

Firestorms: The Bombing of Civilians in World War II

Before World War II, most nations condemned targeting civilians in bombing raids. As the war went on, the nations at war expanded their bombing targets from military to industrial ones, then to workers' houses, and finally to entire cities and their civilian populations.

In the late afternoon of April 26, 1937, German bombers and other warplanes attacked Guernica, a town of about 7,000 persons in northern Spain. This raid was part of the [Spanish Civil War](#), fought just before World War II. The Spanish Republic was battling rebels led by Spanish General Francisco Franco. Hitler had sent a special air force unit to Spain to aid Franco and to test new military aircraft and bombing tactics.

In the [assault on Guernica](#), German pilots left a small munitions factory and other possible military targets untouched. They aimed their explosive and incendiary (fire) bombs into the center of the town. A squadron of experimental aircraft dropped the first bombs on the plaza in front of the railroad station filled with war refugees. An eyewitness described what happened:

A group of women and children. They were lifted high into the air, maybe 20 feet or so, and they started to break up. Legs, arms, heads, and bits and pieces flying everywhere.

Another wave of heavy bombers followed, destroying most of Guernica's buildings, even a church and hospital. People were blown up in their houses, crushed by collapsing structures, and set afire in the streets. A third wave of fighter planes then machine-gunned terrified men, women, and children as they ran for their lives. About 1,000 civilians were slaughtered during the three-hour assault.

Accounts of the attack on Guernica in French newspapers shocked the world. For the first time in history, bombing from the air had destroyed an entire town. The intentional slaughter of innocent people so enraged Pablo Picasso, the Spanish artist, that he immediately went to work on a painting based on the bombing attack. The painting, which he titled "[Guernica](#)," became an icon for the terror experienced by civilians in war.

But the attack on Guernica turned out to be only a preview of a new type of war. In this new "total war," military strategists purposely tried to destroy entire cities and their civilian populations.

Civilian Bombing and the Laws of War

Attempts to control warfare from the air occurred as early as 1899. European powers agreed at The Hague (a Dutch city) to prohibit dropping explosives "from balloons or by other new methods of a similar nature." The [Hague Convention of 1907](#) went further by banning bombardments "by whatever means" on "undefended" towns.

World War I saw the first civilian casualties from air bombing. In 1915, the first-reported victim was an English child killed by a bomb dropped from a German [zeppelin](#) (an airship more rigid and larger than a blimp). Throughout the war, zeppelin and airplane attacks on English and German cities killed almost 2,000 civilians.

After World War I, European and American military strategists debated what would happen if civilians became the main targets of air-bombing attacks. An influential Italian military writer, [General Giulio Douhet](#), actually argued for the sustained bombing of civilians. He predicted that they would become quickly demoralized by such bombing and would force their leaders to surrender.

Despite the theories of Douhet, most at this time felt that bombing civilians was uncivilized and should be prohibited. In 1923, Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and the United States agreed to a set of rules for air warfare. One article prohibited bombing from the air "for the purpose of terrorizing the civilian population . . . or of injuring noncombatants. . . ." The participating governments, however, never ratified these rules, so they were not legally binding. At the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932, most of the world's powers agreed that air attacks on civilians violated the laws of war. But the conference broke up before approving a final agreement.

In the years leading up to World War II, Japan became the first power to attack civilians from the air. In 1932, Japanese warplanes bombed a worker district in Shanghai, China, an incident that produced worldwide outrage. The outrage did not stop Japan from bombing civilian areas of other Chinese cities.

In 1936, Italian dictator Mussolini ordered an attack on the largely defenseless east African country of [Ethiopia](#). When Mussolini's warplanes struck the capital city, causing many civilian casualties, the world again condemned the slaughter of innocent people. The following year, the Germans bombed Guernica.

Along with many other nations, the United States denounced the Japanese, Italian, and German bombing of civilians as "contrary to principles of law and humanity." But the terror bombing of civilians was only beginning.

"Precision" vs. "Area" Bombing

Hitler introduced a new form of aggression in 1939. He ordered his military to attack Poland, thus starting World War II in Europe. "[Blitzkrieg](#)" soon came to mean lightning-fast assaults, not only by land troops and tank divisions, but also by warplanes bombing both military and civilian targets. The Germans hit the Polish capital of Warsaw especially hard, with indiscriminate bombing killing thousands of civilians.

In May 1940, the Nazis invaded the Netherlands on their way to France. Easily overcoming Dutch defenders, the Germans still bombed the center of Rotterdam with explosive and fire bombs, killing tens of thousands.

From fall 1940 through spring 1941, Hitler's air force struck London and other English cities with terrifying night bombing raids. The [bombing of London](#), the main target of German planes, cost the lives of 30,000 people.

Driven from the continent, the British could only strike back by mounting their own bombing campaign against the Germans. At first, the Royal Air Force (RAF) attempted to bomb only specific German military and industrial targets in daytime raids. But the lack of fighter-plane support made these raids risky, and bombs often missed their precise targets because of poor bombsights.

In February 1942, the British abandoned their "precision bombing" strategy. For the rest of the war, the British concentrated on the systematic widespread destruction of German cities by RAF nighttime air raids, a strategy called "area bombing." One reason the British took this fateful step was to "dehouse" the German people, which hopefully would shatter their morale and will to continue the war.

The clearest demonstration of the destructiveness of British area bombing occurred in 1943 during three night raids on Hamburg, Germany. On the second night of bombing, something unexpected happened. The fire bombs dropped by 731 RAF bombers started thousands of fires. They merged to create a huge firestorm, sucking up oxygen and generating hurricane force winds. Many who did not burn to death were asphyxiated in underground bomb shelters. The firestorm killed more than 40,000 people in one night.

When the United States entered the war in Europe, its Army Air Corps had better fighter-plane support and bombsights than the RAF. It could maintain its longstanding policy of daytime precision bombing. The Americans believed that the most effective way to destroy the enemy's ability to continue the war was to strike specific targets like aircraft factories and oil refineries.

Following German rocket attacks against London late in the war, almost 800 RAF bombers bombed Dresden, a center of German art, architecture, and culture. It had been untouched by previous Allied bombing raids. The attack's stated purpose was to disrupt German troop transports to the Russian front. But at least 35,000 civilians died, mainly by inhaling toxic gases created by the second major firestorm of the war. American bombers killed more civilians the next day when they had difficulty hitting their targets through all the smoke.

Firestorms in Japan

After Germany surrendered in May 1945, America wanted to quickly end the war against Japan. As plans went ahead for a costly invasion of the Japanese islands, Major General [Curtis LeMay](#) took command of the bombing campaign against Japan, which had started in late 1944. Having studied British area-bombing tactics, LeMay decided to adopt them in a final effort to force the Japanese to surrender.

On the night of March 9-10, 1945, LeMay's B-29 bombers attacked Tokyo, a city of 6 million people. Nearly 600 bombers dropped 1,665 tons of fire bombs on the Japanese capital, destroying 16 square miles of the city. The resulting firestorm killed 100,000 people, more than died at Hiroshima or Nagasaki from [atomic bombs](#) a few months later. Most of the victims were women, children, and old men. The B-29 crew members put on oxygen masks to keep from vomiting at the smell of burning human flesh.

LeMay's planes continued firebombing Tokyo and more than 60 other Japanese cities in the following months. He thought he could end the war quickly by destroying Japan's economy and crushing the morale of the Japanese people. LeMay argued against using atomic bombs. He believed that his firebombing tactics would force Japan to surrender before American forces were scheduled to invade the homeland.

On August 6, 1945, one B-29 dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, creating a firestorm that wiped out 70 percent of the city and killed 70,000 Japanese. The atomic bomb attack on Nagasaki three days later was somewhat less destructive due to the geographical features of the city. After some hesitation, Japan finally surrendered. The decision to use atomic weapons was fairly easy for American political and military leaders, given the hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths already caused by the bombing of cities during the war. The outrage about such killing at the beginning of the war had been numbed by the horror of "total war" and the desire to quickly bring it all to an end.

The Allied area bombing of civilians played an important role in undermining the will of the German and Japanese people to continue the war. But unlike the predictions of military strategists before the war, this did not happen quickly. For a long time, the bombing of German and Japanese civilians only stiffened their resolve to fight on. They wanted to surrender only after their countries lay in ruins, hundreds of thousands had perished, and all hope of victory was lost.

After World War II

Following World War II, the [Cold War](#) developed between the United States and Soviet Union. It never erupted into actual warfare, but the possibility of World War III loomed. The two nations engaged in a nuclear arms race. Each targeted the other's civilian population, aiming thermonuclear missiles at cities. The massive destructiveness of nuclear weapons made avoiding civilians impossible. It also made nuclear war

unwinnable. The standoff between the two nuclear superpowers ended in 1991, when the Soviet Union disbanded. Nuclear war had been avoided, but the threat remains that some nation might use them someday.

Although no nuclear war has occurred since World War II, many limited, non-nuclear wars have taken place. America has engaged in wars in [Korea](#) , [Vietnam](#) , [Iraq](#) , and [Kosovo](#). It has never again targeted civilians as it did during World War II, but many civilians have died in these wars. Their deaths usually resulted from mistake, accident, or being too close to a military target. With advances in technology, weapons have grown more accurate. The "precision bombing" of World War II often missed their targets. Today's cruise missile usually hits its mark. But even with today's "smart bombs" and precise targeting, civilians still die.

The aftermath of World War II brought more attempts to protect civilians in war. The [Geneva Convention of 1949](#) stated that civilian hospitals "may in no circumstances be the object of attack" The U.N. General Assembly adopted several resolutions, which are not legally binding but do carry the weight of international opinion. A [1961 resolution](#) declared that the "use of nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons" violates the "spirit, letter and aims of the United Nations." Another [resolution in 1968](#) proclaimed that no nation should "launch attacks against . . . civilian populations" The World Court in 1996 made an [advisory opinion on nuclear weapons](#) . It ruled that "the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law" But it stated that international law was unclear on whether they could be used "in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake."

For Discussion and Writing

1. That were the arguments for "precision" and "area" bombing in World War II? Which one do you think was the better strategy? Why?
2. Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay said after the March 9-10 Tokyo bombing, "There are no innocent civilians. . . . The entire population got into the act and worked to make those airplanes or munitions . . . men, women, and children." Do you agree or disagree with LeMay? Why?
3. Do you think international law should define rules of war? Why or why not?