

The Myth of the Good War: America in World War II. The Bombing of Dresden

76 Years Ago, February 13-14, 1945: Why was Dresden Destroyed

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In the night of February 13-14, 1945, the ancient and beautiful capital of Saxony, Dresden, was attacked three times, twice by the RAF and once by the USAAF, the United States Army Air Force, in an operation involving well over 1,000 bombers. The consequences were catastrophic, as the historical city centre was incinerated and between 25,000 and 40,000 people lost their lives.[1]

Dresden was not an important industrial or military centre and therefore not a target worthy of the considerable and unusual common American and British effort involved in the raid. The city was not attacked as retribution for earlier German bombing raids on cities such as Rotterdam and Coventry, either. In revenge for the destruction of these cities, bombed ruthlessly by the Luftwaffe in 1940, Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne and countless other German towns big and small had already paid dearly in 1942, 1943, and 1944.

Furthermore, by the beginning of 1945, the Allied commanders knew perfectly well that even the most ferocious bombing raid would not succeed in “terrorizing [the Germans] into submission,”[2] so that it is not realistic to ascribe this motive to the planners of the operation. The bombing of Dresden, then, seems to have been a senseless slaughter, and looms as an even more terrible undertaking than the atomic obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which is at least supposed to have led to the capitulation of Japan.

In recent times, however, the bombing of countries and of cities has almost become an everyday occurrence, rationalized not only by our political leaders but also presented by our media as an effective military undertaking and as a perfectly legitimate means to achieve supposedly worthwhile objectives. In this context, even the terrible attack on Dresden has recently been rehabilitated by a British historian, Frederick Taylor, who argues that the huge destruction wreaked on the Saxon city was not intended by the planners of the attack, but was the unexpected result of a combination of unfortunate circumstances, including perfect weather conditions and hopelessly inadequate German air defenses.[3]

However, Taylor’s claim is contradicted by a fact that he himself refers to in his book, namely, that approximately 40 American “heavies” strayed from the flight path and ended up dropping their bombs on Prague instead of Dresden.[4] If everything had gone according to plan, the destruction in Dresden would surely have been even bigger than it already was. It is thus obvious that an unusually high degree of destruction had been intended. More serious is Taylor’s insistence that Dresden did constitute a legitimate target, since it was not

only an important military centre but also a first-rate turntable for rail traffic as well as a major industrial city, where countless factories and workshops produced all sorts of militarily important equipment.

A string of facts, however, indicate that these “legitimate” targets hardly played a role in the calculations of the planners of the raid. First, the only truly significant military installation, the Luftwaffe airfield a few kilometres to the north of the city, was not attacked. Second, the presumably crucially important railway station was not marked as a target by the British “Pathfinder” planes that guided the bombers. Instead, the crews were instructed to drop their bombs on the inner city, situated to the north of the railway station.[5] Consequently, even though the Americans did bomb the station and countless people perished in it, the facility suffered relatively little structural damage, so little, in fact, that it was again able to handle trains transporting troops within days of the operation.[6] Third, the great majority of Dresden’s militarily important industries were not located downtown but in the suburbs, where no bombs were dropped, at least not deliberately.[7]

It cannot be denied that Dresden, like any other major German city, contained militarily important industrial installations, and that at least some of these installations were located in the inner city and were therefore wiped out in the raid, but this does not logically lead to the conclusion that the attack was planned for this purpose. Hospitals and churches were also destroyed, and numerous Allied POWs who happened to be in the city were killed, but nobody argues that the raid was organized to bring that about.

Similarly, a number of Jews and members of Germany’s anti-Nazi resistance, awaiting deportation and/or execution, were able to escape from prison during the chaos caused by the bombing,[8] but no one claims that this was the objective of the raid. There is no logical reason, then, to conclude that the destruction of an unknown number of industrial installations of greater or lesser military importance was the *raison d’être* of the raid. The destruction of Dresden’s industry – like the liberation of a handful of Jews – was nothing more than an unplanned “by-product” of the operation.

It is frequently suggested, also by Taylor, that the bombing of the Saxon capital was intended to facilitate the advance of the Red Army. The Soviets themselves allegedly asked their western partners during the Yalta Conference of February 4 to 11, 1945, to weaken the German resistance on the eastern front by means of air raids. However, there is no evidence whatsoever that confirms such allegations. The possibility of Anglo-American air raids on targets in eastern Germany was indeed discussed at Yalta, but during these talks the Soviets expressed the concern that their own lines might be hit by the bombers, so they requested that the RAF and USAAF would not operate too far to the east.[9] (The Soviets’ fear of being hit by what is now called “friendly fire” was not unwarranted, as was demonstrated during the raid on Dresden itself, when a considerable number of planes mistakenly bombed Prague, situated about as far from Dresden as the Red Army lines were.) It was in this context that a Soviet general by the name of Antonov expressed a general interest in “air attacks that would impede enemy movements,” but this can hardly be interpreted as a request to mete out to the Saxon capital – which, incidentally, he did not mention at all – or to any other German city the kind of treatment that Dresden received on February 13-14.

Neither at Yalta, nor at any other occasion, did the Soviets ask their Western Allies for the kind of air support that presumably materialized in the form of the obliteration of Dresden. Moreover, they never gave their approval to the plan to bomb Dresden, as is also often

claimed.[10] In any case, even if the Soviets would have asked for such assistance from the air, it is extremely unlikely that their allies would have responded by immediately unleashing the mighty fleet of bombers that did in fact attack Dresden.

In order to understand why this is so, we have to take a close look at inter-Allied relations in early 1945. In mid- to late January, the Americans were still involved in the final convulsions of the “Battle of the Bulge,” an unexpected German counter-offensive on the western front which had caused them great difficulties. The Americans, British, and Canadians had not yet crossed the Rhine, had not even reached the western banks of that river, and were still separated from Berlin by more than 500 kilometers. On the eastern front, meanwhile, the Red Army had launched a major offensive on January 12 and advanced rapidly to within 100 kilometers of the German capital. The resulting likelihood that the Soviets would not only take Berlin, but penetrate deep into Germany’s western half before the war ended, greatly perturbed many American and British military and political leaders. Is it realistic to believe that, under those circumstances, Washington and London were eager to enable the Soviets to achieve even greater progress?

Even if Stalin had asked for Anglo-American assistance from the air, Churchill and Roosevelt might have provided some token assistance, but would never have launched the massive and unprecedented combined RAF-USAAF operation that the bombing of Dresden revealed itself to be. Moreover, attacking Dresden meant sending hundreds of big bombers more than 2,000 kilometers through enemy airspace, approaching the lines of the Red Army so closely that they would run the risk of dropping their bombs by mistake on the Soviets or being fired at by Soviet anti-aircraft artillery.

Could Churchill or Roosevelt be expected to invest such huge human and material resources and to run such risks in an operation that would make it easier for the Red Army to take Berlin and possibly reach the Rhine before they did? Absolutely not. The American-British political and military leaders were undoubtedly of the opinion that the Red Army was already advancing fast enough.

Towards the end of January 1945, Roosevelt and Churchill prepared to travel to Yalta for a meeting with Stalin. They had asked for such a meeting because they wanted to make binding agreements about postwar Germany before the end of the hostilities. In the absence of such agreements, the military realities in the field would determine who would control which parts of Germany, and it looked very much as if, by the time the Nazis would finally capitulate, the Soviets would be in control of most of Germany and thus be able to unilaterally determine that country’s political, social, and economic future. For such a unilateral course of action, Washington and London themselves had created a fateful precedent, namely when they liberated Italy in 1943 and categorically denied the Soviet Union any participation in the reconstruction of that country; they did the same thing in France and Belgium in 1944.[11] Stalin, who had followed his allies’ example when he liberated countries in Eastern Europe, obviously did not need or want such a binding inter-allied agreement with respect to Germany, and therefore such a meeting. He did accept the proposal, but insisted on meeting on Soviet soil, namely in the Crimean resort of Yalta.

Contrary to conventional beliefs about that Conference, Stalin would prove to be most accommodating there, agreeing to a formula proposed by the British and Americans and highly advantageous to them, namely, a division of postwar Germany into occupation zones, with only approximately one third of Germany’s territory – the later “East Germany” – being assigned to the Soviets. Roosevelt and Churchill could not have foreseen this happy

outcome of the Yalta Conference, from which they would return “in an exultant spirit.”[12] In the weeks leading up to the conference, they expected the Soviet leader, buoyed by the recent successes of the Red Army and enjoying a kind of home-game advantage, to be a difficult and demanding interlocutor. A way had to be found to bring him down to earth, to condition him to make concessions despite being the temporary favourite of the god of war.

It was crucially important to make it clear to Stalin that the military power of the Western Allies, in spite of recent setbacks in the Belgian Ardennes, should not be underestimated. The Red Army admittedly featured huge masses of infantry, excellent tanks, and a formidable artillery, but the Western Allies held in their hands a military trump which the Soviets were unable to match. That trump was their air force, featuring the most impressive collection of bombers the world had ever seen. This weapon made it possible for the Americans and the British to launch devastating strikes on targets that were far removed from their own lines. If Stalin could be made aware of this, would he not prove easier to deal with at Yalta?

It was Churchill who decided that the total obliteration of a German city, under the noses of the Soviets so to speak, would send the desired message to the Kremlin. The RAF and USAAF had been able for some time to strike a devastating blow against any German city, and detailed plans for such an operation, known as “Operation Thunderclap,” had been meticulously prepared. During the summer of 1944, however, when the rapid advance from Normandy made it seem likely that the war would be won before the end of the year, and thoughts were already turning to postwar reconstruction, a Thunderclap-style operation had begun to be seen as a means to intimidate the Soviets. In August 1944, an RAF memorandum pointed out that “the total devastation of the centre of a vast [German] city...would convince the Russian allies...of the effectiveness of Anglo-American air power.”[13]

For the purpose of defeating Germany, Thunderclap was no longer considered necessary by early 1945. But towards the end of January 1945, while preparing to travel to Yalta, Churchill suddenly showed great interest in this project, insisted that it be carried out tout de suite, and specifically ordered the head of the RAF Bomber Command, Arthur Harris, to wipe out a city in Germany’s east.[14] On January 25 the British Prime Minister indicated where he wanted the Germans to be “blasted,” namely, somewhere “in their [westward] retreat from Breslau [now Wroclaw in Poland].”[15] In terms of urban centres, this was tantamount to spelling D-R-E-S-D-E-N. That Churchill himself was behind the decision to bomb a city in Germany’s east is also hinted at in the autobiography of Arthur Harris, who wrote that “the attack on Dresden was at the time considered a military necessity by much more important people than myself.”[16] It is obvious that only personalities of the calibre of Churchill were able to impose their will on the czar of strategic bombing. As the British military historian Alexander McKee has written, Churchill “intended to write [a] lesson on the night sky [of Dresden]” for the benefit of the Soviets.

However, since the USAAF also ended up being involved in the bombing of Dresden, we may assume that Churchill acted with the knowledge and approval of Roosevelt. Churchill’s partners at the top of the United States’ political as well as military hierarchy, including General Marshall, shared his viewpoint; they too were fascinated, as McKee writes, by the idea of “intimidating the [Soviet] communists by terrorising the Nazis.”[17] The American participation in the Dresden raid was not really necessary, because the RAF was undoubtedly capable of wiping out Dresden in a solo performance. But the “overkill” effect

resulting from a redundant American contribution was perfectly functional for the purpose of demonstrating to the Soviets the lethality of Anglo-American air power. It is also likely that Churchill did not want the responsibility for what he knew would be a terrible slaughter to be exclusively British; it was a crime for which he needed a partner.

A Thunderclap-style operation would of course do damage to whatever military and industrial installations and communications infrastructure were housed in the targeted city, and would therefore inevitably amount to yet another blow to the already tottering German enemy. But when such an operation was finally launched, with Dresden as target, it was done far less in order to speed up the defeat of the Nazi enemy than in order to intimidate the Soviets. Using the terminology of the “functional analysis” school of American sociology, hitting the Germans as hard as possible was the “manifest function” of the operation, while intimidating the Soviets was its far more important “latent” or “hidden” function. The massive destruction wreaked in Dresden was planned – in other words, was “functional” – not for the purpose of striking a devastating blow to the German enemy, but for the purpose of demonstrating to the Soviet ally that the Anglo-Americans had a weapon which the Red Army, no matter how mighty and successful it was against the Germans, could not match, and against which it had no adequate defenses.

Many American and British generals and high-ranking officers were undoubtedly aware of the latent function of the destruction of Dresden, and approved of such an undertaking; this knowledge also reached the local commanders of the RAF and USAAF as well as the “master bombers.” (After the war, two master bombers claimed to remember that they had been told clearly that this attack was intended “to impress the Soviets with the hitting power of our Bomber Command.”)[18] But the Soviets, who had hitherto made the biggest contribution to the war against Nazi Germany, and who had thereby not only suffered the biggest losses but also scored the most spectacular successes, e.g. in Stalingrad, enjoyed much sympathy among low-ranking American and British military personnel, including bomber crews. This constituency would certainly have disapproved of any kind of plan to intimidate the Soviets, and most certainly of a plan – the obliteration of a German city from the air – which they would have to carry out. It was therefore necessary to camouflage the objective of the operation behind an official rationale. In other words, because the latent function of the raid was “unspeakable,” a “speakable” manifest function had to be concocted.

And so the regional commanders and the master bombers were instructed to formulate other, hopefully credible, objectives for the benefit of their crews. In view of this, we can understand why the instructions to the crews with respect to the objectives differed from unit to unit and were often fanciful and even contradictory. The majority of the commanders emphasized military objectives, and cited undefined “military targets,” hypothetical “vital ammunition factories” and “dumps of weapons and supplies,” Dresden’s alleged role as “fortified city,” and even the existence in the city of some “German Army Headquarters.” Vague references were also frequently made to “important industrial installations” and “marshalling yards.” In order to explain to the crews why the historical city centre was targeted and not the industrial suburbs, some commanders talked about the existence there of a “Gestapo headquarters” and of “a gigantic poison gas factory.” Some speakers were either unable to invent such imaginary targets, or were for some reason unwilling to do so; they laconically told their men that the bombs were to be dropped on “the built-up city centre of Dresden,” or “on Dresden” tout court.[19] To destroy the centre of a German city, hoping to wreak as much damage as possible to military and industrial installations and to

communication infrastructures, happened to be the essence of the Allied, or at least British, strategy of “area bombing.”[20]

The crew members had learned to accept this nasty fact of life, or rather of death, but in the case of Dresden many of them felt ill at ease. They questioned the instructions with respect to the objectives, and had the feeling that this raid involved something unusual and suspicious and was certainly not a “routine” affair, as Taylor presents things in his book. The radio operator of a B-17, for example, declared in a confidential communication that “this was the only time” that “[he] (and others) felt that the mission was unusual.” The anxiety experienced by the crews was also illustrated by the fact that in many cases a commander’s briefing did not trigger the crews’ traditional cheers but were met with icy silence.[21]

Directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, the instructions and briefings addressed to the crews sometimes revealed the true function of the attack. For example, a directive of the RAF to the crews of a number of bomber groups, issued on the day of the attack, February 13, 1945, unequivocally stated that it was the intention “to show the Russians, when they reach the city, what our Bomber Command is capable of doing.”[22] Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that many crew members understood clearly that they had to wipe Dresden from the map in order to scare the Soviets. A Canadian member of a bomber crew was to state after the war to an oral historian that he was convinced that the bombing of Dresden had aimed to make it clear to the Soviets “that they had to behave themselves, otherwise we would show them what we could also do to Russian cities.”[23]

The news of the particularly awful destruction of Dresden also caused great discomfort among British and American civilians, who shared the soldiers’ sympathy for the Soviet ally and who, upon learning the news of the raid, likewise sensed that this operation exuded something unusual and suspicious. The authorities attempted to exorcise the public’s unease by explaining the operation as an effort to facilitate the advance of the Red Army. At an RAF press conference in liberated Paris on February 16, 1945, journalists were told that the destruction of this “communications centre” situated close to “the Russian front” had been inspired by the desire to make it possible for the Russians “to continue their struggle with success.” That this was merely a rationale, concocted after the facts by what are called “spin doctors” today, was revealed by the military spokesman himself, who lamely acknowledged that he “thought” that it had “probably” been the intention to assist the Soviets.[24]

The hypothesis that the attack on Dresden was intended to intimidate the Soviets explains not only the magnitude of the operation but also the choice of the target. To the planners of Thunderclap, Berlin had always loomed as the perfect target. By early 1945, however, the German capital had already been bombed repeatedly. Could it be expected that yet another bombing raid, no matter how devastating, would have the desired effect on the Soviets when they would fight their way into the capital? Destruction wreaked within 24 hours would surely loom considerably more spectacular if a fairly big, compact, and “virginal” - i.e. not yet bombed - city were the target. Dresden, fortunate not to have been bombed thus far, was now unfortunate enough to meet all these criteria. Moreover, the British American commanders expected that the Soviets would reach the Saxon capital within days, so that they would be able to see very soon with their own eyes what the RAF and the USAAF could achieve in a single operation. Although the Red Army was to enter Dresden much later than the British and the Americans had expected, namely, on May 8, 1945, the destruction of the Saxon capital did have the desired effect. The Soviet lines were situated only a couple of

hundred of kilometers from the city, so that the men and women of the Red Army could admire the glow of the Dresden inferno on the nocturnal horizon. The firestorm was allegedly visible up to a distance of 300 kilometers.

If intimidating the Soviets is viewed as the “latent,” in other words the real function of the destruction of Dresden, then not only the magnitude but also the timing of the operation makes sense. The attack was supposed to have taken place, at least according to some historians, on February 4, 1945, but had to be postponed on account of inclement weather to the night of February 13-14.[25] The Yalta Conference started on February 4. If the Dresden fireworks had taken place on that day, it might have provided Stalin with some food for thought at a critical moment. The Soviet leader, flying high after the recent successes of the Red Army, would be brought down to earth by this feat of his allies’ air forces, and would therefore turn out to be a less confident and more agreeable interlocutor at the conference table. This expectation was clearly reflected in a comment made one week before the start of the Yalta Conference by an American general, David M. Schlatter:

I feel that our air forces are the blue chips with which we will approach the post-war treaty table, and that this operation [the planned bombing of Dresden and/or Berlin] will add immeasurably to their strength, or rather to the Russian knowledge of their strength.[26]

The plan to bomb Dresden was not cancelled, but merely postponed. The kind of demonstration of military potency that it was supposed to be retained its psychological usefulness even after the end of the Crimean conference. It continued to be expected that the Soviets would soon enter Dresden and thus be able to see firsthand what horrible destruction the Anglo-American air forces were able to cause to a city far removed from their bases in a single night. Afterwards, when the rather vague agreements made at Yalta would have to be put into practice, the “boys in the Kremlin” would surely remember what they had seen in Dresden, draw useful conclusions from their observations, and behave as Washington and London expected of them. When towards the end of the hostilities American troops had an opportunity to reach Dresden before the Soviets, Churchill vetoed this: even at that late stage, when Churchill was very eager for the Anglo-Americans to occupy as much German territory as possible, he still insisted that the Soviets be allowed to occupy Dresden, no doubt so they could benefit from the demonstration effect of the bombing.

Dresden was obliterated in order to intimidate the Soviets with a demonstration of the enormous firepower that permitted bombers of the RAF and the USAAF to unleash death and destruction hundreds of kilometers away from their bases, and the subtext was clear: this firepower could be aimed at the Soviet Union itself. This interpretation explains the many peculiarities of the bombing of Dresden, such as the magnitude of the operation, the unusual participation in one single raid of both the RAF and USAAF, the choice of a “virginal” target, the (intended) enormity of the destruction, the timing of the attack, and the fact that the supposedly crucially important railway station and the suburbs with their factories and Luftwaffe airfield were not targeted. The bombing of Dresden had little or nothing to do with the war against Nazi Germany: it was an American British message for Stalin, a message that cost the lives of tens of thousands of people. Later that same year, two more similarly coded yet not very subtle messages would follow, involving even more victims, but this time Japanese cities were targeted, and the idea was to direct Stalin’s attention to the lethality of America’s terrible new weapon, the atomic bomb.[27] Dresden had little or nothing to do with the war against Nazi Germany; it had much, if not everything, to do with a new conflict in which the enemy was to be the Soviet Union. In the horrible heat of the infernos of

Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War was born.

Notes

[1] Frederick Taylor. Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945, New York, 2004, pp. 354, 443-448; Götz Bergander, Dresden im Luftkrieg. Vorgeschichte, Zerstörung, Folgen, Weimar, 1995, chapter 12, and especially pp. 210 ff., 218-219, 229;

“Luftangriffe auf Dresden“, http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luftangriffe_auf_Dresden, p. 9.

[2] See for example the comments made by General Spaatz cited in Randall Hansen, Fire and fury: the Allied bombing of Germany, 1942-45, Toronto, 2008, p. 243.

[3] Taylor, p. 416.

[4] Taylor, pp. 321-322.

[5] Olaf Groehler. Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland, Berlin, 1990, p. 414; Hansen, p. 245; “Luftangriffe auf Dresden,” http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luftangriffe_auf_Dresden, p.7.

[6] “Luftangriffe auf Dresden,” http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luftangriffe_auf_Dresden, p. 7.

[7] Taylor, pp. 152-154, 358-359.

[8] Eckart Spoo, “Die letzte der Familie Tucholsky,” Ossietzky, No. 11/2, June 2001, pp. 367-70.

[9] Taylor, p. 190; Groehler, pp. 400-401. Citing a study about Yalta, the British author of the latest study of Allied bombing during World War II notes that the Soviets “clearly preferred to keep the RAF and the USAAF away from territory they might soon be occupying,” see C. Grayling, Among the Dead Cities: Was the Allied Bombing of Civilians in WWII a Necessity or a Crime?, London, 2006, p. 176.

[10] Alexander McKee. Dresden 1945: The Devil’s Tinderbox, London, 1982, pp. 264-265; Groehler, pp. 400-402.

[11] See e.g. Jacques R. Pauwels, The Myth of the Good War: America in the Second World War, Toronto, 2002, p. 98 ff.

[12] Ibid., p. 119.

[13] Richard Davis, “Operation Thunderclap,” Journal of Strategic Studies, 14:1, March 1991, p. 96.

[14] Taylor, pp. 185-186, 376; Grayling, p. 71; David Irving. The Destruction of Dresden, London, 1971, pp. 96-99.

[15] Hansen, p. 241.

[16] Arthur Travers Harris, Bomber offensive, Don Mills/Ont., 1990, p. 242.

[17] McKee, pp. 46, 105.

[18] Groehler, p. 404.

[19] Ibid., p. 404.

[20] The Americans preferred “precision bombing,” in theory if not always in practice.

[21] Taylor, pp. 318-19; Irving, pp. 147-48.

[22] Quotation from Groehler, p. 404. See also Grayling, p. 260.

[23] Cited in Barry Broadfoot, *Six War Years 1939-1945: Memories of Canadians at Home and Abroad*, Don Mills, Ontario, 1976, p. 269.

[24] Taylor, pp. 361, 363-365.

[25] See e.g. Hans-Günther Dahms, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg*, second edition, Frankfurt am Main, 1971, p. 187.

[26] Cited in Ronald Schaffer. “American Military Ethics in World War II: The Bombing of German Civilians,” *The Journal of Military History*, 67: 2, September 1980, p. 330.

[27] A. C. Grayling, for example, writes in his new book on Allied bombing that “it is recognized that one of the main motives for the atom-bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was to demonstrate to the Russians the superiority in weaponry that the United States had attained...In the case of Dresden something similar is regrettably true.”

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by Jacques Pauwels

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