

Operation Gomorrah

The devastating 1943 bombing of Hamburg shook the Nazi regime as never before.

By Rebecca Grant

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RAF Bomber Command all but annihilated the German city of Hamburg at the close of July 1943. In the view of Air Chief Marshal Arthur T. Harris, the attacks on the so-called “second city of the Reich” were “incomparably more terrible” than any Germany had suffered to that point. The name bestowed on this series of raids seemed to fit its wrath-of-God nature. The RAF called it Operation Gomorrah.

The redoubtable “Bomber” Harris was right. His Bomber Command

threw 2,355 sorties at Hamburg in three massive nighttime raids on July 24-25, July 28, and July 30. The United States Army Air Forces also flung itself into the attacks; Eighth Air Force, based in Britain, generated 235 daylight sorties in two raids during July 25 and July 26.

The main result was a horrendous July 28 firestorm that killed more than 40,000 persons in and around Hamburg. Most died of asphyxiation while huddling for shelter in their basements, or

in the above-ground flames and melting asphalt of the streets.

By contrast, the Luftwaffe’s Nov. 14, 1940 firestorm-bombing of the English city of Coventry killed 538 Britons.

The Hamburg raid was a shock to the Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler, and his air force chief, Hermann Goering. Former reichsminister Albert Speer wrote years later, “Hamburg had suffered the fate Hitler and Goering conceived for London in 1940.”

The situation looked very different



Above and left: The remains of buildings in Hamburg after the RAF's devastating Raid Two on July 28, 1943. The RAF dropped more than 2,326 tons of bombs there.

from the Allied side. Harris described the RAF's own losses (57 aircraft in the three raids) as "minute." Hamburg's fate, in British eyes, could only be called just. "What happened at Hamburg was what happened when Bomber Command 'got everything right,'" wrote historian Martin Middlebrook in his definitive 1980 account of the attacks, *The Battle of Hamburg*.

Few doubted that Bomber Command had taken the World War II air war to a new level.

Total Air War

It was a level that had been conceived—even expected—a decade earlier. Prosecution of "total war" on cities and civilians as well as armies was part of interwar military thought in both England and Germany. In 1932, British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin famously predicted, "The bomber will always get through. The only defense is offense, which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy [does] if you want to save yourself."

The concept resonated with the Luftwaffe, according to American historian Williamson Murray. One Luftwaffe theoretician argued in May 1933 that "terrorizing of the enemy's chief cities and industrial regions through bombing would lead that much more quickly to a collapse of morale."

When war finally came, the Luftwaffe

soon executed city-busting raids on England, notably in the blitz against London and the firebombing attack on Coventry. Nearly three years later, it would be the cities of the Third Reich suffering the effects of these tactics.

Despite the drift of strategic talk in the 1930s, neither the Luftwaffe nor the RAF built top-class strategic bomber fleets before the war. At Bomber Command, the first years of the air war featured only desultory bombing activity. Initial results were poor and losses high.

Then, in September 1941, Prime Minister Winston Churchill approved a plan to build 4,000 bombers, devoting one-third of the British war production capacity to the effort.

Churchill believed a bomber offensive against Germany was a way of "breaking her war will," and he ranked the importance of the effort "second only to the largest military operations which can be conducted on the Continent."

Churchill put Harris in charge of Bomber Command in early 1942. When it came to faith in the power of the bomber, there was no bigger believer than Harris. (See "Bomber Harris," January 2005, p. 68.) He took over a command that was expending more than a quarter of its effort against naval targets, a policy he ridiculed as "frightening cod." The campaign against German industrial targets got about the same level of effort.

Harris redirected the command's

focus, turning it to the generation of mass city bombing.

The choice of tactics came from experience, not theory. Harris in 1942 had tried low-level daylight bombing with his new Lancaster bombers. The results had been disastrous, with the RAF losing many bombers for little gain. From a tactical perspective, Harris thought, the British experience showed that the only way to achieve results was to fly at night and to carpet-bomb entire city areas.

"Hit the Workers"

Harris pursued cities for tactical reasons, but he had a clear operational premise, too. "De-housing" the German workers—and killing many of them along the way—could be as effective as blowing up factories, he concluded. Churchill's science advisor, Lord Cherwell, calculated that 22 million Germans lived in the Reich's 58 largest cities and that turning them out of their homes would weaken German morale.

"If you can't hit the works, hit the workers," Harris said in a famous, and infamous, formulation.

Ultimately, Bomber Command would do both. By the summer of 1943, Harris had built and trained a force geared for taking part in 1,000-aircraft night attacks on German cities. The Americans were ready for mass raids, too. However, the Allies faced a major problem: The air war in mid-1943 had not yet turned decisively in favor of the Allies, and, until it did, the whole plan for the Normandy invasion was at risk.

The most important task was gaining air superiority. Here the Allies were in a tough contest. The more they bombed Germany, the more fighters the Nazis pulled from the Mediterranean and other theaters to stiffen defenses. The Great Depression of the 1930s had left Germany with tremendous industrial overcapacity; war leaders quickly exploited this, and German fighter production actually grew in 1943.

The air war was at a crossroads. London and Washington, being slow in building their strength, had to use their bombers to cripple German industrial production before it was too late. The Americans geared up for August attacks on Schweinfurt and Regensburg. Harris picked Hamburg.

Many factors made Hamburg an ideal target. It was an industrial city, home to Blohm & Voss shipyards and hundreds of other, small manufacturers grouped around the city center. In addition, flying



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to Hamburg would be easier than flying to most other German cities. To reach Hamburg, the bomber stream could fly eastward over the North Sea, slip past anti-aircraft guns and night fighters in occupied Holland, and reach Hamburg without having to fly over more than a sliver of German land.

RAF Bomber Command crews had bombed Hamburg several times before, but this mission was different. Bomber Command had top-notch Lancaster bombers, trained crews, technical advantages, and a daylight partner in Eighth Air Force. Now, as Harris said, "for the first time, the command found itself in a position, under suitable conditions, to inflict severe material damage on almost any industrial center in Germany."

Harris also had an ace in his sleeve. It was a supersecret radar electronic countermeasure, code-named Window. For more than a year, the RAF had been holding back on the use of Window, but Bomber Command pulled it out for the first Hamburg raid on the night of July 24-25, 1943.

Window was a huge advantage. One of the biggest problems confronting Bomber Command was the deadly combination of Luftwaffe night fighters and the radar warning system that controlled them. Grid boxes covered occupied Europe and each contained a night fighter—typically a Bf-109 or Bf-110—equipped with short-range cockpit radar. Prong antennae stuck out from the noses of the night fighters and gave their radars a range of about four miles in a 70 degree cone. The best, such as the He-219, could bag Lancasters seemingly at will and even take down the 400 mph Mosquito light bombers.

Long-range Freya radars picked up bombers at their assembly points about 80 miles from the British coast. From early 1942, the Luftwaffe also had a dense line of Wurzburg radars that gave ground controllers accurate vectors to the bombers. The Wurzburgs also assisted flak gun-laying.

Fool the Wurzburgs

Window's job was to fool the Wurzburgs. Window was tested and ready by early 1942, but then a strange self-deterrence took over and the RAF declined to use it.

Harris said the overriding reason the system did not go into use was the government's "fear of retaliation in kind at a time when our own radar defenses could have been obliterated by the enemy

use of Window." However, Harris scoffed at this concern. It was folly, he thought, to assume the Germans didn't know about electronic countermeasures.

"The biggest mistake anybody can make, militarily," Harris said, "is to credit themselves with being so damn clever that, between two evenly balanced industrial nations, you dare not disclose a particular weapon or device to the enemy for fear of giving him something he doesn't already have."

As the Hamburg raids approached, "the power of the enemy defenses required drastic counteraction," said Harris.

"The morning of July 24, 1943 began as a summer day should, warm and bright," wrote RAF Flight Lt. A.J.F. Davidson, who was already a veteran of 39 bomber missions over Europe. Soon word came that "ops" were on for the night and "my gut began its familiar crawl."

For the 791 bomber crews who took off for Hamburg that night, Window was a new device. More than a few of them had doubts about whether it would work over heavily defended Hamburg.

Certainly the device didn't look like much. Thin aluminum strips, blackened on one side, were tied in bundles. A crew member crouched over a flare chute deep in the fuselage and hand-dispensed one bundle per minute until his bomber was out of Wurzburg range.

With more than an hour's warning from the Freya radars, Hamburg's intricate defenses swung into action. Civilians took to shelters. Searchlights

In this famous photo taken from above, an RAF Lancaster bomber flies over Hamburg on one of the raids that destroyed the German industrial city.





Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris (shown here at RAF Bomber Command headquarters) believed the best way to achieve results was to fly at night and to carpet-bomb entire city areas.

swept the skies and flak batteries slewed to engage the enemy aircraft.

Then the Window clouds flooded the Würzburg radar screens with false returns. Ground control operators lost contacts. This version of Window befuddled cockpit radar, too. On the night fighter scopes, Window clouds forced the fighters to freelance, using only visual cues. Their only option was to turn back into the bomber stream and try to pick out the silhouette of a big four-engine Lancaster.

Window caused the crumbling of the integrated German defenses. Bomber crew reports after the first attack described searchlights waving aimlessly. RAF signals intelligence confirmed the confusion of the ground controllers hit with Window.

The first RAF raid was a success, shutting down parts of the water system, for example. Large-scale fires flared up again and again.

Fire Typhoon

It was the RAF's Raid Two that began the firestorm.

The RAF did not expect this. Hamburg's brick buildings and waterways seemed to render it a less-than-ideal target for incendiaries. Also, a major fire in 1842 had already taken out medieval timber buildings still found in some German city centers, such as Dresden.

Consequently the bomb loads on the July 28 raid combined high explosives plus batches of the four-pound incendiary sticks. More than 700 aircraft of the main force dropped 2,326 tons of bombs in a concentrated area about two miles from the city center. Incendiaries started thousands of fires. Hot, dry weather played a part.

Then came the conflagration.

"About half way through the raid, the

fires in Hammerbrook started joining together," noted an official RAF history. Superheated air of 600 degrees centigrade generated suction in the narrow streets and spun tempests where the "overheated air stormed through the streets with immense force," according to a contemporary German Army report.

Suddenly, the whole area became one

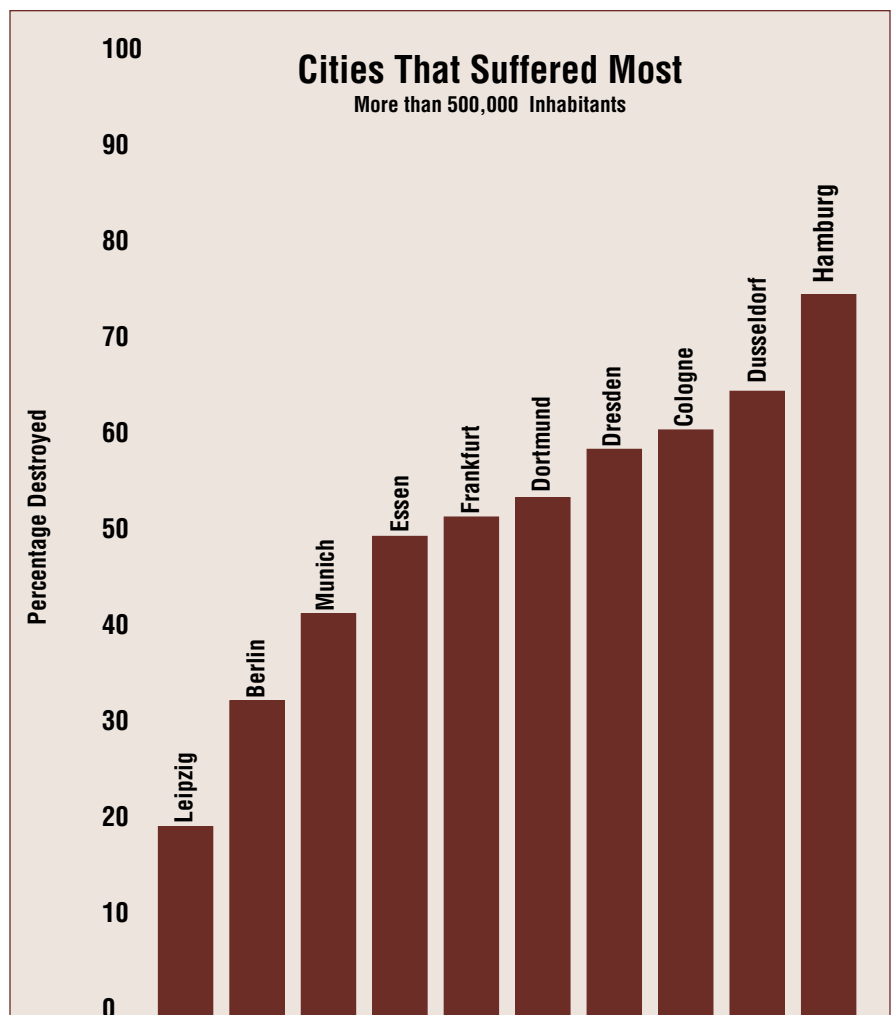
big fire, with surrounding air drawn into it with the force of a storm. The RAF bombing continued for another half-hour, spreading the firestorm area gradually eastward. It is estimated that 550 to 600 bomb loads fell into an area measuring only two miles by one mile.

The firestorm raged for about three hours and only subsided when all burnable material was consumed. Sixteen thousand apartment units vanished, along with more than 40,000 people. A German report called it a "fire typhoon such as was never before witnessed, against which every human resistance was quite useless."

Human tales—some inflated for propaganda purposes, yet all devastating—told of the horror. A policeman wrote of finding a girl, black with soot, wandering aimlessly and dragging her dead little brother behind her. Official records put the dead at 13,000 men, 21,000 women and 8,000 children.

Rattling the Reich

Bomber Command, protected by



For sheer devastation, Hamburg was No. 1.



Flying to Hamburg was less dangerous. RAF and USAAF bombers could fly eastward over the North Sea and cross no more than a sliver of German land.

Window, experienced light losses in the July raids. On previous missions to Hamburg, Bomber Command had lost six percent of each attacking force. This time, however, losses totaled only 57 aircraft—just 2.4 percent of the total.

Beyond the light attrition, both the immediate bomb damage and the ripple effects in Germany high politics were victories for Bomber Command.

“When the smoke cleared,” Harris later wrote, photos showed “the heavily damaged areas” covered at least 74 percent of Hamburg’s closely built-up residential districts. The city docks and four main shipyards were damaged, with power and transport at a standstill. It was World War II’s first widespread destruction of a major city. It would not be the last.

Hamburg’s survivors demonstrated determination, but more than a million moved out of the city. Yet it wasn’t the workers who were rattled. It was Nazi officialdom. For the first time, after almost four years of war, the devastating Hamburg attacks led many in the Nazi leadership to wonder whether Germany would be able to find a way out.

“The first heavy attack on Hamburg

made an extraordinary impression,” Speer told interrogators in 1945. Other Nazi higher-ups were also stunned by the bombing of Hamburg. A city with a million inhabitants “has been destroyed in a manner unparalleled in history,” Goering reported. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels wrote that regime functionaries in Hamburg described “a catastrophe the extent of which simply staggers the imagination.” Goebbels thought food, shelter, clothing, and evacuation transport all presented nearly impossible problems after the raid. He added that the local Nazi official “spoke of some 800,000 homeless people who are wandering up and down the streets not knowing what to do.”

To historian William L. Shirer, the greatest damage was “to the homes and the morale of the German people.” Shirer remembered how lurid reports

of Luftwaffe bombing of England had “buoyed up” German hopes for a quick victory early in the war. Those hopes, naturally, evaporated in an instant. Germany’s military leaders could not deny the consequences. Hamburg, coming on top of the disasters on the Soviet front, brought home to many that Germany was heading for doom.

Speer said in 1945: “It was I who first verbally reported to the Fuehrer at that time that a continuation of these attacks might bring about a rapid end to the war.”

It was not to be. In 1943, the power to capitulate was held by only one person—Hitler. His flunkies might be terribly shaken, but Hitler was not. He refused to visit any bombed cities despite the pleas of Goebbels and others that he do so.

Beginning of the End

Harris and Bomber Command did not win the war at Hamburg. The Allies couldn’t know it at the time, but they faced nearly two more years of hard fighting and tough losses.

The city of Hamburg was attacked several more times right through the end of the war, although there were no more firestorms there. The only other firestorm to destroy a German city came at Dresden in February 1945. (See “The Dresden Legend,” October 2004, p. 64.)

Still, the destruction of 6,200 heavily urbanized acres of Hamburg was grim enough. Only Berlin, with 6,427 burned-out acres, had more total area leveled, according to Bomber Command’s calculations.

Harris had made his point. He turned the tables on Germany itself and Bomber Command shook the foundations of the Reich. What Bomber Command amply demonstrated at Hamburg was that the war could, and would, be won by the Allies, and that Germany would pay dearly. Time was running out on the Reich. As Churchill said, after the Axis forces began retreating from North Africa in November 1942, it was the “end of the beginning.” Hamburg in July 1943 was the beginning of the end.

In 1945, the city of Hamburg surrendered to British armies with no resistance. ■

Rebecca Grant is a contributing editor of Air Force Magazine. She is president of IRIS Independent Research in Washington, D.C., and has worked for RAND, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Grant is a fellow of the Eaker Institute for Aerospace Concepts, the public policy and research arm of the Air Force Association. Her most recent article, “Safeside in the Desert,” appeared in the February issue.