Key Topic 2: Churchill as wartime Prime Minister

2.4 The bombing of Germany

“The German people entered this war under the rather childish delusion they were going to bomb everyone else, and nobody was going to bomb them.’

Sir Arthur Harris at beginning of his bombing campaign

Although Fighter Command had stolen the limelight during the Battle of Britain, steadily Bomber Command became the dominant force within the air force. Its work, particularly under Sir Arthur Harris, was the most controversial aspect of the British war effort.

Chamberlain and Hitler in first months of the war had avoided bombing anything other than military objectives, fearful of starting a tit for tat campaign if civilian targets were struck.

However, by 1940, and with Churchill as prime minister, the situation had evolved. On 24 August 1940, when the Luftwaffe (against Hitler’s orders) dropped bombs on London, Churchill was keen to retaliate. As Best put it, Churchill was ‘enthusiastic [about] the capability of long-range bombers… it was predictable that... he would unconditionally back Bomber Command to take the war to Germany, especially after the Luftwaffe had begun so emphatically to bring it to England’. It is important to add, however, that Churchill did not believe bombing alone could secure victory.

Churchill knew the rules of war. He did not believe outright civilian bombing – such as that seen in the Spanish Civil War – was justifiable. But World War II was not a traditional, limited war, with clear lines between civilians and soldiers. Germany had put their economy on a war footing and thus the scope of what was a legitimate target could, in the eyes of Churchill, be reasonably widened to include
manufacturing and communication centres. **It had to be accepted, therefore, that civilians would become involved.**

Arguably, all-out submarine warfare, or an effective naval blockade, was similar: starving the people who were driving the war effort.

Churchill’s enthusiasm for bombing stemmed not just from giving the Germans a taste of their own medicine, but also to let the occupied peoples know that they had not been forgotten. Similarly, once Germany invaded the Soviet Union, it also allowed Churchill to tell Stalin that Britain was doing **something** to weaken the German war effort.

In the first twelve months of the war the Air Ministry claimed it was hitting its targets and having great success. However, in 1941 **Lord Cherwell (Lindemann)** made an intervention. He claimed that the numbers Bomber Command were producing were wrong and that night time bombing was **so inaccurate as to be having virtually no impact on Germany’s war effort whatever**. Despite the protests of the bomber chiefs, Churchill preferred his adviser’s information. A shift in policy was required.

**In February 1942, Sir Arthur Harris** was put in charge of Bomber Command and changed its strategy. Rather than attempting to bomb specific targets, Harris deployed **area bombing** instead. Best describes it:

Instead of aiming at particular targets and often missing them, the object now was to **drop bombs within particular areas which they could hardly miss**. These areas, it was presumed, could in a **double sense be described as industrial: they would contain factories, railway yards and other economic targets, and they would contain the homes of the people who worked in those places.**

At the outset of the bombing campaign, Harris commented:

> The German people entered this war under the rather **childish delusion** they were going to bomb everyone else, and **nobody was going to bomb them**. At Rotterdam, London, Warsaw and half a hundred other places, they put their rather naive theory into operation. **They sowed the wind, and now, they are going to reap the whirlwind.**

One of the effects of this new policy, as Cherwell (Lindemann) put it, was that people would be ‘**dehoused and demoralised**’. This was euphemistic: he meant many civilians would likely be killed. Nonetheless, from 1942 to 1945, Bomber Command’s approach was legitimised by the claim it was damaging the war effort.

Its impact is hard to measure. Historian Richard Overy, an expert in the subject, judges it thus:

> The important consequence of the bombing was not that it failed to stem the increase in arms production, but that **it prevented the increase from being very considerably greater than it was**. [The] amount of war material that Germany might have been able to produce for the crucial battles of 1944 and 1945 without bombing would have meant a longer and far more costly battle for
the final defeat of fascism, and might have made necessary the use of atomic weapons in Europe as well.

Similarly, Best argues that whilst bombing was not decisive, it nonetheless contributed to success. Roberts echoes this point, noting that although German arms production increased in 1943, ‘it did not do so at anything like the rate it would have otherwise’.

**How justifiable was the bombing campaign?**

There remain many moral questions around the bombing campaign. So many civilians and cities were utterly destroyed that it is easy to question whether it was disproportionate and barbaric. Indeed, Churchill, after watching one Air Ministry film, burst out: ‘*Are we beasts? Have we taken this too far?’*

As early as April 1942, Sir Charles Portal, Chief of Air Staff (and therefore Harris’s senior) updated the Defence Committee about four consecutive days of raids on Germany. Churchill responded: ‘*Don’t make too much of this in the Press* – we’re hitting them three times as hard.’ This would seem to suggest Churchill was worried about inviting criticism from liberals and the Church (who 6 months later started criticising him anyway).

However, during the early stages of the war there was limited debate about whether ‘de-housing’ the enemy by bombing workers’ homes should be considered a war crime.

Nonetheless, the attack on Dresden in February 1945 did provoke particular outcry. The explosives and incendiaries dropped by the second wave of bombers created a citywide firestorm and although the death count is hard to accurately ascertain, the best estimations are around 25,000 lives lost. Many thought it was an example of British bombing gone too far.

At a dinner at Chequers, Jock Colville asked Harris about the effect of the Dresden raid. Harris replied: ‘*Dresden? There is no such place as Dresden.*’

Not long after the Dresden attacks, in March 1945, Churchill sent a (now famous) minute to the Chiefs of Staff. It read:

> It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed. Otherwise we shall come into control over an utterly ruined land... I feel the need for more precise concentration upon military objectives, such as oil and communications behind the immediate battle-zone, rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction, however impressive... The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing.

Many have interpreted this as an attempt by Churchill to distance himself from the Dresden raid and shift blame onto Harris. But as Roy Jenkins points out, in January 1945 Churchill gave Harris *a largely free*
hand to unleash terror on Berlin and eastern German cities, leading to the obliteration of Dresden by some 1,200 British and US aircraft.’

After the war, Churchill conceded that bombing ‘did go on too long, and I pointed it out to the COS’, although pointing out something is not the same as intervening to prevent it.

Notably, Churchill also wrote in a letter after the war saying that Harris ‘should be very careful in all that he writes not to admit that we ever did anything not justified by the circumstances and the actions of the enemy in the measures we took to bomb Germany’.

In a 1977 interview with the BBC, Harris said he would have ‘destroyed Dresden again’.

‘Bomber’ Harris

Harris had a lot of influence with Churchill and was frequently received at Chequers (unlike Alan Brooke). Indeed, an official history of the war described their relationship thus:

Never, indeed, in British history had such an important Commander-in-Chief been so continuously close to the centre of government power as Sir Arthur Harris was to Mr Churchill.

Churchill’s support of Harris can be seen in a moment in 1944. Charles Portal, Chief of Air Staff (Harris’s only superior other than Churchill) directed Harris to move away from area bombing and focus on oil and transportation targets. Harris refused and defied Portal to sack him. He did not. From that moment, only Churchill had the power to intervene – and he never did.

Indeed, Best argues that it was unsurprising that Churchill supported Bomber Command throughout the war:

He got satisfaction from contemplating the initiators of city bombing being repaid in their own coin; ‘tasting and gulping each month a sharper dose of the miseries they have showered upon mankind’. There was nothing wrong with retribution. He believed the British public demanded it. He was sure Stalin appreciated it. Ever anxious to keep Stalin sweet, he was thankful that Bomber Command enabled him to claim that Britain was doing something that could broadly be understood to weaken the German resistance to the Russian offensives.
Harris was known by his men as ‘Butch’ Harris. This has since been used by some to claim he was despised by his men. Actually, it referred to his seeming **indifference to the losses** his aircrews were suffering.

Sir Arthur Harris remains a controversial figure. After the war, Harris was the only senior commander **not to receive a peerage**. Churchill, in his **victory speech on 13 May 1945**, made no reference to Bomber Command, nor did he cover its role in much detail in his war memoirs. Indeed, it was only in 1992 (and against the protests of many in Germany and well as in England) that a statue was finally unveiled to commemorate Harris. The Queen Mother, who unveiled it, was jeered by protesters shouting ‘Harris was a war criminal’. The statue has been vandalized in the past and is now kept under **24-hour surveillance** to deter similar further acts.

In 2019, a memorial of Bomber Command in Green Park, London, was covered in paint as an act of vandalism. This was the fourth such incident in just six years.