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The Bombing of Dresden: Justified or Immoral?

On February 13th, 1945, the United States and British Air Force bombed the German city of Dresden. Between four raids over three days, 1,250 heavy bombers dropped more than 3,900 tons of highly explosive bombs and incendiary devices onto the city. The result was complete and total destruction of the city and tens of thousands of civilian casualties. The Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, along with many other officials, believed Dresden to be a center of vital movement and communication to the Nazi party. It was thought that a blow to Dresden and its surrounding factories would cripple the supplying of the German army. However, I believe that the bombing of Dresden in February of 1945 was not only immoral and uncivilized, but also inhumane and unnecessary.

I agree that an attack on Dresden had a detrimental effect on the German army. Dresden was home to several factories including the “Zeiss-Ikon optical factory and Siemens glass factory, both of which, according to the Allies, were entirely devoted to manufacturing military gunsights.” (Doc 5) The city also “contained factories building radar and electronics components, and fuses for anti-aircraft shells. Other factories produced gas masks, engines for Junkers aircraft and cockpit parts for Messerschmitt fighters.” (Doc 5) This information played a major role in Arthur Harris’ decision to create a firestorm in the city. In a memo to Winston Churchill from Sir Archibald Sinclair, he asserts, “…available effort should be directed against Berlin, Dresden, Chemnitz and Leipzig or against other cities where severe bombing would not only destroy communications vital to the evacuation from the east, but would also hamper the movement of troops from the west.” (Doc 2) Arthur Harris considered Dresden an ideal target not only for this reason, but also because the “city had not yet been attacked and was virtually undefended by anti-aircraft guns.” (Doc 1) Moreover, the Allies had acquired information that led them to judge that Dresden was essential to the Nazis: “Because of this concentration of industry…the allied planners had reason to believe that Dresden was a crucial prop in the German effort to maintain supply for the defense of Germany itself.” (Doc 5)

Although Dresden was an important point of manufacturing for the Germans, I disagree that the utter destruction of the city was vital to the idea of the bombing. Though there was no agreement, treaty, or convention in place during WWII that protected the civilian population or civilian property, taking tens of thousands of innocent civilian lives cannot and will not be justified. Speaking of the bombing, Roy Akehurst, a member of the RAF bombing crew, expressed, “It struck me at the time, the thought of the women and children down there. We seemed to fly for hours over a sheet of fire. … I found myself making comments to the crew: ‘Oh God, those poor people.’ It was completely uncalled for. You can’t justify it.” (Doc 6) When bombing Dresden, the Royal and United States Air Forces created firestorms. Firestorms are achieved by “dropping incendiary bombs, filled with highly combustible chemicals such as magnesium, phosphorus or petroleum jelly (napalm), in clusters over a specific target.” (Doc 1) After the area caught fire, air above the bombed region became extremely hot and rose rapidly. When the cold air rushed in at ground level from the outside, people were literally sucked into the fire. According to BBC, temperatures of some of the masonry within the city’s structures reached an estimated 1,000° C, describing “many victims melting in the intense heat, their bodies becoming welded to pavements.” (Doc 11) Lothar Metzger was a child in Dresden during the bombing and he wrote about his experiences during the raid: “… We did not recognize our street anymore. Fire, only fire wherever we looked. … Explosion after explosion. It was beyond belief, worse than the blackest nightmare. So many people were horribly burnt and injured. … We saw the burning street, the falling ruins and the terrible firestorm.” (Doc 7) Human beings, regardless of race, religion, or any other factors, are equal. The taking of a life is a crime for which there are severe punishments. Yet, when a city full of innocent children and families was bombed for the sake of a military advantage, it’s considered okay. Dresden was a case of mass murder for the sake of possibly challenging the German army, and I believe that all those involved committed war crime.

Many people justified the bombing of Dresden because they believed the manufacturing centers on the outskirts were to be targeted, hindering the production of goods that the German army needed for defense. However, when a map of the destruction of Dresden is examined (Doc 12) it becomes clear that the manufacturing centers were not the real target. The devastation was localized to the very center of the city whereas the factories housed on the outskirts of the city remained untouched. I feel that the bombing of Dresden was a true “terror bombing”. Considering the localized annihilation, it leads me to think that the true goal of bombing Dresden was not to cripple the German army, but to send a message that the Allies would do whatever it took to win the war. Churchill, who approved of the targeting of Dresden, distanced himself from it after the event. In a memo to General Ismay for the British Chiefs of Staff, he declares, “It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities for the sake of increasing the terror, though under pretexts, should be reviewed.” (Doc 8) He continues, “The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing.”

The bombing of Dresden was a war tactic that was taken to an extreme by the Allies. Had the Allies bombed the original intended targets and routes in and out of the city, it may have still had the desired affect without killing tens of thousands of people. Dresden is still a much-debated topic today, with arguments both on the side of justified and unjustified. I choose to side with unjustified, because I feel that the events of February 1945 were a blatant disregard of human rights. Those that were intimately involved with the bombing realized the mistake and decided that the bombing was wrong, and should have been better planned or not happened. Although I realized that the incident at Dresden had a tremendous effect on the outcome of World War II, I support that this could have been achieved through another method that did not require so many civilian casualties.