Victory at Great Cost
Winston Churchill and the Allied
Bombing of Dresden

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On Tuesday, February 13, 1945, the Allies launched the most devastating
European air attack of World War II against the city of Dresden in eastern Germany.
Throughout the night and the next day, British and American bombers dropped over
3,900 tons of explosives in 4 waves, and sporadic attacks continued until April. Due to an
influx of refugees from the Eastern Front, the population had recently soared, and the
attacks killed between 25,000 and 35,000 civilians. Dresden’s cultural significance, the
devastation of the bombing, and the perception of Dresden as a non-military city have led
historians and the general public to label the attack one of the great Allied atrocities of
the war. Winston Churchill’s complicity in the attack has been a subject of particular
interest, as have his attitudes toward the bombing of Dresden and the strategic bombing
offensive against Germany. Two seemingly contradictory memoranda to leaders of the
British Bomber Command reveal his involvement: one beforehand on January 26
sanctioning the attack,¹ and one six weeks afterward on March 28, requesting a
reevaluation of bombing policy in light of the attack on Dresden.² Just as any commander
in chief can be held responsible for all strategy decisions, Churchill was responsible for
the bombing of Dresden. While he authorized the attack as part of an ongoing strategy,
his subsequent response reflected moral sensitivity to the suffering wrought by the
bombing campaign and by his own decisions.

¹ Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-1945,
History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series, ed. Sir James Butler (London: Her

² Webster and Frankland, 3:112. Churchill shortly revised the second memorandum and released a
modified version, based on the suggestion of Chief of Air Staff Sir Charles Portal and his own
reconsideration.
Bomber Command began to consider a concentrated attack on cities in eastern Germany in January 1945 as the Russian army, which had reached the Oder River and was within 165 miles of Berlin, advanced along the Eastern Front. A Joint Intelligence Committee Report, shown to Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff on January 25, directed the British and American strategic bomber force to assist the Russian advance by adding to their list of priorities the “devastation of Berlin” and German “rail communications.” Among the goals of the suggested attacks was to amplify the confusion caused by refugees fleeing Berlin and eastern Germany to delay German reinforcements from the west. Sir Arthur Harris, who had proposed consideration of the “Central Complex” of Leipzig, Chemnitz, and Dresden as a target in 1943, suggested adding these cities to the list of targets. Amidst the flurry of discussion between Harris, Chief of Air Staff Sir Charles Portal, Air Marshal Sir Norman Bottomley, and others at Bomber Command about how to assist the Russians with an air attack, the Prime Minister apparently intervened with a request during a telephone conversation on January 25 regarding “basting the Germans in their retreat from Breslau.” As discussions continued in a more urgent manner, Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Secretary of State for Air and the person to whom the request was directed, responded on January 26 with a hesitant memorandum telling Churchill that, though he was uncertain whether an attack on German cities was

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5 Ibid., 1160.

6 Ibid., 557, note 2; 1161.

7 Webster and Frankland, 3:101.
the best option at the moment, plans were “under examination.” Churchill’s response was direct and perhaps icy in tone: “I asked whether Berlin, and no doubt other large cities in East Germany, should not now be considered especially attractive targets. I am glad that this is ‘under examination’. Pray report to me tomorrow what is to be done.” The minute resulted in “precipitate action;” Bottomley instructed Harris the next day to orchestrate, “one big attack on Berlin and related attacks on Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz, or any other cities where a severe blitz will not only cause confusion in the evacuation from the East but will also hamper the movement of troops from the West.” Churchill’s memorandum to Sinclair demonstrates two things: he sanctioned the attack on Dresden and other eastern German cities, and he sanctioned it as one part of a strategy designed to aid the Russians and impede the German war effort.

By supporting the attack, Churchill was supporting a policy that was already on the table, and had been since World War I, in which aircraft saw their first military action. During the inter-war period, military strategists set about to determine the proper use of an air force in war. While the arguments in Britain centered upon the effectiveness of various options, they necessarily touched on the moral aspects of conduct in war. As Chief of the Air Staff from 1919 to 1930, Hugh Montague Trenchard was an early advocate of a bombing strategy that targeted morale. Since the air force was not bound by the same limitations as an army, Trenchard held that it could forego the usually necessary step of defeating an enemy’s armed forces and pursue objectives that could

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8 Ibid., 102.
9 Ibid., 103.
10 Webster and Frankland, 4:301.
11 Webster and Frankland, 1:46.
cripple the enemy nation’s ability to make war – including the morale of the civil
population. Trenchard’s views met with several negative responses; some were moral
rebuttals, but many simply questioned the effectiveness of Trenchard’s proposed strategy.
In fact, Churchill himself questioned Trenchard’s assertions on the grounds that,
“Nothing that we have learned of the capacity of the German population to endure
suffering justifies us in assuming that they could be cowed into submission by such
methods.”13 His argument was based on effectiveness in war, not moral constraint.

Perhaps Churchill’s famed “stomach for war” prevented him from morally
rejecting Trenchard’s position that targeting civilian morale was the best policy – a
position he had softened toward by 1941.14 On the other hand, Churchill claimed to
follow principles in war. These were probably not based on any body of international
legislation, but on his own “rule of conduct” which included “the hatred of causing
human woe.”15 In Churchill’s rhetoric, this adherence to principles of war was something
that distinguished him and the British from the Nazis. They, he claimed, were sure to

12 Webster and Frankland, 4:67. Trenchard insisted that only military objectives would be pursued, “But it
was always recognized that in such a process heavy civilian casualties were inevitable.” Webster and
Frankland, 1:46.

13 Webster and Frankland, 1:47. Others in the Air Ministry did argue that Trenchard’s views would
inevitably blur the traditional line between civilians and military personnel by targeting civilians
contributing to the war effort through production or other means. Their predictions proved correct. Webster
and Frankland, 4:77.

14 Gretchen Rubin, 40 Ways to Look at Winston Churchill: A Brief Account of a Long Life (New York:
Ballantine Books, 2003), 92. By December of 1941, night bombings had already been occurring as a matter
of course. At this time, Churchill showed no compunction about the bombing of German “civilian
populations and industries” – except to assert that they would not be sufficient to defeat Germany and
should not preclude preparations for a land invasion when it became feasible. Gilbert, Winston S.
Churchill, 21.

271. Despite his well-known fascination with war, Churchill even claimed to consider war a necessary evil,
a “vile wicked folly and a barbarism.” Martin Gilbert, Winston Churchill’s War Leadership (New York:
Random House, 2003), 95.
disregard such principles, and to threaten the British civilian population with “pitiless brutality.”\footnote{16} In contrast, the British nation would meet the Nazi threat and retaliate “to any extent that the unwritten laws of war permit.”\footnote{17} At this point, the laws for air power were in fact unwritten; they were not explicitly covered in the Hague conventions of the early twentieth century, and military leaders in each nation considered themselves free to form their own standards for war in the air.\footnote{18}

The distinction Churchill drew between Great Britain and Germany was a major aspect of his character and activity during the war. In his pre-war and early speeches as Prime Minister, Churchill painted a grand picture of the battle between good and evil, embodied by the democratic empire of Great Britain stalwartly opposing the Nazi regime. Before the war, earlier than most politicians, he warned of the “barbarism” that Nazism posed to the world, and he continually reminded the public of the unprecedented stakes he saw in the conflict: “Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization.”\footnote{19}

This outlook might have given Churchill pause at the prospect of targeting enemy civilians in an effort to maintain a moral distinction between Britain and Nazi Germany, or it could have made him more willing to consider strategies that would kill civilians in

\footnote{16}Winston S. Churchill, Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat: The Great Speeches, ed. David Cannadine (London: Penguin Group, 1989), 140. These were among the reasons that Churchill regularly asserted the need to gain superior air power over Germany.

\footnote{17}Churchill, The Great Speeches, 152.


order to “rescue not only Europe but mankind from the foulest and most soul-destroying tyranny which has ever darkened and stained the pages of history.”

The latter certainly appears to be the case. Churchill had one clear aim throughout his term as Prime Minister and throughout World War II: “victory at all costs… for without victory, there is no survival.” Gretchen Rubins, in her multi-faceted biography of Churchill, highlights this sentiment – his absolute dedication to defending Britain – as the cornerstone of Churchill’s character, expressed most fully in his pledge that the Britons would “defend our Island, whatever the cost may be.” Churchill, and therefore the British Royal Air Force, employed the strategy of area bombing industrial cities – inevitably targeting the civilian population of Germany – because it contributed to this endeavor of ultimate importance.

Churchill first sanctioned attacks on German cities in response to the German attack on Britain, in which London, Coventry, and other major cities were subjected to bombing from the Luftwaffe. Speaking after the Royal Air Force repelled the attack, Churchill asserted that German industries, including their civilian workers, would be subject to attack: “The fronts are everywhere. The trenches are dug in the towns and streets.” While he did not explicitly include civilian morale as a target, the speech described a state of total war in which air superiority would be essential. He had argued


21 Ibid., 149.

22 Rubin, 159; Churchill, “We Shall Fight on the Beaches,” The Churchill Society.

23 The RAF did not exclusively target the morale of the civilian population, but did so in tandem with attacks on the industrial, oil, and communications centers of Germany. Targeting morale was often treated as a secondary objective, but it was consistently a part of Bomber Command Strategy.

before the war against the notion that morale should be the main objective of the air
force, but Churchill’s wartime leadership reflected his acceptance of Trenchard’s
underlying proposition that victory meant defeating the enemy nation, not merely his
armed forces. Within this paradigm of total war, Churchill was willing to cause the death
of German civilians, while he endeavored to protect French or Belgian civilians.\(^{25}\) While
this distinction seems natural and unremarkable, it demonstrates an important aspect of
the total war Churchill was engaged in: instead of considering all non-combatants equal
and outside the scope of the war, he considered German civilians part of the enemy. In a
February 1944 speech to the House of Commons, Churchill drew this conclusion about
the bombing campaign on cities: “I shall not moralize further than to say that there is a
strange, stern justice in the long swing of events.”\(^{26}\)

Along with this acceptance of total war, there were specific reasons that Churchill
allowed and encouraged bombing against German cities; one of these was his consistent
goal of supporting Russia. When Germany attacked Russia in June 1941, Churchill
immediately pledged his support; as a result, the RAF initiated night bombings of the
Ruhr and Rhineland regions, and attacked at least four cities in July.\(^{27}\) Stalin’s constant
urging for a cross-channel invasion from the western Allies was unfulfilled until 1944
when the Americans had built up enough manpower and were ready. In the meantime,
Churchill offered the bombings as evidence of his support. In his August 1942


\(^{26}\) Gilbert, *Churchill*, 768.

\(^{27}\) Gilbert, *Churchill*, 703. The German Luftwaffe continued to bomb Britain during this time, though on a
much lower scale.
discussions with Stalin, Churchill explicitly referred to morale as a military target.\(^{28}\) He regularly reminded Stalin of the ongoing attacks against German cities; once he even sent him a stereoscopic machine with slides showing damage caused by British bombers, providing a more “vivid impression” than photos.\(^{29}\)

While he did endeavor to assist the Russian war effort and demonstrate solidarity through the aerial offensive, Churchill’s support for area bombing did not stem solely from catering to Stalin. His own sense of war and military strategy prevented him from being “content with a defensive war;” he constantly sought opportunities for offensive action.\(^{30}\) Until 1944, when British and American troops had gathered sufficient forces for a cross-channel strike, opportunities to strike directly at Germany were limited. Churchill seized on the bombing campaign, not as an ideal route to victory, but as a necessary one, as he conceded to Portal on March 13, 1941: “It is not decisive, but better than doing nothing, and indeed a formidable method of injuring the enemy.”\(^{31}\) In accord with this policy, Bomber Command included civilian morale as a military objective from early in the war.

Thus, the Dresden bombing was not the result of a new policy or new tactics, but the continuation of total war policy. Bomber Command had targeted other cities in the same way; the July 1943 attack on Hamburg actually caused more deaths.\(^{32}\) In the month

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 727.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 750.

\(^{30}\) Churchill, “We Shall Fight on the Beaches”; Gilbert, *Winston Churchill’s War Leadership*, 54. Churchill was also known for his occasionally offensive personality.

\(^{31}\) Gilbert, *Churchill*, 720.

\(^{32}\) Biddle, 414.
before the Dresden attack, the situation had altered from earlier stages of the war, but related factors still affected strategy decisions. The Russian army was advancing westward; Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff continued to demonstrate support for the Russian effort. In fact, the British received a direct request from General Antonov, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Red Army, on February 4 during the Yalta Conference.33 Also, although attacks on Britain by German bombers had significantly diminished, the Germans had developed a new weapon, the “flying bomb” – V.1 and V.2 rockets.34 Once again, the British population came under fire, and Churchill was anxious to respond.35 The recent German counter-attack leading to the Battle of the Bulge added to Allied “dismay” and “dashed optimism” and evoked fears of a drawn out, World War I-style slugging match.36 When the Joint Intelligence Committee requested a plan from Bomber Command to aide the Russian army by squeezing the Germans with strategic bombing, Harris suggested his plan to attack Chemnitz, Leipzig, and Dresden along with Berlin – and Churchill’s unmitigated support validated it.37

Given Churchill’s action to ensure that bombs dropped on East German cities, his memorandum after the attack is surprising. On March 28, 1945, Churchill forwarded this message to the Chiefs of Staff including the Chief of the Air Staff:

33 Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, 1177. The request did not precede the January 25 Joint Intelligence Committee Report and therefore cannot be labeled the sole precipitant of the attack.

34 Biddle, 425.

35 Gilbert, *Churchill*, 779. Churchill actually considered using poison gas as a means of retaliating against these attacks in a way that would convince the Germans to halt them.

36 Biddle, 425.

It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed… The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing… I feel the need for more precise concentration upon military objectives… rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction, however impressive.\textsuperscript{38}

The memorandum exposed the rationale that was being used to target civilian populations – aiming for military objectives such as communications centers, oil production, or war industry plants, but counting on destruction of civilian homes and lives to lower the national morale – but Churchill seemed to forget that he had supported the policy all along, even in the particular case of Dresden. The delayed, misinformed, and “spur of the moment” reaction is certainly puzzling.\textsuperscript{39}

Although the memorandum was not Churchill’s final say in the matter, it perhaps captured his initial reaction to the events of February 13\textsuperscript{th} and 14\textsuperscript{th} in Dresden. Due to several factors, the attack had been unusually successful – and therefore unusually devastating.\textsuperscript{40} The firestorm that resulted from the heavy concentration of high explosive and incendiary bombs caused extreme amounts of material destruction and killed thousands of people, most of them women, children, and elderly.\textsuperscript{41} Churchill was undoubtedly reacting to reports of the devastation with his proposed reevaluation of bombing policy and his “query” concerning Dresden. There are other examples of what Tami Davis Biddle calls his “ambivalent” and “erratic” view toward the bombing.

\textsuperscript{38} Webster and Frankland, 3:112.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 3:112. It has been suggested that Churchill did not actually compose the memorandum. There is no actual evidence for the claim, only that its content differs from other memoranda and examples of Churchill’s thought on the matter.

\textsuperscript{40} Biddle, 419.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 423.
policy. One frequently cited example is a story in which Churchill, viewing a film showing devastation of German cities in 1943, exclaimed suddenly: “Are we beasts? Are we taking this too far?” On February 1, 1945, two weeks before the Dresden attacks, Churchill expressed the tension in his mind concerning the collateral effects of the war and lamented the hardships borne by German civilians fleeing from the Russians in a letter to his wife Clementine: “my heart is saddened by the tales of the masses of German women and children flying along the roads everywhere… I am clearly convinced they deserve it; but that does not remove it from one’s gaze. The misery of the whole world appals me…”

Churchill’s initial reaction to the Dresden raid may simply have come at a similar moment of regret, but it could also have been an effort to distance himself publicly from the event. Although the Dresden raid drew little immediate attention in Britain, the topic arose in Parliament on March 6, when Catholic member and critic of bombing policy Richard Papier Stokes attacked the bombing policy that had led to Dresden. Exposing an article by Howard Cowan from the Associated Press that termed the Allied air operations as “terror bombing of great German population centers,” Stokes demanded an explanation of the current bombing policy and a reason for the destructive attack on Dresden. A five-hour debate ensued, but ended with no significant change in policy or

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42 Ibid., 444, 446.
43 Gilbert, Churchill, 748.
44 Ibid., 816.
45 Biddle, 444. These questions also drew attention to a previously covered-up critical news article by Howard Cowan from the Associated Press.
46 Taylor, 361. Taylor explains that the story, based on Cowan’s interpretation of Air Commodore Grierson’s press briefing on February 16, aired on Parisian radio and hit American presses, but was not
any kind of apology – the Air Ministry simply denied that the bombing operations were indiscriminate, insisting that military targets undergirded aerial policy.\textsuperscript{47} Although this was the last parliamentary debate on the subject, the attacks on Dresden continued to provoke “disquiet” in Britain, especially among those who respected the cultured heritage of the famed “Florence on the Elbe.”\textsuperscript{48} Churchill’s soul-searching response may have contained an element of concern for public image, but that does not appear to be its main purpose. He was not involved in the March 6 debate, and he released no public statement to justify his actions. Also, Portal convinced him with ease to retract the initial memorandum, replacing it with a more diplomatic one that did not mention the Dresden attack.\textsuperscript{49} The evidence suggests that the original memorandum reflects, at some level, the genuine concerns of the Prime Minister.

While some biographers and historians have totally absolved Churchill of complicity in the Dresden attack, the evidence clearly reveals a certain level of involvement in Bomber Command’s operations of February 1945: he did not propose the attack on cities in eastern Germany, but he sanctioned the plan and gave it priority.\textsuperscript{50} The Prime Minister may have been erratic in his reactions toward the aerial offensive and its

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 364.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 364, 365.

\textsuperscript{49} Webster and Frankland, 3:117. Biddle appropriately points out that he may have been more concerned about his image with an eye toward historical judgment. However, in his own history of World War II, he only mentioned the revised memorandum. David Reynolds, \textit{In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War} (New York: Random House, 2005), 485.

\textsuperscript{50} Gilbert, \textit{Winston Churchill’s War Leadership}, 89. Gilbert claims that Churchill, gone to the Yalta Conference, had very little to do with the decision to bomb Dresden and the other cities; in his biography he writes that the bombing occurred “while he slept.” Gilbert, \textit{Churchill}, 824.
moral implications, but he was not erratic in his policy decisions. The bombing policy remained intact until Churchill released this revised memorandum on April 1, initiating a drawdown phase for Bomber Command:

It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of the so called “area bombing” of German cities should be reviewed from the point of view of our own interest. If we come into control of an entirely ruined land, there will be a great shortage of accommodation for ourselves and our Allies.51

Although Churchill often left Bomber Command to its own devices, content to let Portal and Harris manage affairs, he remained informed on operations, especially in the case of Dresden.

On the other hand, some authors heap all the responsibility for Dresden’s destruction on the Prime Minister, coloring his actions with some vengeful or murderous purpose.52 This conclusion is also unwarranted. Churchill demonstrated no hostility specifically for Dresden; he only facilitated a plan that had already been put forward. His reactions to other examples of devastation from area bombing, and specifically to Dresden also demonstrate that his goal was not to kill civilians, but to achieve victory. When he thought area bombing would assist the Russians, damage the German war effort, and speed the Allies toward victory, he was willing to order it. When he saw that victory was accomplished, he was ready to scale back attacks and begin a new phase, as

51 Webster and Frankland, 3:117. Biddle asserts that Portal and other advisers are to thank for Churchill’s consistency on this and other issues. Portal certainly played a significant role in Churchill’s decisions; this memorandum was actually drafted by Portal and signed by Churchill (Gilbert, Winston S. Churchill, 1257).

52 Robin Neillands, The Bomber War: Arthur Harris and the Allied Bomber Offensive 1939-1945 (London: John Murray, 2001), 362. Neillands’s particular quest is to exonerate Arthur Harris – but Harris was always in favor of such attacks; the plan to bomb East German cities originated with him. He had no apparent qualms about Dresden, highlighting it only as a successful operation. Arthur Travers Harris, Despatch on War Operations: 23rd February, 1942, to 8th May, 1945 (London: F. Cass, 1995), 31.
the revised memorandum and a speech to the House of Commons in November 1946 demonstrate:

There must be an end to vengeance and retribution. I am told that Germany must be punished. I ask: When did punishment begin? It certainly seems to have been going on for a long time. It began in 1943, and continued in 1944 and 1945 when the most frightful air bombardments were cast upon German cities…

Churchill was responsible for the bombing of Dresden, but he shared that responsibility with Harris, others from Bomber Command, and with the American leaders that helped coordinate the attack. Some authors also allow responsibility to fall on “the vortex of total war” – but individual decisions led to the adoption of total war policy and should not be ignored. The destruction of that city and the deaths it caused did not gratify Churchill; rather he was appalled as he often was when faced with the results of total war policy. There is debate as to whether the Dresden attack contributed substantially to the war effort; it certainly did damage German morale as Bomber Command hoped. Even if the attack was a decisive contributor, there is little doubt that Churchill’s victory came at exceedingly high cost – cost in terms of civilian casualties and material destruction, but also of the unwritten principles Churchill claimed to represent. Horst Boog, a German writer prefacing Harris’s Despatch on War Operations, appropriately describes this phenomenon during World War II: “The longer the war lasted… the more the three major air forces, sooner or later and for one reason or another, met on the same lowest common denominator: indiscriminate bombing, even though their

53 Best, 275.

54 Biddle, 429. Taylor also seems to assert that area bombing was inevitable, asking “Did anyone really expect the world to fight back while wearing kid gloves, in order not to damage Germany’s artistic treasures or kill German civilians?” His question is insightful, and certainly captures a sense of the feeling of the time – but Churchill himself claimed that the Allies would adhere to principles of war, the most basic of which would respect the difference between combatants and civilians. Taylor, 411.
doctrinal approaches to the war were quite different.”^{55} The Allies were victorious – but perhaps not with the glory that Churchill predicted in the early days of the war.^{56} Dresden certainly added no glory to the Allied victory, or to Churchill’s cause of defending Great Britain. Even warriors in the service of a just cause can forget or distort the call to uphold *jus in bello*: justice in war.

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^{55} Horst Boog, “Harris – A German View,” in Harris, xliv.

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