

HEADQUARTERS
UNITED STATES AIR FORCES IN EUROPE

WHY DRESDEN WAS BOMBED

A REVIEW OF THE REASONS AND REACTIONS

(UNCLASSIFIED)

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WHY DRESDEN WAS BOMBED

1. Introduction: Aspects Of The Controversy.

Ever since the end of the Second World War the bombing of Dresden has been a highly controversial subject, not only among the Germans themselves, but also with the Communists in the Soviet Zone of Germany, who have capitalized upon the air raids (which in reality aided the Red Army) to further Communist propaganda and sway German sympathies away from Western influences.¹

To be sure, the destruction of this beautiful city with such great loss of life--so late in the war--was catastrophic in the extreme for the German people, an immense misfortune of war. The tragedy of Dresden is even more poignantly etched on the mind by the impact of the tremendous events and absolute chaos which climaxed its last days when multitudes of refugees, fleeing from the east before the onrushing Red Army, swarmed by the tens of thousands into the overcrowded city. Unending streams of refugees poured into Dresden, by day and by night, jamming all the railroad stations, blocking the streets with vehicles, filling each house to the last place, and camping by the thousands in the cold, wet weather in the city squares, parks, and the meadows by the Elbe river.² On the night of its destruction, Dresden

¹ The New York Times, International Edition, 12 February 1953, page 3, titled: "U.S. Lays Dresden Bombing to Soviet Plea, Spoiling German Reds 'Hate America' Line." See Appendix I.

Special Issue of LIFE on Germany, 10 May 1954, page 50, titled: "Bombing U.S.S.R. Sought Is Turned Against U.S." See Appendix II.

²

Der Hochrote Hahn, by Hans Rumpf, (Darmstadt, Germany, 1952), page 133. In Germany the title, "The Bright-Red Rooster," is symbolic with fire destruction.

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sheltered 700,000 refugees according to German estimates,³ in addition to its normal population of over 600,000 residents.⁴ A well-known German author states that "This great city sheltered 1,130,000 human beings within its walls as its destruction approached, as its hour struck."⁵

Such was the hapless predicament of Dresden--celebrated as the "German Florence,"⁶ and the most beautiful city in Europe--on the night of 13-14 February 1945, now remembered by many Germans as "Die Mordnacht von Dresden."⁷ This disparaging insinuation echoes the Nazi accusations of "terror bombing" by the Allies during the war. And now, almost ten years later, with war passions abated and memories fading, the revival of this old charge, albeit in different form, calls for a dispassionate review of the detailed reasons for the bombing of Dresden beyond the scant facts hitherto disclosed in American papers in Germany.

It should be pointed out here that the United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) is the lineal descendant of the wartime

³
Ibid. Herr Rumpf was a high-ranking military fire marshal during the war.

⁴
At the outbreak of the European war in 1939 the population of Dresden was 625,174. The Encyclopedia Britannica, (1954), Volume VII, page 648.

The last census, 1946, gave the population of the city and environs as 510,000. Figures furnished by the Statistisches-bundesamt (German Federal Republic Statistical Bureau), Wiesbaden Office, 15 November 1954.

⁵
Der Tod von Dresden, (The Death of Dresden), by Axel Rodenberger, (Franz Muller-Rodenberger, Dortmund, Germany, 1953), page 16.

⁶
In German, "Elbflorenz," or "Florence-on-the-Elbe" river.

⁷
Literally, "The Murder-Night of Dresden." Der Hochrote Hahn, pages 133-134.

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United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAF)⁸ which, along with the Bomber Command of the Royal Air Force (RAF), carried out the strategic bombing of Germany and German-held Europe. Hence, it is quite likely that USAFE, as the successor to USSTAF,⁹ inherited ex post facto--in many German minds--part of the responsibility for Dresden's destruction, although such sophistry would be completely illogical to American thinking. Nevertheless, the sins of the father are sometimes visited upon the son, regardless of legitimate justification.

Needless to state, this limited report is not an attempt to justify the bombing of Dresden but rather to record all the known historical facts which may have relation to it. Certainly, not all relevant information was available for study, particularly the specific Allied directives ordering the air attacks, or pertinent high-level documents in the British Air Ministry in London and in the Departments of Defense and State in Washington, as well as any possible documentary evidence of the exact Soviet request for this particular bombing assistance.¹⁰ However, all available sources known to the writer have been studied, both

8

USSTAF, commanded by General Carl A. Spaatz, USA, comprised: the Eighth Air Force in England, under Lieutenant General Ira. C. Eaker, USA, and later, Lieutenant General James H. Doolittle, USA; the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy (operational control only), under Major General Nathan F. Twining, USA; and the Ninth Air Force on the continent (administrative control only), under Major General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, USA.

9

USSTAF was redesignated as USAFE on 16 August 1945, per Hq. USSTAF General Orders Number 115, 16 August 1945.

10

See remarks on Russian attitudes at Yalta Conference, 4-11 February 1945, by Major General John R. Deane, USA, Chief of the U.S. Military Mission at Moscow. The Strange Alliance, (The Viking Press, New York, 1947), pages 139-141. See Appendix III.

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official and unofficial, as well as certain German information on the subject; extracts of these are included in this report and accompanying appendices. The reference documentation includes data from books and reports on Allied wartime plans and policies which actuated the fateful decision to bomb Dresden.

2. Events and Decisions Leading to the Bombardment.

Before outlining the reasons for the air attacks on Dresden it is necessary to understand something of the military situation at the time. The reader will recall that the final military objective of the Allied and Red armies was to establish a junction somewhere in eastern Germany, thus forcing the enemy to capitulate. As the war approached its climax in early 1945, most of western Germany was in Allied hands and the Red Army was within sixty miles of Dresden. The continued convergence of these armies toward that city began to shape the remaining German-held territory into two rough triangles, the apex of each joining at Dresden, forming a gigantic hour-glass. Fate thus placed Dresden in the very center of the maelstrom--the last great railroad center left in Germany--through which the remaining German forces in the northern triangle could funnel down to the southern triangle and into the "National Redoubt" in the Austrian-Bavarian Alps.¹¹ Here, it was confidently expected by the Supreme Allied Commander, General Eisenhower, a last stand would be made by the remnants of the German Army, should they be able to retreat into these formidable and almost

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United States Strategic Bombing Survey, (Europe), Reports Number 64-A and 200, Second Edition, January 1947, Chapter III. See Appendix IV.

inaccessible mountains.¹²

In his memoirs, Sir Winston S. Churchill, the British Prime Minister, mentions only the bare fact that Dresden was bombed in February 1945. He notes, however, that the city was "then a centre of communications of Germany's Eastern Front."¹³ Sir Winston also reveals that General Eisenhower's main attack was to be made in the direction of Dresden in order to truncate the German forces and prevent possible resistance in the so-called National Redoubt in the Austrian Alps. This plan was completely acceptable to Marshal Joseph Stalin and indicated mutual agreement with immediate war aims. Referring to a direct telegram that General Eisenhower sent to Marshal Stalin on 28 March 1945, Churchill states:

Eisenhower said that after isolating the Ruhr he proposed to make his main thrust along the axis Erfurt-Leipzig-Dresden, which, by joining hands with the Russians, would cut in two the remaining German forces. A secondary advance through Regensburg to Linz, where also he expected to meet the Russians, would prevent "the consolidation of German resistance in the redoubt in Southern Germany." Stalin agreed readily. He said that the proposal "entirely coincides with the plan of the Soviet High Command."¹⁴

¹²For a more complete explanation of the National Redoubt and its impact on Allied military planning, see General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower's Report By The Supreme Commander To The Combined Chiefs of Staff On The Operations In Europe Of The Allied Expeditionary Force, 6 June 1944 to 8 May 1945, (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1946). See Appendix V.

¹³The Second World War, Volume VI, "Triumph and Tragedy," (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1953), Chapter XIII, pages 540-541.

¹⁴Ibid., page 460.

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Up to 13 February 1945, Dresden had escaped serious bombardment.¹⁵ Previously, many great German cities had been virtually destroyed with heavy loss of civilian life, the direct result of the relentless air attacks made by the Royal Air Force and the U.S. Strategic Air Forces, based upon the long-range strategic plan¹⁶ designed to bring Nazi Germany to her knees.

At the Malta Conference on 30 January 1945 the Combined Chiefs of Staff¹⁷ had decided to throw the combined weight of RAF and United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) heavy bombers into the battle in the East. This decision apparently anticipated a formal request for such assistance made a few days later (4 February 1945) at the Yalta Conference by the Russian General A. E. Antonov, Chief of Staff of the Red Army General Staff.¹⁸

At Yalta, the Western Allies and the Russians were "in strong agreement" that the strategic air forces might prevent German reinforcement of the disintegrating eastern front. This assistance was particularly designed to block the transportation centers through which the German Army might transfer units from west to east, especially the cities of Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, Cottbus, and Chemnitz.¹⁹ Concerning this decision, the official history

15

Earlier, the Eighth Air Force of USSTAF had made two light attacks on Dresden: 7 October 1944 and 16 January 1945. Statistics and source of data cited in next section.

16

Directive Number 3, SHAEF, 12 January 1945, Governing strategic operations of USSTAF and the RAF Bomber Command.

17

The senior members of each of the three services in the United Kingdom were called the Chiefs of Staff and in the United States the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Together they were known as the Combined Chiefs of Staff.

18

The Army Air Forces In World War II, "Europe: ARGUMENT to V-E Day, January 1944 to May 1945," (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1951), Volume III, Chapter XX, page 724.

19

Ibid., pages 724-725.

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of The Army Air Forces In World War II has this to say:

. . . There was also a hope that heavy air raids would increase the panic and confusion already prevalent in those cities, which were thoroughly frightened by the sudden Russian advance and full of refugees. Pandemonium in Berlin, particularly, might have a decisive effect in speeding up the disintegration of Hitler's regime. Accordingly, the air leaders at Malta issued with the strong approval of General Marshall, and with what they took to be the concurrence of AAF Headquarters, a revised directive.²⁰ As a second priority (after synthetic oil plants) came "Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, and associated cities where heavy attack will cause great confusion in civilian evacuation from the east and hamper reinforcements." As a third priority the heavy bombers would direct their efforts on communications in the Ruhr-Cologne-Kassel area to keep the Germans from withdrawing forces in the west to bolster the east.²¹

The catastrophic results of these air operations so reduced the German capacity for resistance that transportation targets as far east as Cottbus and Dresden were attacked "in direct support of the Russian ground armies."²²

20

Ibid. Letter, Major General Frederick L. Anderson, USA, Deputy Commander, USSTAF, to General Carl A. Spaatz, USAF, Commanding General, USSTAF, 2 February 1945, from General Anderson's Journal, ARGONAUT.

21

Ibid. Message CM-IN-259, SHAEF to War Department, Washington, D.C., 31 January 1945.

22

U.S.S.B.S., Report Number 64-A.

The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume III. January 1944 to May 1945, pages 726-727. See Appendix VI.

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After the war Sir Arthur T. Harris, Marshal of the Royal Air Force,²³ stated that he had been ordered to attack Dresden because it was considered to be "a target of the first importance for the offensive on the Eastern front."²⁴ By February 1945, Dresden had become the main center of communications for the defense of Germany on the southern half of the eastern front. The Supreme Allied Headquarters²⁵ decided that a heavy air attack on Dresden would disorganize these communications and also render the city useless as a controlling center for defense. Further, Dresden was a large center of war industry, a target of the "highest importance."²⁶

23

Air Chief Marshal Harris was appointed Air Commander-in-Chief, Bomber Command, on 22 February 1942, and subsequently, Marshal of the RAF.

24

Bomber Offensive, by Sir Arthur T. Harris, Marshal of the RAF, (The MacMillan Company, New York, 1947), page 242. See Appendix VI.

25

Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), London, England, commanded by General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower. Before General Eisenhower assumed command of SHAEF the Strategic Air Forces were under control of the Combined Chiefs of Staff; but the Supreme Allied Commander felt that, "since responsibility for the principal effort against Germany" fell upon my Headquarters, all the forces to be employed within the Theater--by land, sea, and air--should be responsible to me and under my direction" (Report By The Supreme Commander To the Combined Chiefs Of Staff, Etc.," previously cited, page 14.

General Eisenhower further explains:

"In the final command set-up of the air forces, then, the commanders of the Strategic Air Forces (RAF Bomber Command and the United States Strategic Air Forces) reported to Supreme Headquarters independently as did also Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory, commanding the tactical forces which comprised the Allied Expeditionary Air Force. The effort of the three separate commands was coordinated, under my direction, through the Deputy Supreme Commander, Air Chief Marshal [Sir Arthur W.] Tedder." (Ibid., pages 14-15)

²⁶Bomber Offensive, page 242.

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Dresden, the capital of Saxony, was an important railroad center. The main railroad connections between southern and eastern Germany passed through the city, and several rail lines branched out to Leipzig and other parts of industrial Saxony. The harbor was of considerable importance to the freight traffic on the Elbe river. Dresden's transportation network included large railroad marshalling yards, freight yards with considerable storage facilities, extensive locomotive repair shops of great importance, an inland harbor, and railway maintenance shops. There were also factories of importance to the German war effort, in the Dresden area, including an iron foundry, two aircraft repair factories, as well as engineering and armament industries, chemical and explosive factories, shipbuilding yards, and flour mills. Several important factories manufactured electric motors, precision and optical instruments for submarines, and numerous light engineering products. The munitions workshops in the old arsenal occupied an extensive area to the north of Neustadt²⁷ on the right bank of the Elbe, in the industrial region past the aerodrome to a large heath where munitions were stored in quantities.²⁸

3. The Main Allied Attacks.

All was peaceful in Dresden during the evening of 13 February 1945 until half-past nine that night, when a general alarm was

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Dresden comprises two principal parts: Neustadt (New Town), and across the Elbe, Altstadt (Old Town). Greater Dresden embraces the municipal districts of Johannstadt, Striesen, Blasewitz, Friedrichstadt, Löbtau, Plauen, and Strehlen. The principal marshalling yards and main railroad station were in the Old Town, the most beautiful part of the city.

28

Bomber's Baedeker, "A Guide to the Economic Importance of German Towns and Cities," Second Edition, May 1944, Part I, pages 154-161. An official British document published by the Enemy Branch, Foreign Office and Ministry of Economic Warfare, (Landsdowne House, Berkeley Square, London, W. 1). Classification reduced from SECRET to RESTRICTED after the war. Copy formerly in the USAFE Historical Division.

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sounded throughout the city. The first RAF attack began forty minutes later . . . "And then came the inferno!" Graphically, a German author relates: "The clock of the Church of Our Lady showed 22.09 o'clock. Hell broke loose. The earth trembled. Bombs exploded, drowning the noise of the motors."²⁹

The Royal Air Force made two assaults on Dresden on the night of 13-14 February. In the first, 244 "Lancaster" bombers formed the first wave, in the second, 529 bombers of the same type took part. In all, 2,659 tons of explosive and incendiary bombs were dropped on the city, which was then the main center of communications in the southern half of the Eastern front. Explaining the reason for these attacks, the history of the Royal Air Force states: "The destruction of these [communications] was part of the Anglo-American plan for the support of the Russian advance. The crews of Bomber Command very faithfully fulfilled their task" ³⁰

Smoke from this terrible bombardment was still rising to 15,000 feet by the time the American bombers arrived over Dresden in daylight on 14 February to make their bombing run by instrument. ³¹ The heart of the city, the Old Town, and to a lesser

29

Der Tod von Dresden, pages 45-47.

30

Royal Air Force, an "officially commissioned" history, by Denis Richards and Hilary St. G. Saunders, (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1954), Volume III, "The Fight Is Won," pages 269-271. See Appendix VIII.

31

The Army Air Forces In World War II, page 731. Remarks by Lt. Gen. James H. Doolittle, Commanding General, Eighth Air Force, at the Allied Air Commanders' Conference, 15 February 1945.

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extent the New Town across the Elbe, were engulfed by fire--an awesome scene of utter devastation.³² Now followed 316 "Flying Fortresses" (four-motor bombers), raining 782 more tons³³ of bombs down on the marshalling yards of the ruined city, adding to the already devastated area observed in the district of Johannstadt. The main marshalling yards in the Old Town were still burning: an engine roundhouse, freight station, and numerous freight cars in the heavily loaded yards. Damage was severe to public and administrative buildings, while residential damage was scattered but severe in places, as far as the suburb of Löschwitz. Other destruction observed by American pilots included the main railroad station, barracks, industrial buildings, and the "Augustus" and "Carola" bridges spanning the Elbe.³⁴

A German account of the combined RAF-USSTAF attacks states that:

After the first attack this great city was burning in an area seven kilometers long and four kilometers wide. The second attack began two and one half hours later. Thirty-five minutes long the earth trembled under the impact of numberless bombs And ten hours later the third attack followed in daylight in undiminish-

32

"Target Damage To Dresden, Germany, on 14 Feb. 1945."

A Consolidated Statement Covering (American) Attacks of 7 October 1944, 16 January, and 14 February; coverage unavailable for air raid of 15 February 1945. From "K" Report Summarization, Evaluation of Damage to Principal Targets, in Eighth Air Force Monthly Summary of Operations, February 1945, page 22. Now UNCLASSIFIED; formerly in USAFE Historical Division. See Appendix IX.

33

By comparison, The Army Air Forces In World War II states that: "Three hundred and eleven Fortresses dropped 771 tons on Dresden" (Page 731).

34

"Target Damage To Dresden, Germany, On 14 Feb. 1945."

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ed intensity on the last suburbs of Dresden
not yet burned.³⁵

It was this combined attack that apparently caused the tumult about "terror bombing," again voiced by Nazi propaganda. In view of such serious charges and their possible moral effect throughout Germany and the rest of the world, General Marshall felt that, "The Secretary of War had to be apprised of Dresden's importance as a transportation center and the Russian request for its neutralization."³⁶ Even the RAF official report on the attacks went to unusual length to explain how the city had grown into a great industrial center and was therefore an important target.³⁷

Six air raids in all were made on Dresden by the Eighth Air Force of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces based in England. All the attacks were made on the marshalling yards, except those of 7 October 1944 and 17 April 1945, when industrial targets were bombed. In the six American attacks the Eighth Air Force lost nineteen bombers; the losses of air crews are unavailable. A

35

Der Tod von Dresden, pages 10-11.

The author is mistaken as to the intensity of the American attack of 14 February. This third attack, made by the Eighth Air Force, was less than one third the weight of the RAF attacks, as noted by the following official statistics: Total tonnage dropped by the RAF on 13-14 February, 2,659; by Eighth Air Force on 14 February, 782. RAF statistics on number of bombers used and number of tons dropped were furnished the USAFE Historical Division by the British Air Ministry, London, on 9 November 1954.

36

The Army Air Forces In World War II, page 731. Memorandum from General Marshall to the Hon. Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, (drafted by Loutzenheiser), 6 March 1945.

37

The Army Air Forces In World War II, page 731.
RAF Bomber Command Weekly Digest Number 148, n.d.
USSTAF Intelligence Summary Number 69, n.d., page 18.