



BOMBING

a twentieth-century history

CIVILIANS



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The Atomic-Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: A Crime
Against Humanity

INTRODUCTION

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*Suddenly
There was a brilliant white-hot flash.
Buildings crumbled,
Fire blazed,
Smoke swirled all around,
Wires dangled everywhere,
And a writhing mass of humanity fled for safety*

This passage from a poem by Hiroshima victim Sadako Kurihara graphically depicts the horror experienced not only by A-bomb victims but by all who have suffered air raid attacks: fire, smoke, flight. Yet the attackers, hundreds of meters in the air above, have little sense of what is happening down below. For the bomber crews, the people on the ground are entirely abstract; they are targets. By contrast, the experience of their victims is of the most terrible concrete reality. The sharp juxtaposition of abstract and concrete is a phenomenon unique to aerial bombing.

The premium placed on aerial bombing in modern warfare owes much to the relative safety of the attackers and the complete vulnerability of the victims. The psychological remoteness of pilots and bombardiers from the reality of the horror on the ground is well described by Charles Lindbergh, who flew the first solo, nonstop flight across the Atlantic, in 1927. Lindbergh also flew combat missions in the Pacific theater as a consultant for the commander of the U.S. Army Air Forces, General Henry Arnold, during World War II:

You press a button and death flies down. One second, the bomb hanging harmlessly in your racks, completely under your control. The next it is hurtling down through the air and nothing in your power can revoke what you have done. . . . How can there be writhing, mangled bodies? How can this air around

you be filled with unseen projectiles? It is like listening to a radio account of battle on the other side of the earth. It is too far away, too separated to hold reality.

The origin of aerial bombing can be traced to the use of hot-air balloons in warfare in the late eighteenth century. Initially, balloons were used simply to determine the size and position of enemy forces, but militarists soon realized their potential for dropping grenades and other harmful objects on enemy troops. The use of airplanes in the early twentieth century led to a drastic change in war strategy: the wide expansion of war zones to include indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

Aerial bombing of civilians was first conducted by German planes against Parisians in August 1914—eleven years after the Wright brothers successfully flew the first aircraft in 1903. By the end of 1914, the Allies were also making serial air raids into German territories. Thus, by the time World War I ended in 1918, both sides had engaged in indiscriminate bombing, killing or injuring several thousand civilians.

Shortly after World War I, planes from the British Royal Air Force (RAF) were sent to the Middle East to engage in a new type of operation—the bombing of what an RAF document refers to as “rebels of uncivilised tribes” who refused to submit to British rule. Over several years from 1920 onward, the RAF attacked rebel groups in Iraq—for which Britain was the trustee nation at the time—by dropping bombs, including incendiary bombs, on remote villages and tent encampments. The same technique of indiscriminate bombing was also used in other territories of the British Empire, such as India and South Africa. Yet British administrators recommended this use of airpower as “outstandingly effective, extremely economical and undoubtedly humane in the long run.”

As in World War I, at the beginning of World War II, both Britain and Germany initially refrained from aerial attacks on civilians. However, in a repeat scenario, both sides deliberately increased their revenge bombing of civilian quarters in major cities following inaccurate bombings of military targets. The German forces conducted Operation Blitz for almost nine months from September 1940, attacking London, Coventry, Birmingham, Manchester, and many other English cities, killing 60,000 civilians and destroying more than 2 million houses. On September 11, 1940, Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diary that this aerial bombing operation would be decisive in forcing the British government to surrender.

In revenge, the RAF started night raids on industrial cities in the Ruhr region in October 1940. However, aerial attacks on German civilians really expanded in February 1942 when Arthur Harris took over the RAF Bomber Command. Lübeck, a cultural city with no military importance, became the first target of Harris's new strategy, “area bombing.” Cologne was then attacked by more than 1,000 planes. Other cities, such as Essen, Kiel, Stuttgart, Mannheim, Rostock, and Berlin, were also targeted. In February 1943, Harris pronounced that the morale of the German population in the bombed areas had reached an all-time low and that, if the RAF continued bombing, surrender could be expected in the very near future. Night raids continued on many German cities, including Hamburg, where 7,000 tons of bombs were dropped and about 45,000 people were killed. Yet there was no sign of surrender by the Nazi regime.

The RAF then began to target Berlin, bombing the city sixteen times between November 1943 and March 1944, while continuing to bomb other German cities. Still Harris's expectation of Nazi surrender was not fulfilled. On the contrary, the Germans started employing new weapons of indiscriminate killing—V-1 and V-2 rockets. More than 9,500 V-1 rockets were launched killing about 6,200 people. About 1,100 V-2 rockets reached various parts of England, killing 2,700 and injuring 6,500 people. Claiming again that the Germans were on the verge of a collapse in morale, Harris stepped up aerial attacks. In February 1945, the Bomber Command flew 17,500 sorties and dropped 45,750 tons on German cities. Between February 13 and 15, Dresden was heavily bombed for the first time by the RAF, this time together with the U.S. Army Air Force (USAAF). During the fourteen-hour raid, massive quantities of incendiaries burned large areas of this city, which housed no military facility, and killed an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 people.

The USAAF, led by Ira Eaker, entered the bombing campaign in Europe in August 1942. Despite repeated RAF requests to join it in low-altitude night bombing, the USAAF adhered to its traditional strategy, i.e., so-called precision bombing in daylight from a high altitude, using the Norden bombsight. In reality, “precision bombing” was a euphemism, as the bombs regularly fell at least a quarter mile from the target. It is not surprising, therefore, that the USAAF killed not only German civilians, but also many Allied civilians of German-occupied cities such as Paris, Nantes, Lille, Lorient, and Amsterdam. From November 1943, U.S. bombers started “blind bombing,” by which was meant that advances in radar

technology would enable even a blind bombardier to accurately hit the desired target. In fact, due to technical limitations, the bombing became yet more random and indiscriminate. Eaker shared the optimism of Arthur Harris that the British and U.S. cooperative bombing campaign was destroying German morale. Dissatisfied with the results of precision bombing by the 8th U.S. Bomber command, however, General Henry Arnold reorganized the USAAF in Europe and set up the United States Strategic Air Forces in December 1943. Eaker was demoted, and Carl Spaatz became head of the USSF.

U.S. strategy moved steadily from precision to blind bombing throughout the years 1943 to 1945, i.e., to bombing that was increasingly indiscriminate in practice. In the four months between September 1 and December 31, 1944, the USSF dropped more than 140,000 tons of bombs on "major targets," 60 percent of them in blind bombing. Only 674 tons were used for precision bombing in the strict sense. Blind bombing increased to 80 percent of the entire U.S. bombing campaign between October 1944 and the end of the war in Europe in May 1945. In February 1945, U.S. forces, together with the RAF, conducted Operation Clarion, in which numerous German towns and villages were bombed from a low altitude in order to demoralize the populace. It was an operation totally devoid of tactical value. In short, U.S. air attacks in Europe had become mostly "area bombing," with no serious attempt to limit damage to military targets. The fact that the USAAF leaders abandoned precision bombing in reality but maintained it as a meaningless official principle is evident in the counterplan against V-1 and V-2 rockets advocated by General Arnold. That was to fly 500 unmanned, radar-controlled, fully loaded B-17 bombers and crash them into enemy-held cities. Fortunately this plan was never put into practice.

Nevertheless, by the end of the war, 131 German towns and cities had been bombed, and approximately 600,000 German civilians had been killed by "strategic bombing."

It was against this background that the USAAF began the bombing campaign of Japan in late 1944. According to Henry Arnold and Curtis LeMay, bombing civilians was essential in order to break Japanese morale, and this was the quickest way to force them to surrender. At the same time, it was the most efficient method to minimize casualties to their own men. In this sense, Arnold, LeMay, and other U.S. military leaders inherited the idea of strategic bombing originally advocated by RAF leaders in

World War I. According to this concept, the killing of enemy civilians is justifiable, no matter how cruel the method; indeed it is indispensable to hastening surrender. U.S. leaders, however, in their public pronouncements, continued to insist that their bombs were directed toward military targets. Consider, for example, President Harry Truman's announcement immediately after the bombing of Hiroshima: "The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, in so far as possible, the killing of civilians." Truman made this statement immediately following the instant killing of 70,000 to 80,000 civilian residents of Hiroshima. By the end of 1945, 140,000 residents of that city died from the bomb. In the end, more than 100 Japanese cities were destroyed by firebombing, and two by atomic bombing, causing one million casualties, including more than half a million deaths, the majority being civilians, particularly women and children.

Immediately after the war, the U.S. government created the myth that it was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that finally brought an end to the long and bloody war in the Asia-Pacific region, thus justifying the mass killing of civilians. Yet this myth, which the U.S. government has stubbornly maintained for more than sixty years since the end of the war, does not really correspond to the historical facts. The Japanese government did not concede to the Allies immediately after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and U.S. bombing of other Japanese cities continued every day up until August 14, the day before Japan officially surrendered. Clearly, other important issues, in particular, the future fate of Hirohito and the monarchy, as well as the Soviet Union's entry into the war against Japan, must be considered factors critical in ending the war.

The United States was not, of course, alone in indiscriminate bombing in the Pacific War. The Japanese Imperial Navy engaged in the first indiscriminate bombing in the Asia-Pacific region with the January 1932 attack on civilians on Shanghai. Thereafter, Japanese bombers targeted civilians in Nanjing, Wuhan, Chongqing and other cities. Chongqing, in particular, was targeted in more than 200 air raids over three years from the end of 1938, bringing the total death toll up to 12,000. Here, too, the Japanese were not targeting a military facility, but sought to destroy the Guomindang's center of power and demoralize the civilians who supported this regime.

In the Korean War, U.S. forces bombed and destroyed two large irrigation dams, causing enormous flood damage in North Korea. As a result, North Korea's agricultural economy was ruined. In the Vietnam War, napalm, cluster bombs (with a high failure rate), daisy-cutter bombs (so-called earthquake bombs), and Agent Orange (a chemical defoliant) were widely used. These weapons resulted in long-term damage to the environment and the people, bringing suffering and death to countless civilians well after the actual bombing.

While bloody wars were being fought in Korea and Vietnam and many civilians from these countries became the target of heavy aerial bombings, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a cold war. Both nations devoted themselves vigorously to developing new and ever more destructive nuclear arms in order to annihilate each other's citizens. In the process, they produced a total of more than 69,000 nuclear warheads, conducted more than 1,700 nuclear tests between 1945 and 1998, and created a large number of victims of radioactive fallout.

Due to the widespread use of depleted-uranium weapons in both Gulf Wars and the increasing possibility that tactical nuclear arms may be used, as well as the availability of super-large daisy-cutter bombs and mother bombs, the distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons is rapidly disappearing. The number of countries seeking to equip themselves with weapons of mass destruction is increasing as nuclear powers like the United States and Britain attempt to subjugate so-called rogue nations by the use of military might.

The September 11 attack was unquestionably an act of terrorism, for it killed thousands of civilians indiscriminately. This act, perpetrated by an al Qaeda group, can be seen as a variation of indiscriminate bombing using civilian instead of military planes. Certainly al Qaeda would have used bombers if that had been an option. Whether such an attack is carried out by an unofficial armed group or by military forces, it is clearly an act of terrorism from the viewpoint of the civilian targets.

The majority of victims of strategic bombing are civilians—in particular, women and children. In plain language, “strategic bombing” of civilians is an act of terrorism. Is there any moral justification for killing tens of thousands of noncombatants under the rationale that it will force a swift surrender? It is important to remember that no war has ever been brought to an end by bombing civilians. Indeed, such a strategy typically strengthens resistance.

In assessing specific cases of indiscriminate bombing, we must remember the history of its justification and practice, which we have dated from World War I. In World War II, the British, the Germans, the Japanese, and the Americans all engaged in strategic bombing with heavy tolls in civilian lives, allegedly in the belief that it would demoralize the enemy and speed up surrender. We must be careful not to get bogged down in arguing whether or not the firebombing of Tokyo and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were strategically justifiable. The fundamental question is why this theory of mass murder has persisted for so long, even after the atomic bombings. Why was the strategy applied during the Korean and Vietnam wars, and why are variants of it still used to justify the “collateral damage” of “precision bombing” in wars such as those in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Iraq? The fact is that killing civilians is a crime against humanity regardless of the asserted military justification, a crime that should be punished on the basis of the Nuremberg and Geneva principles.