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The Bomber Command Raid of 25 April 1945

Oliver Haller

Introduction

Adolf Hitler celebrated his final birthday in a concrete crypt at the end of April 1945. The reach of enemy firepower had forced him underground to escape an approaching firestorm that had been fuelled by years of hatred, suffering and death. Soviet artillery was well within range of the city and the shells of over 40,000 guns began further reducing a heavily bombed city to ashes. Some of those who remained at the dictator's side already referred to the bunker beside the chancellery as the "mortuary" or as a "show house of living corpses."¹ On 25 April 1945, Soviet armour and infantry pushed through the few remaining German defensive lines and encircled Berlin.

Other historic events on that day underscored the totality of Nazi defeat. An American lieutenant from the 69th Infantry Division met with a small group of Soviet soldiers near the German town of Torgau on the banks of the Elbe in northwestern Saxony. Hitler's rapidly shrinking empire had been cut in two. Journalists understood the implications and rushed proclamations of "victory" into print.² On the same day that Soviet and American troops shook hands at Torgau, the delegates of 50 countries met in San Francisco to form the United Nations. "Nothing is more essential to the future peace of the

Abstract: This paper examines the Royal Air Force raid on Adolf Hitler's Berghof on the Obersalzberg in April 1945. Arthur Harris, the head of Bomber Command, wanted to emphasize air power's decisive role in the defeat of Nazism. However, Winston Churchill and Bernard Montgomery, among others, questioned the usefulness of destroying Berchtesgaden so late in the war. Unlike traditional explanations that focus on post-Dresden guilt, this article contends that British politicians grew increasingly concerned with the economic state of postwar Germany and the potential costs of the upcoming occupation. The continuation of area bombing at this late stage of the war reinforced the fears and consequences of "overkill." Harris's disconnect with postwar civil-military concerns negatively influenced the postwar image of Bomber Command.

world," Harry S. Truman remarked, "than continued cooperation of the nations which had to muster the force necessary to defeat the conspiracy of the Axis powers to dominate the world."³ A new world was already taking shape as the curtain fell on Nazism. A few days later, Hitler's gasoline-soaked corpse burned in a ditch.

A fourth major event on 25 April has largely gone unnoticed by historians and is consequently rarely acknowledged today.

A large force of Avro Lancaster heavy bombers and DeHavilland Mosquito light bombers left England to attack Hitler's mountain retreat in Obersalzberg near Berchtesgaden. His Berghof represented one of the most evocative symbols of Nazism and of the international community's failure to grasp opportunities to stop Hitler prior to German rearmament. Journalists revelled in the payback – even if belated – of the Berghof's destruction. Unfortunately for Bomber Command's image, even though headlines such as "Hitler's Chalet Wrecked" triumphantly celebrated a kind of victory, the RAF's efforts that day have subsequently been portrayed by historians in an anticlimactic manner if at all.⁴

It was simply "intolerable" to Bomber Command, Max Hastings writes in a couple of sentences devoted to the raid, to "sit out the last weeks of the war in idleness."⁵ Considering the British devotion to "rubble bouncing" at the end of the war, the decision to bomb Hitler's retreat must certainly have been motivated by more than boredom. At the time, journalists offered three basic reasons. First, the bombing was simply "business as usual" in that the operation continued the systematic destruction of industrial, military and government facilities. Journalists reported that this raid had the special and laudable objective of decapitating

the Nazi state by physically removing Hitler. A third explanation added that Bomber Command wanted to prevent the construction of an "Alpine Redoubt" for a last stand by German forces with the defensive advantages of mountainous terrain. Journalists as well as a large number of Allied military officers were gripped by nearly "hysterical fears of a never-ending partisan war on German soil."⁶

In revisiting the events of the raid, the present article evaluates these three explanations and suggests a fourth: by striking directly at the hated Nazi leader, Bomber Command was endeavouring to change its image as a blunt weapon of terror. It is clear that Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris, commander-in-chief of Bomber Command, feared that politicians such as Winston Churchill had misinterpreted the destruction of cities such as Dresden or Pforzheim as excessive force bordering on barbarism. Churchill's attempt at distancing himself from the bombing campaign is a familiar theme in analyses of this period. It is the intention here to point out that the destruction of Hitler's Berghof, as described by press accounts based on information provided by the military, tried to remind everyone that the defeat of Nazism had been the overriding aim of the war over Germany. Unfortunately for Harris, a single raid could not possibly change hardening opinions that his lack of political acumen had cultivated. Decades of acrimonious debate concerning the effectiveness and morality of strategic bombing followed.

Strategic Bombing in 1945

The Combined Bomber Offensive was effectively over at the start of April 1945. The chief of the air staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, understood that the area bombing

of industrial cities could no longer influence the war's outcome. He requested an end to the strategic air war on 1 April. At "this advanced stage of the war," he admitted in a later note to Winston Churchill, "no great or immediate additional advantage can be expected from the attack of the remaining industrial centres of Germany."⁷ Portal nevertheless listed a number of cases where the bombers might still be used. These exceptions included strikes against "communications systems" and preventing the formation of centres of resistance and in particular a "redoubt in Southern Germany." The continued determination to use bombs to encourage German surrender, one of the primary goals established at the Casablanca Conference of 1943, did not signify a stop to the destruction of urban infrastructure or the killing of civilians.

Government officials reacted to the inevitability of victory and the continuation of Anglo-American bombing efforts in a different manner and from a far different perspective. Ever since the expulsion of German military forces from Normandy at the end of August 1944, various political agencies had expended considerable energy on establishing a framework for the postwar reconstruction of Europe that included the administration of a conquered Germany. Churchill agreed with the general Foreign Office view that Europe would benefit from a balanced policy that recognized the "importance of the contribution which German industry could make to the rehabilitation of Europe and to world prosperity."⁸ At Yalta in February 1945, Churchill battled against the more punitive demands of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin in order to safeguard German industry and thereby reduce the costs of occupation on British taxpayers. At the end of the month, Churchill summarized these discussions and openly declared his stance on German

industry to the House of Commons.⁹ Most politicians, including Roosevelt and Stalin, understood that the destruction of industrial assets needed for reconstruction or at least as part of a reparations settlement made no economic or humanitarian sense at all.

Churchill grew increasingly hostile to a bombing strategy that called his postwar policy into question. After the destruction of Dresden in mid-February, he sent a minute (later revised to remove the word "terror") to the Chiefs of Staff urging a review of the bombing offensive:

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. Otherwise we shall come into control of an utterly ruined land. We shall not, for instance be able to get housing materials out of Germany for our own needs because some temporary provision would have to be made for the Germans themselves. The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of the Allied bombing. I am of the opinion that military objectives must henceforward be more strictly studied in our own interests rather than that of the enemy.¹⁰

Bomber Command reacted in a myopic manner characteristic of an institution blinded by undue concentration on operational goals at the expense of larger perspectives. "I do not personally regard the whole of the remaining cities of Germany," Harris responded, "as worth the bones of one British grenadier."¹¹ German cities did, however, matter in the kind of stable postwar world Anglo-American politicians wanted to create. It is therefore surprising that some historians share Bomber Command's perspective and attribute Churchill's shift to legacy



The Combined Bomber Offensive was effectively over at the beginning of April, but RAF Bomber Command continued to strike targets in Germany. Here, a Bomber Command Avro Lancaster conducts a daylight raid on Germany in 1945.

issues to shock or even felicitous pandering to increasingly hostile public opinion.¹² Churchill's focus during the month of February expressed a real fear that the bombers were tearing to pieces infrastructure needed for the postwar recovery.

More politically astute than Harris, Portal had decided to find middle ground by restricting what was left of strategic bombing doctrine to what Robert A. Pape calls a "punishment strategy... harming enemy civilians in order to lower their morale and motivate them to force their governments to end the war."¹³ Targeting industry made little sense. On 6 April, Portal repeated Churchill's warning that the further destruction of German cities would only complicate the future occupation.¹⁴ This point was understood by most of the officers who assembled at the SHAEF headquarters in Reims at the start of the month to discuss target selection. The physical seizure of German territory by Allied ground forces and

the actual or imminent overrunning of the enemy's few remaining centres of industrial production weighed on their minds. The American strategists understood that the strategic bombing campaign was over. General Carl A. Spaatz, commander of US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, called for an end to operations and ordered his heavy bombers to work more closely with the tactical air forces to assist the men on the ground. Harris disagreed. Even though he lamented that his Lancasters and Halifaxes "had practically no more targets left," he curiously refused to accept victory and instead wracked his brain in order to come up with methods of avoiding tactical missions.¹⁵ Supreme Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower, having seen the destruction in Germany with his own eyes, tried to force Harris into compliance by transferring the full weight of Allied air power against what remained of the Wehrmacht and the enemy's communications system. His last formal strategic

bombing directive in mid-April repeated the demand that the heavy bombers support the ground forces in the final thrusts into Germany. To ensure compliance with this decision, Eisenhower reminded the Strategic Targets Committee that their tasks were restricted to target selection and not setting overall policy.¹⁶ Harris maintained defiance.

In fairness, Harris had consistently pushed a unique bombing agenda that had no use for moral facades. He had accepted the brutal nature of modern warfare and often showed a sophisticated understanding of industrialized economies. The air marshal's support of area bombing deviated considerably from the American adoption of precision bombing. Based on the work of the Air Corps Tactical School during the 1930s, American bombing strategy called for the disruption of an enemy's industrial system by targeting and destroying the flow of essential commodities such as ball-bearings or fuel. Once this aim was

US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) 342-FH-3A21419-57323AC



Left top: This photo, taken by a US 9th Air Force P-51 scout pilot, shows a group of American B-24s attacking the German city of Nordhausen on 11 April 1945.

Left below: An aerial view of the bomb damaged city of Nordhausen taken on 12 May 1945.

NARA 342-FH-3A22119-57297AC



achieved, it was argued, the output of a stretched wartime economy would plummet. Harris dismissed the central hypothesis of American industrial suppression that formed the heart of daylight bombing against Germany after 1942. Large modern industrial economies retained significant flexibility based on immense dormant dual-use capacities that could be mobilized when needed. Bomber Command learned early in the war that only the aggregate destruction of major German cities within a particular industrial region such as Hamburg could suppress output in any meaningful sense. The American attempt at halting ball-bearing production at Schweinfurt in 1943, for example, failed to acknowledge the ability to draw on stocks, develop alternatives or even buy replacements from neutral states or brutally exploit the occupied territories. Even though many treatments of British strategy after the war have criticized Harris for failing to accept American doctrine and thereby concentrate almost exclusively on synthetic fuel and transportation targets, a strategy that ultimately paralyzed the German economic and military system, this criticism is based largely on a misunderstanding.¹⁷ The aggregate reduction of German cities eroded the overall output of a wide range of dual-use commodities needed for every aspect of the economy including synthetic fuel. The wide dispersal of thousands of small, medium and large firms throughout cities such as Berlin meant that only area bombing acknowledged the actual dimensions and nature of modern industrial economies.

In many ways, especially when it is considered that the Germans on the ground did not often perceive of clear differences between area and precision bombing,¹⁸ the air marshal's strategy was neither wrong nor misguided. The image of Bomber Command suffered in part because of the organization's effectiveness against an industrial infrastructure that could not easily be separated into military and civilian components.¹⁹

Bomber Command's target selection during April demonstrated a spirit of business as usual. Operations during the initial week of that month flattened cities such as Nordhausen. Harris officially proclaimed the need to dislocate the enemy political apparatus by destroying administrative buildings and to weaken military effectiveness by torching barracks. Due to poor bombing accuracy despite significantly improved capabilities, most of the buildings targeted survived unscathed and a majority of the bombs fell on residential areas instead.²⁰ Sadly, concentration camp inmates working at the Dora underground facilities producing V-2s were also killed. While a legitimate military target, the bombing of Nordhausen, which was occupied shortly thereafter, indicated a strong disregard for political concerns by Bomber Command. Politicians could hardly understand any need to further dislocate a disintegrating enemy. In any case, the kinds of buildings targeted were needed by the future occupation authorities in order to house military personnel. Since strategic operations were suspended that week for precisely this reason, it was also apparent that Harris unknowingly worked against future Allied interests.

Although for different reasons, other cities fared equally poorly

after Harris switched to operations the command justified as necessary for tactical support of the ground forces. Aircrew released their bombs over Leipzig on 10 April, Nuremberg and Bayreuth on 11 April and Potsdam on 15 April. The Dresden-Leipzig-Halle and Halle-Nuremberg rail lines, Harris claimed, were critically important for the movement of men and material. The choice of Potsdam, however, shows that these selections permitted the continuation of orthodox area bombing strategy under the cloak of tactical requirements. The Potsdam raid was more indicative of Harris' stubborn faith in air power as a decisive weapon owing to his wartime obsession with the levelling of the Berlin region as a way to knock Germany out of the war – the so-called elusive “knockout blow.”²¹

The Potsdam raid, the last of over 300 attacks against the capital and surrounding area during the war, attempted to vindicate his strategic outlook that the “wiping out” of German cities was “an end in itself.”²² Harris had sponsored a number of large operations that aimed at levelling Berlin and its suburbs, Germany's largest urban area, and

inflicting prohibitive casualties in the hundreds of thousands.²³ In April, Harris ignored Churchill's request to stand down and instead pushed strongly for the destruction of Potsdam (along with Berchtesgaden) at the Air Commanders Conference on 12 April. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, the Deputy Supreme Commander, expressed doubts that the marshalling yards and barracks of either city constituted important targets of any real value at that point in the war. In any case, the field marshal also feared that the bombing of targets along the Soviet line of advance might now carry serious political and military repercussions. Pressing tactical concerns, Harris convinced a reluctant Portal to authorize the operation. The destruction of Potsdam that followed, notable for the loss of the baroque “Garnisonkirche” and not the interdiction of German traffic, resulted in the suspension of these kinds of operations a day later.²⁴ From Churchill's perspective, the bombing of Potsdam demonstrated yet another act of unwarranted destruction. He asked: “What was the point of going and blowing down Potsdam.”²⁵ Instead of recognizing that these

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**Potsdam as it appeared after the war.
Photograph taken in August 1945.**

kinds of raids might work against the image of Bomber Command, Harris turned his attention to Berchtesgaden and the Berghof.

The Decision to Bomb the Obersalzberg

Mid-April witnessed the effective collapse of German resistance. Soviet forces breached the Oder River and surrounded Berlin by 25 April. The Anglo-American advance into Germany helps illustrate a clear problem concerning the area bombing of Nordhausen, Leipzig or Potsdam. On 7 March, the Western power's armies had crossed the Rhine in force. Twenty-one German divisions were bypassed and encircled in the Ruhr. By 11 April, infantry and armour had penetrated as far as Magdeburg only 60 miles from Berlin. American soldiers reached Nuremberg deep in

southern Germany on 16 April and Leipzig was captured three days later. Resistance in the Ruhr pocket dissolved and the commanding officer, Field Marshal Walter Model, perhaps thinking of his complicity in atrocities on the eastern front or in terms of accepted behaviour for a man of his rank, shot himself in the head on 21 April. Area bombing operations against cities that would almost certainly be captured within days therefore hardly made any sense at all. If operations had aimed instead at fulfilling the SHAEF demand to stop the retreating Germans by the tactical application of air power, excessive damage could have been mitigated.²⁶

In any case, the bombers operated under conditions vastly different to those of 1943 or even 1944. In the war's final months, the daily availability of bomber aircraft reached the highest levels of the war. Bomber Command

could throw 1,609 bombers against Germany – including 353 Halifaxes, 1,087 Lancasters and 203 Mosquitos. Almost one-quarter of this strength would participate in the Berghof operation.²⁷ German air opposition had also virtually collapsed. German piston-engine aircraft ceased operations against the western Allies after a last desperate effort on 7 April. Prodded forward by the “strains of martial music over the radio,” 120 German aircraft intercepted American bomber formations and “attempted a mass suicide ramming operation at immense expense.” Thereafter, what remained of the Luftwaffe was ordered to face the Soviet advance and only 200 jet fighters were left to fend off over 9,000 Anglo-American heavy bombers alone.²⁸

These thousands of bombers were unleashed against communications under near perfect conditions with experienced aircrews that now had

An aerial view of Hitler's retreat, four miles east of the railyards in the town of Berchtesgaden. This photo was taken in February 1945 before the area was bombed. 1: The Wachenfels or Berghof, Hitler's housing complex; 2: SS Barracks; 3: the Platterhof hotel; 4: Martin Bormann's house.



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the technological capacities of hitting with exceptional accuracy. US Eighth Air Force flew 3,946 sorties against transportation targets over the 10-day period starting on 16 April. Bomber Command contributed with 622 sorties. Of course, the list of even these tactical targets shrank by the hour. The contracting Reich squeezed what remained of rail movement into an increasingly small area. Much of this traffic was focused on Munich and Salzburg. The number of locomotives operating in the region doubled under increasingly oppressive conditions. The trains simply had nowhere else to go after American bombers struck the marshalling yards of Regensburg, Dresden, Munich and Salzburg. Railway lines were cut, rolling stock was damaged and bridges were brought down or made impassable. Mustering all of the skills developed during the war, including feint attacks and window and mandrel screens, Bomber Command contributed with additional strikes against the cities of Pilsen, Schwandorf, Cham and Komothau. The southern German infrastructure could no longer cope with the weight of traffic and enemy ordnance. A 14,000-car jam near Munich developed that was not cleared until June 1945.²⁹

It could be argued that the 25 April raid against Berchtesgaden was ostensibly part of the same tactical operations. However, since the city represented the end of the rail line, with traffic travelling through Salzburg instead, this hypothesis lacks credibility. The matter of the "Alpine Redoubt" represents another and more complicated issue. A number of authorities such as the American Office of Strategic Services were convinced by Nazi propaganda that fed their analysts' own assumptions that the German high command intended to concentrate what remained of their armies in the Alps in order to wage a desperate defence in the

mountains. An initially unwilling Hitler had ordered the creation of an alpine fortress in mid-March 1945. The Berghof had access to a communications centre equal to those bordering Berlin Zossen. Hitler's frequent visits to the Berghof had demanded extensive development to enable communication between the dictator and his armies. German labourers worked for several weeks to expand the fortifications around Hitler's resort and stockpile armaments, ammunition and food. The inner core of the Nazi party expected Hitler to leave the capital prior to Soviet encirclement.³⁰ Hitler, however, never seriously entertained the redoubt concept. The dictator had decided to stand or fall in Berlin. Party Secretary Martin Bormann summed up Hitler's viewpoint with the observation that any south German military defence could not survive the capitulation of Berlin for long. The factories of the capital were responsible for a significant percentage of overall armament production. Hitler decided to remain in the German capital to fortify the willpower of the few men and boys left to fight his last battle.³¹ On 22 April, he announced that he would stay in Berlin.³²

In any case, the Allied fear of an Alpine redoubt was partly built on the hard fighting experienced in the mountains and hills of Italy and the fact that the enemy's forces from all fronts seemed to be headed towards the Alps. A document from the Luftwaffe operations staff dated 27 April 1945 later appeared to confirm these fears. The report advocated the creation of a "final bulwark of fanatical resistance." The Luftwaffe High Command or OKL called for the area to be sealed off, the transfer of the maximum possible quantities of military supplies, the creation of industrial plant to supply the soldiers, and even the creation of airfields. "They were in a position to withdraw straight into the southern face of the

Redoubt," the RAF Italian campaign narrative records, "retaining, at any rate for a time, the food-producing and industrial area of Northern Italy." The redoubt would have a perimeter of approximately 400 miles with Berchtesgaden acting as the "nerve centre." The advantages of Allied air superiority, it was pointed out, would have been lost in the mountains and Allied attempts to take control of the Alps would have carried the risk of significant losses.³³

On 21 March, the German Chief of the Air Staff General Koller transferred elements of his staff to both Berchtesgaden and Thumersbach near Zell am See in Austria. Ritter von Greim, Hermann Göring and approximately 90 officers later surrendered to the Americans at Thumersbach.³⁴ This transfer of Luftwaffe staff to Berchtesgaden, seemed to RAF analysts to foreshadow the establishment of a redoubt. Considering that the German military had nowhere else to go and that Berchtesgaden's infrastructure already made the area the natural replacement headquarters for Zossen, RAF concerns regarding a redoubt took on skewed – almost wishful – thinking. They even disregarded radio broadcasts that announced Hitler's firm determination to hold Berlin against the Soviet advance.³⁵

Even though the American OSS had initially helped raise the spectre of an Alpine Redoubt, the Americans opposed the bombing of Berchtesgaden and did not share the views expressed by Harris.³⁶ The bunker systems on the Obersalzberg were cut deeply into the mountainside. Similar raids on Monte Cassino in Italy and especially Caen in Normandy had furthermore already demonstrated the limitations of air power. The destruction of Caen on 7 July 1944 reduced the city to more easily defensible rubble; Max Hastings points out that "this action came to be regarded as one of the most futile air attacks of the

war."³⁷ Bomber Command failed to offer evidence concerning how the destruction of Hitler's house or even the railway station would hinder the erection of a defensive perimeter.

In terms of the journalistic accounts issued after the raid, it is painfully obvious that none of Bomber Command's stated aims have the slightest credibility. Regarding the tactical neutralization of enemy communications, Berchtesgaden represented the end of a minor railway line and perhaps one of the most insignificant rail targets left in the Reich. In terms of any effort at decapitating the Nazi state, all available evidence indicated that Hitler remained in Berlin on the other side of Germany. It is furthermore unclear how Harris thought even the largest bombs could cut into the mountain in order to either kill top Nazi or military officials or even destroy valuable infrastructure. The RAF's final mission clearly must have been formulated with something else in mind.

The Obersalzberg Raid

Bomber Command engaged in two major operations on 25 April 1945. In addition to bombing Hitler's alpine retreat, the heavy bombers were sent on a tactical mission in support of the ground forces. The target was the island of Wangerooze near Bremen. The British had learned at Antwerp that coastal artillery could interfere with shipping and keep port facilities closed. British troops had just reached Bremen and required the large port installations to take pressure off of Antwerp. A total of 308 Halifaxes, 158 Lancasters and 16 Mosquitos exploited clear weather, flat terrain and the proximity of the targets to the shoreline, which simplified aiming, to saturate the coastal artillery emplacements with explosives. Six aircraft were lost but the raid was hailed a success.³⁸



CFJIC PL 144281

A strike photo taken during the Royal Air Force attack on the island of Wangerooze on 25 April 1945. Two aircraft, a Halifax above and a Lancaster underneath, cross the target area with bomb doors open, while explosions obscure the ground below.

The Obersalzberg raid was different. The Lancasters struck two primary targets that had no defensive purpose or capability. The first British target was the Kehlsteinhaus. Referred to by the Allies as the "Eagle's Nest," it was a chalet-style pavilion on a 1800-metre peak with a spectacular view built for Hitler to entertain dignitaries and guests. The small building represented a real test of British capabilities. Oboe, the British aerial blind bombing targeting system, had an error radius of roughly 100 metres. Hitting something this small depended on a bit of luck. The second target was considerably larger. The Wachenfels or Berghof, Hitler's housing complex, sat on the rim of the village of Obersalzberg. Located

two miles east of Berchtesgaden, the target area contained Hitler's residence as well as those of other Nazi officials, a hospital, a garage and barracks for the SS guards. The Berghof itself measured roughly 837 by 380 metres.³⁹

Aircraft unable to bomb Hitler's alpine retreat were ordered to release their bombs over a number of secondary targets including the bridges in Salzburg. In accordance with SHAEF orders, that major city represented the focal point of a series of tactically-oriented bombing raids. The Americans also bombed communications targets in Traunstein, Reichenhall, Salzburg, Hallein, and Freilassing – all within close proximity to the Obersalzberg. These strikes resulted in over 300

civilian deaths and caused significant damage to rail stations, hospitals and infrastructure such as gasworks. Bomber Command therefore seemed once again destined to participate on the fringes of an American operation that made far more military sense.⁴⁰

Bomber Command sent 359 Lancasters from 22 squadrons to add Hitler to the long list of "bombed out" Germans – those who lost their homes and were forced into shelters. The aircrews were composed of an international group of 2,529 men from England, Australia, Rhodesia, Canada and Poland. The operational experience of these men ranged from old hands to those flying their first mission. Another 16 Mosquitos accompanied the "heavies" to assist the raid by guiding the Lancasters onto the target using Oboe. Furthermore, a significant number of fighters were also ordered to protect the bomber streams from the now slight danger of interdiction by German fighters. Aircraft from 13 squadrons of RAF Fighter Command and 98 Mustangs of the US Eighth Air Force flew as escorts.⁴¹

The bomber crews could expect near-ideal conditions when they took off from 19 different bases in England on the morning of 25 April. The escort fighters themselves out-numbered

the 200 operational fighters available to the Luftwaffe. Fighters were not scrambled, and the small number of German jet fighters on patrol failed to intercept the bombers. Flying at roughly 320 kilometres per hour, the mass of aircraft headed towards Paris, flying over friendly territory, and then turned towards Germany. The bombers reached the target between 0900 and 1000 hours. Because of the shrinking size of the Reich, the time spent over enemy territory in range of flak batteries was brief. The weather conditions over the target appeared equally positive. Only minimal amounts of snow and mist on the ground obscured the Obersalzberg. The Obersalzberg anti-aircraft artillery defences were relatively light considering the political importance of the area. Bomber Command recorded only minor but accurate anti-aircraft fire. A large number of bombs were therefore dropped onto the two targets under good conditions. About 1,232 tons of ordnance fell on the Obersalzberg. This load included the last six-ton "Tallboys" of the war dropped by 16 Lancasters of 617 Squadron. The bombers then turned towards Belgium and returned largely unmolested to England by 1200 to 1400 hours. The war

diary records that the bombing was "accurate and effective" and that only two Lancasters were lost.⁴²

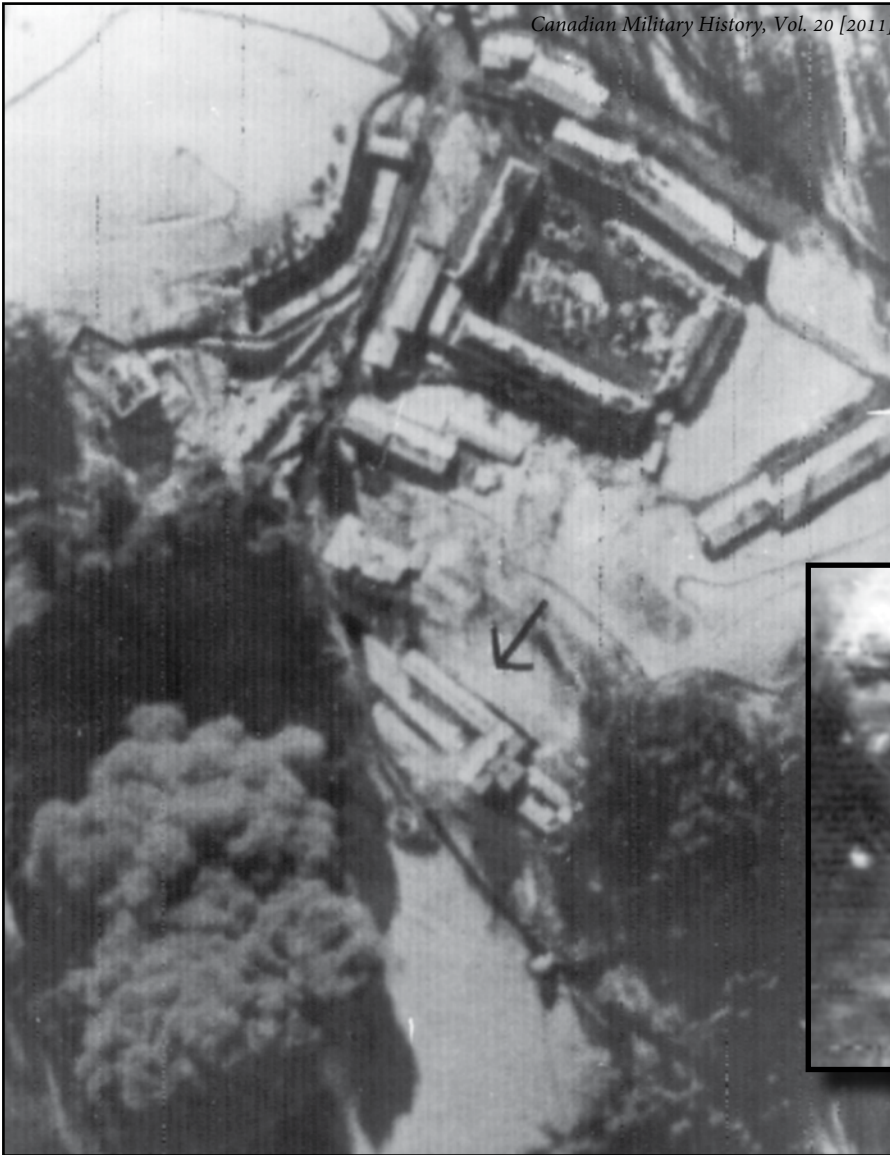
It is necessary to examine this dry comment more closely. First of all, most of the squadrons involved in the two operations flew their last sorties. All combat deaths during the final days of a conflict somehow appear the most tragic. The first Lancaster was manned by aircrew from the Australian No.460 Squadron. The squadron itself was believed to have dropped the greatest tonnage of bombs of any in Bomber Command, or roughly 24,000 tons, during the war. It had also suffered some of the highest loss rates; 169 Wellingtons and Lancasters failed to return home. This particular aircraft, on its first mission, was seriously damaged by flak. Engine power was cut. In the attempt to leave the aircraft, one of the men's parachutes opened inside the aircraft. The pilot remained at his post and executed a "dead-stick" landing to save the trapped man's life. The plane crash-landed near Traunstein about 50 kilometres northwest of Berchtesgaden. Fortunate not to suffer any casualties, the airmen were captured and moved to various prisoner of war camps. The speed of the Allied advance meant that they were soon liberated. Several men were freed within four days.⁴³

The other Lancaster's story was less fortunate. Several aircraft were moderately damaged by the German guns and yet continued back to England. Another aircraft was diverted to Paris as a precaution. But German flak destroyed a bomber from No.619 Squadron. The crew was relatively experienced by the standards of the day. They had participated in a number of operations beginning in December 1944. These included raids against such cities as Heilbronn and Politz in Germany. They also participated in the disastrous 5 January 1945 raid against the French coastal city of Royan that killed between 500 and

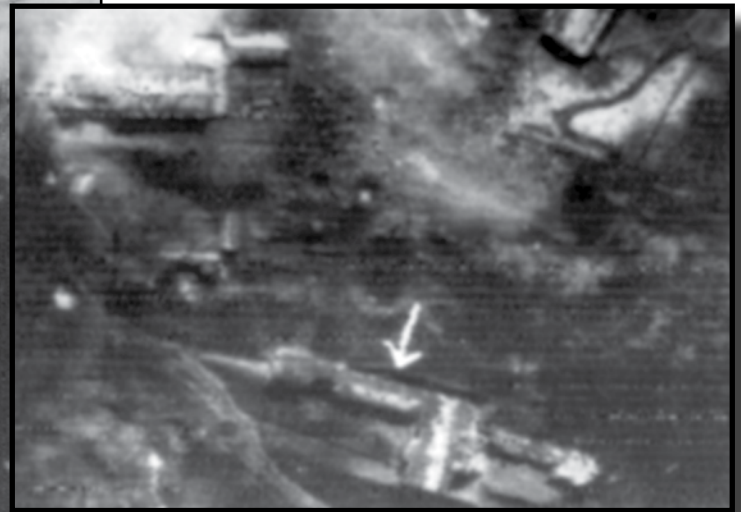
The Kehlsteinhaus, also known as Hitler's "Eagle's Nest," sits atop an 1800 metre peak in the Obersalzberg. It was a prime target in the 25 April raid but emerged unscathed.



NARA 342-FH-3A20295-164760AC



These two photos were taken during the RAF raid on Berchtesgaden on 25 April 1945. In the photo on the left, taken early in the raid, a large cloud of smoke caused by the attack is visible in the bottom right corner; Hitler's Berghof is indicated by a black arrow. The second photo, taken later in the raid shows evidence of the damage caused by the raid including a number of bombs strikes directly on Hitler's Berghof (see the wings of the house to the left and right of the white arrow.)



800 French civilians. Shot down by the German antiaircraft defences, the plane hit the earth near Hallein about 10 kilometres north of Berchtesgaden. Four airmen died. Three survived and were taken prisoner. Like their compatriots, they were soon freed and returned to England in May 1945.⁴⁴

The Raid's Results

What did the Obersalzberg raid achieve? A lone German Arado 234 jet reconnaissance bomber was intercepted by P-51s and destroyed. The pilot successfully bailed out and survived. The pathfinders, however, faced an obstacle more daunting than fighter harassment. Nature itself stood in the way of the specialist

aircraft. Flight Lieutenant John Sampson, who flew a Mosquito IX of No.105 Squadron, stated that none of the Oboe marking aircraft succeeded on 25 April. Subsequent analysis established that the mountains blocked the release signal at the critical moment even though the British aircraft flew at close to 12,000 metres altitude. Furthermore, photographs taken by the Lancaster crews indicate that intense smoke quickly obscured the targets. The marking of Hitler's "Eagle's Nest" and residence proved difficult.⁴⁵

The initial reports pointed out that the Lancasters had generally missed their targets. The "Eagle's Nest" escaped completely unscathed. Not even the "Tallboys" managed to compensate for the bombing accuracy needed to hit such a small building.

Huge bomb craters circled the target. Hitler's residence, considering the weight of bombs, fared relatively well. Photo reconnaissance on 26 April showed that the Berghof was "not so seriously damaged" and only three hits were recorded. The attack was more effective against the army barracks and the surrounding buildings. The initial report noted that "there is very heavy damage to huts in the camp for Czech workers and in the settlement for evacuated children." German assessments corroborate the first British impressions. The German damage report added that Bormann and Göring's houses were destroyed, that the SS barracks were heavily damaged, but that the Berghof and Platterhof Hotel were only damaged.⁴⁶

Subsequent British reports made greater claims. "The Lancasters obtained three direct hits on the chalet," an Air Ministry Bulletin dated 27 April announced, and added that "both wings have been severely damaged."⁴⁷ An intelligence summary went even further:

it can be seen that the Wachenfels, the Fuhrer's personal residence, suffered three direct hits. Part of the main building was destroyed, and both wings were very seriously damaged. All important buildings as well as numerous unidentified buildings in the target area were affected. The SS barracks suffered particularly

heavy damage when one medium block was destroyed, another was wrecked by a direct hit, and a third had half of its top story blown off. The residence of Spahn, head of SS administration, was partially destroyed, and administration headquarters and air raid control center was smoking furiously at time of photography. The main control center for guarding Obersalzberg was also hit.⁴⁸

The latter report's emphasis on the SS barracks, not part of the primary target set, deflected attention from the fact that the mission's two main targets still stood. In any case,

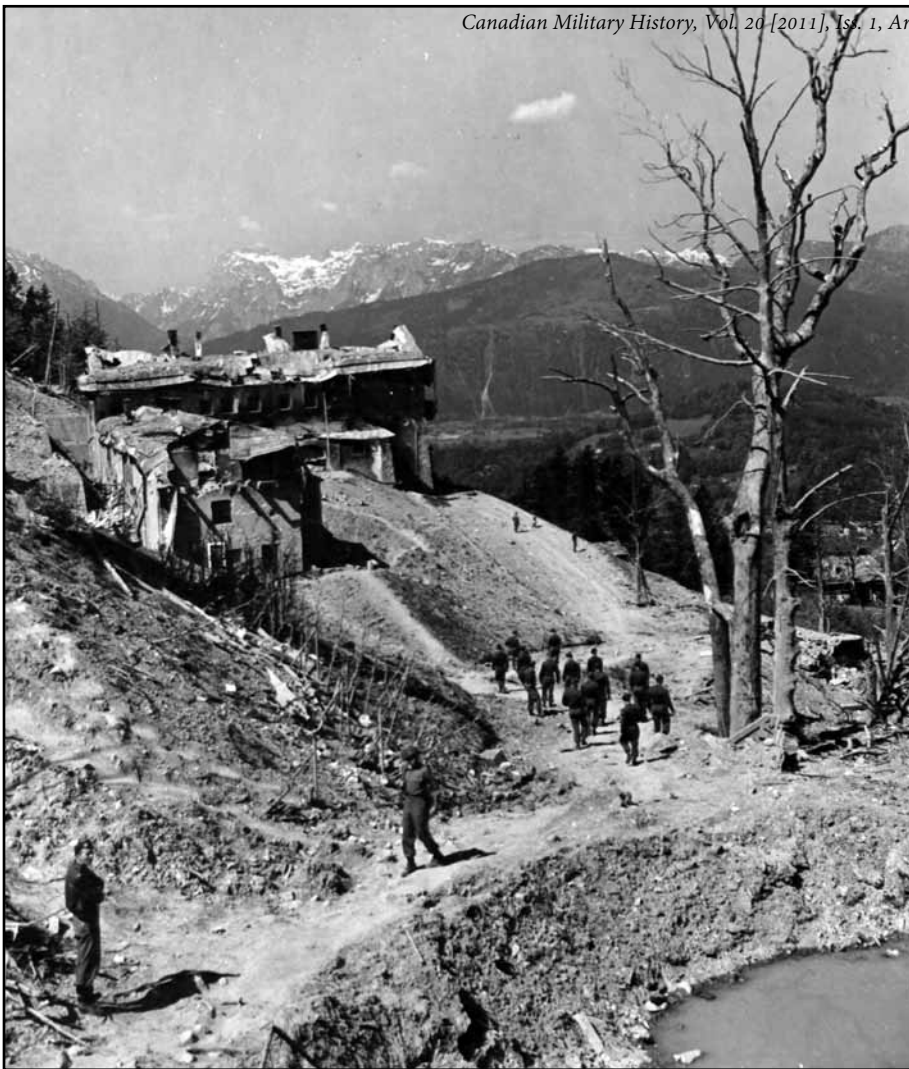
the amended damage reports do not really alter the overall impression that little of substance was achieved. The "Eagle's Nest" escaped damage altogether. The Berghof was later destroyed by SS guards – who set light to the residence and vacated the area. It should also be noted that less spectacular results such as the destruction of a "settlement for evacuated children" vanished from the summary. Nor were any casualties mentioned.

German civilian and military losses on the ground were light. The bunkers of Berchtesgaden and the Obersalzberg, as already noted, had been strengthened as

An American P-47 Thunderbolt passes low over Hitler's Berghof shortly after the end of the war when it became a popular sight-seeing destination (dozens of US soldiers are visible among the ruins). It was one of the main targets of the 25 April raid, but it was not seriously damaged. Most of the damage seen below was caused by SS troops who torched the house before they left. Note the large bomb crater behind the house caused by the impact of a 12,000 pound Tallboy bomb.



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NARA 342-FH-3A20803-B58600AC



These two photos show Hitler's Berghof after the war. Most of the damage was caused by the SS Guards after the war, but at the bottom of the top photo is the crater from one of the Tallboy bombs dropped on 25 April. In the bottom photo, the collapsed portion of the wing of the building in the foreground was also caused by a bomb strike on 25 April.

part of the general reaction to the growing intensity of the Combined Bomber Offensive in 1943. Martin Bormann had personally directed the construction of air raid shelters and had tunnel systems cut deep into the mountain side. These tunnels linked Hitler's bunker with the military headquarters and the local anti-aircraft defences and communications. These systems represented some of the most modern of the Nazi state. The party functionaries had palatial accommodations that were well-serviced by electrical power, heating and ventilation systems. They were even hardened against chemical weapons and the tunnel openings were protected by a series of machine gun nests manned by the SS. These bunkers and tunnel systems successfully protected the inhabitants of the Obersalzberg and Berchtesgaden in April 1945. Even though the damage to some of the village surface dwellings was extensive, the bunkers and tunnels – and the complex's defensive capabilities – were largely intact. Only 31 people were killed.

The bombing did convince those officials who had congregated in the Obersalzberg region to move deeper into the Austrian Tyrol. Hermann Göring, stripped of all his titles and offices by Hitler, emerged from his bunker a few days later, left the vicinity and then surrendered to the Americans on a country road. When the US 3rd Infantry Division entered into the Berchtesgaden area, they found neither defiant German soldiers nor Nazi officials. A timed bomb exploded in one of the municipal offices and wounded several American soldiers, but the "Alpine Redoubt" had been a myth.⁴⁹

The Allied press reports that followed the raid revealed another dimension to the bombing operation. Nowhere was the political nature of the Obersalzberg operation more apparent than in the headlines. "RAF

Lancasters blew to pieces Hitler's Chalet at Berchtesgaden today with a direct hit by a 12,000-pound earthquake bomb," journalists all over the western world celebrated, "and rained the mammoth bombs down on his 'Eagle's Nest' fortress atop Kehlstein Mountain five miles from the chalet."⁵⁰ Additional articles with titles such as "Berchtesgaden Flattened" celebrated the destruction of a major Nazi symbol. Journalists emphasized the special historical role of the Berghof and the importance of its ruin. At a time when the Soviets engaged in fierce street fighting and closed in on Hitler in the German capital, the bombing of the Obersalzberg symbolized the western powers partnership with the Soviet in the final destruction of Nazism and its leader. Berchtesgaden, the articles stated, was an alternate Nazi capital and "the last spot over which the swastika will fly."⁵¹

Such blatant use of hyperbole could not disguise the fact that Hitler had rejected the idea of a final stand in the Alps. As a symbol of Allied victory, any euphoria caused by the supposed destruction of Hitler's house was therefore extremely short-lived. The raid faded from public memory. General Eisenhower later even attributed the entire bombing operation to the US Eight Air Force.⁵²

Harris himself failed to mention the raid in his memoirs. For obvious reasons, he was far more interested in pointing out comments by the Nazi Armaments Minister Albert Speer concerning the effectiveness of aerial bombing in reducing industrial output. Speer argued that the spectacular advances of Allied ground forces in 1944 would not have prevented the armaments industry from supplying German forces for over a year. A Speer memorandum composed in September 1944 speculated that the shrinking land mass of the Reich would not soon lead to serious raw materials

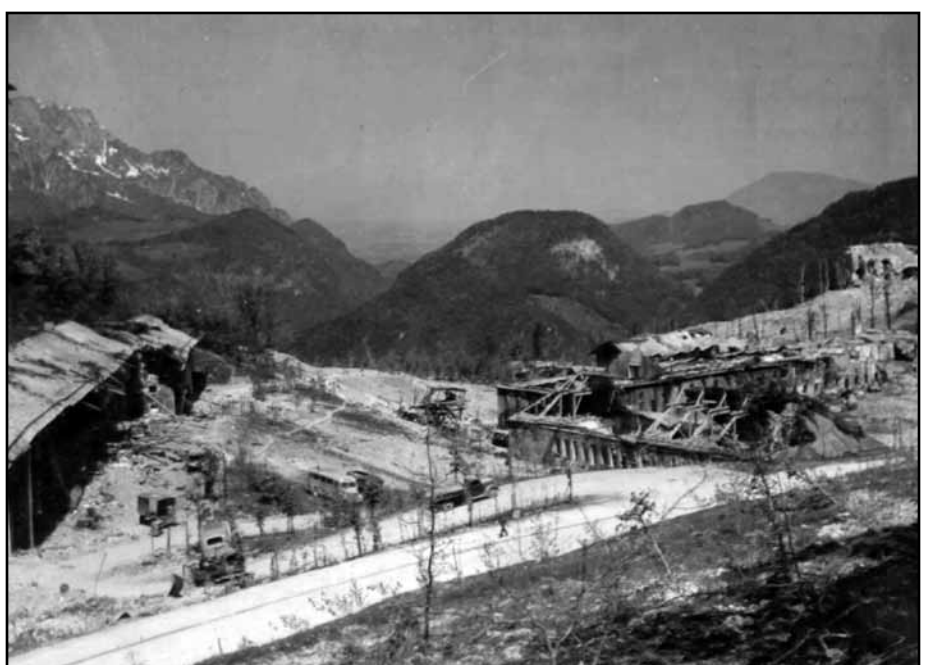
shortages and that industry could still manufacture sufficient arms to resist the Allies until spring 1946.⁵³ Air power, seen from this perspective, shortened the war by several years. Richard Overy points out:

There has always seemed something fundamentally implausible about the contention of bombing's critics that

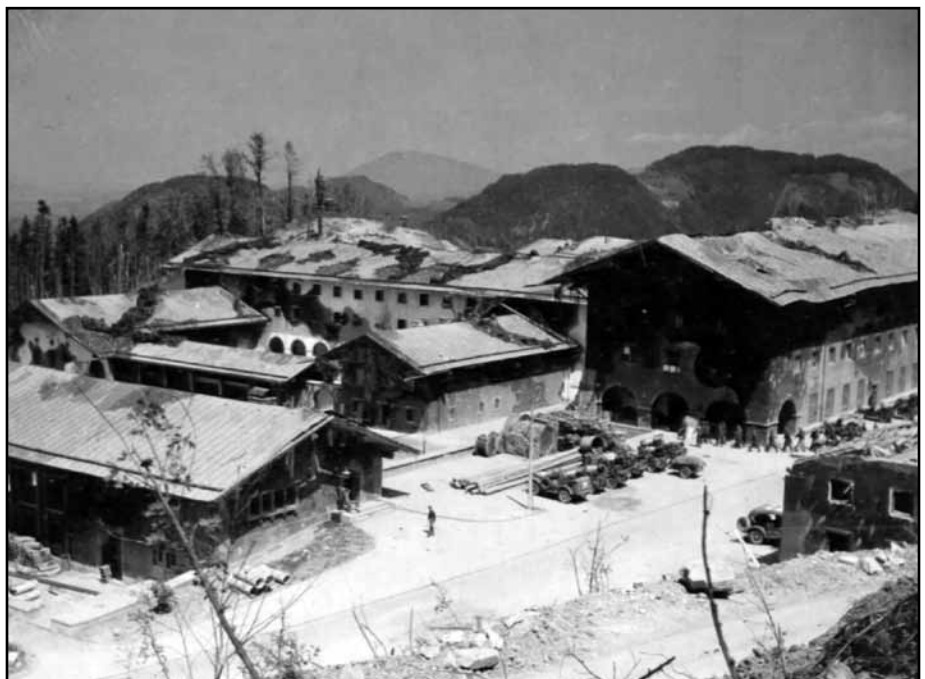
dropping almost 2.5 million tons of bombs on tautly-stretched industrial systems and war-weary urban populations would not seriously weaken them. Germany and Japan had no special immunity...The final victory of the bombers in 1944 was, Speer concluded, 'the greatest lost battle on the German side ...'. For all the arguments over the morality

Below: This photo, taken looking south, shows the ruins of the SS Barracks, heavily damaged in the 25 April raid, on the right, and the Platterhof Hotel garage on the left.

Bottom: The Platterhof hotel was also significantly damaged in the air raid. After the war, the US Army occupied the site and after substantial repairs, the Platterhof was reopened as the Hotel General Walker.



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or operational effectiveness of the bombing campaigns, the air offensive was one of the decisive elements in Allied victory.

Even historians who downplay Bomber Command's contribution, such as Robert Pape, point out that the bombers choked German communications and the flow of commodities such as oil. "From World War I until the 1980s," Pape concludes, "[bombers] were most effective in support of ground power, serving as the 'hammer' to ground power's 'anvil,' with the anvil usually doing most of the work."⁵⁴ It should be pointed out that Pape and others fall victim to a statistical chimera. Even though basic logic would recognize that the sheer scale of the bombing offensive destroyed any German ability to hold the line indefinitely,⁵⁵ it is misplaced to count the number of tanks or guns actually destroyed on the battlefield and measure this total against those weapons systems neutralized by strategic airpower alone. The basic targets of strategic bombing such as manufactured output and especially morale are difficult to define and therefore even harder to judge.⁵⁶

The literature creates a strong case that the collapse of German communications stands as the strongest argument for bombing effectiveness. The interference with rail traffic during late 1944 and early 1945 played the greatest role of any of the services in quickening the speed of German collapse. The historiography is clear that the interdiction of communications restricted the flow of coal and that this in turn led to systemic shortfalls in output at essential fixed nitrogen installations after they had used up their stockpiled coal. As these reserves were depleted, and the Allies closed the ring around Germany, serious fuel and explosives shortages hampered the efforts of frontline

German soldiers.⁵⁷ These arguments demonstrate the decisive impact of both strategic and tactical bombing operating in a murky world between the strategic and operational levels of war. The destruction of bridges, for example, hurt both industry and the ability to move men and material to the front. This duality lay at the heart of strategic bombing doctrine and it is manifestly wrong to focus exclusively on tactical input. Such tendencies, it can be argued, reflexively call Speer's conclusion that the targeting of industrial targets "caused the breakdown of the German armaments industry" into question.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The suppression of German industrial output cost Bomber Command 44.4 percent of their airmen – the highest of any Allied service.⁵⁹ The bombing of the Obersalzberg could have represented the crowning achievement of Harris' difficult and expensive war against Nazism. His policies had shortened the war by several years. Why, then, was Bomber Command robbed of a campaign medal and Harris denied a peerage after 1945? Why was the destruction of Hitler's mountain retreat ignored?

This article demonstrates that Harris's dismissal of concerns about postwar recovery set strategic bombing at odds with pragmatic politicians like Churchill. Bomber Command's attack on urban infrastructure, as pointed out, represented a rational response to the realities of modern armaments production. On the other hand, the American policy of "precision bombing" was premised on an assumption that military and civilian sectors were clearly divisible and "create[d] the illusion of good bombing against bad."⁶⁰ Unlike the Americans, Harris failed to understand that the moral high ground represented a strong weapon

in the arsenal against Nazism. He promoted the open presentation of his strategy that encouraged the "deliberate" devastation of civilian targets.⁶¹ Worse still, instead of standing down in April, Harris continued along a path that threatened to frustrate the future administration of a defeated Germany. Bomber Command exhibited a degree of "civil-military disconnect" that was bound to undermine positive perceptions of its contribution.

Those who toured Germany after the war, such as the economist Kenneth Galbraith, wrote that German cities were a "sickening sight."⁶² A British officer called them "Pompeii petrified by the volcano of modern war."⁶³ American correspondent William Shirer, on visiting Nuremberg at the end of the war, wrote in his diary:

It is gone! The lovely medieval town behind the moat is utterly destroyed. It is a vast heap of rubble, beyond description, and beyond hope of rebuilding. As the prosaic U.S. army puts it, Nuremberg is '91 percent dead.' The old town, I should say, the old Nuremberg of Duerer and Hans Sachs and the Meistersingers is 99 percent 'dead.'⁶⁴

The bombing campaign was now interpreted as a complicating factor in the goal of global prosperity. British economic experts claimed in November 1945 that Bomber Command had returned the German economy "back to the beginnings of industrialisation" and that recovery would be difficult and expensive.⁶⁵ While the German "Pompeii" were potent symbols of strategic air power, they also became linked to postwar hardship and the long road to recovery. From the perspective of politicians such as Churchill, the final bombing raids of the war appeared counterproductive in terms of the coming occupation of Germany and

the overwhelmingly more important task of domestic reconstruction. Harris failed to realize that each additional raid added to mounting worries about the challenges of German reconstruction and the attacks were increasingly viewed in a negative light. Since Churchill had expressed real worries that were reflected in military decision-making at the highest levels, the success of the strategic bombing carried significant negative repercussions expressed in the postwar political unwillingness to openly reward the decisive contribution of strategic air power. Viewed in this way, the bombing of Hitler's mountain worked against Bomber Command and vanished from the historical narrative.

Notes

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- Winston S. Churchill, General Ismay for COS Committee, 28 March 1945, in Bashow, *No Prouder Place*, p.410.
- Henry Probert, *Bomber Harris: His Life and Times* (Stoddard: Toronto, 2001), p.322.
- Ibid.*, pp.321-322 and Bashow, *No Prouder Place*, p.410.
- Strategic bombing strikes "fixed military, industrial or civilian targets in and near political or economic centers...[to] pursue either a punishment strategy by harming enemy civilians in order to lower their morale and motivate them to force their governments to end the war, or a denial strategy, by damaging the opponent's war economy to the point that sufficient production cannot be maintained to continue the war successfully". Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Cornell University Press: New York, 1996), p.46.
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- The routine weekly conference at SHAEF, HQ then at Reims DSC/TS.100/9, Pt. V, Encl.26a. (AHB/IIS/112/1/100/9 (E) in *ibid.*" pp.324 and 325.
- No.4 16 April 1945 (AHB/ID4/377), in *ibid.*, p.324.
- It can, however, be argued that "the evidence suggests that the American bombs ruined the oil industry and British and American bombs flattened it and kept it flattened." Still, the debate concerning area and precision bombing continues. Williamson Murray, *Strategy for Defeat: The Luftwaffe, 1933-1945* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala Air University Press, 1983), p.276; Richard G. Davis, *Bombing the European Axis Powers : A Historical Digest of the Combined Bomber Offensive, 1939-1945* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama Air University Press, 2006), p.571; W. Hays Parks, "'Precision' and 'area' bombing: Who did which, and when?," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18, no.1, 1995, pp.145-74..
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- "It is surely obvious that children, invalids and old people who are economically unproductive but must nevertheless consume food and other necessities are a handicap to the German war effort and it would therefore be sheer waste of effort to attack them...The German economic system, which I am instructed by my directive to destroy, includes workers, houses, and public utilities, and it is therefore meaningless to claim that the wiping out of German cities is "not an end in itself..." quoted in Grey, "Strategic Leadership and Direction," p.278.
- See the description of Operation Thunderclap in Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday 13 February 1945* (Bloomsbury: London, 2005).
- DSC/TS 100/9 Pt. 5 Encl. 33A Para. 12 in "Liberation of North West Europe, Volume V," p.253.
- Bashow, *No Prouder Place*, p.429.
- "The Liberation of North West Europe, Volume V," p.254.
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- Air Ministry (ACAS), "The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force (1933 to 1945)," Air Ministry Pamphlet No. 248 (1947), 2006, pp.388-391, CHOM Library.
- "The Liberation of North West Europe, Volume V," pp.254-255.
- Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Goebbels Diaries - The Last Days* (London: Pan Books, 1979), pp.213-214.
- David Irving, *Hitler's War* (London: Focal Point Publications, 2001), pp.827-828.
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- Appendix 44: OKL/Luftwaffe Operations Staff, The National Redoubt, 27 April 1945, Air Historical Branch 1 Air Ministry, "The Italian Campaign 1943-1945 Volume II," pp.10-11. For confirmation of the Redoubt plan, the narrative cites the OKL document and "German Strategy Brit. Hist. Section C.M. 'Blue Book' Histories," (AHB IJ11/58/29) and Appreciation on the National Redoubt G-2 HQ 15th Army Gp., 18 Apl. 1945. (AHB/IJ11/58/29). Operation Instruction No.3

- HQ 15th Army Gp., 12 Feb. 1945. (AHB/IJ11/58/24 (A), App.0-3.)] in *ibid.*, pp.255-256.
34. "Rise and Fall of the German Air Force," p.399.
 35. "Despite Hamburg radio broadcasts boasting that Hitler was in Berlin commanding the defence of the toppling capital, it was believed generally at Allied supreme headquarters that the fuhrer actually has long since fled to his southern redoubt and probably now is at Berchtesgaden," "Hitler Fleed Berlin Long Ago, Allies Say," *Ottawa Citizen*, 24 April 1945, p.1.
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 40. *Ibid.*, and Schadenmeldung zu den Einfliegen am 25.4.1945, Obersalzberg Institute.
 41. Middlebrook and Everitt, *Bomber Command War Diaries*, pp.700-701.
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 43. For more information on the squadrons, see *ibid.*, pp.771-772 and 777-778 and <www.lostbombers.co.uk/bomber.php>
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 54. Robert A. Pape, "The True Worth of Air Power," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 2 (March/April 2004).
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