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Terror Bombing of German Cities in World War II

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The campaign

In the last week of July 1943, the city of Hamburg was attacked by over 700 aircraft from the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command. A combination of incendiary and explosive bombs was dropped on the central area of the city. Approximately 74 percent of the most densely populated section of Hamburg was destroyed. About 50,000 people were killed in these attacks, and around one million refugees fled to safer outlying areas.¹ Perhaps the most notable aspect of the Hamburg raids was the phenomenon of the firestorm, which produced hurricane-type winds of 150 miles an hour and sucked people, trees, even whole buildings into the center of the flames. The Police President of Hamburg summarized the fate of his city this way:

Its horror is revealed in the howling and raging of the firestorms, the hellish noise of exploding bombs and the death cries of martyred human beings as well as in the big silence after the raids. Speech is impotent to portray the measure of the horror, which shook the people for ten days and nights and the traces of which were written indelibly on the face of the city and its inhabitants.²

The devastation of Hamburg was henceforward referred to by the Germans simply as *die Katastrophe*.

The assault on Hamburg was only one chapter in the RAF's area bombing offensive against Germany. As a method of air warfare, 'area bombing' focused not on specific military or industrial targets but rather on German cities themselves. The targeting instructions given to British aircrew indeed typically designated the center of such cities as

the prime 'aiming point.' The RAF launched some 390,000 sorties against Germany in the entire course of the war, and area attacks accounted for about 70 percent of the total effort, with approximately one million tons of bombs being dropped on the enemy. By the end of 1944, around 80 percent of all German urban centers with populations of more than 100,000 had been devastated or seriously damaged. This exercise in destruction continued even into the spring of 1945, with almost 40 percent of British bombing being directed at city targets.³ It is estimated that overall some 500,000 German civilians lost their lives as a result of the area offensive, and perhaps another 1,000,000 received serious injury. Around three million homes were destroyed.

Can the British area bombing offensive against Germany in World War II be considered a type of 'terrorism' appropriate for inclusion and analysis in the present volume? There are many who would argue against such a proposition, particularly given the nature of the Nazi threat. We typically think of terrorist acts as being directed at innocents, and certainly the Nazi regime could hardly be described as 'innocent.' Some might even extend this point to the broader German society that supported that regime. There were in fact voices in Britain during the war that made precisely this assertion.

Prominent among these was Sir Robert Vansittart, a veteran of the Foreign Office and important diplomatic advisor to the British government, who suggested that throughout history the Germans had been the 'butcher-birds' of Europe, the invariable cause of the trials and tribulations of civilized humanity. Envy, self-pity and cruelty were identified as the fundamental traits of the German people. Even though Vansittart conceded there were a few good Germans, he claimed that for the most part Hitler gave 'to the great majority of Germans exactly what they have hitherto liked and wanted.'⁴ Some British newspapers trumpeted the same line at the time. One typical headline was, 'Why all this bosh about being gentle with the Germans after we have beaten them when ALL GERMANS ARE GUILTY!'⁵ From this perspective, any measures that promised to contribute to the destruction of the Nazi menace were justified, and more to the point, Bomber Command could hardly be accused of a 'terrorist' enterprise (i.e., an attack on innocents) since all Germans bore guilt for Hitler's program of aggression.

In weighing whether area bombing equaled terrorism, we also have various arguments presented by its proponents at the time that suggested a legitimate (and thus presumably 'respectable') military rationale for its use in wartime. One of these was that it would help to divert German resources from the war on the Eastern Front and the Middle East in