

LONDON'S BLITZ AND DRESDEN'S FIRESTORM: BRITAIN'S BOMBING INITIATIVE AS A RESPONSE TO GERMANY'S *BLITZKRIEG* TACTICS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Both Britain and Germany participated in aerial bombing initiatives in the Second World War. Germany developed its bombing technique after a failed attempt to invade Britain using the cooperative land, sea, and air Blitzkrieg method, resorting to bombarding the opponent with aerial power instead. Britain engaged in retaliatory bombings on Germany. Both nations targeted cities dense with civilian populations to crush morale while disguising this controversial motive by attempting to strike at strategic points to hinder enemy advancement as well. As Blitzkrieg regressed into a campaign of aerial terror in British airspace, Britain's bombing initiative evolved into the firebombing of Germany. Neither effort was especially helpful or efficient considering the entire war as they were both insufficiently supported by other military campaigns to be a key factor of either country's advancement.

Among the damage and tension that remained throughout Europe after the First World War, nations were attempting to rebuild their countries and reconstruct their defenses. When another war did come only 21 years later, both sides were equally unprepared. The Second World War began in 1939 with a *sitzkrieg*, no overt aggression from any participating nations; Britain was obtaining supply agreements and Germany was strategizing its first offensive. The Allies were less prepared for war due to the economic collapse resulting from the Great Depression in the interwar period. At the same time, Germany was able to build up its military power through its disobedience of the Versailles Treaty coupled with appeasement from Allied countries. Because the Allies had focused on restoring their economies, Germany took advantage of the chance to build up its military strength and strategy. Germany had developed a tactic called *blitzkrieg* that utilized strategic and technological advancements that had been made through the First World War and

the industrious 1920s. *Blitzkrieg* consisted of extreme military cooperation as airpower would support both ground troops and heavy artillery in a swift, pointed offensive.¹ This strategy “intended to leave an enemy psychologically dazed and disorganized”.² *Blitzkrieg*’s most notable aspect was its heavy reliance on aerial attacks. The attacks set the stage for Germany and Britain’s mutual bombing initiatives that transitioned from tactical, targeted attacks to morale-crushing “city busting”.³ Britain, after experiencing the effects of this aerial-only technique firsthand on Germany’s account, adopted it from the enemy; when it was used on its own, it quickly devolved on both sides into a spectacle of firepower and resources rather than a depiction of effective advancement.

Germany’s successful implementation of *blitzkrieg* in 1940 ended the *sitzkrieg* and led to Axis occupation of the Netherlands, Belgium, and France.⁴ Britain was left extremely vulnerable to a direct German attack.⁵ As Germany conquered the north of France, Allied troops were cornered at Dunkirk. To prove the significance of the German Luftwaffe and destroy British morale, Germany opted to counter any Allied evacuation attempt using only airpower.⁶ Though the Luftwaffe was unsuccessful in stopping the evacuation or demoralizing Britain, its presence demonstrated the growing importance of aerial warfare in the Second World War. Germany’s next plan to advance across the English Channel and into Britain was dubbed Operation Sea Lion; it necessitated the substantial use of the Luftwaffe to clear a path for the implementation of *blitzkrieg*.⁷ Though the Luftwaffe far outnumbered the Royal Air Force (RAF) and targeted their bases in an attempt to gain total control of the airspace during the Battle of Britain, the RAF was extremely determined in fighting off the enemy and won the Battle, thwarting Operation Sea Lion.⁸ However, Britain’s victory did not stop the Luftwaffe from commencing bombing initiatives on London, known as the Blitz.⁹ Not only were RAF resources, factories, and the city of London targeted, but later on, industrial cities like Coventry and provincial cities like Canterbury were hit hard to destroy war production and Allied morale, respectively.^{10, 11} Britain was in need of an offensive tactic to successfully counter the continuous, widespread German bombings.

¹Roberts, "Hitler's Lightning Strike," 18.

²Taylor "Blitzkrieg."

³Lawler, "Dresden: The Fire Last Time," 119.

⁴Byrne, "World War II: European Theatre."

⁵Gross, "Royal Air Force."

⁶Byrne, "World War II: European Theatre."

⁷Gross.

⁸Gross.

⁹Byrne.

¹⁰Gross.

¹¹Lawler, 118.

In response to the many blitzes that Britain had to endure, Britain assigned its Bomber Command to commence its own retaliatory blitzing initiatives on Germany to destroy German morale and war industry while supporting Allied advancement. Britain was greatly affected by the bombings that targeted the nation's civilian populations and its citizens insisted on retribution. Considering the bombing of Dresden specifically, Britain chose the city as a target because it served as a refuge for civilians escaping the destruction of the Russian advancement.¹² Britain explicitly sought to demoralize the Germans while also improving its own citizens' morale by satisfying their demand for revenge.¹³ Even so, this type of "morale bombing" brought up an ethical dilemma often hidden under the tactical reason of bombing to hinder Germany's war production, much like what Germany's initial goal was in the Battle of Britain. Again using Dresden as a primary example, the city's large consumer industry had been reassigned the task of war production.¹⁴ Dresden was also considered a central communications zone and transport location for the German Wehrmacht.¹⁵ In terms of targeting civilian populations, due to the cities' critical features, Britain's area bombing was often portrayed as a strategic endeavour to halt both German supplies and troops from reaching the front lines to advance. Britain's bombing was also motivated by aiding Russia's westward advancement in Germany's two-front war. Britain's Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee suggested that Russia's involvement was crucial to ending the war as quickly as possible and that attacks on eastern German cities, including Dresden, could aid the ally while creating chaos and confusion between refugees and troop movement behind German lines.¹⁶ Britain considered the mission of its Bomber Command as pivotal to destroying German morale and military efforts while also directly furthering the Allied agenda. Germany's *blitzkrieg* tactics in English airspace had greatly influenced the future of Britain's course of strategic action in the war as large-scale area bombing became the preferred method of destruction.

The Battle of Britain demonstrated the necessity for RAF involvement in Allied defense, but the relentless bombings afterwards in both Britain and Germany showed the tactical aerial aspect of *blitzkrieg* regress into the madness of area bombing. Fearful of another drawn-out war like the one only a quarter century ago, the concept of total war consumed the minds of Allies and Axis alike as constraints and ethics surrounding aerial targeting had weakened.¹⁷ Thinking from the perspective of total war, "incendiary bombs [which] were indiscriminate regarding

¹²Lawler, 119.

¹³Lawler, 122.

¹⁴Biddle, "Dresden 1945: Reality, History, and Memory," 424.

¹⁵Lawler, 119.

¹⁶Biddle, 426.

¹⁷Biddle, 429.

specific targets . . . became the weapon of choice for widespread destruction.”¹⁸ In response to the Coventry bombings, Britain struck the German city of Mannheim, largely populated by civilians.¹⁹ When it came to “morale bombing”, Britain had perfected the strategy that Germany had introduced and used it in unison with other Allied efforts.²⁰ However, the RAF and Bomber Command suffered extreme losses in their effort to stop German advancement.²¹ Due to total war, the area bombing increased in intensity in the last years of the Second World War.²² Coupled with American aerial power that targeted war industry, the effects of the raids were proportionate and noticeable, but Bomber Command’s solo efforts were physically ineffective.²³ The firebombing of Dresden took place in the last year of the war for the three reasons mentioned previously, but the destruction of Dresden itself did not accomplish much for the Allies, like most other area bombings that Britain initiated. It cost Britain lives and resources that could have served more productively elsewhere.²⁴ Dresden was referred to by Churchill himself as “mere acts of terror and wanton destruction”²⁵ and raised questions of morality that were to be explored and revamped in the style of American military-objective targeting if the war had gone on longer. Aside from the mostly insignificant nature of the Dresden firebombings regarding Allied victory, Dresden and similar Bomber Command missions raised concerns over ethics and morality that overshadowed any headway the efforts did achieve. Considering the large scope of the area bombings, Britain did accomplish some destruction of German wartime industry. However, the primary goal for the attacks was retribution for German attacks on Britain, as proven by the cities and civilians targeted. The bombings did contribute to some amount of Allied advancement when they were paired with Allied ground troops and American aerial support, but the precision of the *blitzkrieg* strategy that is so crucial for its success disintegrated in favour of retaliation. Instead of using the strategy to quickly overcome the enemy, it was extensively modified and, in turn, perpetuated the devastating effects of total war.

After Germany’s showcase of power in 1940 to end the *sitzkrieg*, Britain was in need of effective strategies to overcome Germany’s advancement. Germany’s adaptation of *blitzkrieg* once Operation Sea Lion was cancelled dominated the aerial warfare practices of both Axis and Allies for the duration of the war. The precision tactic transformed into large-scale area bombings that served the

¹⁸Lawler, 118.

¹⁹Lawler, 118.

²⁰Kampmark, "Among the Dead Cities," 270.

²¹Ramsden, "Churchill and the Germans," 136.

²²Lawler, 118.

²³Grayling, A. C., *Among the Dead Cities*, 250.

²⁴Ramsden, 136.

²⁵"Prime Minister’s Personal Telegram Serial No D.83/5," Winston Churchill to Hastings Ismay, March 28, 1945.

controversial purpose of crushing morale rather than destroying critical resources. Both sides performed “city busting” attacks on the other: Germany in Britain and Britain in Germany.²⁶ German targeting of city centers in London and other populated areas under English skies encouraged Britain to reciprocate the actions, and Britain proceeded by initiating firebombing raids in both industrious and provincial German cities. Once the strategy deviated from traditional *blitzkrieg*, it proved much less efficient and served the purpose of terrorizing rather than advancing the war. Only when area bombing was supported by ground troops and strategy-oriented aerial targeting, as *blitzkrieg* dictates, was there a chance of achievement, proven by Russia’s advancement westward into Germany. The RAF was able to defend itself during the Battle of Britain when attacked only by the Luftwaffe, so naturally, an area-bombing-only campaign would not succeed in Germany either, explaining the need for further Allied support. Britain realized this by the end of the war, after Dresden, as the ethics of area-bombing and population targeting were finally addressed. However, support from other Allies had already proven to be enough in defeating Germany as the war ended only six months after the devastating attacks on Dresden.

²⁶Lawler, 119.

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