

Bombing Civilians

A moral surrender to the Nazis? (Letter exchange)

R. Relievo (Rob Blurton)

R. Yamada

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Dear FE:

After reading your articles in FE #345, Winter 1995 on the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan, I couldn't help but feel a little bit of historical and moral context was needed to balance the distortion contained therein.

Let me first make a distinction: There is a valid case to be made that the Truman administration should not have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki because it was unnecessary in Summer of 1945 to continue demanding unconditional surrender of Japan. (I happen to agree with this view.)

But that is not the same as saying because it was unnecessary it therefore puts America on the same moral level with the Nazis in perpetrating their "Final Solution." To claim as your writer does that, "America and Nazi Germany found common moral ground at Nagasaki and Treblinka" is just ideologically-biased nonsense.

Look, the Nazi regime engaged in a systematic, methodical, cold-blooded policy to round up, transport, and ultimately exterminate millions of Jews. If Hitler had his wish fulfilled, European Jewry would have been completely wiped out; i.e., instead of "only" six million Jewish people killed, the genocidal policy would've been consummated with the deaths of over twelve million Jews.

To equate this Nazi obscenity with Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on two Japanese cities is grossly inaccurate. One could only equate the American and German governments as morally comparable if the U.S. possessed an arsenal of, say, hundreds of A-bombs which it then proceeded to use for the conscious purpose of systematically exterminating the Japanese race. In other words, dropping hundreds of A-bombs not to force Tokyo to accept unconditional surrender, but to erase the Japanese from the face of the earth. Now that would indeed put us on the level of the Nazis.

I agree with the objective statement that "U.S. government actions resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians in the course of the war it waged against Imperial Japan." That's a fact. I also agree with



A scene from "The Good War": American marines boil the flesh off of a Japanese soldier's skull, Guadalcanal, South Pacific, 1942.

the factual observation that, “Hitler’s actions resulted in the deaths of millions of Jewish civilians in the course of a policy separate and apart from the wars he waged against Britain, Russia, and the United States.”

The distinction though between the “innocence” of Japanese civilians killed by the U.S. Air Force and the innocence of Jewish people killed in Nazi gas chambers is crucial in moral judgments. Imperial Japan waged its wars through its citizens, i.e., the conscripts who did the fighting and the civilians who worked in the factories building the instruments of war. That’s just as true with us; America fought the war through the American people. Therefore, it was believed at the time, bombing civilian industrial areas (even strictly urban areas) was a legitimate tactic in order to break civilian morale, as well as crush industrial capacity.

It’s also very important to recall the historical train of events; what happened in the late summer of 1945 was horrible. But what happened in the preceding thirteen years in Asia which led to those days in August we now remember so painfully?

It must be remembered that throughout the 1930s the Japanese warlords chose a path of military expansionism which they clearly saw would lead their country to war with America. They initiated a war of aggression with China, then finding themselves internationally isolated and economically crippled (from diplomatic and economic pressure mainly of the U.S.) they chose to initiate war with America to break the cul-de-sac their own policies had led them to.

They were responsible for their actions, which eventually led to disaster. It’s true the Japanese people should not have been held responsible (and made to pay the price) for the crimes of their leaders. If they are guilty of anything it’s of being duped into embracing an authoritarian ideology that glorified empire-building and the cult of warrior sacrifice. But, as in all wars, the only way to defeat the military ruling-class was to defeat its soldiers and the population supporting them. That’s why the term “innocent” civilian should be used with care with regard to Japanese and German noncombatants in World War II.

Yes, what happened to Japanese civilians in major urban areas in 1944–45 was horrible. As your writer correctly noted, even before the Enola Gay took off in August 1945, conventional fire-bombing by the British RAF in Europe and American B-29’s in the Pacific had already killed hundreds of thousands of German and Japanese civilians. The A-bomb accomplished the job that would have required 300 bombers. I don’t want to sound like I’m defending this, I’m only saying that the U.S (and British) governments believed that in the age of 20th century Total War enemy civilians were no longer off-limits.

And, no doubt, if Tojo and his ilk could have retaliated for U.S. bombing raids, they would have sent Japanese bombers to obliterate America’s industrial centers. (Incidentally, my mother, as a young school girl, survived two U.S. bombing raids on her hometown in Japan; she was, also, required to work in an armaments factory along with her classmates in 1945.)

My point in reviewing these historical facts is that there is a tremendous moral difference between Japanese civilians in this period and Jewish civilians in Europe in 1942–45. For your writer to equate the U.S government and the Nazi regime by calling on “perceived geopolitical interests” as similar motivations is just ambiguous nonsense.

And, if we are indeed guilty of the “mass murder of innocent Japanese civilians,” why not extend your moral indictment to the Japanese themselves for their brutal bombings of Chinese cities which killed many hundreds of thousands of innocent Chinese civilians? Why overlook their conduct? In the interest of historical memory and moral truth we must deal with these issues honestly.

R. Yamada
Seaside CA

R. Relievo responds:

Perhaps all analogies are invidious. Any comparison of any atrocity always tends to diminish the real, lived experience of the victims. My argument was in no way intended to lessen the uniqueness of the Nazi extermination camps, a bizarre, extreme example of instrumental reason—the efficiency of mass killing—even when it cut against the overall “rationality” of Germany winning militarily. With their incredible toll and chilling applications of modern organization and technology, the camps are historically unique. Yet, America did become Nazi-like. You

refer to the German regime's "systematic, methodical, cold-blooded policy," which is exactly the dehumanization and moral equivalence I meant to signify. Perhaps I was ambiguous, but the evidence shows that my comparisons are hardly "nonsense."

If I appeared one-sided in my analysis it was due to my chosen subject matter. Japan's warlords and Europe's fascists certainly were bad, and bore equal responsibility with rival empires for the massacres of their cities. Primarily, I intended to debunk lies surrounding American atomic attacks, and not to comprehensively examine the history of strategic bombing, hence my not incorporating a "moral indictment" of Japanese air attacks on China in the essay. A consistent ethical outlook deplors all butchery of human beings regardless of their nationality or the political system imposed upon them by their state overlords.

International opinion rightly considered Japan's aerial assault on Chinese cities in 1937–38, and Germany's terror-bombing campaigns over Spain, Warsaw, Rotterdam, and London from 1937–40 to be the criminal work of human monsters. Yet by 1942, U.S. and British politicians and air commanders had ditched their objections and adopted the same tactics and moral justifications.

Using this rationale for civilian "guilt"—the fact that portions of subject populations, manipulated by propaganda and coercion, are used as laborers in war industries—allowed the Allies to apply their own instrumental reason to the problem at hand. By early 1945, they had perfected through experience the right mixtures of incendiary bomb-types, aircraft formation tactics, and distances between aiming points to maximize death and destruction.

The most desired result of these attacks, only attainable under certain weather conditions, was the firestorm, an incredible fire-breathing dragon of wind and flame that ripped down city streets immolating everything in its path. Those who managed to escape cremation were often asphyxiated in the oxygen-depleted air.

Anglo-American air forces applied "rationality" over Germany and Japan alike in 1945, tearing up such large cities as Hamburg, Dresden, Kobe, and Yokohama, with the accompanying civilian decimation. The most effective of these slaughter sorties, in March, burned out 16 square miles of crowded Tokyo and incinerated over 100,000 people.

The 1940 Nazi bombardment of Rotterdam that horrified the world had killed less than a thousand; thanks to rational technical advancement, America's ability to deliver aerial devastation now dwarfed earlier crude efforts. This shared, brutalized instrumental reason was the purpose of my comparison with the camps, which have become the most notorious example of rationalized mass death, but not the only one, if we look honestly at history.

The civilians aren't innocent—school children, housewives, vegetable peddlers, hospital workers? Nazi leadership, too, claimed their victims were culpable by posing a threat to the homeland, the same reasoning American officials used when dropping napalm on densely populated Japanese cities made of wood. When a philosopher says no one is innocent, it's one thing. When a war planner does, it brings us precisely to the same spot where nazis and strategists all stand.

The common moral ground I meant to establish was that the enemies of fascism became what they opposed. In *The Pentagon of Power*, Lewis Mumford—who very early on called for opposition to Germany and preparation for war—put it this way: "[I]n the very act of dying the Nazis transmitted the germs of their disease to their American opponents: not only the methods of compulsive organization or physical destruction, but the moral corruption that made it feasible to employ these methods without stirring opposition...This was an unconditional moral surrender to Hitler."

Making heroes out of the pilots and bombardiers who carry out airborne atrocities is unconscionable. To murder defenseless families of human beings is heinous, in Eastern Europe and Japan of the 1940s, or in Iraq and Oklahoma City during the current decade. Any ethical position that does not condemn all such slaughter—whose perpetrators, in uniform or not, always justify their actions as righteous due to sacred political goals—presumes a world view that I vehemently repudiate.

To those not familiar with the ferocity of Pacific combat between the Americans and the Japanese, contrasting it to the genocidal fury of German campaigning in Eastern Europe may at first seem facile, confusing the bitter nature of modern warfare with a blatant attempt by the Nazis at eradication of Jews, Slavs, and other "enemies of the Reich." A closer examination of the historical record reveals an American psychopathology during its war with Japan that was genocidal in spirit.

“Emotions forgotten since our most savage Indian wars,” American historian Allan Nevins wrote about U.S.-Japanese combat shortly after its conclusion, “were reawakened.” The fighting became a race war, where atrocities by both sides were widespread. In this atmosphere, statements advocating the annihilation of the Japanese enemy were commonly voiced, suggestions that could never have been made regarding European foes.

Many American policy makers expressed quite clearly how they felt the Pacific victory should be achieved. In 1943, a Navy representative to an interdepartmental government committee called for “the almost total elimination of the Japanese as a race,” on the grounds that this “was a question of which race was to survive, and white civilization was at stake.” That same year, the British ambassador in Washington observed “universal ‘exterminationist’ anti-Japanese feeling here.”

Responding to concern over the firestorms of 1945, Roosevelt’s son and confidant, Elliott, told former Vice President Henry Wallace that the U.S. should continue bombing Japan “until we have destroyed about half the Japanese population.” a goal which would have meant eradicating several tens of millions of people!

Also in 1945, Senator Thomas Hart commented, “Those savages [Japan’s leaders] have, for many years, taught the Japanese that [world domination] is the divine mission of the Yamato race. It is in their blood and must be washed out.”

Paul McNutt, chairman of the War Manpower Commission, told a public audience that he favored “the extermination of the Japanese in toto.” When asked if he meant Japan’s military or the population as a whole, he confirmed he meant the latter, “for I know the Japanese people.”

The genocidal rhetoric used by these American leaders and opinion-makers corresponds quite readily to the statements of Third Reich theoreticians. Though stated desires never became explicit U.S. policy, I reject your claim that daring to compare them with Nazi beliefs is “ideologically-biased nonsense.”

The racism that American leadership articulated in conversation and public pronouncements found a different form of expression on the atolls of the South Pacific. Atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers in the island war are well known in America, enhancing the absolute good-vs-evil interpretation of the Second World War widely held here.

Less absorbed into our collective memory are accounts of U.S. soldiers and airmen who strafed shipwrecked enemy sailors, shot prisoners, cut off ears as souvenirs, extracted gold teeth from the dead, made letter openers and penholders from Japanese thigh bones, and boiled severed heads in lye to remove the flesh for trophy skulls.

Such procedures did not occur when Americans fought white enemies such as the Germans or Italians, and are reminiscent of ghoulish Nazi death camp practices. (A detailed study of the fundamental differences in Pacific fighting from the European war, at least elsewhere than on the Eastern Front, is John Dower’s *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, Pantheon, 1986.)

A substantial portion of the U.S. populace also displayed such racist, genocidal fury. A December 1944 poll asking what to do with Japan after the war found that 13% of the respondents wanted to “kill all Japanese.” More intensive A-bombing of the home islands, which you feel would have indicated true genocidal temperament, was also desired by triumphant Americans. A Fortune magazine survey at the end of 1945 found that 22.7% of the respondents expressed regrets that the Japanese had capitulated so soon after Nagasaki, and wished the U.S. had the opportunity to use “many more of them [atomic bombs] before Japan had a chance to surrender.”

Unfortunately for these patriots, all three nuclear weapons that America possessed in 1945 had been detonated, making further atomic destruction impossible. The incendiary sorties did not end, however, and two more huge raids were conducted after the atom bombs ran out. The biggest, the day before the surrender, mustered more than a thousand planes over Japan, hitting Osaka and four other cities. While awaiting the strategic results of their new superweapon, American military planners continued burning up civilians until the final bell.

The aerial onslaught devastated 66 urban centers and in the descriptive words of its mastermind, Air Corps General Curtis LeMay, “scorched and boiled and baked to death” somewhere in the neighborhood of 400,000 Japanese civilians. Some estimates put the total at over 500,000—dislocated wartime populations make the exact figure impossible to calculate. This places the 1945 mass slayings of defenseless Japanese, in sheer volume of corpses, alongside both the ongoing genocide in East Timor and the consecutive bloodbaths in Cambodia (the U.S. secret bombing of 1970–75, and the 197579 Khmer Rouge massacres).

It is a strange practice to determine the reprehensibility of a state's policy in proportion to the statistical summary of human death; is the Bosnian tragedy somehow lessened because its carnage is quantitatively below WWII standards? By any reckoning, though, this mid-century American slaughter of half a million people is pretty significant killing, especially considering that nearly all of it occurred in just six months, from March to August of 1945.

In my view, a society that can, in Mumford's words, "employ these methods without stirring opposition" has become nazified. Those who support aerial bombardment of civilians in places like Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq are cheerleaders for new holocausts; those who carry out the campaigns are uniformed terrorists. Retaining one's humanity demands uncompromising opposition to the organized hecatombs of all states.

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