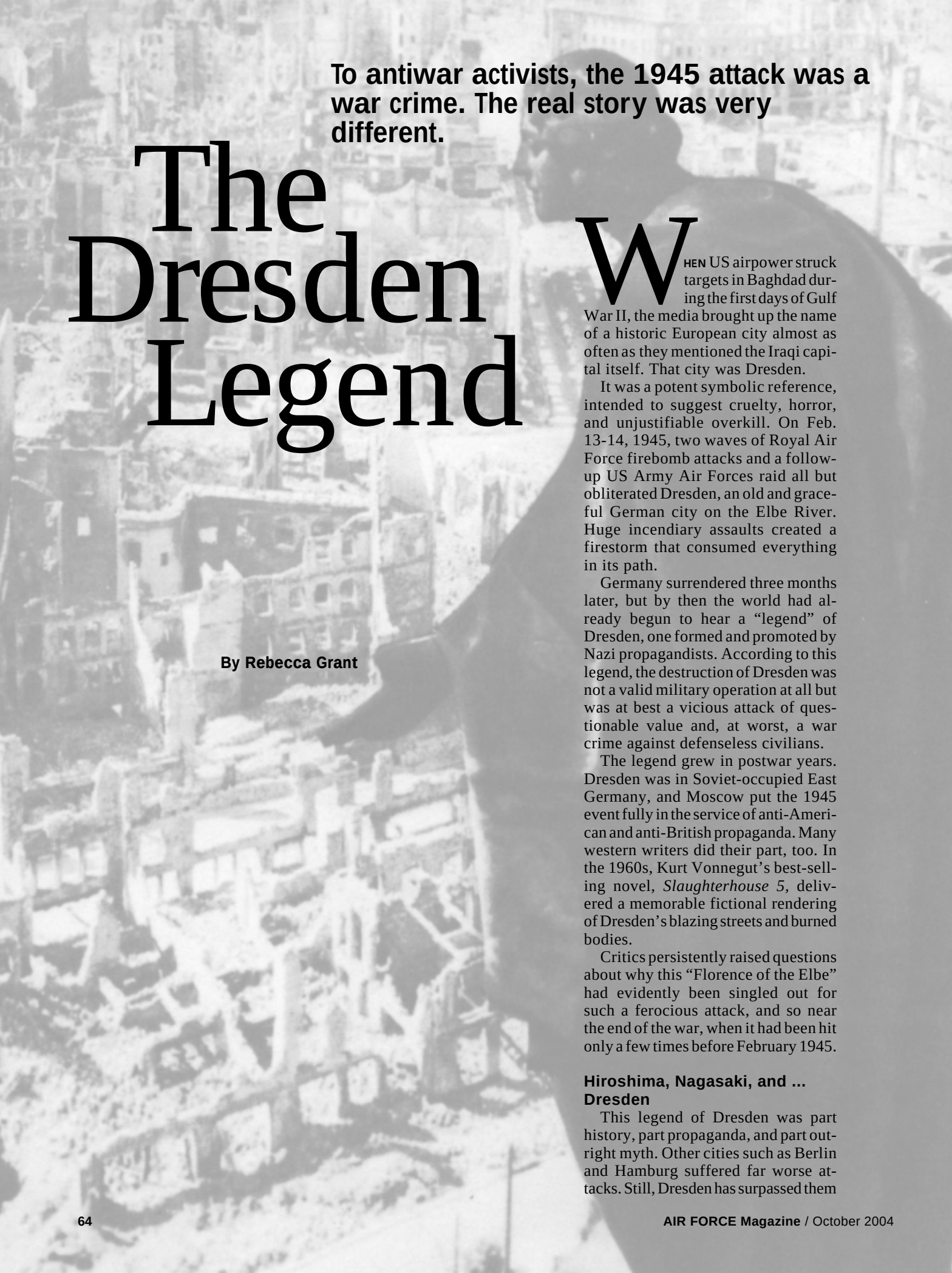
To antiwar activists, the 1945 attack was a war crime. The real story was very different.

The Dresden Legend

By Rebecca Grant



WHEN US airpower struck targets in Baghdad during the first days of Gulf War II, the media brought up the name of a historic European city almost as often as they mentioned the Iraqi capital itself. That city was Dresden.

It was a potent symbolic reference, intended to suggest cruelty, horror, and unjustifiable overkill. On Feb. 13-14, 1945, two waves of Royal Air Force firebomb attacks and a follow-up US Army Air Forces raid all but obliterated Dresden, an old and graceful German city on the Elbe River. Huge incendiary assaults created a firestorm that consumed everything in its path.

Germany surrendered three months later, but by then the world had already begun to hear a "legend" of Dresden, one formed and promoted by Nazi propagandists. According to this legend, the destruction of Dresden was not a valid military operation at all but was at best a vicious attack of questionable value and, at worst, a war crime against defenseless civilians.

The legend grew in postwar years. Dresden was in Soviet-occupied East Germany, and Moscow put the 1945 event fully in the service of anti-American and anti-British propaganda. Many western writers did their part, too. In the 1960s, Kurt Vonnegut's best-selling novel, *Slaughterhouse 5*, delivered a memorable fictional rendering of Dresden's blazing streets and burned bodies.

Critics persistently raised questions about why this "Florence of the Elbe" had evidently been singled out for such a ferocious attack, and so near the end of the war, when it had been hit only a few times before February 1945.

Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and ... Dresden

This legend of Dresden was part history, part propaganda, and part outright myth. Other cities such as Berlin and Hamburg suffered far worse attacks. Still, Dresden has surpassed them

in the public mind as a symbol of brutal conventional bombing and morally questionable target selection. Only Hiroshima and Nagasaki have higher revulsion quotients.

Thus, Dresden is a well-established reference point, guaranteed to prompt debate on city bombing, civilian casualties, and the morality of Allied operations.

Which brings us to Baghdad. In early 2003, the ghost of Dresden was an ever-present touchstone for anti-war forces.

■ "Recently, a debate over whether the Allied bombing of Dresden was a war crime has preoccupied the German press," observed columnist Anne Applebaum.

■ "Dresden 1945. Baghdad 2003: The Same Crime," read a placard in a Berlin protest spotted by a *New York Times* reporter after the start of Gulf War II.

■ After the bombing of Baghdad, "Some excited TV commentators likened the scene to the devastation caused by the extensive bombing of Dresden and other cities during World War II," observed a *New York Times* editorial.

■ It was also a marker for the coalition—a "don't go there." "Baghdad will not be like Dresden," vowed an Air Force colonel conducting a Pentagon background briefing on airpower just before Operation Iraqi Freedom began.

What makes Dresden stand out is the sense that the Allied attack was disproportionate. In the laws of war, proportionality is key. Claims that Dresden was not a legitimate military target, that the attack came too late in the war to make a difference, and that the firebombing tactics were cruel and unusual are at the center of the debate.

Ernest W. Lefever, a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., summed up the case against the Allies with this charge: "Hitler's barbarity didn't justify the fiery obliteration of beautiful Dresden."

Dresden also provides a major count in the indictment of RAF Bomber Command's doctrine of nighttime area bombing.

Denouncers of the Dresden attack come from different points on the political spectrum. For instance, neo-Nazi groups promote the legend of Dresden via Internet postings in order to show that non-Jewish Germans suffered in the war.

The Price. ***Dresden paid a price for Nazi Germany's sins. As Soviet forces closed in from the east, the city's fate was determined by its strategic location along rail and road lines of communication that could facilitate a German counterattack. In this famous photo taken from Dresden's Townhall Tower, a sculpture titled "The Goodness" appears to be surveying the wreckage.***

What, exactly, happened at Dresden in 1945? And why has it remained a powerful symbol nearly 60 years later?

When World War II began, Dresden was the seventh largest city in Germany. Official statistics put Dresden's population at 642,143. It had been a popular tourist destination because of its marvelous cathedral, synagogue, palaces, gardens, and avenues radiating out from the medieval city center.

For all of its charm, however, Dresden had an ugly side. Its leaders and public generally welcomed the Nazis' rise to power.

"Dresden is a pearl, and National Socialism will give it a new setting," Adolf Hitler boasted in 1934. Most resistance to the Nazis in Dresden was stamped out by 1935, according to historian Frederick Taylor in his comprehensive 2004 book, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*.

Even while Dresden was being converted to a Reich stronghold, observers outside Germany paid attention only to its cultural beauty and luxury industries. This was true despite contrary evidence. In fact, said Taylor, an official 1942 guide described the German city as "one of the foremost industrial locations of the Reich."

Dresden shifted to a wartime footing, with the large Zeiss-Ikon camera factory converted to make fuses and bombsight optics. The United States Strategic Bombing Survey listed at least 110 factories and industries in Dresden. Some 50,000 people worked in munitions and armaments production.

Too Far East

Still, Dresden was not a target of Allied air attack until 1944. It was too far to the east. In the early years of the war, RAF Bomber Command and the US Army Air Forces had their hands full attacking Nazi-held France, Holland, and western Germany. Then came concentrated attacks on major industrial targets and the all-important preparations for the Normandy invasion.

In those early years, bombers that found themselves over Dresden generally were strays from raids on Berlin. Dresden recorded just 12 air raid warnings in all of 1940, seven in 1941, and four in 1942. Most came to nothing. Dresden took its first air raid casualties only in August 1944, when some bombs from a raid on the nearby town of Freital fell in its outskirts.

According to official Air Force reports, Dresden was not targeted de-

Decision. ***Gen. Arthur Harris, head of RAF's Bomber Command, got the "go" order Jan. 27, 1945. Harris viewed Dresden as "a mass of munitions works, an intact government center, and a key transportation center."***

liberately until 30 B-24s of Eighth Air Force on Oct. 7, 1944, struck the rail marshaling yards with more than 70 tons of high-explosive bombs—a comparatively light raid. Eighth Air Force returned to Dresden's marshaling yards with 133 bombers on Jan. 16, 1945, dropping 279 tons of high explosives with 41 tons of incendiaries in the mix.

As the war closed in, it was the strategic location of Dresden along rail and road lines of communication that would determine its fate.

By January 1945, one of the most important elements in the Allies' strategic calculus was the new Russian ground offensive. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, had the Battle of the Bulge under control and Allied forces in the west were ready to move into Germany itself. To end the war by summer 1945, the Allies would have to coordinate the eastern and western drives as never before.

Russia's winter offensive began from Poland on Jan. 12, 1945, and made "remarkable progress," as Eisenhower said in his memoirs, reaching German soil a week later.

Though the ring was tightening on Germany, Berlin had a compensating benefit: shorter internal lines of communication. The smaller battle area meant that the German Army could redeploy its forces from one front to another rapidly. According to historian Matthew Cooper, Hitler immediately began shifting his forces, but significant Panzer forces remained in areas like Hungary.

Soviet Jeopardy

By Feb. 2, 1945, the Russians were near Frankfurt, but Moscow's drive now formed a bulge 400 miles long at its base with northern and southern flanks over 100 miles deep. Even this juggernaut was vulnerable to flank attacks from areas still held by the German Army. Dresden was a major rail junction controlling German movement on that front.

A big question was how best to use Bomber Command and Eighth Air Force to support the Russian effort.

Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee had a detailed answer to that question. Composed of representatives from military intelligence service, counterintelligence, naval intelligence, the Air Ministry, and the Ministry of Economic Warfare, this powerful committee tracked the status of German forces and produced papers on the likely outcome of courses of action. According to Taylor, the JIC's Jan. 21, 1945, report put it bluntly: Germany might be able to reinforce the Eastern Front with up to 42 divisions pulled from France, Norway, Italy, Latvia, and elsewhere.

Thus, it was a race between Russian offensive operations and the arrival of German reinforcements. Half a million men pouring eastward was the last thing the Allies wanted. More alarming, the JIC laid out a timetable predicting the Germans could complete the reinforcements by March 1945. The JIC's research was backed up by supersecret Enigma-code intercepts.

The JIC had no doubt that the success of the Russian offensive would have "a decisive effect" on the length of the war. Then came the recommendation: "We consider, therefore, that the assistance which might be given to the Russians during the next few weeks by the British and American strategic bomber forces justifies an urgent review of their employment to this end."

It got more than a review. On Jan. 27, 1945, Gen. Arthur T. Harris, head of Bomber Command, got his orders from his RAF boss. The chief of the Air Staff would allow one big attack on Berlin, but he also ordered related attacks "on Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz, or any other cities where a severe blitz will not only cause confusion in the evacuation from the east but will also hamper the movement of troops from the west."

The idea of US and British air support for the Russian campaign was hardly new. Eisenhower himself used exactly the same technique to support his own Normandy landings in 1944. He was counting on airpower again in 1945 to "prevent the enemy from switching forces back and forth at will" against attackers.

What was good for the Western Front also was good for the Eastern Front. In December 1944, the US ambassador to Russia, W. Averill Harriman, had talked over the idea with Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. Stalin got the same message in a mid-January 1945 meeting in Moscow with Eisenhower's deputy, British Air Marshal Arthur W. Tedder. Tedder briefed him on "application of the Allied air effort with particular reference to strategic bombing of communications as represented by oil targets, railroads, and waterways," and they also discussed how to bring airpower into the fight as Germany began to shuffle forces.

Call for Help

At Yalta on Feb. 4, 1945, Gen. Alexei Antonov, Red Army chief of staff, briefed Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill on the Russian offensive and asked for US and British help. He wanted them to speed up the ad-

vance in the west, crush the Ardennes salient once and for all, and weaken German ability to shift reserves east.

The Russians wanted to begin a new phase of advance in February. To do so, Antonov wanted air forces to pin down German forces in Italy and to paralyze junctions in eastern Germany. That meant Leipzig, Berlin, and Dresden.

The Allies were now committed to an attack on Dresden designed to choke off transport through the city. How would they achieve those effects?

The answer lay partially in the history of the air war to date, starting with the Nov. 14, 1940, German bomber attack on Coventry, England.

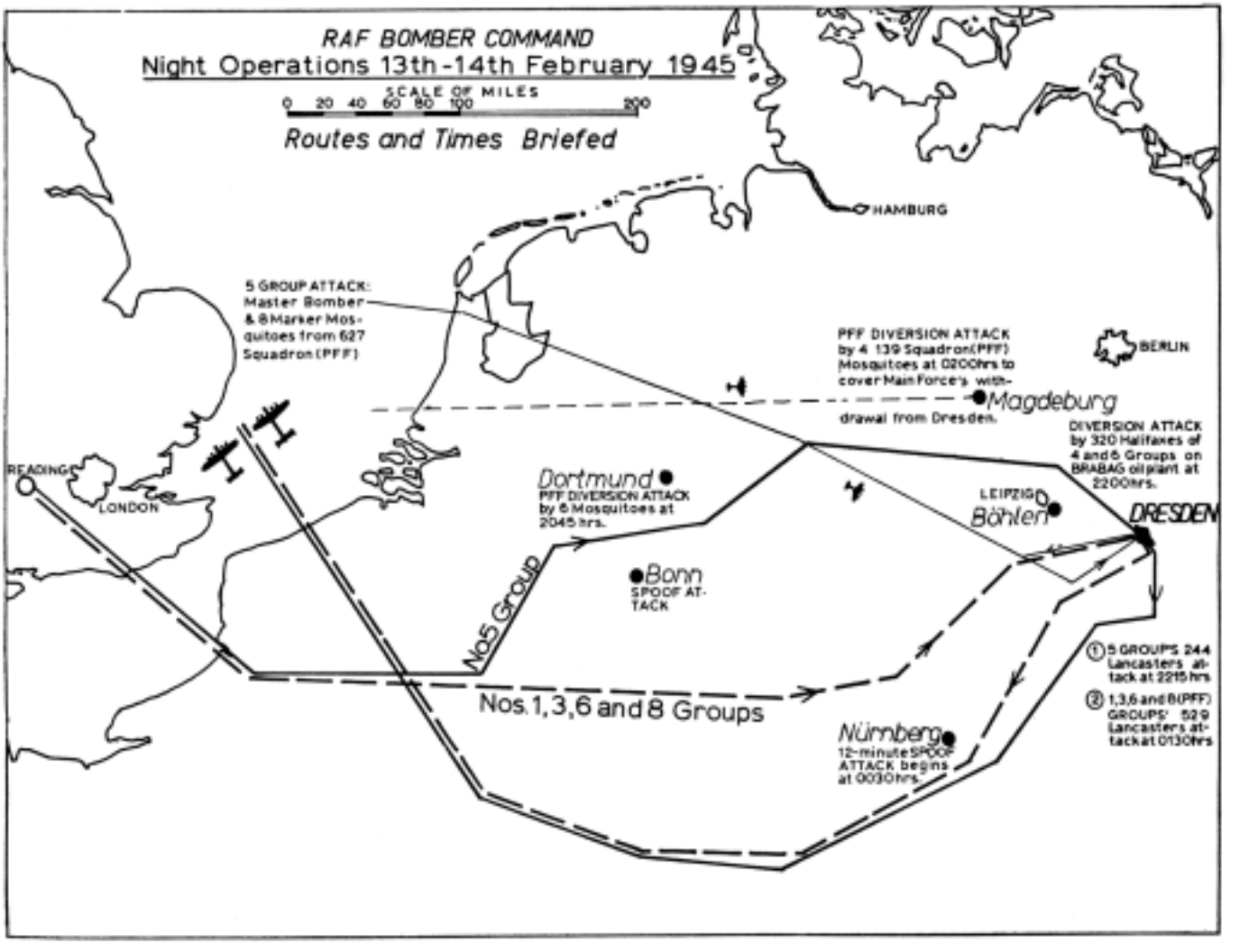
Coventry, like Dresden, was a major manufacturing center built on a medieval city grid with small workshops and factories interspersed through the city. More than 500 German bombers attacked with loads of incendiaries. As the fires combined, they sucked oxygen from street level so that many of Coventry's 538 victims died of asphyxiation.

The main damage to Coventry's economy came from the combined effects of burned houses, factories, and city infrastructure. Instead of counting on the near-impossible task of precision bombing of industrial sites, the Luftwaffe had brought war work to a halt by destroying all the secondary mechanisms that fed the life of the city. "This was a new level of annihilation," commented historian Taylor.

Bomber Command soon figured out how to create firestorms of its own. The attack on Hamburg that began on July 27, 1943, provided a weapons-effectiveness model for Dresden. Nearly 800 bombers headed for Hamburg and masked their approach with one of the first operational uses of Window, Britain's new chaff strips that fuzzed German radar at ground stations and in night fighters. The firestorm killed about 40,000 and compelled even Hitler's war production chief, Albert Speer, to admit that more attacks like Hamburg would derail German war production.

This was the same method chosen by Bomber Command for the Dresden attack. Less than two weeks after Yalta, Bomber Command and Eighth Air Force got the weather they needed for the Dresden attack. The Russians were notified a day in advance via the US military mission in Moscow.

In England, 722 bombers formed up to attack in two main waves. Leading the first wave was Bomber Command's veteran 5 Group, once commanded by Harris himself. Their primary aircraft was the newer, faster Lancaster bomber. Light wood-frame Mosquito pathfinder aircraft led the formations using a radar beacon system to locate city targets with far



The Route. ***This mission map published in David Irving's famous 1965 book,*** **The Destruction of Dresden,** ***shows the route flown by two waves of RAF bombers on the night of Feb. 13-14, 1945.***

Round 3. ***The day after the RAF's nighttime attacks, 316 bombers of the US Eighth Air Force attacked Dresden's marshaling yards outside the city center. Taking part were B-17 Flying Fortresses.***

greater precision than in the early years of the war.

Grim News

Many of the 5 Group veterans preparing to fly that evening had just heard grim news: Their initial tours of duty were being extended from 30 missions to 40 missions. "We shan't make it," commented one aircrew member cited by Taylor. Their pessimism was well-founded, for as late as 1944, official Bomber Command statistics forecast that less than 25 of 100 bomber crews would complete even 30 missions without being shot down. Losses from 1939-45 averaged 60 killed out of every 100 aircrew members in Bomber Command.

Flying so deep into Germany also got the attention of Bomber Command's crews. As one bombardier from 5 Group later recalled, "They said the reason for the raid [on Dresden] was chiefly ... 'blocking the supply to the Russian front,' ... and we were out to knock it out."

Still, conditions favored Bomber Command that night. German air raid warnings went off shortly after 9 p.m. Pathfinders dropping flares from 800 feet marked the targets accurately. RAF 5 Group hit the city at about 10:15 p.m. Ten minutes later, the blaze began. As the old buildings burned, the firestorm spread and created the howling street-level winds that depleted oxygen from the atmosphere. Those who survived escaped the heat with wet blankets and clothing wrapped around them, running through burning streets and reaching either the river or high ground away from the flames.

Now Bomber Command's second wave was on its way. The second wave released weapons from 1:21 a.m. to 1:45 a.m. All told, Bomber Command dropped 1,477 tons of high-explosive bombs and 1,181 tons of incendiaries on Dresden that night.

Although this was Dresden's first heavy attack, the tonnage was not high by Bomber Command standards. For example, Cologne, Hamburg, and Frankfurt-am-Main had all been bombed with mixes including 3,800 to 4,100 tons of incendiaries, more than triple Dresden's totals. The total of 7,100 tons of bombs of all types dropped on Dresden during the war hardly compared to the 67,000 tons of bombs that fell on Berlin or the 44,000 tons on Cologne.

The next day, Feb. 14, 1945, 316 bombers from Eighth Air Force attacked Dresden's marshaling yards outside the city center. The mix was 487 tons of high-explosives and 294 tons of incendiaries. Another 200 bombers of Eighth Air Force returned to hit the same target the next day.

"Dresden still burning from the night attacks," noted Kay Summersby, Eisenhower's British driver, who also kept an official headquarters diary.

Gruesome Result

The human toll was high. POWs were detailed to excavate the bodies, giving Vonnegut, who was a prisoner there, the subject of his novel. Accounts of groups of 10 to 20 people found untouched, but dead of carbon monoxide poisoning in basement shelters, helped to give the Dresden raid its gruesome reputation.

Casualty estimates became a source of ongoing debate. At the time, the British estimated the firestorm killed up to 16,000. One 1948 estimate by two German generals went as high as 250,000. Some British historians in the 1950s and 1960s settled on numbers near 100,000 by adding together known casualties plus estimates of people missing.

Workhorse. ***The heart of the RAF long-range bomber force was the fast-flying Lancaster (shown here). The Lancaster was the RAF analogue to the USAAF B-17 and B-24 bombers. It saw heavy action over Dresden.***

However, the true number was probably closer to the 25,000 to 30,000, now cited in official Air Force historical statistics. Taylor backed the number, too. He cited records recovered from the Dresden archives in 1993, listing the number of people buried after the attack in municipal cemeteries at 21,271. All sources agreed on one fact: A contributing factor in the number of casualties was that Dresden lacked proper air raid shelters for civilians.

Harris was unapologetic. Dresden, he said at the time, "was a mass of munitions works, an intact government center, and a key transportation center." He added, "It is now none of those things."

The attack on Dresden achieved its goal of unhinging the city as a rail transport and communications center. Official USAF figures show that 23 percent of Dresden's industrial buildings were destroyed or severely damaged, along with more than 50 percent of its houses. In total, 80 percent of the buildings in Dresden suffered some form of damage.

The war continued, with Bomber Command recording its heaviest totals of munitions dropped in the entire war during the month of March 1945. The bloody Russian advance went forward, too, and Russian troops actually entered Dresden on the last day of the war in Europe: May 8, 1945.

The distortion of the Dresden raid began almost immediately, and it came from two sources. The first was an ill-advised Feb. 18, 1945, release by Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF). It trumpeted the effect of terror bombings. SHAEF tried to recall the statements, and, at Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold's direction, the Air Staff in Washington launched an immediate investigation—but not before the Dresden terror raid story made the front page of newspapers around the world.

The furor led no less a figure than Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall to issue a definitive statement on Dresden's significance in early March 1945. When Dresden was bombed, the Russian salient was only 70 miles from the city, he said. Russian positions were still vulnerable to German counterattack, and, indeed, counterattacks elsewhere on the Eastern Front cost the Russians very heavy casualties. There was no way the Allies could let the Dresden rail and communications nodes open the gates for German reinforcements. According to a memo signed by Marshall, he concluded that communications through Dresden were made impossible by the Allied bombings, and the Russian salient was thereby protected.

AP photo

Aftermath. ***Dresden was a scene of devastation after the raids. Within days, Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels had launched the "legend." It was, said one historian, "Goebbels' final, dark masterpiece."***

Goebbels Strikes

The second source was Nazi Germany's propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels. The foreign news service and the state-run *Das Reich* newspaper started bumping casualty estimates from around 25,000 to around 200,000 and emphasizing Dresden as a lost cultural treasure. "A city skyline of perfected harmony has been wiped from the European heavens," *Das Reich* said in early March 1945.

Goebbels did his job well. Soon, Dresden was under Russian control, and it became impossible for decades to sort out the facts. In 2004, Taylor came to a conclusion: "[The] ripple of international outrage that followed the Dresden bombing represents, at least in part, Goebbels' final, dark masterpiece."

No doubt the view of Dresden as overture to Hiroshima and Nagasaki also played its part. So did the nuclear balance of terror during the Cold War, where the destruction of Dresden stood as a graphic warning of what nuclear war might do to Europe. Yet even after the Cold War ended, Dresden was held by some to be a black mark against airpower. The strategic and tactical setting of the raid in support of the Russian offensive was long since lost.

In the 1990s, Britain took a special interest in Dresden, by then a part of unified Germany. In 2000, London goldsmiths donated a replica orb and cross as part of the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche cathedral.

The true surprise is that the Dresden legend has lived on and has been used to prompt comparisons between that long-ago operation and present-day American- and British-led air operations. No incendiary raids devastated Baghdad in the Gulf War of 1991. In 2003, it took neither firestorm nor 300-bomber raids on railroads to stop effective maneuver of the Republican Guard around Baghdad. That was the work of truly modern airpower: precise, discriminate, and employed with maximum care to avoid collateral damage.

Dresden will never be forgotten, but its place in the record of airpower belongs only in the past. ■

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