Britain's Revenge: Winston Churchill and the Bombing of Germany

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HIST 597: World War II

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Winston Churchill’s leadership was undoubtedly a significant factor in helping the Allies win the Second World War. Few other British leaders, particularly those who immediately preceded him, could have summoned the unyielding resolve that characterized Churchill’s decisions and countenance as a wartime prime minister. Yet his involvement in the Anglo-American strategic air offensive against Germany, which historian H.P. Willmott considers “perhaps the most controversial aspect of the Second World War,” requires clarification.\(^1\) The reason for this is simple. Despite the massive scope of the bombing campaigns, especially those that took place at the end of the war, Churchill seemed to have had “bouts of selective forgetting” in his postwar writings.\(^2\) In his multivolume history of World War II, he addressed the bombing campaign against Dresden in one sentence: “Throughout January and February our bombers continued to attack, and we made a heavy raid in the latter month on Dresden, then a centre of communications of Germany’s Eastern Front.”\(^3\) In his last volume, he “mentions Bomber Command only once, in passing and critically.”\(^4\) Was he really so uninvolved? Or did he simply desire to distance himself from such a campaign that resulted in the deaths of almost six hundred thousand German civilians? An examination of the work of several historians demonstrates that the ferocious nature of the RAF’s war on German cities largely resulted from Churchill’s official sanction or permissive neglect of Bomber Command’s strategies.

Churchill’s confidence in the strategic use of bombers predates World War II. While he served as the British Minister of Munitions at the end of World War I, he pioneered the concept of “area” bombing, which entailed the saturation of large targets with massive numbers of

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3 Ibid., 271-272.
bombs. While in that office, he planned a thousand-bomber attack on Berlin for 1919 in case the war continued through that year. He realized at the time that the use of bombers made it possible for death and terror to reach far behind the lines of the actual fighting armies.\(^5\) After World War I, he took a close personal interest in the development of aircraft, and he even learned how to fly.\(^6\) In the 1930s, as Hitler rearmed Germany, Churchill demanded that Britain achieve air parity with the Nazi regime.\(^7\) He acknowledged that the increasingly inevitable European conflict might involve the extensive use of bombers to carry a special kind of destruction to the enemy.

At the outbreak of war in September 1939, the official position of the British government was “to avoid any air attack that carried the risk of civilian casualties.”\(^8\) Neville Chamberlain refused to allow Bomber Command to do more than drop leaflets over Germany.\(^9\) Churchill seems to have agreed with this policy at first. His authorized biographer, Martin Gilbert, quotes him saying, “‘This is a military and not a civilian war. You and others may desire to kill women and children. We desire… to destroy German military objectives.’”\(^10\)

Events during the first years of the war, however, altered Churchill’s attitude toward the use of bombers. The Battle of Britain, fought almost entirely by airplanes, cemented Churchill’s conviction that Britain must allocate significant resources to the strengthening of its air corps. Perhaps more significant, events during the Battle of Britain eroded the belief that bombers should avoid civilian targets. German bombers that operated at nighttime increasingly missed

\(^7\) Ibid., 530.
\(^9\) Ibid., 287.
\(^10\) Gilbert, 680.
their intended targets and dropped their bombs on residential areas. On the evening of August 24, 1940, twelve German bombers veered off course and accidentally dropped their load on central London. Although Churchill formerly had proclaimed that he opposed the use of air attacks upon noncombatants, Germany’s ignominious aggression had altered this sentiment.11

Churchill responded with a ferocious vengeance: he ordered over 80 bombers to attack Berlin.12 Although the raid caused little material damage, it infuriated Hitler, who assured his people in a mass rally soon afterwards, “If they attack our cities, we will simply erase theirs.”13 Hitler ordered Air Marshall Hermann Goering to stop attacking purely military targets and instead concentrate his bombers on the city of London itself. Thus began the “Blitz,” the first of many bombing campaigns that proved to be the most systematic destruction of population centers in history.14 German attacks on towns and cities all across Britain soon followed, resulting in extensive material damage and loss of civilian life. London endured 71 major raids during the Blitz. Some 20,000 men, women, and children in that city alone lost their lives, and as many deaths occurred in other parts of England.15 Any British prewar qualms about killing German civilians seemed to disappear.16 When Churchill ordered the terror bombing of Mannheim in December 1940, all pretenses were gone: for the first time, the British had designated a city rather than a military installation as the target.17

Historians generally agree that Air Chief Marshall Charles Portal, who took command of the RAF in October 1940, played a major role in shaping Churchill’s opinion of the bombing

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11 Hastings, 208.
12 Gilbert, 674.
14 Ibid., 53.
15 Ibid., 52.
16 Chickering, 288.
17 Lowe, 51-52.
war. He “was widely considered the cleverest of the Chiefs of Staff.” Like many air officers, his principal goal was to secure the interests of his own service, “and above all its bomber offensive.” Commanders in other branches of service were envious of the skill with which Portal wielded a disproportionate control over the prime minister. Portal therefore asked for a 4,000-strong bomber force, which he believed would end the war in six months by the methodical destruction of 43 major German cities.

Although Churchill initially dismissed the idea that a massive bombing campaign would alone end the war, he soon found greater motivation for supporting Bomber Command. Simply put, the destruction of German cities and industry with bombs was Britain’s only extensive method of taking the war to Germany for several years. Although Churchill suspected, correctly, “that there was no sure and single way to victory over an industrialised enemy,” he nonetheless admitted that bombing at the time remained the most effective method of impairing the German war effort. He also recognized that the bombing campaign was one of the few things that could boost the morale of the British people. Broadcasters announced its results on the radio every day. The British public rejoiced at these raids. Churchill recognized that much of the public “craved action, an outcome, some prospect beyond victimhood.”

The opportunity to batter Germany’s ranks through a heavy bombing campaign became even more appealing to Churchill when the Soviet Union entered the war. The prime minister found himself needing a way to appease Stalin, who frequently demanded that his western allies

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18 Hastings, 124.
19 Hastings, 124.
20 Gilbert, 773.
21 Willmott, 280.
23 Willmott, 280.
24 Johnson, 131.
do more to relieve pressure on the Soviet front. Churchill offered to Stalin “a terrible winter of bombing” for Germany, and he continued throughout 1941-42 “to offer strategic bombing as the most decisive aid short of invasion that the west could provide.” Churchill reassured his Russian ally that Britain would continue to bomb German cities into oblivion. He promised “that the RAF would be ‘ruthless.’”

Area bombing was not the dominant air policy at first. The British initially pursued daytime “precision” bombing, which focused on the destruction of concentrated industrial and military targets, often in areas outside major urban centers. Reports began to indicate, however, that precision bombing was not working. Photographs showed that only a small proportion of bombers were achieving hits within miles of their targets. Churchill despaired and conceded that the bombing campaign seemed to provide little more than an annoyance to the Wehrmacht. Portal tactfully used his sway with the prime minister to disagree. Who was to carry the war to Germany if not Bomber Command? Portal admitted that victory eventually would require the use of ground forces, yet the prospect of an invasion of Europe was slim at the time. Bomber Command thus needed to continue its attacks on German manufacturing and morale.

Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Harris, head of Bomber Command, formulated a plan to saturate defenses with a large concentration of bombs in order to produce maximum destruction. He mentioned it to Portal on May 18. Portal spoke to Churchill, “and both warmly approved.” Because RAF night raiders were incapable of dropping an acceptable proportion of bombs on designated industrial objectives, “British aircraft must henceforward instead address the smallest

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26 Willmott, 272.
28 Gilbert, 727.
29 De Bruhl, 268.
30 Ibid., 97.
31 Ibid., 98.
32 De Bruhl, 98.
33 Terraine, 483.
aiming points they were capable of identifying: cities.”34 Thus, they opted to execute their bombing runs at night to avoid confrontations with German fighters.35 Switching from a “scalpel” to a “bludgeon” decreased the accuracy of the bomber attacks. Yet the air staff “calculated that bombers that missed their targets would nevertheless inflict worthwhile collateral damage.”36 Bombs that did not destroy factories in the cities might still “dehouse” factory workers.37 Portal argued further that area bombing would undermine the morale of the German people and “‘shake their faith in the Nazi regime.’”38

In a major raid on May 30, 1942, over 1,000 bombers inflicted massive damage on the city of Cologne. Churchill’s response to the initial results was one of elation. He told Arthur Harris, “‘This proof of the growing power of the British Bomber Force is also the herald of what Germany will receive, city by city, from now on.’”39 Churchill also cabled Roosevelt, “‘I hope you were impressed with our mass air attack on Cologne. There is plenty more to come.’”40

Indeed, there was more to come. The British adopted additional methods for destroying urban centers, including firebombing. Thus, on July 15, 1943, Churchill gave Harris permission to carry out Operation Gomorrah.41 The firebombing raids of July 24 to August 3 destroyed 8.7 square miles of Hamburg. For the first time, the interaction of British weapons with the forces of nature “delivered dimensions of destruction that up to then had existed only on paper.”42

34 Hastings, 208.
35 Willmott, 274.
36 Ibid., 279.
37 Hastings, 208.
38 Terraine, 261.
39 Ibid., 487.
40 Hastings, 209.
41 Ibid., 69.
42 Friedrich, 95.
Formerly, Churchill’s cabinet had assured the public that it destroyed targets of military significance, “but now it welcomed the deaths of forty thousand Hamburg civilians.”43

The increased capability of the Western Allies to carry out ground campaigns spelled the end of Churchill’s unbroken attention to Bomber Command. The strategy of defeating Germany by bombing alone had proved insufficient, and Operation Overlord emerged as central to Allied efforts by the beginning of 1944. This meant that Bomber Command had to reallocate a large portion of the air forces to roles connected to the invasion.44 Another bomber offensive began, however, in September 1944, after the completion of Operation Overlord released bombers for other purposes.45 Additionally, the entry of the American P-51 fighter transformed the air war by enabling bombers to achieve long-range bombing missions with fighter escorts.46

Yet it seems that Churchill failed to give the RAF attention and oversight in the latter part of the war. The onset of the land campaigns in France caused Churchill to lose interest in Bomber Command. The busy and exhausted prime minister seems to have been oblivious to many of Bomber Command’s decisions that dealt “nightly death and destruction to some of the greatest cities in Europe” in late 1944 to 1945.47 The issue simply receded into the background.

Churchill’s neglect of the RAF’s activities allowed them to shape their own policies. Bomber Command was reluctant to abandon from nighttime area bombing, even as new technologies made successful precision bombing more probable.48 Perhaps one of the reasons for this was the decreasing availability of precision targets as Germany’s economy collapsed at the end of the war. Allied forces had to make a choice between bombing area targets or not

43 Ibid., 97.
44 Willmott, 285.
46 Ibid., 286.
47 Hastings, 452.
48 Overy, 109.
bombed at all. Quite simply, the latter was an unacceptable alternative to the Americans and the British, who “were rivals as well as partners, and neither was prepared to stay its hand as long as the other continued operations.”

Churchill at one point did write to Portal to encourage revisions in the bombing campaign, but Portal continued proceeding with operations. The most basic reason for this “was that a huge force of British heavy bombers existed, and there was deep reluctance to stand them down as long as German resistance continued.” The weapons existed, so Bomber Command determined to use them. The effect was devastating. While an average of 127 people died each day in the 1944 bombing war, an average of 1,023 people died daily from January 1945 until Germany’s surrender in May. The last four months of the war, when the defeat of Nazi Germany was inevitable, represented the peak of the campaign.

Churchill might have failed to supervise most of Bomber Command’s activities at the end of the war, but evidence proves his involvement in at least one major campaign. On June 13, 1944, Hitler began firing a reprisal weapon: the V-1 and V-2 rockets. By the end of the war, the rockets had killed 8,938 people in Britain and injured another 22,524. Churchill knew that the missile attacks on Britain had Englishmen in an uproar. Churchill’s natural reaction was to retaliate with a vengeance.

Various plans developed. One was to strafe German civilians with fighters. Another was to use poison gas, for which Churchill argued strongly. Yet even Portal advised against this. A third option was to firebomb several German cities. Churchill was adamant that Britain

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49 Willmott, 411.
50 Hastings, 451, 452.
51 Ibid., 452.
52 Friedrich, 144.
53 Friedrich, 111.
54 Ibid., 112.
55 De Bruhl, 127-128.
56 Ibid., 130.
57 Friedrich, 113.
retaliate. His response to objections was “immediate and Churchillian. ‘I did not ask you last night about plans for harrying the German retreat from Breslau… On the contrary, I asked whether Berlin, and no doubt other large cities in East Germany, should now be considered especially attractive targets.’”

The firebombing of the city of Dresden was the ultimate result of these discussions.

After Dresden, Churchill seems to have realized how such wanton destruction might have a negative effect for postwar Britain by leaving Germany so ruined that none of its resources would be available to rebuild Great Britain. He expressed his new doubts to Bomber Command and tried to distance himself from the bombing campaign. After the raid on Dresden, he generally dissociated himself from Harris, “whose horror-filled reputation lived on as a ‘butcher’ and as a partner with sole liability.” The prime minister’s role in developing the policies of Bomber Command had been clear earlier in the war, so it must have dismayed his air commanders to hear that Churchill “was not only disavowing the program that had his fingerprints all over it but was also saying that it might have been a big mistake.” He even blamed the Bomber Command’s campaign as terroristic in an effort to shield himself from criticism.

Yet Churchill’s condemnation of the Dresden attack could not erase the fact that “he had been an implicit, if not absolutely explicit, party” in the decision to bomb the city.

In hindsight, several conclusions on the effectiveness of the air war are evident. The bombing offensive did force a significant diversion of German manpower and resources into air defense, which certainly contributed to Soviet success in the east. It also resulted in almost six
hundred thousand deaths, 780,000 serious injuries, the destruction of 3,370,000 dwellings, and the onset of numerous problems for the Reich in providing food, shelter, medical care, and transportation for hundreds of thousands of people. It also ensured Germany’s economic collapse, particularly through the destruction of its oil industry and transportation system.

Yet the evidence now shows that the bombing campaign was not as effective as expected. German cities and industries proved to be surprisingly resilient and were able to recover much more quickly than predicted. Although Harris told Churchill that bombs had destroyed Cologne, it took only one month for industrial production to resume in that city. Manufacturing industry in the Hamburg was too extensive and dispersed for the Allies to destroy it. For most of the war, neither the Americans nor British had the strength to mount sustained operations that could inflict noticeable cumulative damage.

Regardless of what conclusions on the effectiveness of the bombing campaign are available in hindsight, Winston Churchill was clearly more involved than his own accounts of the war make apparent. The bombings gave Churchill the ability to boost the morale of the British people, relieve pressure on the Soviets in the east, and wear down the German war effort at a time when he had no alternative to carry the war to Germany. Yet because of the RAF’s inability to succeed in precision attacks, he sanctioned the destruction of what they could attack: German cities. Historians generally agree that bombing cities was the only practicable strategy open to the RAF, and even to the rest of Britain’s military, at least in early years of the war. The bombings that caused Churchill to distance himself from the campaign, however, occurred 1945,

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65 Willmott, 416.
66 Ibid., 283.
67 Terraine, 488.
68 Willmott, 283.
69 Ibid., 284.
70 Friedrich, 485.
when the RAF was capable of greater precision in its bombing raids. It is a pity that Churchill tried to slow Bomber Command’s momentum several months too late, after many of the German civilians who perished under air attack in 1945 were already dead. Churchill’s stalwart leadership of the British people certainly played a major role in achieving Allied victory. Yet his stubborn and vengeful resolve, combined with his negligence of Bomber Command’s activities at the end of the war, led to an unfettered bombing campaign, the results of which proved too grievous, embarrassing, and ghastly for Churchill himself to admit to his part in their occurrence.
Bibliography


