

Two Excerpts from

Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Volume VII, Road to Victory, 1941-1945*, (Boston, 1986), pp. 1176-1178.

As the Big Three began their discussions at Yalta, their Air and Intelligence Staffs were working together to co-ordinate emergency Air policy. On February 1, three German infantry divisions from the Western front had been identified on the central sector of the Eastern front. 'Reports indicate that further divisions may be on their way,' the British Chiefs of Staff were told, 'including the armoured divisions of Six Panzer Army.'⁵ On the following day, in London, the Vice Chiefs of Staff had met to examine the strategic bombing offensive 'in relation to the present Russian offensive.' They had then agreed to set a new priority for the 'communication targets' south and east of Berlin. The first priority was to bomb 'rail assembly areas and bottlenecks for eastward movements'. The second was to bomb targets in relation to the impending Anglo-American operations on the western front. The third was 'communication targets in cities such as Berlin, Dresden etc.'⁶

These three suggestions had been telegraphed to Yalta that night. The telegram suggested, as a matter of urgency, that attacks on communication targets should be 'concentrated more closely' on several critical areas including 'specially vulnerable bottlenecks' affecting the assembly and entrainment of German troops to the east.

Also identified as priority targets were 'focal points in the evacuation areas behind the Eastern front, namely Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, and Chemnitz, or similar cities'.⁷

This telegraphic advice was reinforced in its urgency on February 3, by the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Red Army, General Antonov, who, in a note to the British and United States Chiefs of Staff at Yalta, explained that Soviet wishes were to 'prevent the enemy from transferring his troops to the East from the Western front, Norway and Italy, by air attacks against communications'.⁸

Antonov's request for Anglo-American air support had been presented to the Big Three at their meeting on the afternoon of February 4, when he had told the meeting that the Germans were transferring to the eastern front a total of eight divisions from the

interior of Germany, eight from Italy, three from Norway and twelve from the western front, in addition to six already transferred. It was this exaggerated assessment—only four divisions were transferred from Italy, for example—which had led Stalin to ask what Churchill and Roosevelt's wishes were 'in regard to the Red Army', to which Churchill had replied that they would like the Russian offensive to continue.⁹ The urgency of the need to take some substantial air action to help that offensive continue was made clear by a sentence in the Cabinet War Room Record that day, pointing out that 'between the Oder bend north west of Glogau and the Carpathians all Russian attacks failed in the face of strengthened German resistance'.¹⁰ On the following day, in a memorandum for the Combined Chiefs of Staff, the British Chiefs of Staff agreed 'to do what is possible to assist the advance of the Soviet Army'.¹¹ That same day, at a meeting of the joint British, United States and Russian Chiefs of Staff, Antonov went so far as to warn the western Generals that if the Allies 'were unable to take full advantage of their air superiority they did not have sufficient superiority on the ground to overcome enemy opposition'.

The British and American Chief of Staff at once agreed to deflect some of their bomber forces from the attack on Germany's oil reserves and supplies, then the current priority, to an attack on the German army's lines of communication in the Berlin-Dresden-Leipzig region. They also agreed, at Antonov's suggestion, that these three specific cities should be 'allotted to the Allied air forces', leaving Russian bombers to attack targets further east.¹²

During this military meeting it became clear that it was not only on the eastern front, but also on the western front, that the Allies, as General Marshall stated, 'had no superiority on the ground in numbers, and were, therefore, dependent upon the Air to give them the necessary preponderance'.

At the end of the meeting there was some discussion about the date of the end of the war with Germany. 'The first of July,' declared Antonov, 'should be a reasonably certain date if all our efforts were applied to this end.'¹³

Footnotes:

- 1 Eden diary, 4 February 1945: Eden memoirs, *The Reckoning*, *op. cit.*, page 512.
- 2 Brooke diary, 5 February 1945: Bryant, *op. cit.*, volume 2, page 407.
- 3 'Notes on Volume VI', written in December 1950: Churchill papers, 4/362.
- 4 Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness of History*, New York 1973, page 181.
- 5 Chiefs of Staff Weekly Resume No. 283, up to 7 a.m. on 1 February 1945.
- 6 Chiefs of Staff Committee No. 35 of 1945, 2 February 1945, item No. 9, sent to Yalta as 'Fleece' No. 75: Cabinet papers, 79/29.
- 7 'Fleece' No. 75: Cabinet papers 120/175.
- 8 Note of 3 February 1945: Cabinet papers, 120/170.
- 9 'Argonaut', '1st Military Meeting', 4 February 1945: Cabinet papers, 120/170.
- 10 Cabinet War Room Record, No. 1981, for the 24 hours ending 7 a.m., 4 February 1945', 'Secret': Cabinet papers 100/13.
- 11 Combined Chiefs of Staff Paper No. 778 (Argonaut), 'Liason with the Soviet High Command over Anglo-American Strategic Bombing in Eastern Germany', 'Memorandum by the British Chiefs of Staff', 5 February 1945: Cabinet papers, 120/170.
- 12 "'Argonaut" Conference', 'Minutes of the first tripartite military meeting held in the Soviet Headquarters, Yalta, on Monday 5th February, 1945, at 1200': Cabinet papers, 120/170.
- 13 'Rough Notes of Tripartite Military Conference, Monday, 5 February 1945', 'Top Secret' (sent by Ismay to Churchill, and seen by Churchill on 7 February 1945): Cabinet papers, 120/170.

Taken from Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Road to Victory, 1941-1945*, (Boston, 1986), pp. 1255-1258.

Since his return from Yalta, Churchill frequently, as on March 17, dined alone.¹ On March 19, he both lunched and dined with only his wife. That night he stayed up after dinner to talk to James Stuart until 11 p.m., then to Sinclair, and finally to Bracken, who stayed until 3:40 a.m. It was not until 4 a.m. that the 'Prime Minister went to bed', as his Private Office diary recorded.² 'He *will* keep up this dreadful 4 o'clock stunt, sometimes 4:30,' Elizabeth Layton wrote home two weeks later, and she added: 'We have all got to a stage now where we don't expect to get to bed before 4:30, and we don't expect to feel anything but dog-beat all day long, day after day. Never mind, nothing is forever.'³

Among Churchill's worries in the third week of March was the extent to which Hitler might still be able to prolong the war. 'I should like the Intelligence Committee,' he informed the Chiefs of Staff on March 17, 'to consider the possibility that Hitler, after losing Berlin and Northern Germany, will retire to the mountainous and wooded parts of Southern Germany and endeavour to prolong the fight there.' The 'strange resistance' which the Germans had made at Budapest,

and were now making at Lake Balaton, and the retention for 'so long' of Kesselring's army in Italy seemed, Churchill wrote, 'in harmony with such an intention'. Churchill added: 'But of course he is so foolishly obstinate about everything that there may be no meaning behind these moves. Nevertheless the possibilities should be examined.'⁴

On March 18 the United States Third Army occupied the town of Bingen on the Rhine. British troops were liberating Holland. That same day Churchill was shown the battlefield casualty figures for western Europe between D-Day and 10 March 1945. There had been 71,000 American dead, and 33,000 British and Canadian dead. In relation to the size of the forces involved, Churchill noted, the proportion of men killed had been 'very much the same between the two Allies'.⁵ That day, Churchill read a complaint from the Dutch Foreign Minister about several hundred Dutch civilian deaths caused in The Hague, during a British bombing raid.⁶ While Churchill had been on the Dutch-German border on March 3, visiting the Allied armies, British bombers struck at German V2 Rocket sites in the Hague Wood, dropping both incendiary and high explosive bombs. By accident the bombs had fallen on several residential areas, including the Government centre. As well as the civilian deaths, many public buildings had been destroyed.⁷ 'The temper of the civilian population,' a report smuggled out of Holland declared, 'has become violently anti-Ally as a result of this bombardment.'⁸ On reading this report, Churchill minuted for the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Sinclair and Portal:

This complaint reflects upon the Air Ministry and Royal Air Force in two ways. First, it shows how feeble have been our efforts to interfere with the rockets, and, secondly, the extraordinarily bad aiming which had led to this slaughter of Dutchmen. The matter requires a thorough explanation. We have had numerous accounts of the pin-point bombing of suspected Gestapo houses in Holland and of other specialised points; but good indications are given in this account of the wood where the rockets are stored, and of the railway lines which, if interrupted, would hamper the supply of rockets. All this ought to have been available from Air Intelligence. Instead of attacking these points with precision and regularity, all that has been done is to scatter bombs about this unfortunate city without the slightest effect on their rocket sites, but much on innocent human lives and the sentiments of a friendly people.⁹

In reply, Sinclair noted 'the difficulty of attack upon these rocket objectives', and he added: 'The Germans are deliberately placing their launching and storage sites in and near built-up areas in Holland.' Nor, Sinclair added, would the bombing of railway lines necessarily avoid losses in Dutch civilian life. Full investigations were nevertheless already in progress, Sinclair added, 'into the reasons for this deplorable event', and he went on to assure Churchill that bombing attacks upon the rocket sites 'ought not to involve serious risk to Dutch civilian life'.¹⁰ Inside the Air Ministry, Portal had already written to Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, at 2nd Tactical Air Force, about the 'gross errors' involved in this Hague bombardment.¹¹

Ten days after his minute to Sinclair about the Hague bombing, Churchill made another incursion into the controversial area of bombing policy, having been shown accounts of the bombing of Dresden on the night of February 13. Churchill's reaction was to raise the whole issue of such bombardments. As he minuted to the Chiefs of Staff Committee, and to Portal:

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. Otherwise we shall come into control of an utterly ruined land. We shall not, for instance, be able to get housing materials out of Germany for our own needs because some temporary provision would have to be made for the Germans themselves. The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing. I am of the opinion that military objectives must henceforward be more strictly studied in our own interests rather than that of the enemy.

The Foreign Secretary has spoken to me on this subject, and 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.¹²

At a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on March 29, Portal pointed out 'that it had always been the aim of our bombing of large cities to destroy the industries and transportation services centred in those cities and not to terrorise the civilian population of Germany'.¹³ Churchill then agreed to withdraw his 'rough' minute, and instructed Portal to redraft it 'in less rough terms'.¹⁴ In Portal's redraft, the word 'terror' did not appear. The new minute still asserted, however, that the time had come to consider a halt to this type of raid. Drafted by Portal, but signed by Churchill, it read:

It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of so called 'area bombing' of German cities should be reviewed from the point of view of our own interests. If we come into control of an entirely ruined land, there will be a great shortage of accommodation for ourselves and our Allies; and we shall be unable to get housing materials out of Germany for our own needs because some temporary provision would have to be made for the Germans themselves. We must see to it that our attacks do not do more harm to ourselves in the long run than they do to the enemy's immediate war effort. Pray let me have your views.¹⁵

This minute was issued on April 1. 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.'¹⁶

Churchill assumed that the new policy would be strictly followed. He was therefore puzzled, two and a half weeks later, to read aircraft had been despatched on the night of April 14 to bomb Potsdam.¹⁷ He wrote at once to Sinclair and Portal: 'What was the point of going and blowing down Potsdam?'¹⁸

In his 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 a 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'.¹⁹

Footnotes:

- 1 Private Office diary, 17 March 1945.
- 2 Private Office diary, 19 March 1945. Churchill dined also alone with his wife on March 21 shortly before she set off on the long flight to Moscow, via Cairo, on her Red Cross tour of Russia, a tour which continued until mid-May.
- 3 Elizabeth Layton, letter of 7 April 1945: Nel papers.
- 4 Prime Minister's Personal Minute, D.74/75, 'Top Secret', 17 March 1943: Churchill papers, 20/209.
- 5 Prime Minister's Personal Minute, M.226/5, 18 March 1945: Churchill papers, 20/209.
- 6 According to A. Korthals, *Luchtgevaar* ('Danger from the Sky'), Amsterdam 1984, the minimum deaths were 520. At Rotterdam, in 1940, 900 had been killed during the German bombing raid on the city which preceded the Dutch surrender.
- 7 Including the Provincial Government buildings, the Law Court, the Military Staff College, the French Embassy, three Roman Catholic Churches and the British Church.
- 8 Report transmitted by the Netherlands Foreign Minister, 14 March 1945.
- 9 Prime Minister's Personal Minute D.75/5, 18 March 1945: Churchill papers, 20/209.
- 10 'Top Secret', 26 March 1945: Air Ministry papers, 19/432.
- 11 'Top Secret', 16 March 1945: Air Ministry papers, 19/432.
- 12 Prime Minister's Personal Minute, D.83/5, 'Top Secret', 28 March 1945: Premier papers, 3/12, folio 25.
- 13 Chiefs of Staff Committee, No. 80 of 1945, 29 March 1945: Cabinet papers, 79/31.
- 14 'Top Secret' (Portal to Churchill), 30 March 1945: Premier papers, 3/12, folio 23.
- 15 Prime Minister's Personal Minute, D.89/5, 'Top Secret', 2 April 1945: Premier papers, 3/12, folio 24. Churchill accepted Portal's redraft in its entirety.
- 16 'Area Bombing, Note by Chief of the Air Staff', 'Top Secret', 4 April 1945: Premier papers 3/12, folios 19-21.
- 17 Cabinet War Room Record No. 2051 for the 24 hours ending 7 a.m., 15 April 1945, 'Secret': Premier papers, 3/12, folio 4. The Chiefs of Staff Committee Weekly Résumé No. 294, of the naval military and air situation for 12 April to 19 April 1945, gave details from aerial photographs taken on April 16 of 'severe damage' in the vicinity of the railway centre and locomotive depot, as well as damage at an aircraft component factory. It also reported 'several areas of devastation' in the city, 'where the majority of the buildings have been gutted or destroyed', including the Post Office and the Town Hall (Chiefs of Staff Paper No. 79 of 1945, 'Secret' 19 April 1945: Cabinet papers, 80/48).
- 18 Prime Minister's Personal Minute, M/362/5, 19 April 1945: Premier papers, 3/12, folio 3.
- 19 'Top Secret', 20 April 1945: Premier papers, 3/12, folio 2.