war ended with two dramatic, history-changing explosions. And the Americans turned to firebombing North Korean cities after the Chinese overran Gen. Douglas MacArthur's United Nations Forces late in 1950.

The history and memory of the Dresden raid have been complicated by national and personal agendas, the Cold War, international politics, and popular culture. Somewhere in that mix, many of the facts were jumbled, exaggerated, or obscured. During the Cold War, histories emanating from behind the Iron Curtain often asserted that the Dresden raid was much less an effort to aid the Red Army advance than to intimidate the Soviets on the eve of the European political settlement. Not entirely without merit since Churchill may have seen an opportunity to achieve two feats at once, these arguments were undermined by the blinding ideological zealotry of their proponents. The events and exigencies of the war were scoured out of the interpretation, context was removed, and Allied motivation was attributed solely to a desire to strike an early blow in the upcoming fight between communism and capitalism and impede reconstruction in the East.¹¹⁵

The Dresden raid became the focus of congressional attention in the United States during the high pitch of anti-Soviet fever reached in the early 1950s. Official historian Joseph Angell was assigned to write up an explanation and overview of the Dresden raid, based on all available sources. He was responding to congressional pressure, including allegations by one congressman that, "as dupes of the Communists the Americans murdered 250,000 innocent persons—mainly women

115. East German perspectives on Dresden are well-described in Elizabeth Corwin, "The Dresden Bombing as Portrayed in German Accounts, East and West," *UCLA Historical Journal*, 8 (1987): 71-96.

and children—in a city that had no military value as a target and was in fact an open city.” Angell would argue that the city was in fact an important transportation center, and thus had military value. Though he could not find in the official record a specific request by the Russians to bomb the city, he told the Chief of the USAF Historical Division, Albert Simpson, that he could nonetheless “make out what I believe to be a conclusive case that the Russians wanted us to bomb Dresden, that we bombed ‘in concert’ as it were, with Russia, and that we would have failed our obligations and agreements had we not bombed Dresden.”¹¹⁶ Angell also took on the issue of casualties. He argued that “the maximum number of dead was about 25,000, despite statements in some German originated documents that insist on the quarter-million total.”¹¹⁷

David Irving’s 1963 book *The Destruction of Dresden* brought the air raid back into Western consciousness in a dramatic way. Reaction to the book—reviews had headlines such as “Massacre at Dresden” and “Apocalypse at Dresden: The Long Suppressed Story of the Worst Massacre in the History of the World”—reflected Irving’s strong and sometimes hyperbolic tones. Irving’s claim, in 1986, that “until my book was published on that subject the outside world had never heard of what happened in Dresden” was certainly wrong. But there is no question that his book—due to the reaction and controversy it has stirred for decades—raised the profile of the raid higher than it would have been otherwise.¹¹⁸ Irving helped lay the foundation for myths and misinterpretations that have existed in the literature until recently.¹¹⁹ In particular, the casualty figures Irving assigned to Dresden helped to further the process whereby Dresden came to overshadow other World War II air raids, such as those on Hamburg and Tokyo, where the death toll was higher.¹²⁰

116. Letter, Joseph Angell to Albert Simpson, 3 April 1953, decimal no. K239.046-38, U.S.A.F. Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. Angell continued: “In other words, I am having to make a somewhat legalistic but I believe nevertheless an air tight case to indicate that the Allied bombing of Dresden was in accordance with Russia’s requests for assistance.”

117. Angell to Simpson, 3 April 1953. He added: “You and I would know, of course, that any such figure as this last could only be some kind of propaganda, but it takes a lot of scrounging around in USSBS reports and materials on other big fire raids to come up with a convincing argument for those who are inclined to swallow the propaganda line for whatever reasons.” A memorandum written by L.A. Jackets, Head of the R.A.F.’s Air Historical Branch, made a similar argument: “It is practically impossible to kill a myth of this kind once it has become widespread and perhaps re-printed in other books all over the world.” See Jackets memo, 20 July 1966, in CAB 146/351, TNA.

118. Irving’s speech is cited in Richard J. Evans, *Telling Lies*, 188.

119. R.H.S. Crossman’s essay, “War Crime,” in the 3 May 1963 issue of the *New Statesman*, 684-685, provides rather a catalogue of these myths.

120. In 1965 Irving raised the death toll, cited in the 1963 edition of his book. See Irving’s letter to *The Observer*, 14 March 1965. Then, in 1966 he rescinded that claim, accepting a lower figure. See Irving’s letter to *The Times* (London) of 7 July 1966. On the general issue of Irving’s figures, see Evans, *Telling Lies*, 157-192, and Frederick Taylor, *Dresden*, 369-372 and 443-448.

As noted in the introduction to the essay, Dresden's historical profile was raised once again by Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five*. The book, which became a classic in the American literary canon, took the firebombing of Dresden as its central theme. First published the year after the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the book increased awareness of the Dresden raid among a new and deeply skeptical generation of Americans. It subsequently became the basis of a popular film as well. In its offbeat and ironic fashion, the novel revealed ways in which art can often capture fundamental human truths more fully than history can.

Once a second world war was unavoidable for Britain and (later) for the United States, it is unlikely—in light of the bitter experience of World War I—that either country would have eschewed the warfighting opportunity that strategic air power seemed to offer. And once a heavy reliance on air power had been embraced and the resources had been allocated, there was no choice but to live with the blunt nature of the instrument as it existed in the middle of the last century. Those who might insist on rethinking Anglo-American strategic bombing must, unavoidably, be prepared to assess the alternatives realistically – alternatives that might well have involved increased Allied casualties and a longer, more attenuated war (with all the consequences following from it).¹²¹

The exhaustion and palpable anxiety stemming from the setbacks of the autumn/winter 1944 are essential to understanding the timing and the nature of the Dresden attack. Only by countenancing the fears, deep concerns, dashed hopes, and weariness of Allied leaders in December 1944 and January 1945 can we fully understand how they came to embrace plans that, in essence, allowed refugees to become a lever against the *Wehrmacht's* ability to wage war. The very existence of those plans, however, ought to give pause to all of us, and to generate further questions and debates among those who study human behavior in wartime. Perhaps the deep symbolic significance of Dresden has accrued over time because it speaks so directly to the level of vigilance needed to control the most destructive of human forces once they have been loosed by war: it speaks powerfully to the brutalizing and corrosive effects of war, even upon those who are fighting for a righteous cause, and who believe themselves to be fighting honorably.

121. Many critics of strategic bombing have too readily been taken in by the phrase “precision bombing”. Viewing it as an accurate statement of reality, they have not studied the science and technology well enough to understand the unavoidably blunt, imprecise nature of Second World War era bombardment. Others, most recently A.C. Grayling in his 2006 book *Among the Dead Cities*, have sought to apply 21st century moral and legal standards to a mid-twentieth century event. Asserting their own ethical certainties, they strip out any notion of uncertainty, fear, or mitigating circumstances – three of the most ineluctable constants in human experience. On this point, see the fine argument made by Max Hastings in his 19 February 2006 review of the Grayling book in *The Sunday Telegraph* (London),

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