Strategic Bombing during World War II: The American Press and Public Reactions

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Strategic bombing has been a major part of military operations for many decades. Air raids became widely utilized during World War II, in Korea and Vietnam, and the more recent wars in the Middle East. Today, when bombings during the Vietnam conflict are discussed, visions of anti-war demonstrations, examples of investigative reporting, and the eloquent photographs published in *Life Magazine* may come immediately to mind. The American press has continued this legacy of investigative reporting during the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The American military and government, aware of the sensibilities of the American public toward civilian casualties, has allowed the broadcast of actual bombing operations in an attempt to prove the efficacy of precision bombing and the efforts in minimizing the loss of life among non-combatants. The realities, and sometimes the horrors, of the war have been brought into American homes, influencing the opinions and reactions of the American public. It is tempting to view the Second World War in the same context as the current war in the Middle East considering the controversies and debates over the last two decades surrounding the strategic bombing operations over Germany—particularly the bombings of Hamburg in 1943 and the baroque city of Dresden in 1945. Despite the tremendous loss of life and the destruction of historical and cultural buildings and artifacts, press coverage of the

Allied air strategy in Europe during World War II was often influenced by patriotic discourse. Newspaper reports, with some exceptions, remained somewhat detached from the actual human tragedy that unfolded in Germany during the last three years of the war. While occasional reports did convey the full reality of the effects of the bombing, it was not until Germany had capitulated and throughout the months leading to the use of the atomic bomb that Americans' opposition to strategic bombing became more vocal.

In the past, civilian casualties had been considered accidental and regrettable yet an unavoidable side effect of armed conflict. According to historian Hew Strachan, this view started to change with the First World War and especially in the years between the two world wars when the definition for *total war* began to "breach the principle of non-combatant immunity."[1] Civilians could be part of a nation's war machine through their contributions to war industries and, therefore, could also be justified targets. In Strachan's view, there were already historical precedents in Britain's colonial endeavors and in the First World War in which civilians had been considered part of the war machine.[2] As the Second World War in Europe progressed, this idea soon became accepted within the higher echelons of the British High Command and government. and influenced allied bombing strategy. When the United States began its raids in 1942, however, the strategic plan presented to the public included the targeting of oil plants, railways, and industrial complexes. The center areas of major cities were considered only secondary targets. According to Davis Biddle, the

[1] Hew Strachan, "Strategic Bombing and the Question of Civilian Casualties," in *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, eds. Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang, (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 2006), 1-2.
[2] Strachan, "Strategic Bombing and the Question of Civilian Casualties," 4.

current George C. Marshall Chair of Military Studies at the U.S. Army War College, the United States government and the American High Command publicly insisted that they were only conducting "precision bombing."[3] In this way, the American government attempted to maintain a different image in the press from that of the British.

The American insistence in distancing their goals and strategy for bombing from that of the British indicates, in Biddle's view, that American sensitivity to the targeting of civilians was considerable. It also explains the type of information made available to the American press and, therefore, to the public. Before the Americans got involved in the war, the press was already reporting on British aerial bombings. These reports were rather factual and statistical in nature, often lacking any statements about the human aspect of such events. Press releases often made clear that the targets were oil depots and industrial centers but did not give much detail about what these "industrial centers" were or whether there were civilians within these locations. For example, in a May, 1941 *New York Times* article, the only reference to potential civilian casualties during a bombing in Mannheim was that "fires were plentiful both on the docks and in the town of Mannheim itself."[4] The article does not mention any possible civilian casualties.

After the United States joined the bombing efforts in 1942, the great majority of articles in *The New York Times* and other newspapers still followed this formula. An article published in January 1943 about Mannheim placed more emphasis on the difficulties that the bombers

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[3] Tami Davis Biddle, "Wartime Reactions," in *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, eds. Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang, (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 2006), 102.

[4] "Mannheim Raided by Heavy Bombs," *New York Times*, May 1, 1941.

faced due to weather than on the human tragedy unfolding in the city.[5] Only occasional glimpses of the actual effect of the bombings of the cities would trickle into the news. Often these glimpses originated from the media in European countries such as Sweden and Norway. For example, the city of Hamburg suffered 213 raids during the war.[6] In July of 1943, a photograph released by the German government and published in *The New York Times* showed Hamburg in ruins after it had been wiped out by Allied bombing.[7] Although the photograph depicted the destruction of structures, it showed none of the human tragedy that resulted in the deaths of about forty thousand people. Instead, it only showed a group of people walking alongside several destroyed buildings.

The human drama was sometimes downplayed and often ignored in these reports. There was some effort from the press to put the bombing in more realistic terms. In contrast to *The New York Times* articles discussed above, in an article published in *Time Magazine*, the attack on Hamburg was described as "killing a city" and that great damage to docks, industry, railways and U-boat pens had been made.[8] The article affirmed that 14,000 people had died, and over 400,000 were left homeless. This number of civilian casualties in Hamburg was grossly underestimated in this article since casualties have actually been calculated to have been about 40,000.[9] Although a few articles provided enough information for the public to develop a strong opinion, these

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[5] "R.A.F. 4-Ton Bombs Batter Hamburg," *New York Times*, February 1, 1943.
[6] Jorg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), 165.
[7] "Nazis Issue a Camera Report on Hamburg Bombing," *New York Times*, August 27, 1943.
[8] "Battle of Europe: Some Germans Learned," *Time Magazine*, August 9, 1943.
[9] Sönke Neitzel, "The City Under Attack," in *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, eds. Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang, (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 2006), 77.

articles did not have great impact, and public opposition to strategic bombing did not increase.

Even though some articles attempted to provide a true picture of the effects that strategic bombing had on the German civilian population, they failed to encourage more vocal opposition to strategic bombing from the American public. The motivations behind the Allied strategic bombing were expressed in a few articles and were not completely hidden from the American public. Hints at these motivations for the bombing and the targeting of civilians can be found, for example, in an article published in November 1944 that described the bombing strategy to be conducted in the winter months of that year. The article mentioned that the objective of the renewed bombing campaign would be to "[strike] beyond the battle lines at the core of the enemy's military effort and will to fight."[10] It also stated that the attacks would "necessarily entail heavy losses among the industrial population," thereby making it clear that the campaign would target a specific civilian population. However, the article only mentioned the workers as targets and said little about the many other civilians that were also being affected. The American public was provided with some degree of truth and, at the same time, was kept in the dark about the full scope of the effects on civilian populations. Due to the press' disclosure of some facts and the omission of others, the American public was not able to forge an informed position on strategic bombing. To some extent, it explains why increased opposition to strategic bombing did not develop.

Another factor that may have influenced the American people was the concept of precision bombing. Many of the newspaper and magazine articles reviewed for this study reflected the idea that bombing

[10] "Winter to Bring Peak of Strategic Bombing," *New York Times*, November 19, 1944.

of specific targets could be achieved. Targets such as railroad tracks, specific industries, shipyards, etc. were referred to constantly in these articles. Today, it is known that the technology necessary to implement surgical bombing or the destruction of specific targets while minimizing damage to other structures was not available at the time. Targets proved to be difficult to destroy with the technology available to the Allied forces.[11] Ironically, the newspaper articles also hinted at this truth. One article reported that German authorities stated that an attack on Hamburg had destroyed two hospitals, killing over fifty individuals.[12] The article added that authorities claimed that the hospitals had been hit because German defenses had forced the bombers to fly too high, thereby affecting precision. The quantity of airplanes and explosives used in each attack as reported by the press was an additional indication of the difficulties of precision bombing. The number of airplanes used in each attack on German cities varied between several hundred and several thousands. The quantity of explosive and incendiary bombs dropped on each city was also in the thousands. An article in 1944 reported that 2,200 American planes had been involved in an attack on Berlin on June 22, 1944.[13] Another article described a bombing operation over Stuttgart and stated that "an estimated 2,200 tons of missiles, including 27,000 fire bombs" had been dropped on the city in a fifteen-minute saturation attack. These blanket bombings over Germany contradicted the Allied forces' strategy of precision bombing. Yet, the press and the public either

[11] Kenneth Werrell, "The Strategic Bombing of Germany in World War II: Costs and Accomplishments," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (December 1986), 706.
[12] "Berlin Says Two Hospitals Hit by R.A.F.," *New York Times,* March 15, 1941.
[13] "2,200 U.S. Planes Hit Berlin," *New York Times*, June 22, 1944.

did not realize that there was an obvious contradiction in the reports, or ignored it entirely.

Newspaper reports also stated that strategic bombing was conducted with the intention of interfering with the ability of Germany to wage war and to break the morale of the German people. This last point, alluding to the issue of German morale, was the one aspect of strategic bombing that was occasionally in contention in the press. For example, an article that appeared in *The New York Times* stated that "Germany can be defeated on the actual battle field, although morale in that country actually has been strengthened during the last six months."[14] The writer had been recently released from a German prison, and he concluded that the air raids and the defeats in the Eastern Front had actually strengthened the Germans' will to resist rather than the desire to give up. These reports indicated that the main objective of strategic bombing—to lower German morale—had not been achieved, but these reports did not result in a heightened public reaction against strategic bombing. In the course of this study, letters to the editor were also searched for evidence of public opposition to strategic bombing and that evidence was rarely found. Moreover, in spite of the articles that questioned the success of the strategy in affecting German morale, the absence of follow-up articles also hint at a lack of aggression in the press in addressing the issue.

These same passive tendencies in the press influenced the coverage of the Allied plan for the air attack on the German city of Dresden. Jörg Friedrich, German broadcaster and historian, contends that the Allies had wished to deliver a horrible blow that would have

[14] Taylor Henry, "Writer Doubts Nazi Collapse," *New York Times*, February 25, 1944.

catastrophic consequences in terms of deaths—a "thunderclap."[15] According to British historian Sebastian Cox, in a memorandum submitted by Sir Charles Portal British Chief of the Air Staff, this was the name of a proposed plan for an attack against Berlin or an alternative target, where "immense devastation could be produced if the entire attack could be concentrated in a town other than Berlin."[16] Cox also argued that the motivation of the High Command in attacking cities like Dresden at such a late time of the war originated from a sense of pessimism among the leaders because the war had not yet come to an end and the bombings so far had done little to force the Germans to capitulate. General Henry Arnold, the Commander in Chief of the United States of America Armed Forces (USAAF), had confirmed that any increase in tonnage or explosive capacity would be accepted as long as it hit where it hurt.[17] The author also concluded that attitudes among the leadership had hardened because of the length of the war. "Thunderclap," the idea of a single devastating blow was not mentioned in the press. The press was never given details of upcoming attacks as these details were classified. The articles reviewed for this study spanned the last year of the war and they did not reflect the overt pessimism among military leaders that Cox has suggested. If the leaders and High Command were pessimistic about the course of the war, they did not allow the press or the public know.

In the absence of aggressive reporting and with little opposition from the American public, the military operation "Thunderclap" went on

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[15] Freidrich, *The Fire*, 310.
[16] Sebastian Cox, "The Dresden Raids: Why and How," in *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, eds. Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang, (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 2006), 18.
[17] Biddle, "Wartime Reactions," 99.

as planned. Dresden was founded at the beginning of the thirteenth century and was a prime example of Baroque architecture and a center for major art and music development and expression. In February 1945, the "Florence of the Elbe" became a major target of allied strategic bombing and the old center of the city, with all its precious buildings and art, was destroyed. The bombing and the resulting fires ended in a death toll of between thirty and forty thousand.[18] Even though the bombing of Dresden so late in the war has been a major cause for debate, in February 1945 the bombing of Dresden was simply one more attack.

The initial reports describing the bombing over Dresden followed the same outline as most articles about previous bombings in Hamburg and other cities. In an article published in *The Times* on February 15, 1945, readers were informed that the forces had "struck one of their most powerful blows at Dresden, now a vital center for controlling the German defense against Marshal Konev's armies advancing from the east."[19] The Russian armies under Konev's command had been forcing the German army to retreat from the Eastern Front and closer to Germany by the time the bombing of Dresden took place. The article was rather superficial about the bombing's effects on the city but also suggested a relationship between the bombing and Marshal Konev's offensive. It gave the impression that Dresden was vital in aiding the Russian offensive. The article also gave exhaustive accounts of how many incendiaries and bombs had been dropped over Dresden and it provided justifications for the attack. These justifications included the idea that Dresden was a communication center for the German

[18] Cox, "The Dresden Raids: Why and How," 51.
[19] "Smashing Blows at Dresden," *The London Times*, February 15, 1945.

Command, that it had a railway system vital for the Germans, and that it was a great industrial town.

In addition, an article in *The New York Times* reported that 14,000 thousand tons of explosives and incendiaries had been dropped over Dresden and that between 12,000 and 13,000 allied aircraft had taken part in the operation.[20] Another article included Germans reports of over 70,000 deaths in Dresden and that the city was cut off from the rest of Germany.[21] Among the few articles that described the bombing of Dresden in some detail, this was the only one that provided any information regarding possible casualties. Yet by mentioning that the information came from German-controlled sources, it could have placed doubt on its veracity, as Goebbels' propaganda was notorious for exaggerating. Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda during the Third Reich, controlled the German press, radio, literature, and art.[22] The press under Goebbels' control had often exaggerated German victories and had downplayed the importance of those of the Allied forces. It is unlikely that Americans would have placed great trust on any information provided by the German press.

Even though initial reports regarding the bombing of Dresden followed the same trend as those preceding them, the remarks made by military officials created some controversy. According to Davis Biddle, British Air Commodore Grierson made some comments to the press that some reporters interpreted as a change in policy regarding the bombing

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[20] "14,000 tons on Germany," *New York Times*, February 16, 1945.
[21] "Dresden Dead Put at 70,000," *New York Times*, February 17, 1945.
[22] Hans Fritzche, "Dr. Goebbels und sein Ministerium," in Hans Heinz Mantau-Sadlia, *Deutsche Führer Deutsches Schicksal. Das Buch der Künder und Führer des dritten Reiches* (Munich: Verlag Max Steinebach, 1934), 330-342.

of cities.[23] As discussed previously, the public stance of the American military had been that the bombing of the cities was primarily conducted with the intention of crippling the enemy's industrial capability and resupply in addition to breaking German morale. Grierson's comments and the fact that it was well-known at the time that Dresden was a center for refugees, women, children, and the elderly made it difficult for reporters to accept that the military objectives were so important that the bombing could not have been avoided. Howard Cowan, a reporter for *Associated Press*, wrote an article in the *Washington Star* denouncing the Allied strategy as "terror bombing."[24] The article resulted in heated editorials defending the military position and also forced the Allied Bomber Command to release statements reiterating the policy of bombing communication and industrial centers.[25] Again, in spite of the controversy, little evidence of public opposition to the bombing through letters to the editor or news of demonstrations, etc. could be found. Certainly, if there had been any public opposition, the press would have reported it. In addition, there is no evidence that Cowan's editorial was published in any other major newspapers. The fact that the editorial was either downplayed or ignored by major newspapers such as *The New York Times* could have played a role in maintaining public opposition to a minimum.

This trend towards silence on the part of the American public and the somewhat lenient press coverage came to an end after Germany capitulated. This may seem contradictory, but it is explained by the fact that Germany became more open to reporters. The press was allowed to

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[23] Biddle, "Wartime Reactions," 106.
[24] Howard Cowan, "Terror Bombing Gets Allied Approval as Step to Speed Victory," *Washington Star*, February 18, 1945.
[25] Biddle, "Wartime Reactions," 109.

enter occupied Germany more freely, the destruction could now be seen first-hand, and the results of the strategic bombing that had been hailed so earnestly could now be inspected. Articles released by the press between May and August of 1945 questioned or flatly refuted the accomplishments of the bombing strategy. For example, one article in *The New York Times* stated that Allied bombing had not destroyed the war potential of Germany.[26] The article ended by adding, "the principal lesson gained from a ground inspection of our primary targets is that the German powers of recuperation and resourcefulness are almost beyond belief."[27] There were some who found it difficult to believe that the Germans were capable to recover after such devastating attacks encouraging a sense of complacency among the Americans. Any press coverage that implied that strategic bombing by American and British forces did not have the desired result would not have made a great impact. Since the evidence could only be examined first-hand after the capitulation of Germany, it was then that trends among the press began to change, although they did not change completely.

As reports such as the one above were being printed after the capitulation of Germany, the military was conducting strategic bombing assignments in Japan. The type of reporting that had been so helpful in keeping public reaction somewhat minimized did not disappear. On May 30, 1945, an article in *The New York Times* presented the bombing of Tokyo in the same light as the bombings in Hamburg and Dresden. The article stated that the city had been destroyed and burned and that Japanese industry had been damaged.[28] However, an inclination to report

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[26] L.S.B. Shapiro, "Allied Bombing Did Not Wreck Reich's Power," *New York Times*, June 13, 1945.
[27] Shapiro, "Allied Bombing Did Not Wreck Reich's Power," June 13, 1945.
[28] "Strategic Bombing of Japan," *New York Times*, May 30, 1945.

more candidly could be seen. Therefore, it was during this period that American opposition to allied air strategy became more tangible.

In addition to questioning the effectiveness of the bombing, and in spite of some of the same type of dry reporting still being conducted, evidence of more vocal protests from the American public can be found after Germany's capitulation. Since the effects of the bombing on German cities was becoming better understood by the public and more widely presented by the press, people started to demonstrate opposition to strategic bombing. In an article found in *Time Magazine* it was reported that religious groups were protesting against strategic bombing. In this article, two groups of churchmen had expressed opposition by stating that nobody in the military had given the American public any proof that "unrestricted bombing" was a military necessity. They further criticized the bombing of Japanese cities and the "large scale massacre of defenseless women and children." Religious groups were usually at the forefront of public opposition to perceived abuses of power or actions that resulted in the deaths of innocents. It is somewhat predictable that religious groups would have become very vocal about strategic bombing once more information became available. General opposition became much greater after the atomic bombs were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[29]

It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons for the lack of aggression in the American press during World War II. The government applied censorship of the information that was provided to the press, while maintaining a semblance of cooperation. President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8381 in May 1940 and cited a law passed in 1938 that forbade unauthorized photographs, sketches, and other information, and

[29] "Religion: What is Military Necessity?" *Time Magazine*, July 2, 1945.

it also gave the President the authority to define which types of military information needed security protection. Herbert Hoover helped establish the Office of Censorship in 1942, making Byron Price its leader. This office maintained an atmosphere of cooperation with the press and Price, according to historian Robert J. Hanyok, attempted to kepe it separate from the Office of War Information and its "pseudo-propaganda."[30]

The propaganda presented by the American Office of War Information was successful in presenting the Third Reich as an evil regime and also portrayed American soldiers as making a great sacrifice for freedom. The American military and the government were concerned enough about American sensibilities to tread carefully around the issues of bombing German cities, not only through the establishment of the Office of War Information and censorship policies, but also by the establishment of a civilian committee to study the effects and effectiveness of the bombing policy.[31] While there was apparent cooperation and concern by the government, to question the motivations and effectiveness of strategic bombing and to sympathize with German civilians would have been construed as unpatriotic. Even today, investigative reporting that presents the American military in a negative light is sometimes criticized. However, the Vietnam War and events such as Watergate has made the public more receptive to aggressive investigative reporting. In addition, newspapers, radio, and television stations are profit-seeking businesses. Investigative reporting sells newspapers and magazines and it is a profitable endeavor. The acceptance of this type of reporting, especially if it was deemed to be

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[30] Robert J. Hanyok, "Literary Review of *Secrets of Victory: The Office of Censorship and the American Press and Radio in World War II*," published at the library page of the CIA website, www.cia.gov/library.

[31] "Bombing Study Mapped," *New York Times*, October 28, 1944.

unpatriotic, was simply not as popular during the Second World War as it had become after the Vietnam War when there was widespread opposition not only to strategic bombing but to the entire war. Therefore, it is possible that investigative reporting during World War II would not have provided the desired profit.

Evidence has been provided regarding the often factual and dry press reports of the Allied bombings over Germany. The reports lacked the investigative nature of reports that Americans are used to seeing today. In spite of contradictions and the occasional report of civilian loss of life, the actual targeting of civilians and the cost and efficiency of the bombings were not often questioned. Following a few cases when the loss of civilian life was reported and the bombings were questioned, these reports failed to increase public opposition to the bombings. After the bombing of Dresden, Cowan's article caused some debate and controversy and caused great concern within military and governmental circles. The press became more aggressive and questioned the results and effectiveness of the bombing in Europe after the capitulation of Germany, most likely influencing public views. Public response in opposition to strategic bombing became more prominent and vocal.

The policy of strategic bombing conducted by the Allies during World War II is still highly debated not only in terms of its shortcomings and effectiveness but also on ethical and moral grounds. The bombing of Dresden has become a symbol of this debate because the justifications provided for the attack on the city have been questioned and because of the high number of refugees in the city in February of 1945. However, the relationships between the press and the government, and the press and the public were complex during the war and continue to be so in recent times. The balance between freedom of the press, the rights of the

public to be informed, and the needs of the military in times of war will certainly continue to be a complicated issue.

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