

## Firebombing and Atom Bombing:

# An Historical Perspective on Indiscriminate Bombing

By Yuki Tanaka | May 17, 2005

*Editor's note: The morality, legality, and strategic effectiveness of aerial bombing of civilians during wartime has been a recurring debate since its inception during World War I. Yuki Tanaka's policy report places some of the contemporary debates over military strategy in historical context, and focuses on asking why this method of mass killing of civilians still has such legitimacy.*

The firebombing of Tokyo, or for that matter the bombing of any city, whether it be Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Dresden, or London, cannot be fully comprehended unless it is examined in the context of the history of indiscriminate bombing throughout the twentieth century.

### The Origins of Indiscriminate Bombing of Civilians

Indiscriminate bombing of civilians during major warfare was first conducted by both the German and the Allied forces during World War I. Initially both sides refrained from targeting civilians or residential areas, but due to the rudimentary nature of their aircraft and aerial bombing techniques, bombs inevitably went astray, killing civilians in their wake. For example, in August 1914, a German plane dropped five bombs in an attempt to destroy a railway station in Paris, taking the life of a woman in a street nearby. By the end of the war about 500 Parisians had been killed by German aerial bombing. In December 1914, the French army bombed the railway station of Freiburg, but the bombs missed their target and many civilians were killed.

From early 1915, "revenge bombing" by both sides gradually escalated. Between 1915 and 1918, the Germans dropped 300 tons of bombs on London and other English coastal towns, killing more than 1,400 people and injuring about 3,400, most of whom were civilians. In the final year of the war alone various cities in western Germany were bombed 657 times by the Allied forces, who dropped a total of 8,000 bombs, which killed approximately 1,200 people. From May 1917, the Germans started to use a number of new large twin-engine bombers, called Gotha GIVs, to attack England. These were capable of carrying up to 500kg of bombs. The RAF also started producing a similar type of bomber plane called a Handley-Page in order to reach inland German cities. If the war had continued, the number of civilian victims would have increased dramatically.

### World War I: A Watershed

World War I was a watershed in both the increased quantity and technological improvement of warplanes. For

example, by November 1918 the British forces possessed almost 23,000 planes, having entered the war with only 110. A total of about 100,000 warplanes were produced in France and England during the war. Most importantly, it was at this time that the idea of "strategic bombing" was conceived and to a certain extent put into practice. Militarists on both sides argued that the "moral effect" of aerial bombing on civilians, i.e., popular fear, disillusion, and demoralization leading to lost working hours, lowered production, and perhaps political upheaval, would force the enemy nation to surrender quickly. In fact, this theory, which has remained robust in air power circles ever since, was simply a myth that has never been proven. The leading proponent of this theory was an Italian officer, strategist Giulio Douhet, author of *Command of the Air* published in 1921, who claimed that the quickest way to win a war was to terrorize enemy civilians with intensive aerial bombing, combining three different types of bombs, i.e. explosives, incendiaries, and poison gas.

In fact, some British generals had entertained similar ideas during the war, although those ideas were never been systematically analyzed. Toward the end of World War I, in April 1918, the British government established the Royal Air Force, historically the first independent air force in the world. Combining its Naval Air Service and Army Flying Corps, officers conducting the move sought to strengthen the British airborne and bombing capability at a time when London had come under repeated attacks by German airships and bombers. The main task of RAF strategic bombing was to strike military targets as well as densely populated industrial centers in Germany and occupied areas. The bombing of industrial centers aimed not only to destroy military arsenals, but also to break the morale of German workers. For example, Lord Tiverton, a staff officer of the RAF, advocated the use of any method

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to demoralize German workers, including dropping plane-loads of Colorado beetles on farmland in order to devastate potato crops. General Hugh Trenchard, who led the Independent Force (the British bomber force), claimed that the “moral effect of bombing stands undoubtedly to the material effect in proportion of 20 to 1, and therefore it was necessary to create the greatest moral effect possible.” After the war, General Trenchard and other leaders of the RAF claimed that British bombing had made a great contribution to ending the war by demoralizing German civilians. None of the post-war surveys conducted by the British, French, and the U.S. forces respectively, however, found evidence to support Trenchard’s claim.

Although Britain won World War I, the war consumed enormous funds and resources, leaving the management of the colonies in disarray. The British Empire faced a serious crisis immediately after the war, encountering popular revolts and violent political demonstrations throughout the colonies and mandated territories. British air power was immediately utilized to suppress such revolts and demonstrations in the territories. For example, in 1920, an air squadron was sent to Somaliland to suppress a revolt by the local militia. The bombing destroyed not only the fortress of the militiamen, but also private dwellings near by.

### Britain, Bombing, and Iraq

Yet it was in Iraq that Britain employed its air force for the purpose of suppressing local revolts most widely and for the longest period. Full-scale bombing in Iraq by eight RAF squadrons began in October 1922 and continued until 1932, the year that the British mandatory rule of Iraq officially ceased. Various types of bombs—including delayed and incendiary bombs—were dropped in attacks on villages where militia were believed to be hiding, and in some cases petrol was sprayed over civilian houses in order to intensify the fires ignited by the bombing. Tents and other types of Bedouin dwellings and even their cattle became targets, resulting in the death and injury of many women and children. British Forces justified this indiscriminate bombing by claiming that their operations “proved outstandingly effective, extremely economical and undoubtedly humane in the long run” as they could swiftly put down revolts and riots. One of these RAF squadron leaders in Iraq was Arthur Harris, who later headed the RAF Bomber Command during World War II. Based on their experience in Iraq, the RAF leaders concluded that the best way to defeat the enemy was to conduct “strategic bombing” on civilian dwellings, in particular those of industrial workers.

### World War II

As in the case of 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 a series of inaccurately targeted bombings. 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 assumed the position of commander of the RAF Bomber Command. Lubeck, a cultural city with no military importance, became the first target of Harris’ new strategy called “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.

In response, the RAF began to target Berlin, bombing the city sixteen times between November 1943 and March 1944, while continuing to bomb other German cities. Still Harris’ 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—against England. 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 14-hour-long raid, massive quantities of incendiaries burnt large areas of this city, that housed no military facility, and

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killed many civilians. The estimated victim toll varies between 70,000 and 135,000, the majority being women, children, and old people.

## U.S. Bombing Campaigns in World War II

The USAAF, led by Ira Eaker, joined the bombing campaign in Europe from August 1942. Despite repeated RAF requests to join it in low-altitude night bombing, the USAAF adhered to its traditional strategy, i.e., the so-called “precision bombing” in daylight from a high altitude, using the Norden bombsight. However, in reality “precision bombing” was simply an official euphemism as the bombs regularly fell at least one quarter of a 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 as a result of “precision bombing.” From November 1943, the U.S. bombers started conducting “blind bombing,” by using newly invented radar called an H2X. However, given technical limitations, the bombing became more random and indiscriminate. Eaker shared the same optimism with Arthur Harris that the British and the U.S. cooperative bombing campaign was destroying German morale. Dissatisfied with the results of “precision bombing” by the 8th U.S. Bomber Command in Britain, however, General Henry Arnold, the commander of the USAAF, reorganized the USAAF in Europe and set up the “United States Strategic Air Forces” in December 1943. Eaker was demoted and Carl Spaatz became the head of USSF.

We observe the steady progress of U.S. strategy from “precision bombing” to “strategic bombing” (indiscriminate bombing throughout the years 1943 to 1945). 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% of them in “blind bombing.” Only 674 tons were used for “precision bombing” in the strict sense. The percentage of “blind bombing” increased to 80% of the entire U.S. bombing campaign in Europe between October 1944 and the end of the war in Europe in May 1945. In February 1945, together with the RAF the U.S. forces conducted “Operation Clarion,” whereby numerous German towns and villages were bombed from a low altitude in order to demoralize the enemy nation. It was an operation totally devoid of tactical value. In short, U.S. bombing activities in Europe became no different from “area bombing.” The fact that the USAAF leaders abandoned “precision bombing” in reality but maintained it simply as an official principle is

evident in the new counter plan against V-1 and V-2 rockets advocated by General Arnold. That was to fly 500 unmanned, radar-controlled, fully bomb-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” conducted primarily by the British with support from U.S. forces.

## Bombing in the Pacific War

It was against this background that the USAAF began the bombing campaign of Japan from late 1944. According to 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” that was originally advocated by the 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, would continue to insist that their bombs were directed toward strategic 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 would have 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.

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 with more than 200 air raids over three years from the end of 1938, bringing the total death toll up to 12,000. Here,

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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)discriminate Bombing of Civilians and Contemporary Warfare

From this brief history of indiscriminate bombing, we can understand that the phrase “discriminate bombing (against civilians)” rather than “indiscriminate bombing” is in fact more appropriate as 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. The real question, then, is “Is there any moral justification in killing tens of thousands of non-combatants in the guise that it will force a swift surrender?”

In assessing specific cases of indiscriminate bombing, we must remember the history of the justification of mass killing of civilians and a praxis that we have dated from World War I. We have shown that in the course of World War II, at different times and for particular strategic reasons, the British, the Germans, the Japanese, and the Americans all engaged in strategic bombing with heavy tolls in civilian lives following a logic that it would demoralize the enemy and speed up surrender. We must be careful not to get bogged down in an argument such as whether or not the firebombing of Tokyo was strategically justifiable, and whether or not the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were strategically justifiable. The fundamental question is why this theory justifying mass killing has persisted for so long even after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is important to ask why the strategy was

applied during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and why variants of it are still used to some extent to justify the “collateral damage” of “precision bombing” in wars such as those in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Iraq. At the same time ways should be explored to increase understanding of the fact 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. Finally, it is important to remember that no war has ever been brought to an end simply by indiscriminate bombing and mass killing of civilians. Indeed, there is abundant evidence that such strategies typically strengthened resistance.

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British National Archives Documents: Air 20/ 1027, Air 5/1287. Air 5/344, Air 5/338

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Risk-transfer Militarism and the Legitimacy of War after Iraq, By Martin Shaw (June 2004)  
<http://www.presentdanger.org/papers/0406militarism.html>

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