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Written by Maureen Younger

IN THE NEWS

Why we should never forget the ruined city

On the 70th anniversary of the destruction of Dresden by Allied bombing raids, *Maureen Younger* explains how the city represents a moral maze which remains with us today.

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Dresden in ruins by Blick vom Rathausturm. Photo courtesy of Deutsche Fotothek, via Wikimedia Commons.

Between the 13th and 14th February 1945, British and American air raids on Dresden left the city, nicknamed the Florence on the Elbe, devastated. By the morning of the 14th, rather poignantly it was also Ash Wednesday, temperatures from the subsequent firestorm rose to over 1500 °C (2700 °F). Streets melted, people's feet burnt as they fled and cars combusted from the heat alone. With the firestorm consuming all the oxygen in the air, people dropped where they stood or suffocated in the cellars where they had taken refuge, while others were drawn into the firestorm from the winds caused by the fire. Those people who had hidden for safety in water tanks were boiled alive.

The allies had dropped 3,300 tons of high explosive and incendiary bombs on the city. They knew the fires, started by the incendiary bombs, would be exacerbated by the high explosives which would help create air flows that transformed these fires into a firestorm. As a result, Dresden with its historic medieval centre and timbered buildings was destroyed for an area of around 13 square miles. And although estimates vary wildly, the current official account of those killed is around 25,000. If nothing else, the bombing of Dresden exemplifies the sheer horror of modern warfare.

Up to then Dresden had been the largest German city left unscathed by allied bombing. The official reason given for this sudden turn in events was that it was to help the Soviet advance on Berlin, thereby, hopefully, hastening the end of the war. The initial successes by the Germans in the west in the Battle of the Bulge had given the Allies a fright and the last thing they wanted was the Soviet advance to be slowed down in a similar manner. They also wanted to thwart any attempt by the Germans to move troops eastwards. Bombing civilians and leaving them homeless meant roads clogged up with refugees, a most effective way of slowing down advancing troop movements. In addition, as the city was still intact, Dresden contained factories devoted to the German war effort and was still a functional transport and communication hub.

However, some question how much of a valid target Dresden was at this late stage of the war, or whether it was simply payback or a means of showing the Germans (and, by extension, the Soviets) what the US and British air forces could do. In a memo following the bombing Churchill wrote: "It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed."

The Dresden bombings led some people, both at home and in the States, to begin asking questions about the Allies' conduct in the war.

Head of Bomber Command, Air Chief Marshall Arthur Harris, not surprisingly disagreed with Churchill's sentiment: "Attacks on cities like any other act of war are intolerable unless they are

strategically justified. But they are strategically justified in so far as they tend to shorten the war and preserve the lives of Allied soldiers."

Churchill wasn't alone in having doubts. The Dresden bombings led some people, both at home and in the States, to begin asking questions about the Allies' conduct in the war.

From left, Dresden's Frauenkirche in 1880. All that remained after the Allied raids (Picture by Erich Braun via Wikimedia Commons). The rebuilt church today.

Can such bombing raids ever be morally justified? Was Air Chief Marshall Arthur Harris right in maintaining that they were strategically justified? Is morality a constant or does morality change in wartime? Can choosing not to bomb be even more immoral if it leads to more death and destruction in the long run? It's easy to be glib in peacetime, but in wartime difficult decisions have to be made. The Second World War is littered with examples. In July 1940, the British bombed the French navy at Mers-el-Kébir, concerned that Vichy France would hand over their fleet to their new German puppet masters. Britain's survival depended on ships getting through to bring much-needed supplies to the country. The last thing they needed was an enlarged German navy. However, 1,297 French servicemen were killed in the bombing. But can one regard such a bombing raid immoral if, in the process, it helped to save British lives and helped ensure the supply line that enabled Britain to fight on. Whatever the answer, it's probably not much consolation to the families of those killed.

Similarly, does it make it morally justifiable to bomb a city to smithereens, killing thousands of civilians, if you then shorten a war, maybe by several weeks or even months and, as a result, save others from death and destruction? Not forgetting, this would include numerous British lives, saved from the indiscriminate bombing from German rockets. Is it simply a numbers game, weighing up how many lives lost against how many lives possibly saved, or considering to which nationality those lives belong, or its possible overall effect on the outcome of the war? And how can any such calculation be accurate when you can't say with complete certainty what would have happened otherwise and how many people would have been killed.

Of the estimated 60 million people killed in the Second World War, approximately 67% were civilians. In other words, 40 million were women, children, old men, the ill and the disabled. Aerial bombings and its – to use the PR phrase du jour – "collateral damage", has become a standard military tactic, from the carpet bombing by the Germans of Rotterdam, to Dresden by the Allies, the napalming of Vietnamese villages in the 1960s and 1970s to current day Gaza, Syria and the Ukraine.

Sadly then, this moral maze is still with us today. You only have to watch the news to see that. After all, it's much easier to target civilians in some kind of obscene war of attrition than fight an enemy, trained to avoid being a sitting duck. So, when we commemorate the Dresden bombings, maybe we should spare a thought for all those other civilians around the world who, at any moment, may find themselves and their loved ones in the crossfire.

Perhaps the final words belong to one of Dresden's most famous literary sons, Erich Kästner: "I was born in the most beautiful city in the world. Even if your father, child, was the richest man in the world, he could not take you to see it, because it does not exist any more. … In a thousand years was her beauty built, in one night was it utterly destroyed."

• Some of Richard Peter's photographs of Dresden after the Allied raids are currently on display at the Tate Modern's Conflict Time Photography exhibition. A review of it can be found here.

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