



**Strike Hard, Strike Sure:
Bomber Command
1939-1945
Classroom Resource**

Information for Teachers

This resource is a taste of some of the issues explored within the 'Strike Hard, Strike Sure: Bomber Command 1939-1945' exhibition at the RAF Museum, London.

It focuses on discussion and debating skills and is for use across Key Stages 4 and 5.

Curriculum links can be found within the following subjects: English, History, Religious Studies, Citizenship, Politics & Government and Science.

The content can also be used within assemblies, to facilitate careers-focused discussion or as stimulus for extra-curricular debate clubs.

Please read the Supporting Teacher Information which accompanies these slides.



Handley Page Halifax II (Trustees of the RAF Museum)

**‘Strike Hard, Strike Sure:
Bomber Command
1939-1945’**

What was Bomber Command of the RAF?



Vickers Virginias at Hendon Aerodrome -
PC/78/3/13, (Trustees of the RAF Museum)

The First World War had proved to military and political decision makers that gaining control of the air over an enemy would be vital in all future war. Theorists said that fighter aircraft would be used to protect home skies like a goalkeeper, but only offensive bombing raids in an enemy's airspace could hit enemy resources and force a surrender. Between the wars, people believed that future wars would start with heavy bombing by both sides. It would be essential to develop as big a bombing fleet as possible. To do this, new RAF Commands set up in 1936 included Bomber Command.

The start of the Bomber Campaign



Handley Page Hampden Mk I, PC98/173/5932/8,
(Trustees of the RAF Museum)

- When the Second World War started in September 1939, Britain's Royal Air Force only had a few hundred twin-engined bombers which were low-powered and inadequate at self-defence
- They had not been tried in a major war, their crews were inexperienced, the bombs they carried were small and bomb sights basic
- After raids on coastal targets and some German industry, a government report found that not very much was being successfully hit
- The public demanded change! At that moment, a new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and a new Chief of Bomber Command, Air Marshal Portal, took over.

Early days in the Bomber Campaign



Avro Lancaster B Mk1 of the BBMF (Vernon Creek)

- The new leaders were determined to scale-up everything and improve target finding at night
- New bigger bombers of four engines would be designed and built in large numbers
- Training and bombing techniques would be improved and rather than just bombing ports, the decision was made to target German industrial facilities and the towns that served them
- This was partly because the British public wanted it – in retaliation for the Blitz on British cities in 1940 and 1941
- But the main reason was to attack Germany's war-winning resources where they were being made – in Germany's industrial cities

What Happened Next



Industrial city in the Ruhr Valley, Germany,
winteroak.org.uk

- German railway junctions, crucial in getting war products moving, would be targeted
- Oil storage and production facilities would be targeted, as would factories that made aircraft, weapons or complex machinery or components
- Precision bombing proved ineffective as targets were covered by smog and bombs dropped were widely spread when dropped at height. Damaged factories were back to work soon after a raid, as the machinery generally survived. The controversial strategy promoted before the war now began – the bombing of civilian areas known as ‘area bombing’ would destroy the homes of the workers that ran the factories and crack their morale and will to work.

By Night and Day



MRAF Sir Arthur Harris,
PC71/19/1311 (Trustees of
the RAF Museum)

- A new Chief of Bomber Command took over, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris. He was ordered by Churchill and Portal to increase the night bombing offensive as quickly and effectively as he could – by area bombing
- He opened a series of ‘Thousand Bomber Raids’ using the available twin-engined aircraft, but as four-engined types entered service, these took over. By late 1942, these ‘heavies’ such as the Avro Lancaster were filling out the squadrons
- American bomber units of the US 8th Bomber Command joined the RAF when they began to attack Germany by day in 1942. Until D-Day in June 1944, bombing was the only way the Allies could hit Germany for most of the war

Coalition Partners

- The RAF was its largest ever size in numbers of people, equipment and spending during the Second World War. Of all the Force, Bomber Command was the largest part. Across the whole war, 125,000 served in the aircraft, not counting a far greater number on the ground. Of the crews that served in the aircraft, 55,700 died – nearly half of the total.
- At the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, US President Roosevelt and UK Prime Minister Churchill confirm their goal of securing the Axis nations' surrender. To achieve this, they agree upon a combined day and night bomber offensive of the same targets
- The UK and the US were junior partners in a coalition – the most important partner was Soviet Russia who would sustain 2,000,000 dead (compared to 250,000 who died in the UK). For most of the war Stalin forced his allies to keep the bomber offensive going as hard as they could to prove they were making maximum efforts to support their Russian allies

Stand Your Ground!

Stand your ground!

Over the next few slides you will be shown a series of quotations about the conduct of Bomber Command and their Allies in the Bomber Offensive. After these, you will see a statement that you can decide on. Move to the left of the classroom if you are 'For' the statement and to the right of the classroom if you are 'Against' it.

Be prepared to justify your point of view if asked!



Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘...and should the Royal Air Force drop two, three of four thousand kilos of bombs, then we will now drop 150,000; 180,000; 300,000; 400,000; yes one million kilograms in a single night. And should they declare they will greatly increase their attacks on our cities, then we will erase their cities!’

Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of Nazi Germany, September 1940

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘Now, those [cities] have become ... battle-areas. It is idle to pretend that they are still the quiet, innocuous towns which they were once. They are not. They are dangerous, lethal, menacing towns ... Terrible things ... are done in them. Battle begins in them. One must think today of battle as being pre-fabricated...The clash of arms is only the final stage of a process which has had its beginning elsewhere and long before...The making of arms is war-making. It cannot be called anything else. It is not non-combatant work.’

Sir Robert Vansittart, former Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1941

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘Of the 60 million people killed between 1939 and 1945, 45 million had been civilians. The deliberate targeting of civilians, in a systematic manner was the hallmark of total war. The home front was no less an acceptable battlefield than the fighting front and with industrialisation, civilians became no less important than the soldier in directing the outcome of a war.’

From the Holocaust to Allied strategic bombing: Total war, 1939-1945.
Jordana Leavesley

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘Total war raises the question, ‘are any means, even unjust ones, acceptable in the pursuit of a just end’?’

From the Holocaust to Allied strategic bombing: Total war, 1939-1945.
Jordana Leavesley

Stand your ground! – Quotations

'The Nazis entered this war under the rather childish delusion that they were going to bomb everyone else, and nobody was going to bomb them. At Rotterdam, London, Warsaw, and half a hundred other places, they put their rather naive theory into operation.

They sowed the wind, and now they are going to reap the whirlwind.'

Sir Arthur Harris

Stand your ground!

RAF Bomber Command was right
to have bombed Germany during
the war



Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘The duty of the RAF is to hit the enemy as hard and as often as possible, and to protect you and your homes’

Part of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Charles Portal, Chief of the Air Staff’s *message to the British population*. Portal, reported to the Prime Minister. Bomber Command reported directly to Portal.

‘...The primary object of your operations should now be focussed on the morale of the enemy civil population and in particular, of the industrial workers.’ Air Staff order, February 1942

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘Another vital lesson, one that has taken even air specialists by surprise, relates to the behaviour of civilian populations under air punishment. It had been generally assumed that aerial bombardment would quickly shatter morale, causing deep civilian reactions, possibly even nervous derangements on a disastrous scale. The progress of this war has tended to indicate that this expectation was unfounded’

Alexander Seversky, ‘Victory Through Airpower’, 1942

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘The old clear distinction between soldiers and civilians has been obscured...The people who make and transport war material are, to the opposing belligerent, active, dangerous enemies. He is as fully entitled to try to put them out of action as if they were commissioned or enlisted soldiers. They are in fact warriors. The fact that they wear no uniform is immaterial. They are in no proper sense of the word non-combatants.’

James Spaight, Bombing Vindicated, 1944

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘The history of the British bombing campaign in World War Two shows us how easily war can erode moral standards. In the first months of the war, Bomber Command was anxious to avoid the risk of killing civilians and constrained itself to leaflet dropping and attacks on naval targets. But after Dunkirk, the heavy bombers remained the only means by which Britain could fight the Nazis in continental Europe.’

[BBC - History - World Wars: British Bombing Strategy in World War Two](#)

Stand your ground! -

Was it right to target German cities
with large civilian populations?



Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘It was a nightly occurrence to see bombers blowing up underneath you, on top of you, next to you. You never really got to know the crews who were killed. You might have gone out drinking with them, but one night they wouldn’t come back. And that went on, and on. The strangest thing is that we accepted it. The next day, there would be another crew on the empty beds and that was that.’

Harry Irons, Lancaster Rear Gunner, 2012

Stand your ground! –

‘[whether] we want the government to continue to carry out, through its Bomber Command, a policy of murder and massacre in our name. Has any nation the right to make its young men the instruments of such a policy?’

Vera Brittain, pacifist campaigner, 1942

Stand your ground! –

‘No chivalrous airman wants to slaughter grandmothers or babies. The tragedy is that he may do so in trying to put the others [soldiers, or factory workers] out of action. It is an unintended, horrible, pitiable incident of war, but to say that is not to condemn air bombardment.’

James Spaight, *Bombing Vindicated*, 1944

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘When I realised I was looking at a city with a population of two million...it became almost frightening to think of what must be going on down there...’

Bomber Command aircrew J Whiteman, 1993

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘I was a messenger boy at the BBC when Broadcasting House was bombed during the Blitz in October 1940, killing seven girls in the music library. I was there when they brought the bodies out and that was what made me decide to join up. I was 17 years and 11 months old when I when I volunteered in 1941’

Doug Radcliffe, Wireless Operator with 425 Squadron

Stand your ground!

Would you volunteer to join Bomber Command to defend your country or family?



Stand your ground! – Fact

In the aftermath of the Allied strategic bombing campaign against Germany, some 300,000 to 600,000 German civilians had been killed by Allied air forces. Some five to seven million non-combatants had lost their homes. In Germany's largest cities, some 40% of the dwellings were destroyed or heavily damaged.

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘...people waited in the shelters until the heat and the obvious danger compelled some immediate action...In many cases...they were already unconscious or dead from carbon monoxide poisoning...The scenes of terror which took place in the firestorm area are indescribable. Children were torn away from their parents' hands by the force of the hurricane and whirled into the fire. People who thought they had escaped fell down, overcome by the devouring force of the heat and died in an instant’

Hamburg police President after the RAF night raids on Hamburg, Germany,
July 1943

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘In our small shelter in our back garden at Jutland Road were packed myself, my wife, my father-in-law, the man next door and his wife and ironically, three children evacuated from London...Shortly afterwards a large bomb exploded...in Richmond Terrace. I went over to the terrace with other neighbours and found that many of the houses had been completely flattened...We spent many hours searching the wreckage and were joined by a squad of soldiers followed by an ambulance. Suddenly a groan was heard from the rubble of one of the houses...and a man, Mr Frank White, was extricated in an injured condition. Nearby were found the bodies of his wife and daughter who had apparently decided to seek refuge in a cupboard under the stairs rather than use the garden shelter which remained untouched.’

Mr AE Davis remembers the raid on Bristol of 12 April 1941.

Stand your ground!

Does where a war is happening
make a difference to how we view
it?



Stand your ground! – Quotations

1. The following rules govern out bombardment policy in British, Allied or Neutral territory occupied by the enemy: Bombardment is to be confined to military objectives and must be subject to the following general principles: (1) The intentional bombardment of civilian populations, as such, is forbidden. (2) It must be possible to identify the objective. (3) The attack must be made with reasonable care to avoid undue loss of civilian life in the vicinity of the target.
2. German, Italian and Japanese territory: Consequent upon the enemy's adoption of a campaign of unrestricted air warfare, the Cabinet have authorized a bombing policy which includes the attack of enemy morale. The foregoing rules do not, therefore, apply to our conduct of air warfare against German, Italian and Japanese territory.

October 1942 Air Staff memo

Stand your ground! –

‘In February 1944, the United States Special Planning Committee finally rejected morale as a suitable target [for bombing]. Morale was already low in German cities, the Committee found, and there was no evidence that the social disruption would result in public pressure to end the war. In fact, the bombing was increasing Nazi controls over the population, and ... since German civilians had less influence on their government than in a democracy, morale bombing could hardly be expected to bring about a revolt’

US General Kuter, assistant chief of staff for war plans, 1944

Stand your ground! – Fact

Nazi Reich Munitions Minister Dr Albert Speer said Germany's failure to defeat Bomber Command was Germany's greatest lost battle of the whole war. He believed the Strategic Bombing Offensive did more damage to the German war effort than losing every battle in Russia, including the surrender of Stalingrad, because bombing continuously damaged with ever increasing ferocity, and then ultimately destroyed, Germany's ability to produce the means necessary to make war.

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘There are a lot of people who say that bombing cannot win the war. My reply to that is that it has never been tried...and we shall see.’

Sir Arthur Harris, Commander in Chief, Bomber Command, in a film by the RAF Film Production Unit, June 1942

‘...the Bombers alone provide the means of victory.’

Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister, July 1940

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘Morality is a thing you can indulge in in an environment of peace and security, but you can’t make moral judgements in war, when it’s a question of national survival.’

Bomber Command pilot Charles Patterson

‘...despite the moral evils which all wars produce, and the terror, and the sense of loss when friends went missing, I still believe it was ‘right’ at the time.’

Halifax pilot Michael Foster, 1983

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘The unconditional surrender and complete subjugation demanded of the Axis powers prolonged the war, thus creating the idea that war crimes were necessary in reaching their goal. It was the industrialisation of murder, with the vast majority of people killed being the innocent bystanders caught up in total war. Both the Holocaust and strategic bombing demonstrate the lack of restraint that total war enables.’

Jordana Leavesley, From the Holocaust to Allied strategic bombing: Total war, 1939-1945

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘If you can’t stop the bombing, we can’t win the war.’

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel: to his Nazi superiors after the Allied invasion on D-Day, June 1944

Stand your ground! – Quotations

‘War was always a great evil, but in some particularly extreme circumstances, it may be the lesser of two evils.’

Philosopher Bertrand Russell, 1943

Stand your ground!

Do you have to stop bombs with bombs? Are there other solutions?



Persuade Me

Target Dresden – 13-15 February 1945



Dresden Altstadt in the late 19th century,
Wikimedia Commons

Dresden was a major industrial and transport hub. Clusters of factories provided munitions, aircraft parts and other supplies for the German war effort. Troops, tanks and artillery travelled through Dresden by train and by road networks. Hundreds of thousands of German refugees fleeing the fighting had also arrived in the city.

Bomber Command said it was the largest German city yet to be bombed. British and American air chiefs decided an attack on Dresden could help their Soviet allies - by stopping German troop movements.

Target Dresden – 13-15 February 1945



Hamburg 1943, IWM – by permission

Allied commanders were afraid of allowing the German army to regroup within Germany's border if they eased on their pressure. The US Army alone had suffered 27,000 casualties in the week prior to the Dresden bombing, the heaviest loss rate in their European war so far.

On the night of 13 February 1945, over 500 British aircraft launched an attack on the eastern German city of Dresden. The US 8th Air Force attacked the next day with another 375 aircraft and launched another raid with 210 bombers on February 15.

Altogether nearly 4,000 tons of bombs were dropped. The ensuing firestorm killed 25,000 people, ravaging the city centre, sucking the oxygen from the air and suffocating people trying to escape the flames.

Aftermath



Post-war Dresden, Bundesarchiv – Wikimedia Commons

The city itself was a silent, burned-out shell. Thousands of structures had been destroyed in a 15 square-mile radius. There was no electricity or water. No vehicles moved. The stench of burned wood and human flesh hung over the city. Dresden lay in ruins. A handful of stunned survivors picked their way through the still-burning rubble, searching for relatives or anything of value.

The RAF reported that 78,000 dwellings had been totally destroyed, with another 27,700 left uninhabitable.

Persuade Me

In the following slides you will find quotations from people who experienced the bombing raids on Dresden first-hand, others from those who ordered the raid; or decision makers who reflected on it shortly after the event.

Get into groups of five. Consider the ethical and legal issues involved in deciding to bomb a city such as Dresden. Take into account the reasons for bombing and the objections against doing so. Decide as a group - going with the majority view – whether you would bomb the target and the worst effects of bombing the target.

At the end we will take a vote to see whether your group would order a raid on Dresden, or not.

Persuade Me – Quotations

‘Leipzig, Dresden and Chemnitz, which are not only the administrative centres controlling the military and civilian movements but are also the main communications centres through which the bulk of the traffic moves...The possibility of these attacks being delivered ... is now under examination.’

Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air to Prime Minister Winston Churchill, January 1945.

Persuade Me – Quotations

‘[Basement shelters] looked like a streetcar full of people who simultaneously had heart failure. Just people sitting in their chairs, all dead”—robbed of oxygen by the all-consuming firestorm’

US Army POW in Dresden, Kurt Vonnegut

‘Fire, only fire everywhere we looked.... It was beyond belief, worse than the most fearful nightmare.’

9-year-old Dresden boy during the second raid

Persuade Me – Quotations

‘In the United States, U.S. Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, who also felt the heat from the destruction of Dresden, authorized an inquiry that came to the conclusion that the raid, based on the intelligence available, was fully justified because Dresden was a place through which German forces could be moved to reinforce their lines on the Eastern Front.’

warfarehistorynetwork.com

Persuade Me – Quotations

‘We have never gone in for terror bombing and the attacks which we have made in accordance with my Directive have in fact produced the strategic consequences for which they were designed and from which the Armies now profit.... Attacks on cities, like any other act of war, are intolerable unless they are strategically justified. But they are strategically justified in so far as they tend to shorten the war and so preserve the lives of Allied soldiers.’

Arthur Harris, March 1945

Persuade Me – Quotations

‘I saw with my own eyes that Dresden was an armed camp: thousands of German troops, tanks, and artillery, and miles of freight cars loaded with supplies supporting and transporting German logistics toward the east to meet the Russians.’

Colonel Harold E Cook, American prisoner of the Germans in Dresden

Persuade Me – Quotations

‘Bomber Command's policy of targeting residential areas clearly contradicted Chamberlain's pre-war statement in parliament that it was 'against international law to bomb civilians as such and to make deliberate attacks on the civilian population'. How could a nation so proud of its high moral standards drop bombs on women and children?’

Detlef Siebert - [BBC - History - World Wars: British Bombing Strategy in World War Two](#)

Persuade Me – Quotations

‘I know that the destruction of so large and splendid a city at this late stage of the war was considered unnecessary even by a good many people who admit that our earlier attacks were as fully justified as any other operation of war. Here I will only say that the attack on Dresden was at the time considered a military necessity by much more important people than myself.’

Sir Arthur Harris

Persuade Me – Quotations

'The air raid sirens started their mournful wailing and because this happened every night, no notice was taken. The sirens stopped and, after a short period of silence, the first wave of pathfinders was over the city, dropping its target flares...As the incendiaries fell, the phosphorus clung to the bodies of those below, turning them into human torches. The screaming of those who were being burned alive was added to the cries of those not yet hit. There was no need for flares to lead the second wave of bombers to their target, as the whole city had become a gigantic torch. It must have been visible to the pilots from a hundred miles away. Dresden had no defences, no anti-aircraft guns, no searchlights, nothing.'

Victor Gregg, British Prisoner of War, held at Dresden

Persuade Me – Quotations

‘The feeling, such as there is, over Dresden could be easily explained by any psychiatrist. It is connected with German bands and Dresden shepherdesses.

Actually Dresden was a mass of munition works, an intact Government centre, and a key transportation point to the east. It is now none of these things.’

Sir Arthur Harris, 1945

Persuade Me – Quotations

‘It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed.... [and] acts of terror and wanton destruction...” should now cease.’

Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a private memo after the bombing of the city of Dresden, 28 March 1945

Persuade Me – The Discussion

Now discuss the issues within your team of five and decide whether or not to go ahead with the bombing of Dresden.

Remember – you get to decide with the benefits of historical hindsight. In the event, the raid was carried out in the heat of total war.

Persuade Me – The Outcome

Count up the number of 'For' and 'Against' votes in the room to decide the fate of our potential target.

How did it feel to be involved in this decision?

What ethical issues did your discussion raise?

Full Circle

Full Circle

Sit in a circle and prepare to debate the statement revealed on the next slide. The first person says ‘Yes, because...’ and the second person says ‘No, because...’. Carry on around the circle until everybody has had a chance to speak. If you get stuck towards the end of the circle it’s OK to develop somebody else’s idea rather than adding anything new (e.g., If your debate statement was ‘It was unfair for journalists to nickname Sir Arthur Harris “Butcher” you could say ‘No, because his bomber force killed thousands of people’)

Full Circle

The Allied bombing campaign
helped to shorten the Second
World War

Full Circle – extension statement

There is no way to justify
killing civilians even in a modern
'total war'

Thanks for downloading

If any students have experienced difficulties with the serious nature of the issues covered in this Resource, you may want to contact the UK Trauma Council for support or advice at - [Resources - UK Trauma Council](#)

Further exploration - [BBC - Ethics - War: In an ethical war, whom can you fight?](#)

If you have any comments, please email learning-london@rafmuseum.org



