

This British newsreel clip depicts the massive Allied bombing attack on Dresden, during February and March of 1945.

By the time the bomb runs were over, many people were dead and Dresden was in ruins. One of its city officials said the place had been "smashed to atoms."

Hitler had originally planned to move Germany's capital to Dresden, if the war rendered Berlin uninhabitable. The newsreel narrator notes that now Hitler will have to find "a substitute for the substitute."

The necessity of the attack, which devastated the city and its people, remains a subject of debate. The story of the bombing is featured in works of literature, such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (where Billy Pilgrim is a dazed survivor).

Comparing the impact of Hiroshima with Dresden, Vonnegut uses these words for one of his characters:

*Even then I was supposedly writing a book about Dresden. It wasn't a famous air raid back then in America. Not many Americans know how much worse it had been than Hiroshima, for instance. I didn't know that, either. There hadn't been much publicity.* (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, Electronic Edition, page 12.)

For people outside of Dresden, the city's disastrous bombing is still not widely known.

For people inside of Dresden, the city's disastrous bombing will never be forgotten.

To learn more about it, we can:

- Examine the reasons why the city was bombed;
- Assess whether those bombing objectives were met; and
- Compare those results with the cost of human lives.

In January of 1945, Britain's Royal Air Force Marshal Arthur T. "Bomber" Harris wrote an internal memo about bombing Dresden:

*Dresden, the seventh largest city in Germany and not much smaller than Manchester is also the largest unbombed builtup area the enemy has got. In the midst of winter with refugees pouring westward and troops to be rested, roofs are at a premium, not only to give shelter to workers, refugees, and troops alike, but to house the administrative services displaced from other areas.*

*At one time well known for its china, Dresden has developed into an industrial city of first-class importance.... The intentions of the attack are to hit the enemy where he will feel it most, behind an already partially collapsed front... and incidentally to show the Russians when they arrive what Bomber Command can do.* (See *Bomber Command*, by Max Hastings, at page 300.)

At the time of the devastating bomb run, was Dresden really "an industrial city of first-class importance?" It was a city of culture, to be sure, but what was it contributing to the Nazi war machine?

The day before Dresden's city center was obliterated, the town was known as the "German Florence." One of the most beautiful cities in Europe, its population had at least doubled since so many refugees were fleeing from the approaching Red Army.

Dresden was also an important railroad center with trains from eastern and southern Germany continuously passing through town. Its harbor, on the Elbe, was a key component of freight traffic traversing that river.

On the eve of its destruction, Dresden also had an iron foundry, aircraft repair factories, engineering and armament industries, shipbuilding yards and other businesses which were supporting Hitler's war efforts.

Those industrial businesses were mostly located outside of the city's center.

The devastating bomb runs of 13-15 February 1945 mostly targeted the city's center.

Although the February attacks eliminated Dresden as a railroad junction for the rest of the war, Albert Speer (who served as Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production) said (after the war) that the city's key industrial businesses quickly bounced back:

*Day attacks made in addition to night raids would only have had some effect if in the main they, like the night raids, had taken the form of incendiary [fire] attacks. Such a system of attack was employed on Dresden, and despite all previous raids throughout the Reich during the three years, it caused a considerable shock effect. Nevertheless, the industrial life of Dresden recovered with comparative rapidity.* (See footnote 42 of "Why Dresden Was Bombed," by Joseph P. Tustin, Chief Historian, United States Air Force in Europe, 1954.)

What was the impact of the bombing on people? There are many survivor stories, one of which is from Lothar Metzger who was nearly ten years old when the bombings took place. Years later, in 1999, he still recalled the disaster:

*It is not possible to describe! Explosion after explosion. It was beyond belief, worse than the blackest nightmare.*

*So many people were horribly burnt and injured. It became more and more difficult to breathe. It was dark and all of us tried to leave this cellar with inconceivable panic. Dead and dying people were trampled upon, luggage was left or snatched up out of our hands by rescuers.*

*The basket with our twins covered with wet cloths was snatched up out of my mother's hands and we were pushed upstairs by the people behind us. We saw the burning street, the falling ruins and the terrible firestorm. My mother covered us with wet blankets and coats she found in a water tub.*

*We saw terrible things: cremated adults shrunk to the size of small children, pieces of arms and legs, dead people, whole families burnt to death, burning people ran to and fro, burnt coaches filled with civilian refugees, dead rescuers and soldiers, many were calling and looking for their children and families, and fire everywhere, everywhere fire, and all the time the hot wind of the firestorm threw people back into the burning houses they were trying to escape from.*

*I cannot forget these terrible details. I can never forget them.*

After the war, Dresden was part of East Germany. The people did their best to rebuild and restore their city and their lives.

### Credits:

Historical footage of the bombing of Dresden, February and March, 1945. Online, courtesy U.K. National Archives.

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