

CHURCHILL AND BOMBING POLICY

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Aviation, air power and bombing were part of Churchill's life for half a century. As a thirty-four-year-old member of the British Government's Committee of Imperial Defence, he urged his colleagues – all of them older and more senior than he – to make contact with the Wright Brothers in the United States, in order to be at the cutting edge of the new science of aviation – in its military implications. Churchill told the committee, on 25 February 1909: "The problem of the use of aeroplanes was a most important one, and we should place ourselves in communication with Mr. Wright, and avail ourselves of his knowledge."

This was not just a passing interest. In 1913, while First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill learned to fly. He also formed an air arm of the Royal Navy, the Royal Naval Air Service, which was in action, as a bombing force, from the outbreak of war in 1914. On 22 September 1914, at Dunkirk, he inspected his Royal Naval Air Service pilots. Three squadrons, of four aircraft each, were ready to attack. Three of the pilots were men who, a year earlier, had taught him to fly. The head of the squadrons, Commander Samson, noted in his log that Churchill was 'very insistent on attacking German lines of communication'.

This was done: German vehicles, troops and stores were bombed from the air as they attempted to advance on the Channel ports and cut off the British Expeditionary Force, then seeking to halt the German advance on Belgian soil. The German Zeppelin sheds at Düsseldorf and Cologne were also bombed, although many of the bombs failed to explode.

On 24 September 1914 German Zeppelins dropped bombs on Ostend, then an open town of no military significance. Churchill proposed as a reprisal dropping an equal number of bombs on the German city of Aachen, or possibly, he suggested, dropping bombs in a ratio of sixteen to ten. Churchill explained to the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey: ‘After this had been done, I should explain the reason and announce that this course will be invariably followed in the future. This is the only effective way of protecting civilians and non-combatants. Care will of course be taken to aim at barracks and military property....’

Grey turned down Churchill’s suggestions. His argument was two-fold: ‘They have more aircraft than we have, and it will only put us on the same plane morally as they are.’ Grey’s authority was considerable, and no reprisal raids took place.

On Christmas Day 1914, while for a few hours the guns fell silent on the Western Front and British and German forces fraternized, Churchill’s Royal Naval Air Service experimental seaplane carrier *Engadine* (a converted Channel packet steamer) launched its four seaplanes on a bombing raid on the German naval base at Cuxhaven. (Renamed *Corregidor*, and sold by Britain to the United States Navy, *Engadine* survived until December 1941 when she was mined by the Japanese in Manila Bay).

From July 1917 to September 19, as Minister of Munitions - with German bombers striking at London, killing 800 civilians, and sending 300,000 people in panic to shelter in the underground stations - Churchill regarded the bombing of Germany, and with it the production of bombs and bombing aircraft, as a priority. As he explained to his Director of Aircraft Supplies, General Barnes, on 15 November 1917: ‘Hitherto both the Naval and Military Authorities have altogether underrated

bombing possibilities, and steadily discouraged the construction of bombing machines.’

Under Churchill at the Ministry of Munitions, all that changed. As he told the War Cabinet on 5 March 1918, at a crisis time on the Western Front: The results of the conflict would be decisive if either side ‘possessed the power to drop not five tons but five hundred tons of bombs each night on the cities and manufacturing establishments of its opponents.’

Churchill undertook, in the summer and autumn of 1918, while the outcome of the struggle on the battlefield, was still far from certain, to make the munitions plans needed for the war of 1919. To do this, 3,000 American aircraft engines were to be bought, as he explained to the War Cabinet: ‘particularly for the bombing of Germany’.

On 18 August 1918, Churchill sent his French opposite number, Louis Loucheur, a written appeal for closer Anglo-French co-operation in the design and manufacture of long-distance bombing planes. It was essential, Churchill wrote, to draw up plans in such a way as to ensure that, during the autumn, Britain and France would be able ‘to discharge the maximum quantity of bombs upon the enemy’. Churchill reminded Loucheur of: ‘...all these months immense preparations to bomb Germany - not only the Rhine but Westphalia - and having our organization and plant perfected ...’

Churchill added: ‘This is the moment to attack the enemy, to carry the war into his own country, to make him feel in his own towns and in his own person something of the havoc he has wrought in France and Belgium. This is the moment, just before the winter begins, to affect his morale, and to harry his hungry and dispirited cities without pause or stay. While the new heavy French machines ... will

strike by night at all the nearer objectives, the British, who alone at the moment have the experience, apparatus and plans already made to bomb not only by night but in broad daylight far into Germany, must be assured of the means to carry out their role.’

Some of the bombers that Churchill bought, built and armed, were already in action in October 1918, attacking German railway junctions, steel works, chemical factories and aerodromes. Among the cities reached were Metz, Frankfurt, Coblenz, Bonn, Mainz and Karlsruhe.

As Secretary of State for War and Air from 1919 to 1921, and then as Colonial Secretary in 1921 and 1922, Churchill authorized the use of aerial bombardment on three occasions: first, in 1920, against the IRA. Repelled by Sinn Fein’s act of terror, Churchill suggested on 1 July 1920 to his advisers at the War Office that if a large number of Sinn Feiners were drilling, with or without arms, and could be located and identified from the air, ‘I see no objection from a military point of view, and subject of course to the discretion of the Irish government and of the authorities on the spot, to aeroplanes being dispatched with definite orders in each particular case to disperse them by machine-gun fire or bombs, using of course no more force than is necessary to scatter and stampede them.’

Secondly, Churchill authorized bombing against insurgents in Iraq, when, as he reported to the Cabinet: ‘The enemy were bombed and machine gunned (from the air) with effect by aeroplanes which co-operated with our troops.’ Continuing to use the Royal Air Force in Iraq would entail, as Churchill explained to Air Marshal Trenchard, ‘the provision of some kind of asphyxiating bombs calculated to cause disablement of some kind but not death...for use in preliminary operations against turbulent tribes.’

Churchill was in no doubt that gas could be successfully employed against the Kurds and Iraqis, using gas bombs, he explained to his advisers on 29 August 1920, 'which would inflict punishment upon recalcitrant natives without inflicting grave injury upon them.' During the debate within the War Office, Churchill minuted: 'I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poison gas against uncivilised tribes.' Churchill argued that gas, fired from ground-based guns or dropped from aircraft, would cause 'only discomfort or illness, but not death' to dissident tribesmen. Warned that the gas might 'kill children and sickly persons, more especially as the people against whom we intend to use it have no medical knowledge with which to supply antidotes', Churchill remained unimpressed, stating that the use of gas, a 'scientific expedient,' should not be prevented 'by the prejudices of those who do not think clearly'.

In the event, gas shells were not dropped from aircraft because of technical difficulties. Regular bombs were dropped, however.

The third use of bombs under Churchill's immediate post-war authority was in Palestine. On 5 May 1921, following an Arab attack on the Jewish town of Petakh Tikvah, Churchill authorized the dropping of bombs to drive away the attackers.

On 14 September 1939, eleven days after Britain declared war on Germany, Churchill - once more First Lord of the Admiralty - argued in favour of making 'the fullest possible use of the offensive power of our air Force' by bombing what he called 'strictly military objectives', such as the synthetic petrol plants in Germany that were vital to her prosecution of the war, and which, at the same time, were, at his insistence, 'isolated from the civil population.' The Secretary of State for Air, Sir

Kingsley Wood, opposed this because of Britain's 'small and inferior air force': something Churchill had fought against in vain for the previous six years.

In April 1940, it was the failure to embark on any sustained bombing raids against Germany since September 1939 that was one of the main criticisms of the Watching Committee of Peers and Members of Parliament that was to play a major part in the growing demand for the resignation of the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain.

On 12 May 1940, two days after Churchill became Prime Minister – and as German bombers struck at the Dutch port of Rotterdam - the War Cabinet discussed whether it was right 'on moral grounds' to bomb targets in Germany. Summing up the general tenor of the discussion, Churchill told his colleagues: '... we were no longer bound by our previously held scruples as to initiating "unrestricted" air warfare. The enemy had already given us ample justification for retaliation on his country.' But the balance of opinion was against him on the following day, when Neville Chamberlain - a member of Churchill's War Cabinet – opposed bombing military targets in the Ruhr, as it might lead to German retaliation in Britain.

The other argument made on May 13 against action was Britain's air weakness, stressed by the new Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, and the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Cyril Newall. To address this weakness, of which he had warned so strongly in the previous years, Churchill had to devote considerable efforts throughout the summer and autumn of 1940.

The day-to-day course of the war, so often disadvantageous to Britain in the first two years of Churchill's premiership, and Germany's military predominance, determined Churchill's - and the Air Ministry's - bombing policies. At the beginning of July 1940, when invasion seemed imminent, the continuous bombing then taking

place against German oil refineries, aerodromes, and railway marshalling yards had to be curtailed in order to switch bombing resources to avert invasion. The urgent need then, Churchill wrote to Sinclair on July 3, was for ‘bombing the ships and barges in all the ports under German control.’

If invasion could be prevented, the next question was: What would be the best means of taking the war to Germany? To Lord Beaverbrook, the Minister of Aircraft Production, Churchill wrote on 8 July 1940 – in urging him to increase the resources being put into bomber as opposed to fighter production: ‘When I look round to see how we can win the war, I see that there is only one sure path. We have no continental ally which can defeat the German military power.... Should [Hitler] be repulsed here or not try invasion, he will recoil eastward, and we have nothing to stop him. But there is one thing that will bring him back and bring him down, and that is an absolutely devastating, exterminating attack by very heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland.’

Sir Arthur Harris commented to me (on 21 October 1982) about this letter: ‘It was the origin of the idea of bombing the enemy out of the war. I should have been proud of it. But it originated with Winston.’

Norway, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and France had just been overrun by Germany. The United States was neutral. Churchill was trying to imagine a way that might one day destroy the Nazi juggernaut. Unless the Germans could be overwhelmed by aerial bombardment, he explained in this letter to Beaverbrook, ‘I do not see a way through.’

Churchill also felt that it was important for British morale that if German bombers struck at London, British bombers should be able to strike at the German

capital, Berlin, and, as he wrote to Sinclair on July 20, to do so 'next day'. Sinclair replied that this could be done with even less than twenty-four hours notice.

The raids possible then, in the summer of 1940, using the whole of Britain's bomber force, would enable the dropping of 65-70 tons of bombs each night for a week, rising to 150 tons of bombs on alternate nights.

On 24 August 1940 the first German bombs fell in central London; several had already fallen in suburban areas. On the following night, August 25/26, more than eighty British bombers struck, for the first time, at Berlin. There were few casualties on either side, but a deadly confrontation had begun. The next German air raid on London was by day on August 26. Learning of a British bombing raid on Leipzig that same day, Churchill wrote to Sinclair: 'Now that they have begun to molest the capital, I want you to hit them hard, and Berlin is the place to hit them.' While London was being pounded almost every night by German bombers, these smaller raids against Berlin helped raise British morale.

President Roosevelt also contributed to the bombing debate. On 27 September 1940, his advice was passed on to Churchill by Sir Walter Layton, head of one of the British missions in Washington. The President, wrote Layton, 'had always urged that we should bomb Germany everywhere, not merely at a few points.'

Roosevelt's advice was already being taken. As a counter to the continuing German bomber raids on British cities, Churchill had suggested on October 6 what he called 'minor, unexpected, widespread' attacks on 'the smaller German centres' on two or three nights a week, explaining to Sinclair: 'You must remember that these people are never told the truth, and that wherever the Air Force has not been, they are probably told that then German defences are impregnable.'

That September, as German bombers wreaked death and destruction on London and on many other British cities, and with as many as 2,000 British civilians being killed each week, Churchill reiterated to his advisers what had been his view four months earlier: ‘The fighters are our salvation but the bombers alone provide the means of victory. We must therefore develop the power to carry an ever-increasing volume of explosives to Germany, so as to pulverise their entire industry and scientific structure on which the war effort and economic life of the enemy depends, whilst holding him at arm’s length from our island.’

To ensure keeping the Germans ‘at arm’s length’, Churchill kept a careful watch on the build-up of German invasion barges in the Channel ports, and faced criticism in Parliament when bombing raids upon Germany were curtailed in order to bomb the barges. Churchill was also warned by the War Cabinet of criticism that Britain was not ‘hitting back hard enough at Germany in our bombing’, and that this was having an adverse effect of the war effort.

In reply, Churchill pointed out to the War Cabinet that Britain did not have the resources for the scale of bombing that the public wanted, and that British bombers had to take far longer flights to reach their targets. As he pointed out, the German bombers could fly from bases in France across the Channel, whereas, for the British bombers, the industrial cities even of the west of Germany were ten times further away. The people of Britain, Churchill said, ‘must stick it out’.

Each week, Churchill studied the successes of Bomber Command. There were always some. In the week ending 17 October 1940, Bomber Command flew 764 sorties against Channel port barges, naval units assembled in German ports as part of an invasion fleet, and German cities. At Essen, the Krupps work had been bombed on

three nights. At Gelsenkirchen the gasometer, the largest in Europe, had been destroyed.

Against Berlin, where the Soviet Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, was negotiating with his German opposite number, von Ribbentrop, Churchill authorized a special raid. Two years later, when Churchill was in Moscow, Stalin told him of how Ribbentrop was telling Molotov that ‘the British empire was now finished’ and that the time had come to work out the partition of those lands between Germany and Russia.’ At this moment,’ Stalin recounted, ‘the bombers arrived, and Ribbentrop decided to continue the discussion in the dugout. When safely established underground Ribbentrop continued saying that, as he had already mentioned, the British Empire need no longer be taken account of. Molotov interrupted at this point with the awkward question: “Then why are we down here now?”’

Bombing the enemy had to confront many problems. The expansion of British bomber strength from 1940 faced the difficulties of supply and productive capacity. On 20 October 1940 Churchill wrote critically to Sinclair: ‘I am deeply concerned with the non-expansion, and indeed contraction, of our Bomber Force ... according to our present policy. Surely an effort should be made to increase our bomb-dropping capacity...’ Churchill’s minute continued with a series of suggestions for action: ‘... is it not possible to organize a Second Line Bomber Force which, especially in the dark of the moon, would discharge bombs from a considerable and safe height upon the nearest large built-up areas of Germany, which contain military targets in abundance. The Ruhr of course is obviously indicated. The object would be to find easy targets, short runs and safe conditions. How is such a second Line or auxiliary Bomber Force to be improvised during the winter months? Could not crews from the Training Schools do occasional runs? Are none of the Lysander and Reconnaissance

pilots capable of doing some of this simpler bombing, observing that the Army is not likely to be in action unless invasion occurs?’

Churchill’s minute ended: ‘I ask that a whole-hearted effort shall be made to cart a large number of bombs into Germany by a Second Line organization such as I have suggested, and under conditions in which admittedly no special accuracy would be obtained. Pray let me have the best suggestions possible, and we can then see whether they are practical or not.’

Churchill and his advisers were repeatedly forced to consider the urgent needs of war that arose unexpectedly and required new bombing priorities. Throughout April, May and June 1941, the main resources of Bomber Command were needed for Battle of the Atlantic.

In the late summer of 1941, voices were raised against the intensification of the bombing of German cities, and the increasingly heavy German civilian deaths. Churchill defended what was being done. In July 1941, in a public speech in London’s County Hall, he declared: ‘If tonight the people of London were asked to cast their vote whether a convention should be entered into to stop the bombing of all cities...the people of London with one voice would say to Hitler: “You have committed every crime under the sun. Where you have been the least resisted there you have been the most brutal.... We will have no truce or parley with you, or the grisly gang who work your wicked will. You do your worst—and we will do our best. Perhaps it may be our turn soon; perhaps it may be our turn now”.’

The renewed bomber offensive against Germany continued. It was not aimed at civilians. There were two main targets: industrial cities and railway centres. Setbacks were frequent. In a daylight raid on German merchant shipping in Rotterdam at the end of August 1941, seven out of seventeen British bombers were lost. Churchill

wrote to the Chief of the Air Staff, 'While I greatly admire the bravery of the pilots. I do not want them to be pressed too hard. Easier targets giving a high damage return compared to casualties may be more often selected.'

Churchill recognized the bravery of these pilots. 'The devotion and gallantry of these attacks on Rotterdam....' he wrote, 'are beyond all praise. The Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava is eclipsed in brightness by these almost daily deeds of fame.'

Which way to go? In 1941, Sir Charles Portal, Chief of the Air Staff, advocated that entire German cities and towns should be bombed. Portal believed this would quickly bring about the collapse of civilian morale in Germany. Arthur Harris, who became head of Bomber Command in February 1942, agreed. It was he who introduced a policy of area bombing (known in Germany as terror bombing) where entire cities and towns were targeted. Churchill was critical. On 13 January 1942 he told the Defence Committee he was 'sceptical of these cut and dried calculations which showed infallibly how the war could be won' by bombing.

Churchill continued: 'In the early days of the war it had been said that if the Royal Air Force were allowed to launch an attack upon the Ruhr, they would, with preciseness and certitude, shatter the German industry. Careful calculations had been made to show that this could be done. After anxious thought, the attack was eventually made when the Germans invaded the Low Countries, but there had only been a fractional interruption of work in the industries of the Ruhr.'

The entry of the United States into the war in December 1941 created a new dimension for British bombing policy. Churchill understood this at once. Nine days after Pearl Harbor, and five days after Germany declared war on the United States, Churchill noted for his advisers that the arrival in Britain of, say, twenty American

bomber squadrons, ‘... would be the most direct and effective reply to the Declaration of War by Germany upon the United States.’ This was one of Churchill’s main proposals when he met Roosevelt in Washington a week later.

Anglo-American policy, for such it had become included the Far East, where two British possessions, Malaya and Hong Kong, had been attacked simultaneously with Pearl Harbor, and two British warships, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, sunk by Japanese torpedo bombers. On December 20, as Churchill approached the shores of the United States for the first time in his premiership, he noted for his advisers that Allied sea and air power must be built up until it made possible bombing raids on Japan itself. ‘The burning of Japanese cities by incendiary bombs,’ he wrote, ‘will bring home in a most effective way to the people of Japan the dangers of the course to which they have committed themselves and nothing is more likely to cramp the reinforcing of their overseas adventures.’

The newly created Anglo-American Joint Chiefs of Staff had bombing policy as a high imperative. On Christmas Day 1941 in Washington, Churchill and Roosevelt agreed that American bombing squadrons could come over from the United States to Britain ‘and attack Germany from the British Isles.’ British bombers were also being manufactured in the United States in substantial quantities. New technical devices were leading to new tactical and new strategic possibilities. ‘Gee’ the new position finder, came into use in February 1942.

Throughout 1942 the Anglo-American political imperative that dominated Allied thinking was the fear that Germany, which had attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, might overwhelm her, and then turn her increased capacity, including the oil of the Caucasus and the raw materials of the Ukraine, against Britain in the West.

To take the pressure of the Eastern front, Stalin called repeatedly for an Anglo-American landing in North-west Europe – the Second Front. Given the lack of American manpower in Britain, however, and the considerable shortage of landing craft, this was judged not to be realistic until 1943 or even 1944. In place of a Second Front on land, Stalin was offered a Second Front in the air: an Anglo-American bombing offensive so heavy that it would weaken the German offensive power in the East.

This was done despite Churchill's doubts about the effectiveness of such bombing. As he wrote to Sinclair on 13 March 1942: 'You need not argue the value of bombing Germany, because I have my own opinion about that, namely, that it is not decisive, but better than doing nothing, and a formidable method of injuring the enemy.' Sixteen days later, Churchill wrote to Roosevelt: 'We must not let our summer air attacks on Germany decline into a second-rate affair. Everything is ready for your people here, and there are targets of all kinds, from easy to hard, to work up in contact with the enemy.'

At that time a priority target were the German U-boat construction sites, and U-boat bases. On the night before Churchill's message to Roosevelt, 250 British bombers had struck at the U-boat pens in Lubeck, on the Baltic Sea.

The Second Front in the air was extraordinarily effective. By June 1942, British bombing efforts were keeping one half of all German fighter strength away from the Eastern Front. Between July and September 1942 the Royal Air Force dropped 11,500 tons on bombs on Germany: 2,500 tons were on the Ruhr industrial city of Duisburg. Some of these were the new four-ton bomb.

One of Churchill's main tasks as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence was to look ahead, to plan for what lay in the future. Determined to see an even more powerful bomber offensive by the end of 1942, he pressed the Air Ministry – as early as 14 April 1942 - for detailed plans to be made ‘to make sure that the maximum weight of the best type of bombs is dropped on the German cities by the aircraft placed at their disposal’. Crews must be practised in the use of the new ‘blind bombing’ apparatus. Navigators must master new methods of navigation ‘to get them within twelve and fifteen miles of the target’, before the blind bombing equipment came into play. In order to prevent the bombers being immobilized by bad weather, preparations had to be made for ‘adequate runways’, homing devices, fog-clearing gear on the aerodromes, and de-icing and blind-landing equipment on the planes.’

In the spring and early summer of 1942, when the Ruhr became the ‘primary goal’ of British bombing policy, Churchill noted in his memoirs: ‘Dramatic results were achieved’ in the fire-raising attacks on Lübeck and Rostock. Lübeck was bombed on the night of 28/29 March 1942. In the words of Air Marshal Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris, Air Officer Commanding RAF Bomber Command: ‘The main object of the RAF attack on Lübeck was to learn to what extent a first wave of aircraft could guide a second wave to the aiming point by starting a conflagration. I ordered a half an hour interval between the two waves in order to allow the fires to get a good hold.... Lübeck was not a vital target, but it seemed to me better to destroy an industrial town of moderate importance than to toil to destroy a large industrial city.... I wanted my crews to be well, “blooded” as they say in fox hunting, to have a taste of success for a change.’ Lübeck was still ‘an industrial town’, and industrial targets were selected for the bombers.

A high proportion of incendiary bombs were used in the Lübeck raid, in which 304 Germans were killed and 5,000 homes destroyed. In retaliation, the Germans bombed Exeter on 23 April 1942, the first of a series of raids targeting picturesque, historic British cities that were relatively unimportant strategically. Baron Gustav Braun von Sturm, a German propagandist, is reported to have said on the day after the Exeter attack: 'We shall go out and bomb every building in Britain marked with three stars in the Baedeker Guide.' 1,637 British civilians were killed and more than 50,000 houses destroyed in the Baedeker Raids. Among the buildings destroyed were the York Guildhall and the Bath Assembly Rooms.

After the first eight Baedeker raids, the Royal Air Force launched its first 1,000-bomber raid. This was against Cologne, on 30/31 May 1942, when 486 Germans were killed and 13,000 homes destroyed. Churchill telegraphed to Roosevelt: 'I hope you were pleased.... There is plenty more to come.' There was: on June 1, 1,036 British bombers attacked Essen and the Ruhr; 35 bombers were lost.

In August 1942 the Pathfinder Force was formed; by using the latest radar devices to find the target for the bombers, the Pathfinders made Britain's night bombing more accurate. But the effect on German war production and civilian morale was far from what had been hoped. As Churchill later recalled: 'the strength of her economy had been underestimated'.

In August 1942 Churchill flew to Moscow for his first meeting with Stalin. Bombing policy was much on the agenda. Churchill told Stalin that Britain looked upon German morale 'as a military target'. Churchill added: 'We sought no mercy and would show no mercy. We hoped to shatter twenty German cities as we had

shattered Cologne, Lübeck, Düsseldorf and so on.... If need be, as the war went on, we hoped to shatter almost every dwelling in almost every German city.’

This sustained and intensifying Anglo-American Second Front bombing offensive led to more than 100,000 German civilian deaths. On 12 September 1942, Churchill telegraphed to Stalin from London: ‘I thought you might like to know the weight of bombs dropped by the Royal Air Force on Germany since 1st July this year. The total amount from 1st July to 6th September was 11,500 tons. The tonnage dropped on the more important targets was Duisburg 2,500 tons, Düsseldorf 1,250 tons, Saarbrücken 1,150 tons, Bremen and Hamburg 1,000 tons each, Osnabrück 700 tons, Kassel, Wilhelmshaven, Mainz, Frankfurt, all about 500 tons; Nuremberg received 300 tons and there were many lesser tonnages. Included in the bombs dropped were six 8,000-lb bombs and 1,400 4,000-lb bombs. We have found that by using these with instantaneous fuses the bombs do not break up but explode most effectively, so that parachutes are not required.’

The weakening of German morale remained a priority. On 22 October 1942 Churchill told the Chiefs of Staff Committee, which was then planning for the coming bombing offensive, that he was ‘most anxious that there should be no slackening of the bomber effort during the rest of the year, but rather it should be built up’. The Germans were going to have ‘a very trying winter’ and it would ‘ease their minds a great deal if they thought the bombing was easing off.’

Yet Churchill's doubts about bombing policy remained. On 3 December 1942 he told the Chiefs of Staff that great efforts must be made in 1943 to engage the enemy militarily, on land. ‘The idea that all we need to do was to drop bombs on Germany was not enough.’

One long-term effect of Britain's bombing of German cities was to force the German air force on the defensive, turning German aircraft production increasingly turned from bombers to fighters. Churchill later noted: 'This was the beginning of the defeat of the Luftwaffe, and our turning point in the struggle for air supremacy which we gained in 1944, and without which we could not have won the war.'

The Casablanca Conference at the beginning of 1943 raised the whole scale of the Anglo-American bombing offensive. Churchill wanted the American bomber supreme, General Ira C. Eaker, to join Harris in night bombing, in order to reduce the high rate of American daytime casualties, but Eaker told Churchill, at Casablanca on 20 January 1943: 'If the British bombed by night and the Americans by day, bombing them thus around the clock will give the devils no rest. And it will prevent the nightwatchers from going to the factories in the daytime. There are a million men now standing on the west wall to stop our tiny bomber offensive of 100 planes. If it were not for this they would be marshaled into divisions and sent to the Eastern Front.'

In explaining what had been decided at Casablanca, Churchill and Roosevelt wrote jointly to Stalin from Marrakech on 25 January 1943: 'We believe an increased tempo and weight of daylight and night attacks will lead to greatly increased material and morale damage in Germany and rapidly deplete German fighter strength. As you are aware, we are already containing more than half German air force in Western Europe and the Mediterranean. We have no doubt our intensified and diversified bombing offensive, together with the other operations which we are undertaking, will compel further withdrawals of German air and other forces from the Russian front.'

The Casablanca directive set out the aims of the Anglo-American bombing of Germany, and the crucial importance of that bombing for the forthcoming amphibious

cross-Channel landing. The aim of the joint Anglo-American bomber offensive, it stated, was to disrupt German military and industrial production, and create a decline in German morale, as a pre-requisite to a cross-Channel landing.

The success of the Casablanca bombing directive was an integral part of the planning of the amphibious landing, one of several conditions without which that landing would not be able to take place. As part of these conditions Casablanca also set the priority of 'the destruction by air bombardment' of the oil refineries at Ploesti in Romania.

Under the Casablanca Directive, which was issued on 4 February 1943, Britain and the United States would carry out a joint bombing policy: the United States by day, Britain by night. On 11 February 1943, Churchill told the House of Commons that the 'dominant aim' of this Anglo-American bombing policy was 'to make the enemy burn and bleed in every way that is physically and reasonably possible, in the same way as he is being made to bleed and burn along the vast Russian front.'

In March 1943, acting within the Casablanca Directive, and as an essential preliminary to the cross-Channel landing, a four-and-a-half month series of British bombing raids were launched on German industrial targets, principally in the Ruhr. Specific industrial targets related to Germany's war making capacity were chosen for each raid. On 4 March 1943 Churchill informed Stalin that 800 tons of bombs had been dropped on Hamburg during the previous night. These, Churchill explained, were 'very heavy discharges' compressed 'into such short periods', and he added: 'I expect the Nazi experiences will be very severe, and make them less keen about the war than they used to be.' Goebbels' diary confirms that this was so.

These raids were continuous. On the night of March 5/6 986 tons of bombs were dropped on Essen, in an area of two square miles. The Essen raid introduced a new technique: it began with 8 Mosquitoes dropping target indicators using the blind bombing device 'Oboe', followed by twenty-two Pathfinder Force heavy bombers illuminating the target with flares.

The raids on the Ruhr created serious loss for Germany of coal, iron, and crankshafts needed for tanks and armoured vehicles. 100,000 men had to be drafted for repair duties and the German anti-aircraft defences doubled, draining men and anti-aircraft units from the Eastern Front. On the night of March 27/28, 1,050 tons of bombs were dropped on Berlin in fifty minutes, by 395 heavy bombers, for the loss of nine. On the night of April 3/4, 900 tons of bombs were dropped on the Krupp Essen works. On the night of April 5/6, 1,400 tons on Kiel – one of the heaviest discharges of bombs thus far. April 5 saw an American daylight raid on the Renault tank factory in Paris.

Not all the raids went well. After the night raid on Stuttgart on April 19/20. Churchill informed Stalin that 81 bombers and 500 'highly trained personnel' had been lost. But there was to be no let-up. On the May 1-2 night raid in Duisburg the 1,450 tons of bombs dropped was the heaviest yet.

Not only German war production, but also German civilian morale remained a factor in Anglo-American strategic thought. At an Anglo-American conference in Washington in the last week of May 1943, Roosevelt asked for 'occasional raids' on smaller German towns with factories, telling Churchill that it would 'greatly depress the Germans if they felt even the smaller towns could not escape.'

On the afternoon of 25 May 1943, in Washington, Roosevelt and Churchill gave a joint Press Conference. When Roosevelt told the assembled newspapermen that the combination of the day and night bombing of Germany by the United States and British aircraft was achieving ‘a more and more satisfactory result’, Churchill remarked, amid laughter from the journalists: ‘It’s like running a twenty-four-hour service.’

The air weapon, Churchill added, ‘was the weapon these people chose to subjugate the world. This was the weapon with which they struck at Pearl Harbor. This was the weapon with which they boasted – the Germans boasted they would terrorise all the countries of the world. And it is an example of poetic justice that this should be the weapon in which they should find themselves most out-matched and first out-matched in the ensuing struggle.’

In June 1943, Churchill was in dispute with Bomber Harris. During discussions about the need to bomb German strong points before an amphibious landing - as had just happened on the Mediterranean island of Pantelleria - Harris opposed any diversion of the existing bombing effort on German cities. Churchill understood, however, the importance of bombing the blockhouses and shore fortifications before any amphibious landing: such landings were then in prospect both in southern Italy and northern Europe.

Churchill minuted on 14 June 1943: ‘It is essential that full consideration should be given to this newly emerging and important factor. The opinion of C-in-C Bomber Command is influenced by the fact that he wishes everything concentrated on the bombing of Germany, and he would consider the opening of large-scale military

operations in Europe a disaster. This may be natural from his point of view, but we must not allow such localized opinions to obstruct our thoughts.'

There was always the moral aspect of bombing German cities to be considered. Bishop Bell of Chichester had spoken publicly against such bombing. At Chequers on 27 June 1943, after watching a Royal Air Force film of the bombing of the German city of Wuppertal, Churchill was distressed, turning to the Australian representative, Richard Casey, and asking: 'Are we beasts? Are we taking this too far?'

Terror bombing as such had in fact already been abandoned. Less than three weeks before Churchill's comment, the Point-Blank Directive of 10 June 1943 had been issued. This amended the Casablanca Directive in order to give first emphasis to the attack on German fighter forces and the German aircraft industry. The Point Blank targets included, from 29 June 1943, the Peenemunde rocket bomb experimental station on the Baltic, which was bombed with 571 heavy bombers on 17 August 1943, setting back German progress.

Within the final remit of the Casablanca Directive, the first heavy British attack on Hamburg took place on the night of 24/25 July 1943. These Hamburg raids continued until August 3. The first Hamburg raid saw what Churchill later described as '...greater destruction than had ever been suffered by so large a city in so short a time.' The Germans called it 'the great catastrophe'. The German armaments minister, Albert Speer later said if six more cities had suffered the fate of Hamburg, German war production would have broken down.

On 6 November 1943 Churchill was given the figures for the percentage destruction of German cities thus far: Hamburg 74, Cologne 54, Hanover 41, Düsseldorf 39 and Essen 39. Berlin had 480 acres devastated, as against London's 600 acres.

That November, as the battle raged in Italy, Churchill again took issue with the priority of bombing Germany, including bombing raids using the new route from Anglo-American air bases recently secured in Southern Italy. In Churchill's view, the land battle had to take first place in bombing priorities. 'It is surely altogether wrong,' he wrote to the Chief of the Air Staff, 'to build up the Strategic Air Force in Italy at the expense of the battle for Rome. The strategic bombing of Germany, however important, cannot take precedence over the battle, which must ever rank first in our thoughts. Major tactical needs must always have priority over strategic policy....'

Churchill added: 'I was not aware until recently that the build-up of the Army had been obstructed by the forward move of a mass of strategic air not connected with the battle. This is in fact a departure from all orthodox military doctrine, as well as seeming wrong from the point of view of common sense.' A week later Churchill minuted: 'The monstrous block of air, in its eagerness to get ahead, has definitely hampered the operations of the army.'

At the end of 1943, the Cairo Conference reviewed Anglo-American bombing policy. The first fruits of the conference were seen in 'Big Week', which began on 23 February 1944: a series of American daylight raids on German aircraft industry production centre. There was also the Schweinfurt raid of 24 February 1944, a joint Anglo-American night-and-day raid, with 266 American daylight bombers followed by 734 British bombers that night. Churchill wrote of the Schweinfurt raid: 'Unfortunately the discussion had lasted so long that this tremendous attack was robbed of much of its effectiveness. Warned by the American daylight attack four months earlier, Speer had dispersed the industry.'

There were always special – and urgent - bombing targets, first and foremost the

German rocket bomb installations (Ski sites) and German heavy-water plants and storage. But even strategic bombing, during which there were always some civilian victims, was rousing the concern of the moralists. This criticism threatened to affect the morale of Bomber Command. To defend the pilots and air crew, Churchill told those who still questioned the moral basis of bombing the enemy, speaking in the House of Commons on 22 February 1944: ‘This air power was the weapon which both the marauding States selected as their main tool of conquest. This was the sphere in which they were to triumph. This was the method by which the nations were to be subjugated to their rule. I shall not moralise further than to say that there is a strange stern justice in the long swing of events.’

The last of the Casablanca Directive bombing raids took place against Nuremberg on the night of 30/31 March 1944. Of 795 British aircraft on the raid, 94 did not return. It was the heaviest Bomber Command loss in a single raid, and, in Churchill’s words after the war, ‘... caused Bomber Command to re-examine its tactics before launching deep penetration attacks by night into Germany’

In his War Memoirs, having described the bomber offensive in detail, Churchill wrote: ‘...it would be wrong to end without paying our tribute of respect and admiration to the officers and men who fought and died in this fearful battle of the air, the like of which had never before been known.... Here chance was carried to its most extreme and violent degree... There was a rule that no one should go on more than thirty raids without a break. But many who entered on their last dozen wild adventures felt that the odds against them were increasing. How can one be lucky thirty times running in a world of averages and machinery?’

Churchill also recounted in his memoirs the story of Detective-Constable McSweeney, ‘one of the Scotland Yard officers who looked after me in the early days

of the war, was determined to fight in a bomber. I saw him several times during his training and his fighting. One day ... jauntily as ever, but with a thoughtful look, he said, "My next will be my 29th." It was his last. Not only our hearts and admiration but our minds in strong comprehension of these ordeals must go out to these heroic men, whose duty to their country and their cause sustained them in superhuman trials'.

Flight Lieutenant Conal McSweeney, DFC, had been killed in action over Germany on 4 October 1943. His grave is in the Commonwealth War Cemetery at Durnbach, thirty miles south of Munich. Churchillians who are in Munich might want to make a journey to see it.

Bombing policy was again under scrutiny as the Normandy Landings were being prepared. As the bombing of railway yards in northwest France began, Churchill was concerned by the high French civilian losses that were expected. At the War Cabinet on 4 April 1944, Portal advised that between 20,000 and 40,000 French civilians might be killed. Churchill told his colleagues he 'felt some doubts as to the wisdom of this policy.' To Portal he wrote: 'You are piling up an awful load of hatred'.

Churchill asked to Eisenhower to set a limit for each raid, of, say, a hundred estimated dead. Eisenhower declined. Churchill then put the matter to Roosevelt. This 'slaughter,' he warned the President, 'may easily bring about a great revulsion in French feeling towards their approaching United States and British liberators. They may leave a legacy of hate behind them.' Roosevelt supported Eisenhower, telling Churchill: 'I am not prepared to impose from this distance any restriction on military action by the responsible commanders that in their opinion might militate against the success of Overlord or cause additional loss of life to our Allied forces of invasion.'

The bombing went ahead. The casualties were high, more 4,000 civilian dead, but far fewer than feared, and the railway disruptions were effective.

Towards the end of June 1944 a plea to bomb the railway lines leading to Auschwitz was made by the Jewish Agency to Anthony Eden, who passed it to Churchill, who replied in writing: 'Get anything out of the Air Force you can, and invoke me if necessary.' Bombing of such a precise target would have to be done by day: that is, by the Americans. The American air supremo in London, General Ira C. Eaker, was willing to try, but the War Department in Washington decided against it.

If the non-bombing of Auschwitz has become controversial, the bombing of Dresden is in many ways even more so. In 1995 the Soviet Union denounced it as an Anglo-American war crime. On learning of the effect of the Anglo-American raid on Dresden on 13/14 February 1945, Churchill minuted: 'It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed ... The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing.'

It was not the Anglo-American Allies, however, but the Soviet Union that had been the catalyst for the Dresden bombing. Alerted by Bletchley Park to intercepts revealing substantial German troop movements towards the Breslau front, the Soviet High Command had asked for an Anglo-American bombing raid to stem the flow of these troops, whom the intercepts showed were coming from central Germany, Norway and even Italy. This Soviet request was approved - in the absence of Churchill and Portal en route to Yalta - by Clement Attlee and the Vice Chief of the Air Staff. It was a brief diversion of forces and a change of targets to support an ally in difficulty and danger.

Churchill's minute critical of the bombing of Dresden was issued on March 28. Three days later the Air Staff agreed that 'at this advanced stage of the war' there was 'no great or immediate additional advantage' to be expected from air attack on 'the remaining industrial centres of Germany'. Churchill assumed that this policy would be strictly followed. He was therefore puzzled, two and a half weeks later, to read that aircraft had been sent on the night of April 14 to bomb Potsdam. He wrote at once to Sinclair and Portal: 'What was the point of going and blowing down Potsdam?'

In reply, Portal pointed out that this attack had come about following a report of the Joint Intelligence Committee, describing the evacuation of the German Air Force operational headquarters from Berlin to Potsdam. Another object of the raid, Portal explained, was to destroy 'communications leading west from Berlin through Potsdam'.

Portal's reply ended, with reference to Churchill's earlier protest of March 28: 'In accordance with your decision on the recommendation of the Chiefs of Staff we have already issued instructions to Bomber Command that area bombing designed solely with the object of destroying industrial areas is to be discontinued.'

The attack on Potsdam, however, Portal explained, 'was calculated to hasten the disintegration of enemy resistance'.

Every bombing raid has a specific reason, an urgent imperative. No qualms, even those of Churchill, could be allowed to deflect from the clamant strategic needs of total war.

At the same Potsdam that Churchill had not wanted bombed in April 1945, three months later, on the morning of 22 July 1945, Churchill was given a full account of the first atom bomb test in New Mexico. Inside a one-mile circle, devastation had been total. Churchill then went to see Truman. 'Up to this moment,' Churchill

recalled, ‘we had shaped our ideas towards an assault upon the homeland of Japan by terrific air bombing and by the invasion of vary large armies. We had contemplated the desperate resistance of the Japanese fighting to the dearth with Samurai devotion, not only in pitched battles, but in every cave and dug-out... To overcome Japanese resistance “man by man” and conquer Japan “yard by yard” might require the loss of a million American soldiers and half a million British – or more if we could get them there: for we were resolved to share the agony.’

With the news that the atomic bomb was a reality, Churchill reflected, ‘all this nightmare picture had vanished. In its place was the vision – fine and bright indeed it seemed – of the end of the whole war in one or two violent shocks.’

On 18 August 1946, a year after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Churchill wrote to George Bernard Shaw: ‘Do you think that the atomic bomb means that the architect of the universe has got tired of writing his non-stop scenario. There was a lot to be said for his stopping with the Panda. The release of the bomb seems to be his next turning point.’ Churchill was then Leader of the Opposition. The British atomic bomb was built during the premiership of his successor, Clement Attlee. Churchill was neither consulted nor informed.

Churchill became peacetime Prime Minister in October 1951. Studying Attlee’s commitment to a British atomic bomb, he saw the link between the nuclear deterrent and détente. On 27 May 1954 he declared, at the Royal Albert Hall: ‘It is my belief that we may live to see - or you may live to see - the awful secrets which science has wrung from nature serve mankind instead of destroying it, and put an end to the wars they were called forth to wage.’

Asked in his final retirement to look back over his life and reflect on it, Churchill felt that in the main it had been period of great progress; but he added: 'My only regret is that mankind ever learned to fly.'

It would seem that the 'beasts' had prevailed.