

**From Foe to Victim**  
**The British Face the Bombing of German Cities during the Second World War**

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**Abstract**

During the Second World War, the Bomber Command of the RAF employed an area bombing strategy over cities in Germany in order to hit its inhabitants and demoralize them. These air attacks between 1942 and 1945 claimed the lives of between 500,000 to 600,000 Germans, left about 7,500,000 homeless, and destroyed dozens of cities. This study unveils the various positions taken by the British public with regard to the area bombing and examines the reasons for these diverse views in the thirty years following the war. It traces the processes and events that invoked a gradual change in their positions regarding Bomber Command – from outright glorification during the war to its exclusion from public discourse at the end of the war, and, ultimately to the ethical condemnation of its operations. By quoting extensively from primary sources, the study demonstrates how this change in attitudes gained expression from the 1940s until the mid-1970s in various circles – among the British who served in British Occupation Zone in Germany (1945–1949), in parliament debates, in media coverage of Bomber Command’s operations, and in British historical research.

Several key figures supported the area bombing policy between 1942 and 1944 – the Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Arthur Harris, and Chief of the Air Staff Charles Portal – all of whom hoped that air warfare would prevent the recurrence of carnage that characterized the First World War. They believed that the bombings would break the morale of Germany’s citizens and that by undermining the workers and civil morale, the German war machine would become paralyzed and German society would collapse, rendering it unable or unwilling to continue fighting. However, the bombing of cities also largely resulted from Britain’s sense of frustration about its inability to retaliate in Europe in the early years of the war and from its desire to take revenge on Germany for the destruction and suffering it sowed during these years. Harris, the key figure identified with the area bombing,

gained Portal's support in adopting this strategy exclusively until April 1944, when the Command was technologically capable of making precise strikes on German strategic targets, such as oil resources. Churchill continued to support Harris until the bombing of Dresden in February 1945, three months before the end of the war in Europe.

The soldiers of Bomber Command received constant exposure in the press, on the radio, and in daily newsreels at the cinema, prompted by Britain's leadership and Ministry of Information. The bombers earned a respected and prestigious status among the British public for the duration of the war, or at least until the bombing of Dresden. They were portrayed as an elite unit that spearheaded the battle against the Germans on their soil and could strike the enemy precisely, directly, and painfully to bring about an expedient victory for the Allies. Although the British had a long tradition of liberal discourse, with freedom to express minority views and criticize the government, during the war only a handful of intellectuals dared to come out publicly against the area bombings and point out that, contrary to international treaties and humanitarian law, they indiscriminately struck noncombatant civilians.

The main arguments of those who opposed bombings rested on ethical grounds and are presented in this study primarily through the writings and speeches of the British pacifist author Vera Brittain and Bishop of Chichester George Bell. Both supported Britain's decision to join the war against Germany but claimed that their homeland was fighting not only for its physical existence but also for the democratic and liberal values it represents, and that these should be expressed in the way it chose to fight. They rejected revenge as a motive for military actions and maintained that intentional killing of civilians as a tool for winning the war was fundamentally unacceptable, even if the war itself was justified. They both stated that in wartime one must think about the impending days of peace and called for avoiding a deathly blow to the enemy that would make it very hard to bridge over the rifts of hatred and lack of trust between the fighting countries. The few who spoke out against the bombings during the war were mocked by their countrymen, perceived as unpatriotic, and in extreme cases even accused of treason.

Immediately after the war, for fear of being accused of crimes against humanity, the British government excluded Arthur Harris and the activities of Bomber Command

from public discourse and from the British victorious narrative. The Bomber Command operations disappeared almost completely from the media, and in the few references made to them they were presented as precision attacks that struck only military and strategic targets, but not civilians. The study shows how this campaign gradually changed the way in which the Command had become rooted in the collective memory.

At the same time, British soldiers and civilians who had served in the area of the British Occupation Zone, or who had visited it, were exposed at the end of the war to the extensive physical and human destruction caused by the area bombing. Moreover, they had to restore the ruined cities that were hit and re-educate the German people. Alongside the exposure to the scope of damage caused to the Germans, who not long ago had been perceived as a faceless and demonic enemy, the close relations and cooperation led the British in the occupation zone to gradually change their attitudes. They engaged in an internal discourse regarding the damaging ramifications for the civilian population and the appropriate treatment of its victims. This study draws the reader's attention to the fact that the first fissures in British support of the area bombing, after the fact, began to appear among those who first understood the harsh humanitarian implications; only after more than a decade did recognition of the bombing's unethical ramifications surface in Britain itself. In the years of occupation, the beginnings of a humanitarian discourse met a nationalistic criticism in Britain, still influenced by the systematic demonization of the Germans at wartime.

The study attributes the change in British discourse regarding the area bombing, not only to the exposure to their results, but also to changes in international politics and in international discourse after the war. This change was expressed especially in the British Parliament's debates. For the better part of the war, members of Parliament who dissented vehemently to the undiscerning strike on the German civilian population faced scorn and contempt by their colleagues, and their loyalty to the homeland was questioned. After the harsh bombing of Dresden, which was perceived by many to have been excessive at this advanced stage of the war, the parliamentary dialogue began to change, and more doubts were raised as to the efficacy, necessity, and even ethical nature of the area bombings. Already in the early 1940s, speeches delivered in the House of Commons voiced claims very similar to those of Bell, Brittain, and their few proponents; this trend became stronger at the end of the war.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when hundreds of thousands of civilians in Korea and Vietnam were subject to incessant area bombing by the American Air Force for prolonged periods of time, the comparison between the bombings in the wars in southeast Asia and those perpetrated by the British in the Second World War was inevitable. Among the members of the British Parliament there was a uniform opinion regarding the way in which the Vietnam war was conducted; their critical views on this subject led more and more members of Parliament, from both the Conservative and Labour parties, to condemn *ex post facto* their own country's use of area bombings in the Second World War. As time passed, many more members of Parliament referred to the activities of Bomber Command as war crimes. A similar change was evident in the media coverage.

The study also indicates that condemnation of the bombings spread among the British public from the 1960s on, following different publications (reports of bombing survey units, official histories, and academic studies) that received wide exposure in the media, determining that the Bomber Command warfare was a costly failure. They claimed that the strategic bombing offensive did not achieve most of the goals it had set for itself and did not justify its use of large resources: since the morale of Germany's inhabitants was not broken, and they did not rise up against Hitler's regime, the bombings indeed did not expedite the dictator's surrender. These publications also brought to the public's attention, for the first time, the real extent of the destruction caused to the German inhabitants and their cities. Understanding the operational failure and the scope of the destruction, reinforced – for both historians and the public at large – the position that the failure was also an ethical one and that this policy was contrary to the basic values of the British people.