

Death From the Sky: Hiroshima and Normalised Atrocities

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When US President Harry S. Truman made the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, followed by another on Nagasaki a few days later, he was not acting as an agent untethered from history. In the wheels of his wearied mind lay the battered Marines who, despite being victorious, had received sanguinary lashings at Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

A fear grew, and US military sources speculated about, the slaughter that might follow an invasion of the Japanese homeland. They also pondered the future role of the Soviets, and wondered whether there were other means by which Japan's involvement in the war might be terminated before Moscow got its hands on the battered remains of North East Asia.

Much is made about the moral dilemma Truman faced. He knew there was the nastiest of weapons at hand, born from the race to acquire it from Nazi Germany. But on a certain level, it was merely another weapon, one to use, a choice sample in the cabinet of lethal means and measures. By that stage of the war, killing civilians from the air, not to mention land, was banal and common place; enemy populations were to be experimented upon, burned, torched, gassed, shelled and eradicated in the program of total war.



By the time Truman made his decision, Japan had become a graveyard of strategic aerial bombing. General Curtis E. LeMay (image on the right) of the US Air Force prided himself on incinerating the enemy, [and was encouraged](#) by various study commissions advocating the use of incendiary bombs against Japan's flammable urban architecture. He was realising the dreams of such figures as the pioneering US aviator and air power enthusiast Billy Mitchell, who fantasised in the 1920s about Japanese cities being "the greatest aerial targets the world has ever seen". In 1941, US Army chief of staff George Marshall [spread the word](#) to journalists that the US would "set the paper cities of Japan on fire". Civilians would not be

spared.

Towards the end of the war, daylight precision bombing had fallen out of favour; LeMay preferred the use of Boeing B-29 Superfortresses, heavily laden with firebombs, to do the work. His pride of joy in conflagration was Tokyo. During the six-hour raid over the night of March 9 and 10, 1945, the US Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that 87,793 had perished, with 40,918 injuries.

There was little novel in LeMay's blunt approach. Britain's Air Force Marshal Arthur "Bomber" Harris fertilised the ground, and the air, for such an idea. He made it his mission to not only kill Germans but kill German civilians with a cool determination. He did so with a workmanlike conviction so disturbing it chilled the blood of many Britons. As he put it, "The cities of Germany, including their working populations, are literally the heart of Germany's war potential." It was his intention to, [he explained](#) to personnel, "in addition to the horrors of fire ... to bring masonry crashing down on top of the Boche, to kill the Boche and to terrify the Boche". The Teutonic enemy came, not so much in all shades, but one. Saturation bombing, regarded after the Second World War as generally ineffective, a ghastly failure to bring the population to its knees, received its blessing in Bomber Command.

This entire process neutered the moral compass of its executioners. Killing civilians had ceased to be a problem of war, one of those afterthoughts which served to sanction mass murder. Britain's chief of the air staff for a good deal of the war, Charles Portal, [called it](#) a "fallacy" that bombing Germany's cities "was really intended to kill and frighten Germans and that we camouflaged this intention by the pretence that we would destroy industry. Any such idea is completely false. The loss of life, which amounted to some 600,000 killed, was purely incidental." When 600,000 becomes an incidental matter, we are well on the way to celebrating the charnel houses of indiscriminate war.

When the issue of saturation bombing creased the legal minds behind the Nuremberg and Tokyo war crimes trials, an admission had to be made: all sides of the Second World War had made the air a realm of convenience in the killing of humanity, uniformed or not. To win was all that mattered. While the Nuremberg Charter left it open to criminalise German aerial tactics, the International Military Tribunal hedged. As chief of the Luftwaffe, Hermann Göring was singled out for air attacks on Poland and other states but the prosecutors refrained from pushing the point, likely reflecting the cold fact, as Matthew Lippmann [puts it](#), "that both Germany and the Allies engaged in similar tactics."

It is true that Germany and Japan gave a good pioneering go at indiscriminate aerial slaughter. But the Allied powers, marshalling never before seen fleets of murderous bombers, perfected the bloody harvest. The war had to be won, and, if needed, over the corpses of the hapless mother, defenceless child and frail grandparent. As the historian Charles S. Maier [notes](#) with characteristic sharpness, a tacit consensus prevailed after the Second World War that the ledger of brutality was all stacked on one side. German bombings during the Spanish Civil War, notably of Guernica; Warsaw, Rotterdam, London and Coventry during the world war that followed, were seen as "acts of wanton terror". The Allied attacks on Italian, German and Japanese urban centres, in proportion and scale far more destructive, were seen as "legitimate military actions".

Distinctions about civilian and non-civilian vanished in the atomic cloud. Hiroshima's tale is the apotheosis of eliminating distinctions in war. It propagated such dangerous beliefs that

nuclear wars might be won, sparing a handful of specialists and breeders in bunkers planning for the new post-apocalyptic dawn. It normalised, even as it constituted a warning, the act of annihilation itself.

Prior to the twin incinerations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the redoubtable nurse and writer Vera Brittain [issued a warning](#) that remains salient to those who wish to resort to waging death from the sky: "If the nations cannot agree, when peace returns, to refrain from the use of the bombing aeroplane as they have refrained from using poison gas, then mankind itself deserves to perish from the epidemic of moral insanity which today afflicts our civilisation."

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