

# The Necessity of Bombing / Honouring the Past / the Hard Hand of War

[Alternative titles.]

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Well, what would you have done? August 1945. British forces are unable to compete with the Germans in Continental Europe. Soviet forces are reeling back. America is neutral. 'Bombing on a vast scale is the weapon upon which we principally depend for the destruction of German economic life and morale.' A British strategic review of August 1941 was to the point. At that stage, the alternative was a deal of some type with Hitler. What about later on in the war? What about after Kursk and D-Day? The intensity of the Anglo-American campaign increased in the last year of the war precisely because Germany had not collapsed. Indeed, the fighting determination of its armed forces was to the fore in late 1944 as resistance stiffened, the Battle of the Bulge was a shock, Germany was firing rockets at Britain, and was developing new technology, notably in jet aircraft and submarines.

This is the background in which to consider Arthur Harris and the Combined Bomber Offensive. Keeping statues is an aspect of the trust between the generations and, if we were to go down the track of getting rid of what offends the readily-offendable, we would remove all religious sites and iconography as a starter. But retaining the past while 'recontextualising' it in partisan terms is scarcely any better. Aside from murdering and imprisoning large numbers of priests, the Soviets of course followed that path with some churches.

In the case of the RAF, despite the limited precision of bombing by high-flying aircraft dropping free-fall bombs, strategic bombing was crucial to the disruption of German communications and logistics, largely because it was eventually done on such a massive scale, and because the targets could not be attacked by any other means. Attacks on communications seriously affected the rest of the German economy, limiting the transfer of resources and the process of integration that is so significant for manufacturing. In addition, the oil industry and aircraft production were hit by Allied air attack, while, from 1943, the Germans diverted massive resources to anti-aircraft defence forces, including much of the *Luftwaffe*. These units and the manufacturing capacity they represented could otherwise have been employed on the front line. Moreover, the Allied air attack had a significant impact on Germany's allies, notably Italy.

Bombing alone did not of course bring victory as some air-power theorists had anticipated, but most military leaders accepted that bombing should be part of an integrated strategy, and that became possible for Britain and America once large forces were able to advance on Continental Europe.

The impact of the bombing on German civilians may be suggested by the absence of significant civilian opposition to the Allied advance or of subsequent resistance to occupation. There was more to German resilience than Hitler's determination, and the inability to stop the Allied bombing encouraged a sense that defeat was likely, indeed was already occurring. Propaganda about the inability of Allied bombing to damage targets within Germany was discredited. Whether these benefits justified heavy civilian casualties and a high level of losses among Allied aircrews has modern resonances but, by 1944, total war was being pushed as precisely that, and was of course being waged by Germany.

As a result, the concerns of contemporary military planners can best be addressed in instrumental terms, notably alternative uses for the resources devoted to heavy bombing. However, there were serious practical and institutional restrictions on any reallocation of resources, along with the economic difficulties confronting a retooling of manufacturing and the feedback process of judging and resetting strategy was far from easy given the nature of information flows and alliance commitments.

The Anglo-American bomber offensive made a major impact. It is right that the dedication and bravery of those involved is honoured. The 'contextualisation' of memorials and statues should not provide an opportunity for the trashing of the past and the dishonoring of those who risked and gave their all.

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