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Bombing Germany A-Level Extension Tasks

LAURENCE REES: What were the views of the Americans and British, before the war began, about the 'morality' of bombing?

TAMI BIDDLE: I think there was a lot of confusion and ambivalence during the inter-war years with people trying to understand how to think about this new category of warfare. How do you think about the use of the airplane and the effect that it's going to have on civilians on the ground? And people are truly struggling with it, because it's clear that modern industrial societies pull people into factories to produce raw materials. Does that make those people in the factories legitimate targets? They're obviously contributing to the war effort, but they're not in uniform. How do you make sense of that? Clearly there was an effort during the inter-war years and during the 1920s to sort it out, but there was no resolution.

I think everyone was afraid that if they signed up for anything, once the war started everyone would probably back off of those commitments and the commitments therefore wouldn't mean anything at the end of the day. What would really mean something would be your capabilities, and if you had the capability to attack cities, to attack the places where production takes place, where communications takes place, where politics happens, what were called the vital centres during the inter-war years. If you had those capabilities, or if your enemy did, you had better have them too, because the only way you would deter your enemy from utilizing those capabilities would be to have them yourself.

LAURENCE REES: It seems extraordinary that people can talk about 'de-housing' and 'affecting morale' when actually they mean killing civilians?

TAMI BIDDLE: Well, I think perhaps at one level they are understanding it. On another level, for the Brits, they're under attack themselves. The British had been under attack since the Blitz; the Battle of Britain had been a close run thing and they'd been feeling like they were sort of hanging on by a thread for quite a while before the 1942 directive was issued. The first time that the British went to a city and attacked a city as a designated city, as a target, was Mannheim on the 16th of December 1940, which was right in the wake of the Coventry raid. And so it's an acknowledgement that this is all we can do, but we're also giving them as well as we're getting, you know, we're going to give them a dose of their own medicine because they're attacking us in this way.

LAURENCE REES: So it's the old British phrase 'they started it'?

TAMI BIDDLE: I think in large part yes. And I think it was a recognition that the gloves were going to come off in the course of the war, but they had been coming off with the attack on Warsaw, the attack on Rotterdam and then with the Blitz. I think by that time Portal felt that we're probably not going to get a lot of people standing up and saying that this is a terrible thing we're doing, because the bombs are landing on our heads as well. We're now in a fight for survival, this is an existential fight with Hitler and if we don't fight on their terms we might not live long enough to have a chance to go back to something better. We might not be able to re-establish a moral world order if we aren't willing to fight to the death right at this moment in time.

LAURENCE REES: So there's a sense in which it is kind of ironic, isn't it, that Hitler subsequently called the V weapons 'revenge' weapons, but actually - before that - the British aerial bombing had a component of revenge?

TAMI BIDDLE: Yes, absolutely.

LAURENCE REES: To what extent was the American decision to focus on precision bombing in Europe made for military or moral reasons or a combination of both?

CONRAD CRANE: There were a lot of factors that went into the development of American precision bombing doctrine. When it's being developed in the 1930s there's a sense that attacks on cities are illegal, and that the American tradition was marksmanship and being accurate, and also the American technology being developed, the B17, was seen to be best utilised in a more precise attack on key elements of an enemy economic system. Overall it was also seen as the most efficient, effective and economical way of using aerial technology to win a war. There was an element of morality involved as well, there were some of the people involved that thought this was also the most moral way to fight, but all these factors kind of work together to produce the American precision bombing doctrine that is taken into World War Two.

LAURENCE REES: To what extent was the morality driving the technology?

CONRAD CRANE: The people in the 1930s really didn't envisage a bomb that could take out a whole city, so it's one of those questions that I'm not sure how they would have dealt with at the time. They're dealing with the technology they're familiar with which are 500 and 1,000 lb bombs; they didn't consider gas, gas bombs or poison gas bombs as moral or legal either so they took those out of their calculus. Really they're dealing with a high explosive and some incendiary bombs, which have much smaller capacity.

LAURENCE REES: So ultimately, isn't the American policy no more 'moral' than the British.

CONRAD CRANE: Even later in the war, though, when the Americans are bombing a marshalling yard in the middle of a city and they understand there is going to be collateral

damage of civilians, they still tell themselves, well, we're not targeting civilians on purpose, so we are different. We still haven't crossed the line where we're indiscriminately targeting human beings. We understand it's happening and we've got to do this to end the war, but we are not out to de-house workers as the British will state, and we're not out to terrorise German civilians. There's always an element of morality here, but I think efficiency is probably more important. I mean, Americans, even to the end, believed that terror bombing is inefficient, it's not going to work.

LAURENCE REES: Not necessarily. Some Americans at the time saw area bombing as going out and massacring women and children. This was in comparison to their own attempts at precision bombing. So therefore there was a sense even at the time that this was not acceptable.

RICHARD OVERY: Yes, and there was a lot of critical pacifist opinion too about this. I think Churchill's post-Dresden reining back, asking: are we beasts and so on should not be exaggerated. Churchill had supported this all the way through and knew perfectly well we were killing very large numbers of people. Why I say the moral issue is separate is not because I think that we should say that it wasn't a war crime or it was a war crime, it's just that you're asking a historian to do a different kind of thing. You're asking me to go back and make a moral judgement about this, not asking me to say why it was that they did it. Now, clearly, in moral terms it was indefensible, the whole strategy is indefensible and from the summer of 1941 they do make the decision to de-house. They call it de-housing because nobody would write a directive that says we want to kill very large numbers of Germans. Harris doesn't have that problem. He writes an airborne leaflet later in 1943 in which he says: what we're doing is killing you. He knows that what he's doing is killing large numbers of people. Of course it was de-housing workers around factories and the idea was that you were not attacking all people and de-housing everybody, you were just attacking the people in industrial cities. Harris had a list of them and he ticked them off one by one as they obliterated them.

LAURENCE REES: But why did we end up with the ability - via bombers - to do the very thing that we were simultaneously saying was against international law and would therefore be deeply morally questionable?

RICHARD OVERY: It's a very interesting question. Why do the Americans focus on producing the B17 and Roosevelt gives it the go-ahead? Roosevelt seems to have very few scruples about bombing, he recommends it all the time. I think that these are questions we don't actually have a full answer to yet and it's one of the areas I think historians have tended to skirt round. The two democratic states, both of which had leaders, Roosevelt and Chamberlain, who took initiatives throughout the 1930s to try and outlaw bombing as a form of warfare, end up sanctioning the development of heavy bombers that can only be used for one thing; attacking other people's cities. For Chamberlain, of course, the idea was that the bomber really would only attack blast furnaces, and if you had to unleash it that's what it would be doing. The B17 was also designed so that it can hit a submarine pen or whatever it is.

LAURENCE REES: But, in reality, morality in a war like this is considered something of a luxury. The truth is we would have done whatever was necessary for own preservation.

RICHARD OVERY: Yes. Well, Churchill throws his weight behind bombing. And it does seem to me he doesn't think very heavily about what it actually means to the populations on which his bombs are raining. There seems to be a strong rhetorical streak to Churchill's view of let's take it to the Germans and it's interesting that right at the end of the war after the news at Dresden and so on he begins to say: have we actually done something wrong? And it's quite extraordinary. He doesn't really think about this sufficiently. But imagine for a moment Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff sanctioning when British troops arrived at the first German city. Saying, well, now you can shoot 40,000 of the inhabitants, line them up against a wall. Shell them till they're dead. This would have been the most atrocious war crime, like the rape of Nanking and so on.

But dropping 4,000 tons of bombs from the air and incinerating 40,000 people doesn't seem to provoke the same kind of soul searching. And I think that that is, again, something historians need to answer a lot more: why was air power regarded both functionally and morally in different terms from the way in which you'd expect somebody to behave at ground level?

TASK: To what extent did moral considerations feature in the Anglo-American bomber offensive? Discuss.