

The British People, the Press and the Strategic Air Campaign against Germany, 1939–45

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This article sets out to explore the way in which the RAF's wartime strategic bombing campaign against Germany was presented to the British people. It seeks to understand the flow of information about Bomber Command activities and the manner in which the media reacted. The essay also seeks to question the idea that there was widespread discontent and unease with British operations, arguing that though the media coverage fell short of explaining the true nature of the British campaign, most people had guessed what it entailed from the information presented to them and supported it.

No other combatant nation made as large a commitment to the bomber in the Second World War as the British. Bomber Command devoured treasure and blood. Len Deighton has estimated that by 1943 each raid cost somewhere in the region of £1 million to stage.¹ By 1945 the RAF had killed over half a million German civilians, destroyed 3.37 million houses, had ripped the guts out of the German railway system and ruined millions of square feet of industrial plant. But it had cost Bomber Command 55,000 British, Commonwealth and allied lives and it had taken invading armies from the east and west to finally end the conflict. The bomber came to symbolise the British war effort; the Avro Lancaster was the ultimate expression of the People's War, for it required the skills of thousands of individual men and women to build, maintain, arm and fly.²

It is the intention of this article to look at the relationship of the British people to Bomber Command and the strategic air campaign against Germany. Why did Britain become so obsessed by the bomber? To what extent did the British people know, understand and accept the nature of British bombing policy? To answer these questions it is necessary to study the evidence presented to the British people at the time. How did the press and newsreels present the Command and did the media reflect or shape popular attitudes towards the bomber? Finally, it seeks to show that

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Contemporary British History, Vol.16, No.2 (Summer 2002), pp.39–58
PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON

whatever happened after the war, between 1939 and 1945 British public opinion remained firmly in favour of a bomber campaign against Germany.

The investigation into British reactions to their own bombing campaign is a necessary one, for the majority of Bomber Command's historians have failed to address this subject. It has often been assumed that Bomber Command was a publicity conscious organisation and yet very little has actually been written about Bomber Command's image, other than studies of the Crown Film Unit's famous drama-documentary, *Target for Tonight* (1941).³ For example, Max Hastings noted in his otherwise thorough study, *Bomber Command* (1979), that the Command had a greater interest in publicity than most other branches of the armed services, and yet he avoided discussing press reactions or Bomber Command's attitude to the press in any great detail.⁴ Those that have looked at attitudes to Bomber Command's strategy have often concentrated on those who protested against it, and have taken the views of a small intellectual and spiritual elite led by Bishop George Bell of Chichester, Vera Brittain and George Bernard Shaw as representative of the nation as a whole.⁵

The use of the press as a yardstick or barometer of popular opinion is, of course, a tricky proposition. Paul Addison has pointed out that the fact that three million people bought the *Daily Mirror* 'is no help in discovering how many read the leaders, agreed with them, or were influenced by them.'⁶ Readers' letters to editors also require a certain degree of caution. Just how many people feel the need to express themselves in this way, and does it reflect a wider body of opinion? However, it cannot be denied that the press was an important instrument of mass communication. John Stevenson has pointed out that the years between 1920 and 1947 were a golden period for British newspapers, achieving mass readerships with huge daily sales figures. He asserts that 69 per cent of the population aged over 16 read a national newspaper by 1939.⁷ In this world – as with today – the choice of newspaper made an important statement about class, identity and education. Ross McKibbin in his study of class, class-consciousness and the symbols of class, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (1998) has shown how identity and newspaper readership were connected, and that the *Daily Mirror* became the preferred choice of the services during the Second World War. The *Daily Mirror* was a staunchly working-class paper and it consistently advocated a vigorous prosecution of the war that found a ready appeal in the conscripted army and those working in war industries.⁸ It is the contention of this article that the conclusions the British people came to about their bombing war were connected to the information they received about it, and that this was largely dependent on the newspapers and newsreels they were exposed to.

The Control of Information

The delivery of news about British bombing missions – and about the war generally – requires some clarification. At the start of the war the long-planned Ministry of Information was activated, moving into the Senate House building of the University of London.⁹ The Ministry of Information was to coordinate censorship, propaganda, news and publicity on behalf of the state. It ran into trouble almost from the start, for despite the advance planning, few clear and concrete decisions had been made on the mechanics of its role. Was the Ministry to act as a clearing-house for news and information? If so would other government departments be happy to liaise with it? It was not long before the new Ministry found itself in a mire of contradictory instructions and confused jurisdictions. The most difficult departments proved to be the service ministries themselves. The War Office, the Admiralty and the Air Ministry were all extremely capricious, intensely suspicious of allowing any information to pass into the public domain one moment, the next by-passing the Ministry of Information altogether to deliver news directly to the press. Administratively, it proved a nightmare, one that was never quite resolved.¹⁰ Of the three service departments, it has been noted that the Air Ministry was the most publicity conscious. Max Hastings has written: ‘The airmen, even more than the other two services, monitored public opinion intently.’¹¹ The desire for recognition was probably inspired in part by the relative youth of the RAF; formed only in 1918 and nearly abolished in the early 1920s, it needed to prove its worth and distinctiveness.¹²

During the conflict a mixture of factors dictated newspaper and newsreel attitudes to Bomber Command: the views of the editor, the owner, their reading public and the government. For the *Daily Express*, interest in the bomber campaign was maintained despite the scepticism of its owner, Lord Beaverbrook. As Minister for Aircraft Production 1940–41, Beaverbrook had a deep interest in the RAF. However, his enthusiasm for the service was channelled in a particular direction, for he had a much greater interest in fighters, giving them preference over bomber production. He also doubted whether British bombing would ever reduce Germany to its knees.¹³ The fact that one of his own papers should have taken an opposite line reveals his commercial sense. Bomber Command became the darling of the British people, and so whatever his personal feelings, Beaverbrook was not going to imperil the circulation of the *Daily Express* by interfering with its editorial policy.

At the *Daily Mirror*, attitudes were shaped by the desire to weed out the ‘Chamberlain Gang’. For the *Mirror*, Bomber Command was the symbol of Britain’s vigour, youth and modernity. Obsessed with the inefficiencies

propagated by the 'Colonel Blimps' and former appeasers in government and the service ministries, the *Daily Mirror* revelled in what it perceived to be the no-holds-barred philosophy of Bomber Command, particularly once Sir Arthur Harris became Commander-in-Chief.¹⁴

The newsreels were regarded as extremely important forms of information by the government, thanks to their potent combination of words and moving images. Worried that the newsreels might display material that would make the government uncomfortable, the Ministry of Information was ordered to make newsreels a top priority case. This necessarily meant subjecting the newsreel companies to both pre and post-production censorship, for as Nicholas Reeves has pointed out: 'The precise form of a particular newsreel can be as important in determining the way in which the material is understood as the content.'¹⁵ All of which demanded that the censor had to see material before it was edited and once it was assembled in final form. The Ministry of Information had to develop a quick and efficient system of newsreel censorship in order to allow the companies to meet this more rigorous form of control in time to beat the deadline for cinema distribution. In turn, this probably made newsreel companies more likely to lean towards the official interpretation of events in order to smooth the passage of their product.¹⁶

But, whatever the views of the press, they were dependent on information supplied by the Ministry of Information and the Air Ministry. The Ministry of Information was never quite happy with Bomber Command, reflecting the wider malaise of the government on the issue and internal debates within the Air Ministry and Bomber Command itself. The Air Ministry and Bomber Command took some time to come to the conclusion that precise, accurate bombing was impossible. Once that conclusion was reached, policy became dedicated to 'area bombing', in order to kill and 'de-house' German workers. The government was extremely worried about this aspect of the war, fearing that the strategy gave the Germans a propaganda weapon that might affect Britain's position as the power occupying the 'moral high ground' in the conflict. At the same time, it became clear that Bomber Command was crucial to maintaining Britain's image as an independent, aggressive force, capable of delivering wounding blows to the heart of the enemy. The newsreels gave consistent coverage to the stream of visits made by the Royal Family and Winston Churchill, emphasising Bomber Command's position as *the* favoured offensive weapon.¹⁷ It made government and Ministry of Information policy uncertain; at one and the same moment they were both fearful of the realities behind the campaign while being eager to play up its successes.

But the Air Ministry was determined to give the press what it wanted. One of the reasons for the press's acquiescence with Bomber Command lay

in the Air Ministry's skill at controlling the flow of news. Arthur Christiansen of the *Daily Express* believed that this approach ensured that the RAF gained a sympathetic ear in Fleet Street; the other services were, in comparison, difficult to deal with. Lord Mountbatten complained to Christiansen about the imbalance in the press coverage:

I told him about Jimmy Robertson, a clever P[ublic].R[elations]. O[fficer]. at the Air Ministry, who had recruited the best Fleet Street men available when war broke out, people like Stanley Bishop and L.M. McBride of the *Daily Herald*. It was these trained newspapermen who fed the correspondents with news they were glad to print instead of providing the stereotyped hand-outs that the retired admirals and generals of the other Services relied on.¹⁸

Ensuring a policy on the presentation of the work of Bomber Command was a concern that stretched to the very top. In January 1941, a conference with representatives from the BBC, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Economic Warfare and Bomber Command was held at the Air Ministry. Sir Richard Peirse (then Commander-in-Chief, Bomber Command) said that 'there was general misconception as to the scale, purpose and effect of our bombing' and he thought that it was 'advisable wherever possible to mention specific targets that have been attacked or hit because if this was not done the impression that our bombing is indiscriminate or inaccurate is at once produced.'¹⁹ A secret BBC report to the Director General on the same meeting revealed an embarrassing lack of coordination on the presentation of the British bombing war. The BBC delegates were immediately aware of an argument that had been going on behind the scenes. They reported the tense atmosphere between the Foreign Office and Ministry of Economic Warfare on the one side and the Air Ministry on the other. It was said that they had been sniping at the Air Ministry over its claim to be successfully bombing Germany. The Ministry was reminded of how dangerous it was to overstate successes for it caused others to question the validity of British propaganda and information. The BBC representatives felt that Peirse sympathised with the critics, a move that put his own propaganda and information officers on the defensive.²⁰

But Peirse was not prepared to concede too much for he told the meeting that he was about to launch a far more intensive raiding campaign against Germany. He foresaw a problem with the presentation of this policy, for he was unable to 'see how the Air Ministry news draftsmen could do justice to these forthcoming operations after the way they had been sending the flames hundreds of feet high, and laying waste the target areas' in their earlier reporting of relatively small attacks.²¹

The report revealed many elements that were to dog the Command and its subsequent campaigns and images. First, it seems clear that there was very little liaison with other ministries as to the most effective way of mounting the bombing war. Second, the claims made were often fantastic and so could create disillusion when the truth was revealed. The sensitivity that surrounded the campaign also meant that Fleet Street often had only sketchy material to work on and so could interpret the strategy in whatever way it chose. It was also confusing for the press to be caught between two sources of information – the Ministry of Information and the Air Ministry. No one was ever quite sure where the news would come from. Such a strange system of news delivery meant that the press often had to do its own reading between the lines and draw its own conclusions. Finally, the complexity of the bomber campaign meant that it was extremely hard for the press to argue with the Air Ministry and Ministry of Information: judging the success of a bombing raid was an extremely difficult proposition, a fact revealed by the reams of statistics produced by Bomber Command during the war, all of which were subject to detailed analysis.²² It was a lot easier to go along with the user-friendly aerial photographs Bomber Command could produce showing huge areas of destruction and damage.

Sir Arthur Harris certainly appreciated the value of such images; he gave the press and the layman what they wanted, carefully avoiding anything that might require too much technical knowledge. When considering the release of aerial photographs of the Cologne raid, he told his Public Relations Officers to pick good, clear photos. He added in his own inimitable style: ‘even Service Officers in many cases have not the vaguest idea what they are looking at when viewing an air photograph ... one never knows whether they are vertical photographs of air damage or the south end of a bathing beauty looking north!’²³ Such was the atmosphere and conditions in which the British bombing war was reported. It was an odd mixture, perfect for the creation of myths, controversies and confusions.

The Early Months, 1939–40

When the war began there could be little doubt that the British people were all too aware of the potency of aerial weapons. Films such as *Things to Come* (1936), based on H.G. Wells’ novel, had graphically depicted the results of air raids. The bombing of Guernica (1937), especially as revealed by the newsreels, shocked the British public; and Stanley Baldwin had gloomily predicted that ‘the bomber will always get through’.²⁴ Such an atmosphere stimulated interest in the RAF, and its bomber force in particular. In 1939, the British people expected both to be bombed and to bomb others.

On 5 September 1939, just two days into the war, the *Daily Express* front page headlines announced, with the sensationalism it had become famous for under its flamboyant owner Lord Beaverbrook, that: 'RAF Bomb Two Battleships/ Several Direct Hits on Kiel Canal/ Mid-Air Battle: Some Casualties'.²⁵ The story under the headlines was quoted verbatim from an Air Ministry communiqué. It told of how the German fleet was attacked in the ports of Wilhelmshaven and Brunsbüttel by British aircraft. Several hits were reported which had resulted in some damage. In return, the RAF aircraft had encountered attacks from the German airforce and from anti-aircraft fire that had resulted in 'some casualties'. So with the war just a few days old, the British public woke up to the exciting news that the RAF had drawn blood in the war against Nazi Germany. But when the story is examined a little more closely, barely a fact can be deduced from it. Did Bomber Command actually manage to sink any ships? Were any explosions seen? What exactly does 'some casualties' mean?

The raid had taken place a day earlier, when 15 Blenheims of 2 Group and 14 Wellingtons of 3 Group set off to raid targets at Wilhelmshaven and Brunsbüttel. The final balance sheet did not make good reading. Some German warships had received dents and chipped paintwork in exchange for the loss of seven aircraft, or a shocking 23.3 per cent of aircraft despatched.²⁶ This was the reality behind the headlines, but no one in Britain was going to be allowed to know it.

The autumn and winter of 1939–40 proved to be a frustrating period for Bomber Command. Much of its pre-war planning had depended upon the ability of bombers to defend themselves in daylight and to bomb with precision. Reality was a shock. As the Command tried to interdict German shipping, it found its aircraft vulnerable to counter-attack. Matters reached a head in December 1939 when a series of raids went disastrously wrong, leading to the loss of 17 aircraft.²⁷ As Bomber Command mulled over the actions of December, the public was told a particular version of events. The *Daily Express* played up the positive sides. In fact, it was difficult to deny the success of the operations according to these reports. On 19 December 1939, the *Express* claimed British losses were a fiction invented by the Nazis in order to deflect German opinion from the loss of the pocket battleship *Graf Spee* a few days earlier.²⁸ The headlines proclaimed: 'Biggest Air Battle/ Nazis Lose 12 and We Lose 7/ Berlin Claims "Victory" as Spee Tonic'. The *Express* blithely told its readers that the RAF had outwitted the German air force, with the bombers easily able to protect themselves against German attacks. It was reported as the biggest air battle of the war so far and, of course, as a British victory. The British public was being fed a manipulated version of the bombing war – the seeds of later confusions, controversies and conflicts were being sown.

When the storm finally broke in the west, on 10 May 1940, Bomber Command was let off the leash; the prohibition of attacking Germany was finally abandoned. Back home, the public never really got a chance to understand just how outclassed the British machines were and how little damage Bomber Command could do to Germany. Once again the *Express* was the yardstick of popular knowledge. On 13 May 1940, its headlines read: 'RAF Destroy Bridges. Cut German Lines'.²⁹ On 15 May, 'RAF Bombers Smash Up Tanks as Fighters Clear Air'. The report continued: 'British bombers are giving Hitler a lesson in blitzkrieg war today. They flew all twenty-four hours of the day, blowing Hitler's own blitzkrieg troops off the roads.'³⁰

The Blenheim crews were pressing home their attacks with a manic desperation – a desperation barely perceptible in the press. The divergence between reality and propaganda was fully illustrated by the raid on Gembloux on 17 May. Twelve Blenheims attacked German troop concentrations in the area, losing 11 in the process. The Air Ministry's communiqué, quoted in most newspapers, was a beauty of understatement: 'They encountered a large formation of enemy fighters and intense AA fire. In spite of great gallantry and determination eleven of our aircraft failed to return.'³¹ The *Daily Mirror* ignored the communiqué and, unbelievably, stated that no aircraft were lost.³²

The Battle of Britain then put Fighter Command at the forefront of the public imagination during the high summer of 1940, despite the fact that Bomber Command suffered higher casualties in this campaign with its constant attacks on German invasion shipping.³³ By late August, resistance to mere reprisals was the common theme. The *Daily Telegraph* argued that 'to adopt such a course at the expense of the main objective, which is to weaken the enemy's power of mischief by attacking his bases and factories' would be 'contrary to sound strategy'.³⁴ However, the true nature of British bombing strategy remained a tricky question throughout the war. For some the defence of the British campaign rested on the belief that while some enemy civilians were killed, the main aim was to paralyse German war industry, and was therefore militarily effective and justifiable. The *Daily Mail* claimed British moral superiority in the autumn of 1940: 'Berliners are learning that their city is no more immune than is London from large-scale bombing. The one difference is that our airmen select their targets and concentrate on objects of military value.'³⁵ By 1942, the diplomatic correspondent of *The Times* denied that bombing could ever affect German morale, but did support the idea of its blockade effect, slowly strangling Germany into submission.³⁶ According to this thesis, British bombing was eroding Germany's industrial infrastructure and was not a crude campaign of revenge.

When it became clear that German morale might not collapse as a result of British bombing, it became all the more important to stress the military

and economic repercussions of the campaign. In November 1943, a leader in the *Daily Mail* claimed that Britain was not out to smash German morale, but was involved in a new strategy of war; an attempt to break the enemy by destroying his sinews. Goebbels' claims that the RAF was involved in a terror mission were laughed off.³⁷ This reflected a more general trend in the reportage of the aerial campaign during the second half of the war. The media stressed that bombing would not end German resistance by itself, but it would lessen resistance to the invasion of Germany. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, the work of the allied bomber forces 'would certainly smooth the invasion and therefore it is the most effectual means of shortening the war.'³⁸

Calls for Reprisals

But the coverage was always shrouded in ambiguity, for the revenge element was never too far from the surface. As the German blitz of British cities began in the autumn of 1940, so too did the desire for retribution. At this stage of the war, with Britain seemingly impotent, there was a marked desire in the press to dish it out to the Germans. Whatever certain leader writers might have argued, and whatever they thought the RAF was capable of, there was always the lingering feeling of revenge in the air. A defence of British policy in the *Daily Mail* was rounded off with this rather more ambiguous statement: 'The ruined homes and broken lives of Britain will be avenged. When Hitler has spent his fury in his useless effort to bring this country to her knees, the hour for attack will come. Then Britain must launch against Germany the most devastating offensive that has yet been seen.'³⁹ Similarly, the *Daily Mirror* said British operations should never be associated with the word 'reprisals', but then thundered: 'in war when you're hit, you hit back. Hit of course. That, dear friends, you must do.'⁴⁰ Over the next few weeks its attitude hardened even more: 'we must continue with the skilled job of driving Berlin into its shelters – remembering that war *must* be carried into Germany, and that we *must* pass, as rapidly as we can, to the offensive.'⁴¹ On 12 September 1940, the *Mirror* leader came up with the most overt defence of unrestricted violence yet uttered by the British press. It called for a 'gloves off' approach and destroyed the distinction between civilian and soldier, implying that it was redundant in modern war. Referring to the bombing of Berlin, the paper asserted:

This is the only policy. This is the only effective method available to us in self-defence. This is the offensive ... Bomb for bomb and the same all round! The only policy.

And the only policy on which our dauntless suffering people *insist*. If the Air Minister doesn't agree with them he must clear out. The air war is no time for lecturers, and gloved persons wishing to live up to a high standard of ancient chivalry. The invention of the bombing plane abolished chivalry for ever. It is now 'retaliate or go under'.

We are not dedicated to passive and polite martyrdom. We *must* hit back...

Also the dislocation of German communications and nerve-centres is essentially a 'military objective' – if really it is reasonable to go on making this almost obsolete distinction.

A distinction that wears very thin. People are killed, in the devilish war of today, everywhere, anyhow. People killed are, in tens of thousands, useful workers; mainly war workers. They are in the war. Everybody matters. Maybe everybody is a victim.⁴²

The *Telegraph* became a forum for debate about bombing and attracted letters supporting many differing views. In April 1941, J.M.L. Service wrote in to advocate bombing of Berlin and all Germany's regional capitals to teach the Germans a lesson. In the same issue C.D.L. Enoch wrote that: 'We ought, with utter impunity, to bomb Berlin and bomb it unmercifully.' In order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed he said the RAF should announce these raids in advance thus allowing civilian evacuation to take place. 'A Medical Psychologist' took up the theme that seems to fascinate Anglo-Saxons, the Teutonic character. The conclusion this correspondent reached was that German morale was extremely susceptible: 'they [the authorities] don't seem to realise that what merely stiffens our backs flattens a German'. Seeing as this was the case the best thing to do was to 'whip them as they have whipped us'. 'There must be thousands in this country', wrote B.M. Maynard, 'who feel with me that until the people of Germany themselves are made to feel and suffer what they are willing to make others suffer it will be a very long time before we can shatter the prestige which the Nazi regime continues to enjoy'. G.L. Braidwood added that: 'Civilian morale is the most important of all strategic objectives in this war and may ultimately be the crucial one ... Berlin and Munich in ruins would shake Nazism more profoundly than the next twelve month's bombing of "military targets".'⁴³

Such views cannot be dismissed lightly, as has often been the case by those anxious to prove the British were not interested in reprisal raids on Germany. Winston Churchill himself publicly encouraged a spirit of reprisals and revenge. On 14 July 1941, he reviewed the London fire and civil defences services in Hyde Park and then attended a luncheon at County Hall. His speech referred to what the people of Britain and other nations had suffered under Nazi bombers. He then proclaimed that:

If tonight the people of London were asked to cast their vote as to whether a convention should be entered into to stop the bombing of all cities the overwhelming majority would cry, 'No, we shall mete out to the Germans the measure and more than the measure they have meted out to us' [The Decca recording of this speech reveals a good deal of table-rapping and noises of assent when this line is delivered].⁴⁴

In the spring of 1942, when the war news was evermore bleak, the British people demanded a way of hitting back. Disaster piled on disaster. It was the blackest period of the war. There was the debacle of the 'Channel Dash' and the collapse of Singapore. The newspapers in turn were filled with a mixture of anger, indignation and resignation, as was much of the country. The leader of the *Daily Mirror* announced on 13 February 1942, 'WE CAN LOSE!'⁴⁵ The Ministry of Information's Home Intelligence Weekly Report for 16–23 February noted that the public felt that it had been 'the blackest week since Dunkirk'.⁴⁶ There was, however, a key difference. Dunkirk had produced a sense of solidarity. This time the mood was of recrimination and introspection. For the newspapers and the public enough was enough. The war had to be fought by new men with new ideas or else. For too long Britain had suffered from its Blimps. The war had to be prosecuted not as a gentleman's game, but with all the ruthlessness and dedication of the Nazis. Right could only be made mighty by the correct application of every energy, and it did not matter too much whether the British sense of sportsmanship was overridden in all this. Dear old Blighty might cease to exist if it remained a matter not of whether you won or lost but how you played the game. February 1942 finally proved that Winston Churchill had been absolutely right in May 1940: 'Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival.'⁴⁷

The 'Harris Effect' and the Dresden Controversy

When the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief Bomber Command, Sir Arthur Harris, mounted his first major attack against Lübeck in April 1942, the havoc he wrought on that city gratified the British public. The *Daily Express* displayed aerial photographs of the smouldering ruins and crowed: 'This is what happened to the city of Lübeck, where 150,000 Germans live and work, on the night last month when the RAF decided to render an English translation of the word "blitz"'. No city in all Britain ever suffered so much in a single attack.⁴⁸ As new Lancasters began to stream off the production line in August 1942, *Movietone* quoted Harris, 'no part of the Reich is safe'.⁴⁹

In May 1942, when Harris launched his first 1,000 bomber raid on Cologne, the atmosphere was highly charged. The *Express* headline read: 'The Vengeance Begins!'⁵⁰ The newsreels also had a field day. *Gaumont* reminded its viewers of the just retribution the Germans were receiving – its item was titled '1000. RAF Lets Hitler have it, right on the chin!'

Do you remember how those jackbooted German troops marched over Cologne Bridge to re-occupy the Rhineland in 1936? That for the world was the rebirth of German lust for bloodshed and conquest. It's poetic justice that it should be Cologne that got the first raid of the Thousand Plan. What's coming to the Nazis in Germany is what they would do to us if they could: and still will, if they can ... Never forget – it was Hitler's Germany that started this: we never wanted it: and since our would-be peacemakers, for all their trying, failed to keep the peace, let the men of war get peace back again in the only possible way ... the hard way.

Thanks, Bomber Command! You're doing a grand job: this was Cologne, making war with factories: but the RAF has thrown a spanner in the works.⁵¹

When Hamburg was attacked in July 1943, an awful firestorm was created. *Movietone News* reported: 'The second largest city of the Reich is being liquidated in a series of record attacks by the RAF.'⁵² This hardly reveals much squeamishness about the campaign.

An even bigger publicity coup was scored with the dambusters raid of March 1943. 'Huns get a flood blitz/Torrent rages along Ruhr' proclaimed the banner headline in the *Daily Mirror*; 'Floods roar down Ruhr Valley' met the readers of the *Daily Express*.⁵³ Across the Atlantic the *New York Times* announced: 'RAF Blasts 2 Big Dams in Reich; Ruhr Power Cut, Traffic Halted As Floods Cause Death and Ruin.'⁵⁴ For *The Times* in London, it was a moment of well-deserved retribution: 'Only now are the German people beginning to pay the penalty of their own leaders' crimes – the bombs rained on Warsaw in 1939 without so much as a declaration of war, and in 1940 on the open and defenceless city of Rotterdam.'⁵⁵ Operation Chastise had lived up to its name and achieved legendary status within hours of its completion.

Harris's campaign against Berlin, which raged from the autumn of 1943 through to the spring of 1944, brought equal levels of glee at the thought of the misery heaped on the German people. The *Mirror* noted that 'in about thirty minutes a load nearly six times as big as the heaviest tonnage ever dropped on London in a night was unleashed'.⁵⁶ *British Movietone* also picked up on this statistic, and referred to the 'heavy saturation bombing of Berlin'.⁵⁷ And in March 1944, it trumpeted a new record of tonnage dropped

in one night. Berlin was ‘the most bombed city in the world’, according to the *Sketch*.⁵⁸ A few weeks later it referred to ‘the elimination of the capital of Nazism’ and, a few weeks later still, it succinctly stated that Berlin had suffered ‘an obliteration attack. Just that’.⁵⁹ The raids on Mannheim and Ludwigshafen in February 1944 were covered by *British Paramount News* under the title, ‘How the RAF “Obliterate”’, and the edition revealed how the easily visible water communications made both cities perfect targets for the RAF, a ‘bomber’s dream’, in fact.⁶⁰

Of course, the raid that has become synonymous with Harris and all that is thought most reprehensible about British bombing is that of Dresden. However, Dresden was not a *cause célèbre* at the time. Rather, it was just another raid that gained notoriety after the event thanks to Churchill’s sudden attack of conscience and discomfort at some reports in the US press. In Britain there was hardly a murmur as the British public continued consuming a diet they had become used to. The *Daily Express* told its readers that according to sources in neutral Sweden, the attack on Dresden had ‘brought confusion to southern Germany comparable only with that in the north after the last big raid on Berlin ... Now the Dresden artery is severed, temporarily at least. Railway stations and yards have been demolished, bridges and viaducts blown up, and factories laid in ruins.’⁶¹ The *Sketch* noted that ‘Dresden, capital of Saxony and key control centre in Germany’s defence against Koniev’s land forces, less than seventy miles away, was the principal target of two great blows by the RAF on Tuesday night, and by American airmen yesterday.’⁶² Readers of the *Daily Telegraph* were met by the headline: ‘Non-Stop Air Blows Aid Both Fronts/ 650,000 RAF Fire Bombs on Dresden/ Biggest Day in the West Since Falaise/ Air Fleets Sweep Reich by Day and Night’. The report mentioned German claims that a terror attack had taken place. But this was part of a well-oiled German routine, and the *Telegraph* countered it with the fact that ‘Dresden is desperately needed as a concentration area for troops and to administrative services evacuated from elsewhere in the Reich’.⁶³ The newsreels were equally unrepentant. *British Paramount News* told its viewers that the RAF and American air force had ‘shattered’ Dresden, and added: ‘Dresden lies on both banks of the River Elbe. A city of great beauty in peacetime is now a mass of ruins, one more sacrifice made by the German people to their insane desire for world domination.’⁶⁴ On 5 March 1945, the *Daily Mail* reported that: ‘Dresden was completely wiped out by the massive Allied air blows on February 14 and 16, said the German Overseas News Agency last night ... “Today we can only speak of what once was Dresden in the past tense”’.⁶⁵ But there was hardly any remorse in the rest of the report.

As the allied armies advanced, capturing German cities, the newsreels took the chance to look at the devastation caused by bombing. The

commentaries contained a reflective element, but it was hardly one designed to cause angst in Britain. The ruins of Cologne therefore became, for *British Paramount*, a monument to the righteous anger of the allies:

It lies today a gaunt, fantastic ruin – this once proud city of Cologne. It lies today a symbol of the all-but divine anger of free men, slow to wrath, terrible in vengeance. It is a cemetery – one of the many in Germany today – beneath whose rubble are entombed the crimes, boastings and blood-stained achievements of the Third Reich.⁶⁶

The significance of Dresden, and the haunting, accusing, sight of Germany's devastated cities, is a post-war imposition on British memory.

British Bombing Policy: Criticism and Support

But this does not mean that Bomber Command was immune from criticism at the time. The morality of the British campaign was certainly debated. But the debates on it tended to be confined to the pages of learned journals and the broadsheet newspapers. The interest that historians show in the protests of people like Bishop George Bell and Vera Brittain seems to overstate their significance. When Bell and his fellow bishop, Clifford Woodward of Bristol, objected to British bombing policy, the *Daily Sketch* pointedly reminded them not to interfere in military matters.⁶⁷ The *Sunday Dispatch* was equally strident; it pointed out the bishop's lack of military knowledge: 'He suggested that Britain – fighting with her back to the wall against the greatest gangsters in history – should sacrifice the one weapon which will help her most to victory.'⁶⁸ Richard Stokes, Labour MP for Ipswich and ex-officer of the Great War, also questioned British policy in the House of Commons.⁶⁹ This certainly created a difficulty for the government and the Air Ministry. How was Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air, to answer Stokes' questions on the nature of the British campaign?

The criticism of Bomber Command and the accusation that its policy was both savage and militarily ineffective led to a sharp divergence of opinion as to the most effective reply. Sir Charles Portal, Chief of the Air Staff, was sensitive to charges of indiscriminate bombing. He was most upset to receive complaints about the BBC's coverage of the raid on Leipzig on 20–21 October 1943. Portal wrote to his Deputy Chief of Staff, to Sinclair and to his Director of Publicity:

I understand that a complaint has been made to you that the account apologised for our bombing offensive and attempted to defensively justify what we were doing by reference to marshalling yards of which

the public were tired ... In order to make the matter clearer I have for some time been expounding that the whole of an industrial city is in itself a military objective. Only last Thursday, as a result of special guidance given in regard to the purpose of area bombing, the principal newspapers were full of the damage done to seventeen of Germany's major cities including a direct comparison with the damage suffered at Coventry.⁷⁰

Portal was moving towards a more open explanation of what British bombing entailed, but it was not enough for Harris. Portal's letter provoked Harris into action. He demanded a full statement about British bombing. He demanded a clear admission that civilians were being killed *as a matter of policy*. On 25 October 1943, Harris wrote to Portal and Sinclair:

The aim of the Combined Bomber Offensive and the part which Bomber Command is required by agreed British-US strategy to play in it, should be unambiguously and publicly stated. That aim is the destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers and the disruption of civilised community life throughout Germany.

It should be emphasised that the destruction of houses, public utilities, transport and lives; the creation of a refugee problem on an unprecedented scale; and the breakdown of morale both at home and at the battle fronts by fear of extended and intensified bombing, are accepted and intended aims of our bombing policy. They are not by-products of attempts to hit factories.⁷¹

The British public and the Commons were never going to be given an unambiguous statement along these lines. Instead, the Air Ministry, the Ministry of Information and Sinclair trod a delicate path, claiming that the campaign was aimed at German industry, while allowing the press to hint at the righteous destruction of German lives and property. Such confusion has helped to cloud the memory of the British bombing campaign ever since.

What cannot be doubted is the high regard in which the British people held Bomber Command throughout the war. Perhaps the most amazing example of public support for the RAF, and Bomber Command in particular, was the 'Wings for Victory' week in the spring of 1943. Trafalgar Square was dominated by two Lancasters, and a Stirling was placed in St Paul's churchyard. The response of the public was stunning. Over a million people flooded through Trafalgar Square and then blocked the Strand as they made their way towards St Paul's Cathedral. The *Express* announced 'the Biggest Crowd since the Coronation'. Such was the size of the crowd that the organisers were overwhelmed, people crushed into the tents where civil servants tried to create order from chaos, the system of collecting money

broke down under the strain, meaning that many people were not even given the chance to invest in War Bonds. It fully reveals the commitment of the British people to the RAF and Bomber Command.⁷²

The BBC also achieved one of its greatest successes of the war in a programme about Bomber Command. On 4 September 1943, Wynford Vaughan Thomas accompanied the crew of Lancaster ED586 'F for Freddie', of 207 Squadron piloted by Flight Lieutenant Letford. The recording revealed the 'matter-of-factness' of the crews, and their dedicated determination shone through. Vaughan Thomas stressed the fury of fire, defensive and offensive that covered Berlin: 'That's the city itself. And there in the heart of the glow there goes a red flash – the biggest we've yet seen ... it's pretty obvious as we're coming in now through the searchlight cones that it's going to be hell over the city itself.'⁷³ All the time the drone of the Lancaster engines shuddered in the background along with the odd dull thud of flak and bombs.

The BBC conducted a survey of listeners to the 'Cutting the Skipper' programme. They found that the listening figures were 'exceptionally large for an isolated feature programme'. The appreciation index was 92, which had only been equalled once before by a programme about the Battle of Britain. Listeners were asked whether the live material was worth it considering its technical shortcomings: '95% gave an emphatic affirmative ... 80% considered that the additional material made the programme much more interesting'. The most commonly expressed feeling was of admiration for the crew and, not far short of it, admiration for the BBC men who took part. It is clear from the report that people were thrilled by the realism and felt they had learned something about the dangers involved in bombing. Many expressed the deep impression the stoic, quiet heroism of the crew had made on them. It was noted that very few objected to the recording of a bombing mission. Fewer still expressed sympathy with the Berliners. 'Others expressed great satisfaction to have participated in the sensation of dropping a bomb on Berlin.' 'Retired' called it 'a magnificent programme'; 'Secretary' considered it 'the finest broadcast to date' and 'Civil Servant' said 'a most exciting broadcast and one that would stand repeating'.⁷⁴

Public opinion on bombing itself remained remarkably consistent and actually hints at the fact that the British people had a shrewd idea of the implications of the policy pursued in their name but were shying away from them, taking comfort in the ambiguities of the reportage. Tom Harrison of Mass Observation noted at the height of the blitz that people of bombed cities displayed little obvious desire for revenge, but the elapse of time kindled an appetite for retribution.⁷⁵ In May 1941, the *News Chronicle* published a Gallup survey of attitudes towards bombing which supported

Harrison's understanding. Gallup asked people across the country, 'Would you approve if the RAF adopted a policy of bombing the civilian population of Germany?' The results proved that 'the people of Britain are in favour of reprisal bombing of Germany', but it was not as clear-cut as that conclusion seemed to suggest. It was found that people living in areas away from the main German attacks, in the rural north-west for example, were far more likely to support the idea of reprisals than Londoners. 'It would seem that sentiment in favour of reprisals is almost in inverse ratio to the amount of bombing experienced,' the survey concluded. A survey conducted in December 1940 had found a much more even spread across the country, with 46 per cent saying they approved of reprisals, while 48 per cent disapproved and eight per cent did not know. The ensuing period had the effect of raising by seven per cent for the whole country those in favour of reprisal bombing.⁷⁶

In revealing that most people did not like the idea of reprisals – most people who had actually been bombed, that is – it made no statement about whether people believed all bombing was wrong or thought it was ineffective. Indeed, according to some sources the public had not rejected the idea of reprisals at all. In March 1941, Home Intelligence had reported to Churchill that 'people will want a lot of convincing that really heavy raids on civilian centres in Germany are not our most efficacious weapon'.⁷⁷

In 1944, the *New Statesman* published Mass Observation's survey of opinions on British bombing. It found that in London six out of ten people gave unqualified verbal approval to the raids. Two said they were necessary, but expressed major qualms about their effects on the civilian population of Germany. Only one in ten felt they were too awful to be approved in any way, 'though few go so far as wanting them stopped'. It was found that very few expressed gloating or vengeful sentiments. Only one in six felt that bombing would end the war, but considerably more believed that it would shorten it 'and this is the most usual reason for approval of our raids'. The survey was obviously carried out in the knowledge that British bombing was aimed at civilians, for it was noted that 'an interesting reflection of the depth of guilt felt about bombing *people* is afforded by the extent to which men and women still manage to believe that we are only bombing military targets'. To imply that people were not interested in retribution is wrong, however, for the survey also found that most people wanted Germany dismembered and comprehensive war crimes trials.⁷⁸ Whatever ambiguities surround the public knowledge of, and debate about, British bombing the overwhelming conclusion is that most people wanted it to continue and believed that it was proving effective in some way.

Conclusion

From late 1940, British bombers set out to smash German cities into submission by killing Germans, destroying their houses and ruining their industries. Harris knew it, Portal knew it and Churchill knew it; the crews probably guessed it but they were, in that rather hackneyed but in this case nonetheless true phrase, only carrying out orders. The only difference was that Harris was prepared to admit it to all and sundry.

The British public was presented with many different interpretations of the aerial war and was fed a diet of truths, half-truths and outright lies. The attitude of the newspapers varied only slightly; a reader of the broadsheets may have consumed slightly less lurid reportage, but the information and stance was remarkably similar to that of the tabloids. Later, this allowed the British people and politicians to claim ignorance as to the true nature of strategic air campaign. The British people were told that Germany was going to be ruined from top to bottom. They knew this was the promise of Bomber Command, and their newspapers and newsreels reminded them of this promise on an almost daily basis. Germany was going to have the guts ripped out of it. They knew this too. But some managed to convince themselves that it was going to be done by bombing factories alone. Most did not manage this trick and silently accepted the implications of the policy, probably even rejoiced in it. Some, a very few, yelled out loud against it.

By 1942, the war was very obviously one of national survival. Nazi forces were rampant on the Atlantic. They were preparing to swallow even more chunks of the Soviet Union. They were driving towards the Suez Canal and had pushed their ships through the English Channel under the eyes of the impotent British. In the Far East, Japan had taken Hong Kong, Singapore had fallen, Mandalay was abandoned, Darwin was bombed. It was not a moment for delicate stomachs. Britain needed to win, or else, in Churchill's words, it 'would slip into the abyss of a new dark age' and in that moment of supreme national emergency a force was created which would unleash a terrifying level of violence against the enemy. In the post-war years the British retreated from the animal they had unleashed in themselves and made scapegoats of Harris and his men. This was a fudge, for if there is blame all are guilty.

NOTES

1. Len Deighton, *Bomber* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p.283.
2. Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars: A New History of RAF Bomber Command in the Second World War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), pp. 65, 158–63.
3. *Target for Tonight* has been covered in great detail by James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998) and K.R.M. Short, 'RAF

- Bomber Command's *Target for Tonight* (1941)', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 17 (1997), pp.183–4.
4. Max Hastings, *Bomber Command* (London: Michael Joseph, 1979). It is also worth noting that none of the other major historians of the campaign discuss public attitudes or Bomber Command's publicity in great detail. See the official history, Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Campaign Against Germany, 1939–1945* (London: HMSO, 4 volumes, 1961); Denis Richards, *Hardest Victory, RAF Bomber Command in the Second World War* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994); Richard Overy, *Bomber Command 1939–1945* (London: HarperCollins, 1997).
 5. The best example of this is Stephen A. Garrett, *Ethics and Airpower in World War Two: The British Bombing of German Cities* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993).
 6. Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), p.15.
 7. John Stevenson, *British Society 1914–1945* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp.402–3.
 8. Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.506.
 9. For a history of the Ministry of Information, see Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979).
 10. *Ibid.*, p.26.
 11. See Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p.174.
 12. *Ibid.*, pp.39–40.
 13. A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), pp.403, 431.
 14. For the attitude of newspapers, and the major personalities within Fleet Street, towards the war as a whole see Angus Calder, *The People's War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969). For a fuller discussion of newspaper attitudes to Bomber Command see Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, pp.49–54, 111–20.
 15. Nicholas Reeves, *The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality?* (London: Cassell, 1999), p.156.
 16. *Ibid.*, pp.156–7.
 17. See, for example, *Pathé Gazette*, 4 December 1940, 2 Apr. 1942 and 19 Nov. 1942. See also *British Movietone News*, 12 June 1941 and 21 May 1942.
 18. Arthur Christiansen, *Headlines All My Life* (London: Heinemann, 1961), p.197.
 19. BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading: R34/856/1, report to the Governor General, 25 January 1941.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. See Hastings, *Bomber Command*, pp.251–3.
 23. Public Record Office, London [henceforward PRO], AIR 20/4229, Harris memo. 28 June 1942.
 24. See Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p.9.
 25. *Daily Express*, 5 Sept. 1939.
 26. Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt, *Bomber Command War Diaries* (London: Viking, 1985), p.22.
 27. See *ibid.*, pp.26–7.
 28. *Daily Express*, 19 Dec. 1939.
 29. *Daily Express*, 13 May 1940.
 30. *Daily Express*, 15 May 1940.
 31. See, for example, *Daily Express*, 17 May 1940.
 32. *Daily Mirror*, 18 May 1940.
 33. Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, pp.30–31.
 34. *Daily Telegraph*, 27 Aug. 1940.
 35. *Daily Mail*, 25 Sept. 1940.
 36. *The Times*, 14 Sept. 1942.
 37. *Daily Mail*, 29 Nov. 1943.
 38. *Daily Telegraph*, 21 May 1943.
 39. *Daily Mail*, 10 Sept. 1940, original emphasis.
 40. *Daily Mirror*, 28 Aug. 1940.

41. *Daily Mirror*, 30 Aug. 1940.
42. *Daily Mirror*, 12 Sept. 1940, original emphasis.
43. *Daily Telegraph*, 10 Apr. 1941.
44. Winston S. Churchill, *War Speeches* 3v. (London: Cassell, 1963–64), Vol.2, p.25.
45. *Daily Mirror*, 13 Feb. 1942.
46. Quoted in Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It! The British Cinema in the Second World War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.126.
47. Churchill, *War Speeches*, Vol.1, p.181.
48. *Daily Express*, 25 Apr. 1942.
49. *British Movietone News*, 13 Aug. 1942.
50. *Daily Express*, 1 June 1942.
51. *British Gaumont Newsreel*, 6 Aug. 1942.
52. *British Movietone Newsreel*, 8 June 1942.
53. *Daily Mirror*, 18 May 1943; *Daily Express* 18 May 1943.
54. Quoted in Richard Morris, *Guy Gibson* (London: Penguin, 1995), p.175.
55. *The Times*, 18 May 1943.
56. *Daily Mirror*, 17 Feb. 1944.
57. *British Movietone News*, 29 Nov. 1943.
58. *Daily Sketch*, 25 Nov. 1943.
59. *Daily Sketch*, 17 Feb. 1944.
60. *British Paramount News*, 24 Feb. 1944.
61. *Daily Express*, 14 Feb. 1945.
62. *Daily Sketch*, 14 Feb. 1945.
63. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 Feb. 1945.
64. *British Paramount News*, 22 Feb. 1945.
65. *Daily Mail*, 15 Mar. 1945.
66. *British Paramount News*, 22 Mar. 1945.
67. *Daily Sketch*, 19 May 1941.
68. *Sunday Dispatch*, 18 May 1941.
69. See Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p.117.
70. PRO: AIR 2/7852, Portal letter to Sinclair, 26 Oct. 1943.
71. *Ibid.*, Harris letter, 25 Oct. 1943.
72. *Daily Express*, 8 Mar. 1943.
73. BBC Written Archives, File LR/2094.
74. *Ibid.*
75. Tom Harrisson, *Living Through the Blitz* (London: Penguin, 1990 edn), pp.314–16.
76. *News Chronicle*, 2 May 1941.
77. Quoted in Michael Balfour, *Propaganda in War, 1939–1945: Organisations, Policies and Publics in Britain and Germany* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1979), p.201.
78. *New Statesman*, Vol.27, No.677, 12 Feb. 1944.