

SIFTING DRESDEN'S ASHES

Sixty years after the Allies' bombing of Dresden enveloped the city in flames, controversy persists over whether the attack was militarily justified or morally indefensible. But another question, no less crucial, is seldom asked: Did wartime conditions allow military leaders to look away as they violated their own principles?

by Tami Davis Biddle

In early 1945, the German city of Dresden lay directly in the path of a great swell of refugees fleeing the advance of the Red Army along the eastern front. German authorities, their resources strained to the breaking point in World War II's final months, struggled to keep this river of wretched humanity moving so that it would not impair the mobility of the Wehrmacht. But before the city's 100,000 refugees could be moved, Dresden was attacked by waves of British and American heavy bombers over the course of nearly two days, igniting a firestorm that swept the heart of the city.

Most of the refugees and remaining inhabitants were women, children, and old people. As the bombs fell, tens of thousands crammed into shelters and basements, while others fled to the lower levels of public buildings, including the overcrowded main train station. Many of them found no safety. The firestorm sucked oxygen out of shelters and replaced it with carbon monoxide, causing mass suffocation. Crowds rushing to escape the fires faced smoke, noxious fumes, collapsing buildings, thickets of downed electrical wires, showers of burning embers, and lethal walls of superheated air surging ahead of the flames. The firestorm's powerful winds pulled roof tiles, sheet metal, and even entire trees from their moorings, propelling them through the air with hurricane-like force. Molten tar in the streets stripped away people's shoes, exposing their bare feet to burns. One young survivor would later recall a scene on the Chemnitzerstrasse: "There were people there who in their desperate need had clawed themselves onto the metal fence. They were burnt and charred; and they were not only adults, there were children of dif-



In this famous photograph taken from the Rathausurm (town hall tower), August Schreitmüller's sculpture "Goodness" surveys Dresden after a firestorm started by Allied bombers in 1945.

ferent ages hanging there." Even the city's great reservoir offered no protection. The air became so hot and unbreathable that those who had sought refuge in the water were forced to flee, and many died trying in vain to climb the reservoir's smooth cement walls.

Despite the heavy use of incendiary bombs during World War II, firestorms were relatively rare events. These uncontrollable fires required just the right combination of weather, weight of attack, ordnance mix, timing,

and architecture. During the attacks on Dresden, all those elements were in place—and the civilians and depleted ranks of firefighters who remained in the city were ill equipped to battle the flames. The worst of the firestorm occurred in the early-morning hours of February 14, but the city smoldered for weeks. In the city center only the fragile, lacework remnants of some buildings remained standing.

The death toll at Dresden has been, over the years, a matter of extensive and emotional debate. The number of refugees in the city and the confusion following the devastating raids have added to the difficulty of establishing a final figure. The claim of up to 250,000 casualties made by British historian David Irving—who later gained notoriety as a Holocaust denier—after the 1963 publication of his book *The Destruction of Dresden* was shown to rely on a report doctored during the war by the German propaganda ministry. And in considering the stories of eyewitnesses who recalled seeing the center of Dresden covered with bodies, one must bear

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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 sight. Based on the most reliable numbers available, it is reasonable to conclude

that the final death toll was in the vicinity of 25,000. Tens of thousands of others were wounded or made homeless.

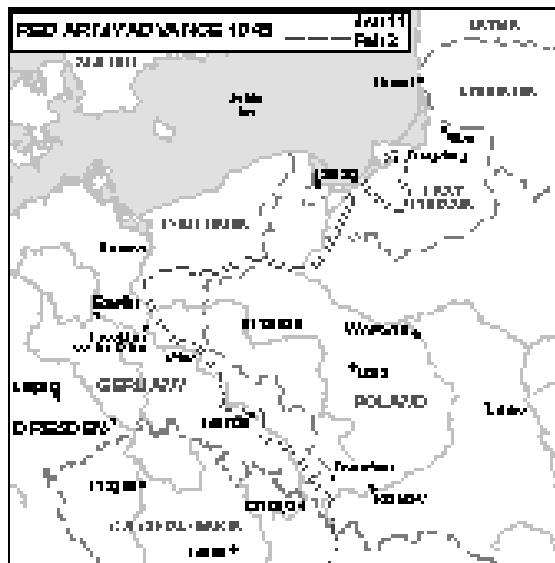
The Dresden raid has insinuated itself powerfully into the public memory of World War II. Filled with beautiful churches, elegant Baroque apartment blocks, a magnificent opera house, and lovely garden walks, Dresden had been a center of art and culture and a showcase for striking architecture since the beginning of the 18th century, which only increased the regret felt over its destruction. The presence of large numbers of war refugees, and the fact that they were set upon by a fiery maelstrom, also made the Dresden raid seem disturbingly different from others conducted in the same air campaign. The name “Dresden” is often invoked alongside “Hiroshima,” and it is still frequently one of the first words spoken when debates occur over aerial bombing in contemporary wars, as they did during the bombing of Baghdad at the onset of the Iraq War in 2003. Today, Dresden is generally portrayed as a wholly atypical episode, a moral anomaly—a kind of one-off event wherein the Allies employed new and unusual bombing tactics to create a firestorm.

In its execution, however, the attack on Dresden was similar to other air attacks the Americans and the British carried out in January and February 1945. Dresden contained military targets, and it met the fate that had befallen other

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German cities, such as Cologne in 1942 and Darmstadt in 1944—and that would befall still more, including Pforzheim and Wuerzburg, before the war ended. In terms of lives lost and damage done, the Dresden raid was less destructive than the now largely forgotten American air attack on Tokyo on the night of March 9–10, 1945, which killed 100,000 Japanese. And it did less damage than the devastating firestorm Britain's Bomber Command visited on Hamburg in late July 1943. But what does set Dresden apart is rarely explored in analyses of the motives for the raid and the events surrounding it: that an erosion of moral sensibilities had cleared the way for attacks on a city the Americans and the British knew was swollen with refugees. The history of the Dresden raid deserves to be told clearly because it speaks directly to the brutalizing and corrosive effects of war, even upon those who are fighting for a righteous cause and believe themselves to be fighting honorably.

In the late summer of 1944, five months before Dresden, the Normandy breakout and the rout of the Germans at the Falaise Gap had the Allies heady with optimism about a swift end to the war. But this sense of imminent victory flagged in the autumn as German defenders inflicted punishing losses on the Allies at Arnhem and other points in their advance. The recent appearance of impressive new German weapons—including V-2 rockets, snorkel submarines, and Messerschmitt 262 jet fighters—provided disturbing evidence that the Third Reich's war machine was still operating effectively and that British and American optimism had been premature. Meanwhile, poor weather hindered Allied air attacks on the German army's oil



Less than two weeks before the 1945 bombing of Dresden, Soviet troops were within 125 miles of the city.

supplies. And in December 1944, Hitler counterattacked in the west, launching the Battle of the Bulge—an astonishing feat that left the Allies in a scramble of embarrassment and eroded confidence. Allied casualties soared; the U.S. Army alone suffered 74,788 casualties on the western front in December, and another 61,692 the following month.

Intelligence estimates reflected the air of crisis. Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee reported on January 16, 1945, that the "probable worst case scenario" was that the Soviet winter offensive and the coming Allied spring offensive in the west might achieve "no decisive success." On January 21, the U.S. Strategic Air Forces Intelligence Office concluded that British and Amer-



Lieutenant General Carl A. Spaatz, commander of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces, in the center, engages in teatime chat with his British counterpart, Sir Arthur Harris, at right, in 1942. General Ira Clarence Eaker, head of the U.S. Eighth Air Force at the time, is also pictured.

ican armies had lost the initiative in the west, and that the Luftwaffe had rebounded “to a degree not considered possible by Allied intelligence some eight months ago.” A subsequent report of the Joint Intelligence Committee urged a review of the utilization of the strategic bomber forces and stated, significantly, 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.”

In a discussion of strategy held the same day the report appeared, Sir Arthur Harris, commander in chief of Britain’s Bomber Command, suggested to his superiors that Leipzig, Chemnitz, and Dresden might be good targets along with Berlin in order to aid the Soviet advance. From above, Prime Minister Winston Churchill aggressively pushed for a wider campaign, inquiring what plans the Royal Air Force had for “basting the Germans in their retreat from Breslau.” Churchill was anxious that the war effort not be allowed to stall. But on the eve of the Yalta Conference in early February, when he was to meet with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Premier Joseph Stalin, he also wanted to reinforce his old argument to the Soviets that the Anglo-American bomber offensive had served as a second front. Air attacks on cities in eastern Germany would not only aid the advance of the Red Army but would re-emphasize the contribution of strategic bombing to Allied victory, perhaps helping to impress upon the Soviets the might of Anglo-American airpower.

Harris was promptly told that his superior, Chief of Air Staff Sir Charles Portal, was amenable to attacks on the four cities and any others “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.” Before departing for the island of Malta, where Anglo-American talks on war strategy would be held in preparation for the Yalta Conference, Portal discussed the plan with Lieutenant General Carl A. Spaatz, commander of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces, the American analogue to Bomber Command. The American conferred with his British counterparts, and, on January 31, Portal was informed that an agreement had been worked out with Spaatz to “meet the present situation.”

The next day, Spaatz articulated the same plan in Paris at a meeting of Allied air commanders at General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces. Attacks on synthetic oil

plants would remain the first priority, but a new priority was inserted ahead of the standard strikes against “communications” targets: assaults on 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.”

The way in which Spaatz understood this new guidance is important. He had heard the specific language of the plan—had even read it aloud to his fellow commanders—and agreed to it without requesting a change. Raids in the new 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” was a third, and distinct, category listed in the guidance. 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 its lines.

These decisions were rendered in unemotional, bureaucratic tones; there appears to have been little debate over them. But they signaled a stripping away of the last boundaries restricting the use of strategic bombers. Enjoining bombers to “cause great confusion” and “hamper movement of reinforcements” allowed planners to elide the actual meaning—in human terms—of those phrases, creating a space in which moral dilemmas could be avoided. What the language really meant was that the Allies were prepared to use the large number of refugees on the eastern front to create a “human wall” that would impede the Wehrmacht and drain away food, fuel, and medical attention from the German war effort.

The absence of debate reflected the degree to which the years of war had

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Incendiary and explosive bombs fall from the belly of a B-17 toward Dresden on February 14, 1945. This U.S. Eighth Air Force attack followed Royal Air Force runs the previous night that started fires visible 200 miles away.

hardened attitudes. In September 1939, 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 jointly declared that they would spare civilian populations and government property. The Germans said that they welcomed the president’s appeal and would bomb only military targets, but their attacks on Warsaw and Rotterdam quickly rendered these claims hollow. By 1945, the last tatters of the pledges of 1939 to protect noncombatants were removed.

The willingness to overturn previous constraints also revealed the urgency and anxiety that colored British and American deliberations at that moment in the war. On December 30, 1944, General Henry “Hap” Arnold, the Washington-based commander in chief of the U.S. Army Air Forces, told Spaatz that he was concerned about the Germans’ reviving their fighter plane production. “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,” Arnold wrote. At the same time, Robert Lovett, the U.S. assistant secretary of war for air, drew up a detailed memorandum arguing for an expanded air effort—in particular, for spreading the attacks to Germany’s smaller cities and towns. Arnold forwarded the memorandum to Spaatz, with a cover note declaring that the Soviets’ operations on the eastern front would have a decided effect on what happened on the western front.

Spaatz’s deputy for operations, Major General F. L. Anderson, reported to his boss that the principal architect of the army’s war plans, General George C. Marshall, had discussed at Malta the desirability of bombing Berlin and other cities: “He certainly was all for it,” Anderson said of Marshall. On the British side, estimates by the Joint Intelligence Committee reflected the same sense of urgency. Churchill was suggesting that Berlin and other large cities in eastern Germany be “considered especially attractive targets.”

The Dresden attack came in perhaps the darkest period of the most violent and deadly year of the 20th century. In the United States, Secretary of War Henry Stimson announced the latest American casualty figures on February 8: They had climbed by 27,242 in the space of one week. On February 22, the previous week’s casualties were reported: another 18,982. That same day, Eisenhower told Stimson that German resistance remained stiff along the entire western front.

In the Pacific, meanwhile, American troops were about to embark on a





costly battle for Iwo Jima. The Americans were preparing to begin trials with low-level, nighttime incendiary raids against Japanese cities. This signaled the beginning of a dramatic departure from their attempts to hit specific factories and military installations in Japan in daylight attacks. In its March 5 issue, *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.

Yet the British and Americans followed different paths to Dresden. Early in the war, the strength of German air defenses had forced the British to fly their bombing raids at night, when the only targets that crews could find reliably were the largest ones: cities. Bomber Command crews worked to improve their accuracy under all conditions, and by 1944 they had made dramatic strides and were able to hit specific targets (such as railway marshaling yards or synthetic oil plants) with enough precision to contribute signally to the aerial bombardment that preceded the D-Day invasion. Still, Bomber Command remained principally a night bomb-



ing force, and northern European weather conditions ensured that opportunities for striking specific military targets were the exception. To maximize the impact of imprecise strikes, the British dropped a mix of high-explosive and incendiary bombs. The high explosives blasted structures into bits, and the accompanying incendiaries ignited the ruins and spread the destruction. In February 1945, incendiary bombs typically constituted 40 to 60 percent of total bomb load.

That winter, Bomber Command leader Harris and his superior, Portal, engaged in a lengthy and vigorous exchange over targeting choices. But they were debating only the close calls, when cloud cover broke up enough to allow for a difference of opinion on precision capabilities. Otherwise, the British bombed freely. Portal believed that Harris was too cautious, and thus missed

These photographs show the same area of Dresden in 1934 (left) and 1947 (below). Known as the “Florence of the Elbe” before the war, Dresden was renowned as a cultural center and showcase of ornate Baroque architecture. The domed Frauenkirche, or Church of Our Lady, was the work of German master architect Georg Bähr. It dominated the heart of the city for more than 200 years and endured two days of bombing, but not the firestorm that resulted.



chances to go to specific oil targets when weather allowed. Harris always wanted to go to cities—and to aim for the dense, built-up areas of worker housing. He believed passionately that relentless attacks on German cities would prove too much for the Reich to bear. Though he sent his crews to other targets when directed, he regarded his city campaign—designed to devastate more than 60 of Germany’s principal urban areas—as 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 casualties for Allied armies, and a likely repetition of the terrible prolonged battles of World War I. No doubt Harris and other British commanders felt less than apologetic about their bombing strategy because Britain’s own cities had endured many attacks by German bombers and, in recent months, missiles.

Harris drove his Bomber Command crews to perfect the techniques of nighttime incendiary bombing. They learned to mount “feint” raids to confuse German defenses, and dropped “window”—short aluminum-coated strips—to disorient defensive radar. They refined their target acquisition methods as well. Crews in Lancaster marker aircraft would fly over the target first, using bright white flares to define the parameters of the area to be bombed. Then Mosquito marker aircraft would descend to drop bombs containing brilliant red flares that produced a giant “bull’s eye” of red light at one or more points in the city for the heavy Lancaster bombers that would follow.

Every time Harris sent his bombers to a city, his goal was to inflict precisely the devastation that could be caused by mixing high-explosive and incendiary bombs in built-up urban areas. Incendiary bombs, in particular, spread tremendous collateral damage and, if conditions were right, could trigger the physical and psychological devastation of a firestorm, as the residents of Hamburg experienced in late July 1943. A year and a half after the Hamburg raid, the British had more keenly honed their methods and had introduced the use of a “master bomber,” who would remain in the raid area and direct incoming crews to specific targets by radio. The much-reduced effectiveness of German defenses made it possible for bomber crews to put these skills to even more devastating use.

The Americans had entered the war in 1941 convinced that they would bomb specific industrial targets visible by day from high-altitude bombers flying in self-defending groups, without fighter escorts. But, like the British, the Americans found themselves making significant wartime modifications to their doctrine. Cloudy weather often nullified the advantages of the much-touted Norden bombsight, preventing the Americans from delivering the kind of “precision” strikes they had counted on. At a conference on bombing accuracy in March 1945, researchers re-

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vealed that when the U.S. Eighth Air Force bombed through heavy cloud that winter, 42 percent of its bombs fell more than five miles from their targets. In order to maintain a reasonable operating tempo, the Americans had taken to mounting frequent attacks on railway mar-

shaling yards—large, visible targets either within 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 less discriminate “area” raids. The Americans typically included incendiary bombs, which were not particularly efficient against marshaling yards but could cause widespread collateral damage. When targets were shrouded in cloud and precision was impossible, incendiaries raised the likelihood of broad disruption and destruction. The target category “marshaling yards” received more of the Eighth’s bomb tonnage than any other.

Though the Americans strongly preferred to strike specific industrial sites when weather permitted, the bulk of their raids through clouds were, in essence, area raids. But to distinguish their efforts from those of the British, the Americans continued to define these attacks in the language of precision bombing. The insistence on this language reflected American sensitivity to the ethical questions raised by strategic bombing. But their frustration as the war dragged on eventually made the Americans more amenable to waging air attacks that were designed, at least in part, for their psychological effect on the enemy. On February 3, 1945, they launched a massive attack on the center of Berlin to aid the Soviet advance and hasten Germany's surrender.

The seventh-largest city in Germany, Dresden lay 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. On October 7, 1944, months before the Dresden firestorm, the Eighth Air Force had conducted a small raid against the city's "industrial area," and on January 16, 1945, had hit its marshaling yards. But Dresden had not suffered the kind of devastating damage that Harris and Bomber Command could inflict on cities. Its reputation as one of the jewels of Europe—Germany's Florence—had fed rumors that the city would be exempted from a major air attack.

Late on the night of February 13–14, Lancaster and Mosquito marker aircraft began dropping target indicator bombs across Dresden to guide the incoming bombers to their aim points. In Dresden, the bull's eye for the Mosquito crews was the main sports stadium. The target marking was so effective that the Lancaster bombers of Bomber Command's No. 5 Group could readily locate the glow of the red flares. When the 244 bombers arrived, they met with little German resistance. By that point in the war the Luftwaffe was no longer much of a menace, and Germany's heavy guns had been divided between anti-aircraft duty and antitank duty against the Soviet army. The British pilots were able to fly low and make careful, concentrated runs. Though the first wave of bombers stayed over the city only briefly, their precise work seeded intense fires that were fanned by steady westerly winds.

Just as the first target markers began to fall over Dresden, a second group of 550 British heavy bombers was taking off from Britain. When they arrived, crews mostly bombed blind through the fire and smoke, extending the area of the fire in all directions. Just before 2 A.M. the last of the bombers departed, leaving behind fires visible from 100 miles away.

Shortly after noon that day, American B-17 bombers of the Eighth Air Force's First Air Division approached. This raid on Dresden, originally scheduled to precede the British attack, had been postponed because of bad weather. It was one of three American air attacks in the region that day; targets in Magdeburg and Chemnitz were also hit. Nine of the division's 12 groups reached Dresden; the other three bombed Prague, 70 miles to the southeast, by mistake. Some crews were able to drop their payloads on the Dresden railway marshaling yards; most of the others, inhibited by smoke, bombed on instrument, and thus scattered their bombs widely across the city. All told, 311 B-17s of the First Air Division dropped 771 tons of bombs, including 294 tons of incendiaries.



A day later, 210 B-17 bombers that had failed to reach their designated target—a synthetic oil plant—bombed Dresden as a “secondary” option. They dropped another 461 tons of bombs. *The New York Times* reported the raids the following day under the headline “8,000 Planes Batter Nazis Close to 2 Fronts; Dresden Hit Thrice as Russians Move on It.” The story said 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.”

In an editorial on February 16, 1945, *The New York Times* acknowledged without regret the terrible damage to Dresden and other cities caught in the air campaign. Under the title “Doom over Germany,” the editorial pointed out, “The Allied triumph is being achieved with the very weapon [airpower] that was to win the world for Hitler.” It concluded by observing 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 land-



A year after the Allied raid, Dresdeners negotiate the rubble that remains to board a tram. Much of the city lay in ruins for years after the bombing, which destroyed several square miles at its center.

marks of European culture and Germany's own better past must be wiped out, the Germans may, as they were drilled to do, thank their Fuehrer for the result."

But more controversy was to come. Even as *The New York Times* published its editorial, British Air Commodore C. M. Grierson of the Allied Supreme Headquarters Air Staff Section held a press conference in Paris in which he tried to explain how attacks on cities created logistical and administrative difficulties for the Germans and impaired their war economy. Asked about attacks on Dresden and "other points ahead of the Russian front," Grierson explained that "they are centers 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 had gotten himself onto 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."

An Associated Press war correspondent named Howard Cowan soon filed 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 centers as a ruthless expedient to hastening Hitler's doom." The report was widely circulated in the United States, to awkward effect. Among other things, Cowan's phrase "the Allied air chiefs" linked the British and the Americans in ways that the Americans found uncongenial.

On February 18, Cowan's story appeared in newspapers across the United States. In addition to declaring that the Allies had adopted a deliberate terror bombing policy, Cowan noted, "The all-out air war in Germany became obvious with the unprecedented daylight assault on the refugee-crowded capital two weeks ago and subsequent attacks on other cities jammed with civilians fleeing from the Russian advance in the east." He added, "The decision may revive protests from some allied quarters against 'uncivilized warfare,' but they 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."

The Cowan story did not adequately link the attacks on eastern German

cities to the objective of aiding the advance of Soviet forces. And the assertion that the “Allied air chiefs” had, of their own accord, decided to launch an entirely new kind of campaign was, at the very least, misleading. Nonetheless, the story captured something essential. Allied planners had, for a variety of reasons, managed to sidestep the real human consequences of their decisions. Grierson had wandered into the very territory they had avoided entering. His comments triggered a series of official inquiries and “clarifications” that revealed how Allied leaders, weary and alarmed, had conceived a plan for intensifying the war but had not wrestled with the plan’s likely human toll.

Allied Supreme Headquarters had already denied reports that the Allied air chiefs had adopted a policy of deliberate terror bombing. *The Times* of

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London reported that 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 communica-

tion or oil centers.” Headquarters spokesmen argued that the Dresden raid was designed to “cripple communications and prevent the shuttling of troops between the eastern and western fronts.” The article’s final sentence read, “The fact that the city was crowded with refugees at the time of the attack was a coincidence.” But the refugees’ presence was, of course, no coincidence.

The day after the Cowan story broke, a *Washington Star* editorial grappled with its troubling implications. Cowan, the editorial noted, had not specified the precise meaning of the phrase “terror bombing”: “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 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 20th-century civilization.” But the *Star* rejected this interpretation and discovered a “more humanitarian meaning” in Cowan’s claim, suggesting 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 *Star* concluded, was a “harsh but legitimate objective of war.”

In the meantime, General Arnold nervously called Spaatz to account, asking him to transmit the text of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces’ current operating directive, and to add any commentary he wished. In a memo that went out to Spaatz at roughly the same time, Colonel Rex Smith warned of the public-relations problems posed by the Cowan dispatch: “This story will certainly bring an avalanche of queries because it contradicts all of our announced policies and purposes of precision bombing.” Spaatz’s deputy, Anderson, answered, defending the existing bombing directive and the decisions of the

field commander, and arguing that it made great strategic sense to support the Soviet advance, subject to the first priority of continued attacks on oil plants. He insisted that “there has been no change in the American Policy of precision bombing directed at Military objectives.”

At the same time, Anderson worked with reporters, public-relations officers, and the European manager of the United Press to contain and manage the debate. He also met with Eisenhower to discuss a statement reiterating that there had been no change in policy. Acknowledging that air attacks would always endanger civilian lives, air force spokesmen emphasized that American bombers would continue to refine their technique and to direct the maximum concentration of bombs on military targets. Secretary of War Stimson took up this line in a further effort to reassure the public. In a February 24 editorial, *The Washington Star* readily embraced Stimson’s explanation that the Cowan story had been “an excusable but incorrect” interpretation of some presumably ambiguous remarks made by a briefing officer. The *Star*’s editors seemed immensely relieved to accept this 1940s version of spin control: “It is reassuring to have Secretary Stimson’s word for it that our air forces have not adopted a policy of deliberate terror bombing against German civilians.”

In early March, however, Stimson, perturbed by some of the claims in the news, asked for an investigation of the Dresden raid. Angry about the second-guessing, Arnold 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.” His staff’s report to Stimson pointed out that the Royal Air Force had caused most of the damage, and argued that Dresden had been bombed because it was an important communications center. The aging Stimson, who was usually two or three steps behind when it came to modern air warfare, let the matter drop.

In one sense, the Americans were right to claim that there had been no change in policy, and that their attack on Dresden—a coda to the much larger Bomber Command attack—had not differed tactically from other U.S. raids. The American air attack was aimed at the marshaling yards and was thus considered a raid on a military target. Such attacks had indeed been waged extensively in support of the western front. Despite increased interest in targeting for psychological effect, the Americans still believed that specific military aim points were the most efficient targets—and they struck such targets whenever weather permitted.

In another sense, however, the Americans had been engaged in a kind of cognitive self-defense that linked intention and outcome in sometimes problematic ways: The *actual* effect of the late-war, large-scale raids on marshaling yards, especially when sizable percentages of incendiaries were used, was devastating and often indiscriminate. And Spaatz, in agreeing to attack eastern German cities, had agreed as well to participate in a campaign designed, in part, to complicate and exacerbate the refugee problem the Germans faced on the eastern front. Even if the Allies did not conceive of this phase of the air war as “terror bombing,” it did not require a large leap of the imagination to envision

the horrific impact these raids would have.

Certainly it is true that Britain's Bomber Command was responsible for the great bulk of the damage done to Dresden, and it is true, too, that the American raids were meant to be more discriminate. Nonetheless, the Americans had followed on Harris's heels in two separate raids that were intended to disrupt transport, cause confusion, and burden relief efforts in a city

swollen with desperate and displaced civilians.

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The Americans' reluctance to deviate from their original plans and principles had been considerably eroded by years of war. At the time of the Dresden raid, American bombers in the Pacific theater were already in the process of switching from bombing aimed at industrial targets to low-level, nighttime incendiary bombing of Japanese cities. Allied

air commanders were also debating a plan to fly remote-controlled, "war-weary" B-17s laden with bombs into German industrial areas. And, in the immediate wake of the Dresden attack, the Americans took the lead in Operation Clarion, which was designed to use all available Anglo-American airpower against a wide range of transportation targets in Germany, including grade crossings, stations, barges, docks, signals, tracks, bridges, and marshaling yards, most of which were located in small towns that had never been bombed before and were not well defended.

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

Nevertheless, the raids were a clear departure from the moral doctrine of the "double effect." That doctrine, as philosopher Michael Walzer points out, was formulated as part of "just war" theory by Catholic casuists in the Middle Ages in order to reconcile "the absolute prohibition against attacking noncombatants with the legitimate conduct of military activity." Its requirements, as Walzer explains, include the following: "The inten-



A cupola adorned with a gilded orb and cross is hoisted atop Dresden's Frauenkirche in 2004 as part of a restoration financed by charities from several countries, including Great Britain and the United States. The crowning ornaments were crafted by a team of British silversmiths, among them one whose father participated in the World War II raid that destroyed the church.

tion of the actor is good, that is, he aims narrowly at the acceptable effect; the evil effect is not one of his ends, nor is it a means to his ends, and, aware of the evil involved, he seeks to minimize it, accepting costs to himself." Although their use of vague language shielded them from coming fully to terms with it, the British and Americans violated this moral principle. They used the presence of vulnerable civilians to hasten a military outcome.

Apart from the newspaper editorials, the Dresden story did not generate great public interest in the United States. Headlines in those weeks tended to concentrate on the great battles being waged in the Pacific, the Yalta Conference, and the advance of ground armies fighting hard in Germany and the Philippines. Convinced, perhaps, that strategic bombing was the best possible substitute for costly ground battles of attrition, Americans were not inclined to demand more rigorous and searching analysis from their war correspondents and other reporters. Indeed, those who tried to criticize either strategic decisions or the use of particular weapons risked being branded disloyal or unpatriotic.

In Britain, where the war in Europe was closer to home, the debate was muted to some degree by the fact that the Cowan dispatch was suppressed. But stories of the Dresden raid made their way into Britain via press reports from neutral countries such as Switzerland and Sweden. In general, most Britons were not eager to question Allied bombing policy. However, a few determined critics—including Anglican bishop George Bell, the

Marquess of Salisbury, and influential writer Vera Brittain—had kept a debate over bombing in the public view.

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Bomber Command had come under repeated scrutiny in Britain, especially in the early years of the war when it was a weak instrument that seemed ill equipped for the enormous task

it faced. And though the fortunes of the force had largely reversed, arguments lingered about the wisdom of relying heavily on a mode of warfare so hard to control that it dealt substantial civilian casualties even under the best of conditions. On March 6, 1945, Richard Stokes, a longtime parliamentary critic of Bomber Command, raised questions about the Dresden raid in the House of Commons. A deputy of the secretary of state for air delivered the reply: “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.” The exchange drew attention to the Cowan story, causing headaches for the Air Staff and for the British high command more generally.

At this point, Prime Minister Churchill interposed himself, once again, into the history of the Dresden raid. By March 1945 the crisis atmosphere surrounding the war effort had passed, and the fate of Hitler’s Reich was well and truly sealed. With Yalta behind him as well, Churchill now had troubled second thoughts. These surfaced in a minute he wrote on March 28 to Portal and General Sir Hastings Ismay (for the Chiefs of Staff Committee). “It seems to me,” Churchill 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.”

To the Air Staff, the final sentence seemed particularly galling; no one in Bomber Command was prepared to accept that the air campaign had been, in any sense, “wanton.” Harris was outraged, and Portal was, not surprisingly, taken aback by what seemed to him a baffling and sanctimonious display by the prime minister. Believing that Churchill’s stance might have been influenced by “haste or tiredness,” Portal nonetheless could not let the minute stand. He insisted that it be withdrawn and replaced by a version he himself drafted, which 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.”

Because Churchill personally had done a great deal to instigate the Dresden raid, his actions in this instance seem curious. But they are not particularly out of character if one considers his ambivalent attitude toward strategic bombing throughout the course of the war. A longtime airpower enthusiast and a proponent of aerial bombing since World War I, Churchill had used arguments about the prospect of bombing Germany to win the day in earlier debates over British wartime strategy. Subsequently, though, he had grown despondent over the limited impact and inherent inaccuracy of strategic bombing. Though Portal had convinced him to stay the course, he had never parted company with deep-seated concerns about its effectiveness.

His worries and ruminations caused him to be erratic in his attitudes, and would prompt him, ultimately, to erect roadblocks to a substantial British postwar survey of aerial bombing and to remain remarkably quiet on the topic of bombing in his six-volume history of the war. His March 28 minute may have been—at least in part—an attempt to transfer to others some of the personal responsibility he felt, consciously or unconsciously, for the Dresden raid, and to note for the record and for posterity his own position on its outcome.

It took time, particularly in the United States, for the name “Dresden” to provoke the moral uneasiness that it does today. Whatever qualms American policymakers may have felt about Dresden were not reflected in the Far Eastern theater. The Americans firebombed Japanese cities until the Pacific war ended with two mushroom clouds in August 1945. And five years after Dresden, the Americans did not hesitate to firebomb North Korean cities after the Chinese overran General Douglas MacArthur’s United Nations forces.

During the Cold War, when the city was part of East Germany, historians behind the Iron Curtain often asserted that the Dresden raid was much less an effort to aid the Red Army advance than a cynical and bloody demonstration designed to intimidate the Soviets on the eve of the postwar European political settlement. In the United States, as anti-Soviet fever peaked in the early 1950s, a government historian was assigned to prepare an offi-

cial review of the raid in response to congressional pressure, including allegations by one congressman that “as dupes of the Communists the Americans murdered 250,000 innocent persons—mainly women and children—in a city that had no military value.” The historian’s final report put the maximum death toll at 25,000, and concluded that if the Americans had not carried out the bombing, which was indeed intended to assist the Soviet advance, the country would have failed in its military duty.

David Irving’s *The Destruction of Dresden* brought the air raid back into Western consciousness in a dramatic way when it was published in 1963. “Apocalypse at Dresden: The Long Suppressed Story of the Worst Massacre in the History of the World” was the headline on one typical review. The book, which has continued to stir reaction and controversy in the decades since, helped lay the foundation for a number of myths and misinterpretations that remain in the literature to this day. The exaggerated casualty figures Irving assigned to Dresden—he estimated the deaths at 135,000 in his book, but later promoted estimates as high as 250,000—contributed to the raid’s overshadowing other World War II air attacks in which the death toll was higher than the actual count in Dresden.

Dresden’s symbolic status was raised again by Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), which became a classic in the modern American literary canon. Vonnegut had witnessed the attack on Dresden while being held in the city as a prisoner of war, and, without specifically indicting the attackers, he put the event at the heart of the novel. Published the year after the Tet offensive in Vietnam, *Slaughterhouse Five* was more a general attack on the horror and stupidity of war, but it etched the raid into the consciousness of a new and highly skeptical generation of Americans.

Dresden continues to be a source of discomfort for Britons and Americans. But though the horrific firestorm that consumed the city and the tragic deaths that resulted are what claim a hold on the Western mind, they are not what distinguishes this episode from many others in the war. The most troubling aspect of the Dresden raid has not been emphasized often enough by historians: The raid—like others waged along with it—was envisioned in part as a way to cause disruptions behind German lines by exploiting the presence of refugees. Yet many of those responsible did not allow themselves to recognize what they were doing. In their compulsion to explain, to shape interpretations, or simply to distance themselves from the story and its implications, Allied military and political leaders displayed a collective conscience that was not unburdened by Dresden’s fate. Only by appreciating the fears, dashed hopes, and weariness of Allied leaders in the winter of 1945 can we fully understand how they came to embrace plans that, in essence, made refugees pawns in a fearsome drive to end the Wehrmacht’s ability to wage war. But the very existence of those plans ought to give pause to us all, and stir wider and more thoughtful debate about human behavior in wartime. Dresden is a stark reminder of how hard it is to control the human capacity for destruction, once the forces of war have set it loose. □