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BOMBS OVER BISCAY, BARCELONA AND DRESDEN (1937-1945)

From the Spanish Civil War to the Second World War

Joan Maria Thomàs (coord.),
Jon Irazabal Agirre, Ramon Arnabat Mata

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Tarragona, 2019

PUBLICACIONS DE LA UNIVERSITAT ROVIRA I VIRGILI

Av. Catalunya, 35 · 43002 Tarragona

Tel. 977 558 474 · publicacions@urv.cat

www.publicacions.urv.cat

1st edition: April 2019

ISBN URV (paper): 978-84-8424-746-3

ISBN URV (PDF): 978-84-8424-747-0

DOI: 10.17345/9788484247463

Legal deposit: T 580-2019



Cite the book.



Find the book in our website.



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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes tragedies that have little to distinguish them from a wide range of similar events and which can make no claim to record numbers of casualties or destructive impact go down in history as fundamental and emblematic. This is the case of two of the airstrikes discussed in this volume: Barcelona and Dresden. Other tragedies, however, are sometimes obscured by circumstances elsewhere. This is the case of the “other Guernicas”: that is to say, the bombings of Otxandio, Durango and Elorrio in Biscay. They are good examples not only of the brutality inherent in all wars and of how methods of combat become increasingly barbaric as conflicts wear on (although not in all because, in some, the level of brutality is at a peak right from the very start) but also of the way in which some circumstances push events to the forefront of history and make them emblematic. Focusing only on the Allied bombings of the Second World War, for example, why is the Anglo-American raid on Dresden on 13, 14 and 15 February 1945 much better known than the American raid on Tokyo three weeks later – 9 and 10 March of the same year – when the number of victims (80,000) more than tripled the number in the German city? And, also in Nazi Germany and also in comparison with Dresden, why is the bombing of Pforzheim of 23 and 24 February 1945, which killed a third of the population of 65,000, much less known even though the ratio of the town’s population to be killed was considerably higher? Likewise, although the main reason is clear, we should ask ourselves why the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known the world over whereas the attack on Tokyo is not. Turning now to *our* war, why does the whole world know the town of Guernica after the Nazi-Fascist raids of April 1937 while the raids on Alicante in May 1938 have gone largely unnoticed? And why do we know so much about the bombings by Franco’s forces – with the assistance of the Germans and the Italians – of the

so-called Republican Zone but so little about the Republican bombings of so-called “National” Spain.¹

Of course, the reasons for all this have nothing to do with the alleged whimsical nature of history; on the contrary, they can be analysed and understood as long as we ask relevant questions and have the resources to respond to them as historians. The aim of this book is for our readers to understand not only *what* happened in Otxandio, Durango, Elorrio, Barcelona and Dresden but also *why* it happened and why the last two of these events – together with Guernica² (which we do not discuss here) – have gone down in the history of airstrikes targeting civilians and military objectives during the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War.

Did the airstrikes we discuss have both civilian and military targets? Or only the former? This is one of the questions that we shall attempt to answer here and it is by no means a trivial one because one of the airstrikes discussed – Dresden – generated considerable controversy. It gave rise to a wide range of revisionist ideas that went so far as to question the extent of the Nazi holocaust and sowed doubts about the legality and morality of attacks on civilian targets, which, in conjunction with other major events of the World War, subsequently led to international legislative measures being enacted in an attempt to prevent such tragedies from ever occurring again. This is not to say that the law is respected and enforced, as we can see in the current conflicts in Syria and Yemen. But the fact that it is repeatedly ignored does not necessarily mean that legal action will never be taken against those who do not comply at some point in the future.

Nevertheless, the texts in this book by Irazabal, Arnabat and Thomàs raise many more questions: the reasons behind the military decisions to engage in terror bombing; the political use of the airstrike to attempt to balance forces within the Nazi-Fascist Axis; or the consequences of the bombings in the Republican zone such as attacks on prisons and the murder of “national” prisoners, as well as precise estimations of the number of victims that contradict Nazi and Francoist manipulations.

1 A recent overview of the state of the art can be found in Ruiz Núñez, J.B. “Los no combatientes y las reacciones ante los bombardeos aéreos republicanos”. *Investigaciones Históricas, época moderna y contemporánea*. 2018; 38: 403–428.

2 Irujo, X. *The Bombing of Gernika. A Short History*. Reno: Center for Basque Studies/University of Nevada; 2018.

So, as the coordinator of this publication, and on behalf of the ISOCAC Research Group History, Society, Politics and Culture from Catalonia to the World of the Department of History and History of Art of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili, I would like to say that it is a great satisfaction to be able to present this volume. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Publications Unit of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili and the Catalan Institute for Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA) for their support in the publishing process. The book brings together the texts presented at the lectures “From the Spanish Civil War to the 2nd World War. Bombings of the Civilian Population: Dresden, “the Other Guernicas”, Barcelona” organised by ISOCAC with the support of the Doctoral Programme in Humanistic Studies of our university, its director Doctor Maria Bargalló, and the Grants Committee of the Arts Faculty. The lectures took place on 22 November 2018 in Tarragona and attended by teaching staff, students and the general public. Such was its success that our research group has been encouraged to continue organizing new academic activities of general interest.

JOAN MARIA THOMÀS

ICREA Academia researcher/ISOCAC/ Universitat Rovira i Virgili

CHAPTER 1

Bombs over Biscay. The other Guernicas: Otxandio, Durango, Elorrio

Jon Irazabal Agirre

Gerediaga Elkarte



Durango under the Italian bombs on March 31, 1937 (Rino Zitelli).

*For the men and women of Gerediaga Elkarte
for their help in recovering the history that had been silenced*

Biscay: the war from the air

In July 1936 a sector of the Spanish army rose up against the Republican Government and sparked a civil war that was to last three years. The Basque Country was divided into two zones. The insurgents achieved military victory over Navarre and Alava, which meant that these two provinces became part of what subsequently was known as the “National Zone”, while the provinces of Biscay and Gipuzkoa remained in the legal territory of the Republic.

While the troops that had rebelled in Vitoria consolidated their positions in the province, the troops in Navarre, under General Emilio Mola, launched an offensive which, by the end of August 1936, had occupied almost the whole of Gipuzkoa and established the front line close to the border with Biscay. Only Eibar and Elgeta remained under Republican control. The effective power of Jose Antonio Agirre y Lekube, the president of the first Basque Government set up on 7 October, was limited to the province of Biscay and these two towns in Gipuzkoa.

Air warfare, the use of which had been discussed *ad nauseam* in the first decades of the 20th century, was a constant feature of the Spanish Civil War and subsequent conflicts. In contrast to the attempts made by the legislators of the League of Nations and other organisations to prevent civilians from being targeted, war theorists were clearly of the opinion that if the enemy’s morale was to be undermined there was no other option. In 1932, Stanley Baldwin said the following in the British parliament:

I think it is well also for the man in the street to realise that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through. The only defence is in offence, which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves.

The Basque Country was no exception to these strategic approaches to total warfare and Biscay was the target of numerous airstrikes during the Spanish Civil War. The strikes can be divided into two different phases. The first was between July 1936 and the beginning of 1937, and the second between 31 March 1937 and 18 August.

According to the studies by Xabier Irujo Amezaga, in this second phase Biscay was the target of 718 bombing operations. He defines bombing as the action taken by aircraft on a target in the course of one day and, by way of example, he discusses the bombing of Mount Bizkargi on 15 May 1937. It is regarded as being one bombing but, in fact, there were six different raids during the day.

Bilbao, or rather Greater Bilbao, was the nerve centre of Biscay and one of the areas that was most targeted. To date, these bombings have not been the object of an in-depth study. Hence, there is no agreement about the number of victims or other details of the raids and the descriptions of the events in studies and articles vary widely. On numerous occasions both General Mola and the high command of the Condor Legion had expressed their desire to raze the capital of Biscay to the ground.

Of all the bombings on the city – a total of 56 according to Irujo – the most important took place on 25 and 26 September 1936, 4 January and 18 April 1937. With the exception of the bombing on 18 April there were relatively few victims. On this last occasion the target of the airstrike was the Cotorruelo factory manufacturing rubber and footwear and 67 of the female staff and their families were killed precisely in the place they had gone to shelter from the bombs.

The bombings of Bilbao made their mark more because of the reaction they had on the militia and the population than the actual damage they caused. Of particular note are the riots that took place after the air raids on 25 September when a group of militiamen stormed the prison ships *Cabo Quilates* and *Altuna Mendi*, where numerous people were being held for their alleged support of the rebels. A total of 64 were murdered. On 4 January 1937, another

raid by the Condor Legion again provoked a hostile reaction from the militia and local people: they stormed three prisons in Bilbao – Larrinaga, Ángeles Custodios and Casa Galera – and murdered 217 prisoners.

The airstrikes were planned in advance but in some cases bad luck played a role in the final choice of target. On 6 April the records of the 214 squadron show that the planes took off with the intention of bombing Villaro (Areatza) but ended up targeting Dima because of cloud cover over the initial objective. The Italian bombs rained down on the town, struck an ammunition dump and caused numerous fatalities.

As has been pointed out, nearly all towns in Biscay were targeted by at least one airstrike and, today, despite all the local studies on the Civil War, it is impossible to say for sure how many raids were carried out by the rebel Spanish air force and their allies the Italian Legionary Air Force and the German Condor Legion. This, and the limitations of space, means that in this article I have focused on Otxandio and Durango, the most significant airstrikes – Gernika aside – because of the nature of the bombings, the forces that carried them out and their consequences.

Otxandio. 22 July 1936

Otxandio is in the far south-east of the province of Biscay on the border with Alava. The road through the province from Dima and Durango to Vitoria-Gasteiz was, at the time, in the hands of the rebel soldiers. The town had a population of about 1,400 and for centuries had been home to the most important iron foundry in Biscay. However, the industrial recession at the end of the 19th century had forced the furnaces to close and turned agriculture into the mainstay of the local economy. The recession, however, had not done away with the whole of the industry and in the 1930s some traces of the iron-making tradition still remained (for example, Talleres Omega, Sucesores de López Heredia, Vicinay and other factories). This economic background was also reflected in the town of Otxandio, where the habitual Carlist traditionalists and Basque nationalists lived alongside the minorities affiliated to the General Workers' Union (UGT) and the Spanish Communist Party.

The 18 July was the festival of Saint Marina, the patron saint of Otxandio and, therefore, a holiday in the town. However, given the political circumstances, the cycling race, the *pelota* matches and the other scheduled activities had all been suspended.

The rebel Alavese soldiers established the front line in Legutio (Villarreal de Alava), the town in Álava in closest proximity to Otxandio. After José Echeverría Novoa, the civil governor of Biscay, had quashed the risk of a coup in the Garellano garrisons in Bilbao, he took control of the situation and, in conjunction with the left-wing parties and the PNV, organised several armed columns with soldiers and volunteers in an attempt to defend the Republic. On 20 July, a column of 1,000 men from Bilbao under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joaquín Vida set off for Otxandio. Their aim was to neutralise any possible attack on Biscay from Vitoria and, if possible, seize the capital of Álava. After leaving Bilbao, the initial column divided in two in Igorre. One of them, made up of civil guards and militiamen from the Fulgencio Mateos battalion, marched through Barazar towards Legutio under the orders of the Civil Guard captain Juan Ibarrola. The other, larger column, under the orders of Lieutenant Colonel Joaquín Vidal Munárriz, marched through Dima and Otxandio, also for Legutio.

The 19 members of the Civil Guard quartered in Legutio had not remained in the garrison; instead, they had hidden along both sides of the road at the summit of Pagotxiki. Aware of this situation, Captain Ibarrola headed for their position and forced them to surrender. But instead of occupying their position in Legutio as an outpost to combat the rebels in Vitoria-Gasteiz, which had succumbed to General Mola, and against the opinion of the militiamen, he ordered the column to retreat to Otxandio to spend the night. This decision proved to be a serious mistake since Legutio was never recovered by the forces loyal to the Republic.

After they had left Legutio, the column of militiamen arrived in the town of Otxandio and set up camp in the parish church of Saint Marina. In a town that was largely nationalist and traditionalist, the presence of the militia created a considerable amount of tension among the locals.

The bombing

Dawn broke on 22 July. The streets of Otxandio were full of militia, soldiers and civilians who had come to the town because of the local festivities and the special circumstances of the moment. Between 9 and 9.30 in the morning, two aeroplanes approached the town.

Unaware of the impending tragedy, children were playing in the Plaza de Andikona and the surrounding streets. It was quite common for children to

play in the Plaza because the fountain and the small stream that crossed it were a constant source of amusement. The square was also frequented by women who went there to fetch water from the fountain or to do the washing at the edge of the stream. And it was the place chosen by the soldiers to set up camp. The reason why the Plaza was such a hive of activity was that the water from the Vulcano fountain in the town's main square had a high iron content and could not be used for cooking so the locals were obliged to go to the Plaza de Andikona. And the soldiers had set up camp there for exactly the same reason.

The children and adults in the Plaza had all noticed the planes and when they saw that the pilot had dropped some objects, at first they thought they were pamphlets, sweets or something of the sort. In fact, they were three- or four-kilo bombs. Tragedy struck the small Plaza de Andikona.

José Antonio Marulagoitia, a 38-year-old doctor from Otxandio described the tragedy to the reporter of the newspaper *Euzkadi* in the following terms:

Despite the nature of my work, which involves episodes of great sadness, I have never witnessed anything as terrible as what occurred in the Plaza de Andikona. I was shocked not so much by the shattered rooftops or the fallen power lines, but by something much more serious, much more terrible: human pain.

People were wounded, children mutilated, women decapitated. The townspeople were screaming at me, in Basque, begging me to help them. A torrent of blood was flowing towards the small fountain in the middle of the square.

I asked some people to help me, which they did at once, and I used sheets to attend to the most pressing injuries. Some – in fact, many – unfortunately did not need my help. They had been mown down by the barbaric shrapnel of the bombs dropped in two waves.

Other boys and girls with severed limbs were begging for my help with sentences in Basque that I still cannot get out of my mind.

The events of that day were not immediately reported in the newspapers, perhaps in an attempt not to alarm the civilian population. But on 24 July *A. de O.* published a description of the Plaza after the attack in the newspaper *Euzkadi*.

In the Plaza de Andikona, on the corner with Calle Urigoyen, the power lines lie broken, dragging posts in their wake. Half a house has been demolished, its weight-bearing beams destroyed. The shattered old tiles of a rooftop open

up an enormous hole that looks down on the stables. On the other side, a transport lorry has a thousand shrapnel impacts. Nobody has bothered to clean up the great pools of blood and the various human remains: part of a head, some fingers, the encephalic mass clinging to the cobblestones and the fountain have turned a naturally cheerful, happy place into a macabre spectacle.

One of the witnesses, the musician Carmelo Bernaola, years later recalled the tragic bombing in the following terms:

On that day I was burying a cat with a group of boys near the Plaza de Andikona, the target of the bombing. We saw a plane that had flown past the day before and dropped some leaflets (*papelak die, papelak die...*) but on this occasion it dropped bombs. The flames were horrific. Everything turned red. Some of my friends and people I knew were killed or seriously injured....

Some witnesses claim that the soldiers managed to repel the attack by shooting at the plane with their rifles and machine guns from the main square and the church tower, but whatever action was taken was more symbolic than effective.

The local people quickly organised themselves. They began to attend the wounded and evacuate them to Bilbao and Durango in cars, lorries and any other means of transport available. Many of them died before they reached their destination and others died in the Civil Hospital in Bilbao.

Victims of the bombing

In the study I published in 2003 I identified 57 people who died in the bombing. At the time I pointed out that this number could be higher because some of the wounded who were taken to Bilbao or other places may have died and not been included in my figures. And this is precisely what happened. In 2011 Igor Olabarria Oleaga increased the number of fatalities to 61. Of these, 45 were civilians (16 of whom were children under 10 years of age), 9 were soldiers and 7 cannot be reliably identified.

In his book *Guerra Aérea 1936–1939*, Jesús Salas Larrazabal claims that the bombing wounded only 23 people and killed 7 (more specifically, 1 woman, 2 girls and 4 soldiers). This underestimation of the number of victims is quite common in Salas Larrazabal's work. In his studies on the bombings of Durango and Gernika he also gave ridiculously low figures for the number of wounded and fatalities.

Responsibility for the bombing

Exactly who carried out the bombing has raised a great deal of controversy. Traditionally, it has been attributed to the Lezama Legizamon brothers: Luis, a right-wing financier and president of the Biscay traditionalists, who had been imprisoned by the EAJ-PNV and was to be exchanged for Nationalist prisoners; and José, an air pilot who on 19 July had fled by plane from Bilbao to Gasteiz. Nowadays, they are not believed to have taken any part in the bombing.

However, Ángel Salas Larrazabal, from the Biscay city of Orduña, is known to have taken part. Born in 1906, Ángel had studied Spanish military aeronautics in only the second year the course had been taught and he had fought in the war in Africa. He made his escape from the airbase in Getafe (Madrid) to Pamplona on 18 July 1936 in a Breguet XIX plane. In the course of the war he acted as General Mola's liaison with Franco and the other rebel leaders. As his brother Jesús states in his book *Guerra Aérea 1936–1939*, on 22 July Ángel Salas Larrazabal took off in his Breguet XIX from the Recajo-Agoncillo aerodrome (Logroño) and, together with another plane piloted by José Muñoz Jiménez, bombed Otxandio, causing the 61 fatalities mentioned above. Captain Miguel Rubio Larrañaga may also have taken part. In a memorandum José Muñoz Jiménez mentions that they were congratulated by General Emilio Mola for carrying out the raid. In 1991, Ángel Salas Larrazabal was promoted to the rank of Captain General by King Juan Carlos. He died in 1994.

Durango: 25 September 1936

The first bombing

On 25 September, at about 11 o'clock in the morning, Durango underwent its first bombing when it was targeted by various rebel planes that had taken off from Vitoria. They dropped four bombs, one of which hit the *frontón* court in Ezkurdi where a group of militia members and refugees fleeing from Gipuzkoa were resting and playing *pelota*. The bomb struck the side wall of the court, and exploded in the middle of the group of people. There were 12 fatalities and numerous wounded. Another of the bombs fell in the garden of Doctor Marcos Unamunzaga and two struck the railway station. The dead were all male aged between 18 and 32 and mostly from Gipuzkoa.

I have been unable to determine with any great exactitude who was responsible for the airstrike. The General and Historic Air Archive in Villaviciosa de Odon (Madrid) contains no documents or references to the event. In his book *Guerra Aérea 1936–39* Jesús María Salas Larrazabal makes no mention of the attack either, although he does point out that the civilian pilots Sebastián de San Vicente and Basaldúa took part in sporadic raids. He also says that the civilian pilot Usandizaga took part in acts of war during September. The planes that dropped the bombs may have been piloted by some of them.

After the bombing, a group of militiamen, possibly from the Russian Battalion of the Unified Socialist Youth (JSU), outraged by the scenes of death and destruction caused by the bombing, made their way to the prison in Hermodo where several residents of Durango were being held on suspicion of supporting the rebels. In August about 60 people had been arrested, although many were released after just a few days and about 40 were then taken to the prisons in Bilbao. In September a further 22 people were arrested.

After the guards had been overpowered, the 22 prisoners were brought out and taken to the cemetery where they were shot without trial next to the chapel. Not fully satisfied with the punishment meted out, the militiamen attempted to detain and shoot other suspected right-wingers from Durango who were being hidden by supporters of the PNV until Durango was taken by the troops of General Mola.

For a long time speculation was rife about who was responsible for the massacre. The British reporter George L. Steer shared the blame among the militiamen of the UGT-8 Battalion, refugees from Gipuzkoa, anarchists and the “mob”. On 2 January 1938, the first anniversary of the events, the Bilbao newspaper *La Gaceta del Norte* pointed the finger squarely the UGT-7 Battalion and made absolutely no mention of the anarchists. During the dictatorship, several Francoist writers accused more than one group of the killings: the priest José Echeandia blamed the militia of the UGT and the Malatesta battalions (CNT), and the mob; and Antonio Moreno accused the militia of the UGT-7, UGT-1 and Malatesta battalions. Today, it is generally held that the Russian Battalion was responsible.

Durango: 31 March 1937

Planning the airstrike

On 21 March 1937 Franco decided to take back the northern territories – Biscay, Santander and Asturias – that were still in the hands of the Republic. If he could manage to win the war on that particular front he would be able to send a sizeable contingent of troops and military equipment to other fronts. He would also control a wide variety of raw materials such as iron and coal, and military factories which, if they were captured, would reinforce his military machine and, if they were destroyed, would at least undermine the Republican troops. This action would also enable him to tackle the political problem that was being caused by the support the Spanish Republic was getting from the Basque nationalists, most of whom were Catholics, when he justified the conflict by claiming that it was a religious crusade. General Emilio Mola, Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Army, was put in charge of the military operation.

The northern offensive had been ready since the beginning of 1937. On 2 March, Juan Vigón, a lieutenant colonel of the Engineers, sent a letter to General Alfredo Kindelán, the head of all the rebel air forces (including the German Condor Legion and the Italian Legionary Air Force) in which he said that “we have finalised the plan and put everything down on paper.” The use of the plural pronoun may be a reference to General Mola’s participation in the planning. In the letter, he makes a request that is key to understanding the Durango bombing: “I would like to request that you study the possibility of providing us with some support from the Aragon Front which could be based in the aerodromes of Logroño so that the operations here would not involve terminating operations there.” Some days later, on 10 March, he sent Alfredo Kindelán, in his capacity as Head of the Spanish National Air Force, the documentation that specified the targets of future airstrikes and assigned the Condor Legion to action over the front line and the Legionary Air Force to attacks on the rearguard. The document, under the title of “General Plan of Operations over Biscay” envisaged the bombing of Durango and Elorrio. According to the notes in Alfredo Kindelán’s personal diary, the plans were constantly discussed, agreed to and endorsed by Hugo Sperrle, Emilio Mola, Vincenzo Velardi, Jose Solchaga and Francisco Franco himself.

This initial document was subsequently worked on and the planes available were assigned to specific operations by Doctor Wolfram von Richthofen, Head of the General Staff of the German Condor Legion and the Legion’s logistical

service. On 22 March, they began to make the final preparations for the raids. On 24 and 26 March, Richtofen discussed various possible raids to be carried out by the Condor Legion, and made the following important observation: “The air forces will target the local and sectorial reserves, and make no allowances for the civilian population.”

On 30 May 1939, in the official journal of the German Ministry of War, *Die Wehrmacht*, the Division General Hugo Sperle published an article entitled “Wir kämpfen in Spanien” (We fought in Spain) in which he claims to have planned the “experiments” of Durango, Gernika and other places alongside Richtofen.

The bombing

In contrast to widely held public opinion, which for decades has attributed the airstrike to the Condor Legion, it was planned by the Germans but actually carried out by the Italian Legionary Air Force, which after its defeat at Guadalajara acted as a military unit within the Condor Legion.

The document “Orden de colaboración de apoyo de las fuerzas aéreas con las Brigadas de Navarra el 31.3.37 (Legión Cóndor L/a)” (“Order for air-force support and collaboration with the Brigades in Navarre on 31/3/37”) describes the strikes to be made by the air force and assigns the various attacks to specific units. The Italian Legionary Air Force, stationed in Soria and Logroño, was assigned the raid on Durango and Elorrio. One example of the Italian dependence on the Condor Legion can be seen in Richtofen’s diary on 28 March, just three days before the general offensive.

The relation with the Italian air forces are somewhat strained. When the Italian High Command was obliged to withdraw its troops for at least two months to reorganise after the operation in Guadalajara, relations between the Italian and the Spanish commanders broke down. The Italians found out about the plans to attack Bilbao from the Germans. The commander of the Italian air force, General Velardi (who used the pseudonym Velani while he was in Spain) offered to provide support and was given a vague answer by the Spanish. In response, Velardi contacted the German commander and asked to be informed and assigned missions. This led to a relationship of friendly subordination until the capture of Bilbao and the battle for Brunete when the Italian army rejoined the fray. With a little diplomacy, it was not such a difficult situation to handle. The supreme command of the Italian Air Force moved its headquarters to Vitoria, and was sent daily reports on the current state of affairs and future projects by the German high command.

The bombings in detail

On 31 March 1937 at 7.15 a.m. the Savoia 81 planes 1, 2, 5 and 6 from the 214 squadron (group 24) of Pipistrelli heavy bombers, piloted, respectively, by Captain Gildo Simini, Lieutenant Ezio Ceretta, Lieutenant Colonel Ferdinando Raffaelli and Lieutenant Giulio Beccia took off from the aerodrome in Soria. They were each laden with 20 fifty-kilo bombs and 4 twenty-kilo incendiary bombs. A total of 4,320 kilos of explosives heading for Durango.

The order they had been given by Ferdinando Raffaelli, alias Umberto Marelli, commander of bombing squadron 21 of the Italian Legionary Air Force who was to lead the mission in person from his Savoia 81 no. 5, was to bomb Durango. Alongside them on take off was squadron 213, under the command of Iginio Mencaroli, whose mission was to bomb Elorrio.

At 7.55 a.m., over Logroño, they were joined by nine Fiat CR fighters piloted by Captain Armando Francois, alias "Arturo Martori, Lieutenant Alfiero Mezzetti, alias Mariani, Lieutenant Giovanni Beretta, alias Romualdo Bianchedi, Lieutenant Giuseppe Recchi, Sergeant Major Giulio Cesare, alias Angelo Tranca, Sergeant Bruno Sartori, alias Giovanni Corona, Sergeant Major Giuseppe Alessandri, alias Alessi, Sergeant Giulietti Adamo, alias Ugo Guglielmotti and Sergeant Fiorenzo Milella.

The air contingent flew to the town of Idiazabal in Gipuzkoa and from there to their target, Durango. During the flight the Savoia 81 no. 6 piloted by Lieutenant Giulio Beccia noticed that the tail fin was vibrating excessively and decided to return to base, which reduced by more than a ton the load of bombs dropped on Durango.

At about 8.30 a.m., the three remaining bombers and the nine fighters that were escorting them reached their target and dropped their bombs. The inhabitants of Durango were warned of the planes' approach by sirens but most of them were caught at home or going about their daily business. A minority had managed to seek protection in the shelters provided by the authorities.

With the sun behind them, so the crew were not dazzled, and the bell tower of the Basilica of Santa Maria de Uribarri as a reference, the Savoia 81s flew from the end of Calle Kurutziaza towards the town's old quarter. The bombers started the attack at one end of Calle Kurutziaza and the first bombs fell on the intersection of this street with what is today known as the Calle Músico Altuna, where they destroyed the Kurutziaza cross. The rest of the bombs were dropped in the 350 metres between this point and the Plaza de

Ezkurdi. The bombing was recorded for posterity from the attacking planes by the photographer Angelo Zoia.

The air raid inflicted severe damage on Durango's old quarter, the most densely populated area of the town. The streets that were most affected by the morning bombing were Kurutziaga (mentioned above), Andra Mari, and the areas of Kalebarria, Goienkale, Artekale and Barrenkale close to Calle Santa Maria. Other nearby streets were also struck but the damage was not so severe.

Several significant buildings were hit and the number of victims was considerable. The first to be struck was the San José Church in the School of the Jesuit Fathers where at the time of the bombing Father Rafael Billalabeitia Mauroñoagoitia was saying mass. He was killed outright as were several members of his congregation. The Santa Rita Convent of the Augustinian nuns was also struck. Although the church was damaged, on this occasion the real tragedy occurred nearby. In an attempt to seek protection from the bombs, the nuns had taken shelter in an outhouse in the grounds behind the convent believing it to be safer than the convent where a battalion of sappers had set up their base. Tragically, one of the shells scored a direct hit on the outhouse killing 11 of the nuns and a young serving girl.

The other important building to be struck was the Church of Santa María de Uribarri and its historic portico. Inside the church, the priest Carlos Morilla Carreño was saying mass with the altar boy Rafael Cuevas. Carlos Morilla, the brother of Guillermo Morilla, a notary in Durango and a leading member of the Republican Left party, had sought refuge in Durango in the belief that being a member of a religious order and Carlos' brother he would be safer than at home in Asturias. Next to the church was the Santa María portico where the weekly market was now held since the Plaza del Mercado had been occupied by the vehicles belonging to the Basque army. This was where people from the outlying villages and the townspeople themselves went to do their shopping. There were numerous victims in these places but also hundreds of other fatalities and wounded in private homes, businesses and streets throughout Durango.

According to Claudio Alegría Mendialdua, a doctor from Gernika who rushed to the scene after the raid to assist the victims, the bombing lasted about 7 minutes, just the time it took for the planes to fly over those fateful 350 metres and drop three tons of bombs, and for the fighters, flying very low, to machine gun the people fleeing, undoubtedly aware that they were civilians and not soldiers of any description.

At the time, there was a great of speculation about whether incendiary devices were dropped on Durango, Today we are in a position to say that the documents kept in the Ufficio Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare in Rome make it clear that during the morning bombing 12 incendiary bombs weighing 20 kilos were dropped on Durango.

In the afternoon, at 2.25, the Savoia 81s of squadron 214 once again took off from the aerodrome in Soria under orders to bomb Durango one more time. On this occasion, the three bombers from squadron 214 assigned to the mission were numbers 1, 2 and 5 and the crews were almost exactly the same as the ones in the morning strike. These three bombers were joined by three others from squadron 213 about which we know only what is contained in the squadron's *Diario Histórico* (logbook): one was commanded by Captain Ugo Macchieraldo and the others by Lieutenant Domenico Valsania and Lieutenant Stefano Castellani. Their target was the Durango railway yard.

Over Logroño, they were joined by seven CR.32 escort fighters, from the "La cucaracha" group of squadron number 5, piloted by Captain Armando Francois, alias "Arturo Martori", Sub-Lieutenant Adriano Boldetti, Sub-Lieutenant Franco De Micheli, alias "Costanzi", Sub-Lieutenant Pietro Garfagnoli, alias "Garfini", Sergeant Major Delfino Fratini, alias "Constantino D' Angelo", Sergeant Major Annibale Ricotti, alias "Ricci" and a sub-lieutenant whose alias was "Pasencei" but whose real identity is unknown.

After reaching the area at around 4.30 p.m., the bombers focused on two different targets. The three bombers from squadron 214 returned to Durango's old quarter. This time they had been ordered to target the path that wound down from the cemetery to the town and led into Calle Zeharkale which crossed the old quarter from east to west. At that time of day it was the busiest street in the town because it was the only way to the cemetery, which was where the victims of the morning bombing had been taken.

The planes dropped 22 hundred-kilo bombs and 56 fifty-kilo bombs – that is to say, a total of 5,000 kilos – the main targets of which were the houses in Calle Zeharkale and the surrounding streets of Barrenkale, Artekale, Goienkale and Kalebarria. After the horrific experience in the morning, the inhabitants of Durango fled from the town centre into the surrounding fields where they fell under a hail of machine-gun bullets from the escort fighters. Witnesses claim that in the fields of San Roque, Landako, Montorretas and El Pasiego the fighters killed more people than the bombs had done.

The three Savoia 81 bombers from squadron 213, on the other hand, targeted the station, the workshops and the rolling stock in the marshalling yard. The bombs hit their targets and caused considerable damage to both the installations and the rolling stock. In the raid, 12 hundred-kilo bombs, 20 fifty-kilo bombs and 55 fifteen kilo bombs were dropped.

Despite being close to the railway yard, a major military factory, Hijos de Mendizabal, was not attacked and neither was a house of the same name that had been commandeered as the artillery barracks or the Monton bridge, vital for communication between the rearguard and the front. This clearly shows that military targets were not the priority of the airstrike.

Aim of the bombing

There has been considerable speculation about the reason for the airstrike. Gonzalo Queipo de Llano's claims on Radio Sevilla that the Nationalist forces had nothing to do with the bombings and that the deaths of the priests and their congregations were the work of "red separatists" can be safely ignored, so the justification for the airstrike of 31 March 1937 is often said to be that Durango was a military target.

One of the first to make this claim was Alfonso Merry del Val y Zulueta, who, alongside Jacobo Fitz-James Stuart y Falco, was Franco's unofficial representative to the British government in London. In statements to the media, Alfonso said that he knew Durango very well because of family connections, which was true. His wife was the daughter of the distinguished Bilbao resident Pablo de Alzola y Miñondo and his son had been married until 1932 to Carmen Gurtubay Alzola, marchioness of Iurreta, a locality adjoining Durango and which had been annexed to it in 1926. This family not only held the marquisate of Iurreta and the Duchy of Andría but also owned the Castejón palace in the district of San Agustín in Durango. Alfonso Merry del Val y Zulueta claimed that its barracks and factories made Durango a military target of the first order and defended the airstrike.

Was Durango a target of any military importance? In March, when General Mola's General Staff were drawing up their strategy to conquer Biscay, Durango was home to various targets of military interest, of which they were fully aware. On 27 February, Captain Alejandro Goicoechea Omar, who had been born in Elorrio and was in charge of fortifying Biscay, defected and told the National forces exactly how Biscay planned to protect itself. The document

“Fortification system of the city of Bilbao. Detailed information from the report provided by the engineer Captain Goicoechea, recently escaped from the city”, dated 12 March 1937, describes various places in the town of Durango as “positions of military interest occupied by the reds”: various barracks that had been set up in an old market near the Plaza Ezkurdi, in the residence of the Jesuit fathers, in the Convent of San Francisco and in the Mendizabal house. The National forces even had diagrams indicating their exact position which are preserved today in the Coronel Francisco Iglesias Brage collection in the Archive of the Reino de Galicia in La Coruña.

Also of military importance was the Plaza del Mercado, which the Basque army used to park all their vehicles, and the Santa Susana School, which was used as a billet for a battalion of sappers. The Parish Church of Santa María de Uribarri had acted as a quartermaster’s store until Easter. And there were factories of military interest such as La Ferretera Vizcaína, Mikeldi, Ortiz de Zarate and Hijos de Mendizabal which manufactured aviation bombs and accessories, and rifle cartridges.

The geographical situation of the region meant that it was full of strategically important points: the Arzubia bridge, between Durango and Matiena (Abadiño), and the Monton bridge, between Durango and Iurreta, both of which were of great importance for the communications between the fronts in Gipuzkoa and Álava, and Bilbao and the rearguard. Durango was also the nerve centre of the Ferrocarriles Vascongados (Basque Railways). The town was on the line from Bilbao to San Sebastián, it was the connection with the branch lines to Elorrio and Arrazola, and it housed much of the railway’s infrastructure (yards for locomotives and carriages, and workshops for manufacturing and repairing rolling stock).

However, with the exception of the Jesuits and Santa Susana, where the churches were hit but not the convents where the barracks had been set up, and the railway yards attacked on the afternoon of 31 March, none of these positions were bombed. Not only were they not hit; the immediate vicinity was not even targeted.

Today, in the light of documents found in various archives, we can surmise that the aim of the bombing was not to target these positions of military importance. In its logbook, squadron 214 of group 24 of Savoia 281 heavy bombers noted the following: “The airstrike on Durango, carried out by our squadron and escorted by fighters, was absolutely deadly. The target was covered by bombs, none of which missed its objective.” The text leaves not the

slightest doubt that the target was the old quarter of Durango. The logbook also referred to a bombing carried out on 9 April on Bilbao and described the objective as “to demoralise the enemy with an aerial exhibition that makes it quite clear that it is useless to attempt to resist the power of the national forces.”

On 28 May 1937, Joachim Richtofen, military analyst of the Condor Legion assigned to the Ministry of Aviation in Berlin, drafted a secret report entitled “Effect of the bombings on Spanish cities (Biscay Front)”. The report came to light as a result of the research done by Stephanie Schüler-Springorum and analyses the raids on Durango, Eibar and Gernika. The report states that “the buildings are similar to the ones in the small cities of our neighbouring Western countries” (that is to say, Poland, Belgium, etc.). This confirms that the bombings were not only used as a means to conquer Biscay; they were also military rehearsals in preparation for the approaching European conflict.

Consequences: victims and material damage

In 1936, official figures put the population of the municipality of Durango at 9,502. After Gipuzkoa was occupied, this figure grew significantly because, by February 1937, the town had taken in 2,884 refugees. If we take into account this floating population of refugees and that some of the young people had been mobilised to the front, we could tentatively set the number of inhabitants in Durango on 31 March 1937 as between 10 and 11 thousand.

The bombs were the direct cause of a large number of victims but so too were the escort fighters. After the events of the morning, when the people of Durango realised that the planes were returning on that fateful afternoon they fled into the fields around the town where they believed they would be safe from the bombs. They could not have been more wrong. Without any weapons to defend themselves and in the open countryside they were mown down by the fighters’ machine guns. The fighters were flying so low that the Italian pilots of the Fiat CR.32s were well aware that their victims were mainly women and young children (that’s to say, non-belligerent civilians).

Unlike other attacks carried out during the Civil War and also unlike the bombing of Gernika, in the aftermath the town of Durango remained in the hands of the Government of the Basque Country (until 28 April). This meant that the wounded could be cared for, the damage assessed and nearly all the bodies recovered. Shortly after the attack, the Justice Department of the Basque Government, presided over at the time by Don Jesús María de Leizaola,

published a leaflet entitled “Durango 1937” which gave an official list of those who had died both at the scene and subsequently in the hospitals of Biscay. For many years, the official number of fatalities was based on this list which named those who had been identified and specified that 127 had died at the scene and had been buried at the Santa Cruz Cemetery in Durango. The leaflet also contains a list of 131 other victims who died some days later in the hospitals in Basurto, Amorebieta, Deusto and various other places.

It is well known that any list of the victims of the bombing will always contain mistakes or lack information. Even so, considerable trouble has been taken to identify as many as possible. The list published by the Basque Government shortly after the raids was extended with information from the media in Bilbao (*Euzkadi*, *Euzkadi Roja*, etc.) in April and May 1937, details from the victims’ families and entries in the death records of the parishes of Durango and surrounding villages. Finally, the list was completed with the deaths recorded in the archives of the Health Service of the Basque Government, which are kept at the Historical Archive of Biscay. The final list of names was published in 2001 in the book *Durango. 1937 martxoak 31 – 31 de marzo de 1937*.

As a result of all this data, which is regularly updated or corrected, the number of victims of the bombing, initially set at 256 in 1937, has increased to 361. Of these 300 have been identified and 61 have not even though some of them were carrying some form of identification (such as the dog tags worn by soldiers).

Some historians have pointed out that the list of victims may have contained the names of casualties from the front simply because they had died in hospitals located in Durango. This may well be true but there are so few cases that they will have very little effect on the final count. It is also possible that some victims were counted twice. They may have been classified as unknown on the Basque government’s list, and then identified by family members or other documentary sources. Even bearing in mind these possible discrepancies or duplications, the 336 fatalities published in 2001 can be regarded as the official number of victims of the Durango bombings.

The material damage is documented by the National Service of Devastated Regions and Reparations of the Ministry of the Interior. According to this information, a total of 70 houses were destroyed during the bombing or had to be totally demolished subsequently. A further five buildings had to be partially demolished and 229 houses suffered some sort of damage. Of the 304 houses affected, 294 were in the old quarter and surrounding streets (that is to

say, 96.71% of the total). On top of this, six religious buildings were destroyed. In economic terms, the damage was valued at 4,239,901 pesetas in 1939. This is the value of the buildings destroyed and does not include the damage caused to streets, infrastructures or items of furniture.

Elorrio: 31 March 1937

Also on 31 March, squadron 213 of the Italian Legionary Air Force under the command of Captain Vittorio Cannaviello took off from Soria, flew alongside squadron 214 for a time and then peeled off to bomb Elorrio.

This airstrike, during which 18 fifty-kilo bombs were dropped, first targeted the district of Kurutziaga, around the Aldatzekua palace, and then went on to attack Calle Berriotxoa y Elizauru with the planes flying over Elorrio from east to west. The bombing killed at least seven people but had little impact on the town's old quarter. The bombs mainly hit the town in the vicinity of the Aldatzekua building in the district of Kurutziaga, the La Paz boarding House and other places in the Calle Berriotxoa, the Santa Ana novitiate and the Greaves house in the Calle Elizburu. The inhabitants of Elorrio, which was in the rearguard at Elgeta, were quite used to the misfortunes of war and had set up various air-raid shelters, the main one of which was inside the church under the choir stalls. The double roof of the church and the choir stalls was reinforced with sandbags.

Very little has been written about the events of that day in Elorrio. It seems that the uncertainty of the time, the proximity of the front and other reasons diverted attention to other areas. Nevertheless, one of the reports that has survived is the one below, written by the journalist for *Euzkadi Roja*:

We reached Elorrio at 8.30 a.m. The bells of the parish church were sounding the alarm, so we were warned of the danger. We were obliged to halt on the outskirts of the town and we waited, trembling with indignation, for the evil flying creatures to leave. The explosions we could hear made us realise that the planes were dropping a large number of bombs. The *gudaris* (Basque soldiers) were not daunted and they responded to the attack from above. The noise was deafening. The droning of the engines was extremely irritating, particularly for us because we had no weapons and were quite unable to do anything to stop the deadly attack.

After a while, we began to lose all notion of time. How long had we been waiting in that spot before the driver finally told us that we could go into the town? We have no idea. We would be lying if we said that we did. A brief drive around the town was sufficient for us to see that several buildings had been destroyed: Social Assistance, the Paz boarding house, Misericordia, the Viuda de Arregi Hotel and the San Fausto hermitage on the outskirts of the town. It was quite a demonstration of the firm religious convictions of the rabble responsible for the airstrike. Also totally destroyed was the mansion belonging to the Marquess of Tola, a staunch monarchist, so the Fascists, like tigers smelling blood, pay no heed to their fellows if by so doing they can further their cause.

And once again we shudder in horror when we see with our own eyes – the marks in the walls of the buildings are irrefutable proof – that the rebels have used their machine guns to stop the townspeople from escaping. Such a display of cruelty against peaceful people leaves us dumbfounded. Hardly had we finished our brief tour of the town than the bells once again announced impending danger. We hurriedly sought shelter with some of the locals. It was 9.30. A lone Fascist plane flew over Elorrio. This time the target was Batzoki and, unfortunately, more victims fell to the rebels' rage. One of them was a nun.

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Busta 64/76

“213ª Squadriglia bombardamento terrestre. Diario storico”

Busta 65/83

“214ª Squadriglia bombardamento terrestre. Diario storico”

Busta 66/84

“24ª Squadriglia caccia terrestre”

Serie 10... Registri di volo. Regg. 52/7

“25ª Squadriglia caccia terrestre”

Serie 10... Registri di volo. Regg. 52/8

“214ª Squadriglia bombardamento terrestre”

Serie 10... Registri di volo. Regg. 52/23



Portico of the church of Santa Maria de Uribarri used as a market place at the moment of the bombing.

CHAPTER 2

Aerial siege of the city of Barcelona:

16, 17 and 18 March 1938

Ramon Arnabat Mata

ISOCAC-URV



Bombing on the city of Barcelona on March 17, 1938 by the Italian Legionnaire Aviation.
A bomb hit a trilite truck on its way through the Gran Via (Ufficio Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare de Roma).

In March 1938, the city of Barcelona was the target of showers of fire from the sky by the Italian Legionary Air Force based in Majorca.¹ Although the raids carried out on 16, 17 and 18 March 1938 were exceptional in the sense that there were many of them and an enormous amount of explosive was dropped, the Catalan capital was regularly bombed from the sea and the sky between February 1937 and January 1939 when Franco's troops entered the city. Nevertheless, the city was not singled out for special treatment. Throughout 1938, cities, towns and villages all over Catalonia were bombed by the Italian and German Fascist air forces that supported Franco: Barcelona, Badalona, Sant Adrià del Besos, Vilanova i la Geltrú, Sitges, Tortosa, Tarragona, Reus, Amposta, el Perelló, Sant Feliu de Guíxols, Granollers, Cambrils, L'Hospitalet de l'Infant, etc.²

The airstrikes on cities in the rearguard during the Spanish Civil War caused widespread international controversy and in April 1937 they were condemned by the United Nations although no serious attempts were made to stop them. The governments of England and France continued with their policy of non-intervention and looked the other way. A young girl from Barcelona, Pilar Dosaigües, wrote the following in her diary:

1 We borrow the expression "showers of fire" from Antoni Rovira i Virgili who used it in the article "Dues ciutats màrtirs", published in *La Humanitat* on 8 August 1938.

2 See Solé i Sabaté, J. M. and Villarroya, J. *Catalunya sota les bombes, 1936–1939*. Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat; 1996; Íñiguez, D. and Gesalí, D. *La guerra aèria a Catalunya*. Barcelona: Dalmau; 2012; Arnabat, R. and Íñiguez, D. *Atac i defensa de la rereguarda. Els bombardeigs franquistes a les comarques de Tarragona i les Terres de l'Ebre (1937–1939)*. Valls: Cossetània-URV; 2013; Gort, E. and Palomar, S. *Viure sota les bombes: els bombardeigs a Reus, 1937–1939*. Reus: Arxiu Municipal de Reus; 2010; Prat, J. and Pricot, J. *Bombes sobre Girona. La Defensa Passiva a la Guerra Civil (1936–1939)*. Girona: Ajuntament de Girona; 2012; Arnabat, R., Íñiguez, D., Gesalí, D. and Cabezas, A. *Els bombardeigs franquistes sobre el Penedès, 1937–1939*. Vilafranca del Penedès: Institut d'Estudis Penedesencs; 2011.

[the Francoists] have a lot of foreign aircraft and ammunition, but nobody is helping us [the Republicans]. They [the army] are now resorting to 18-year-old boys. They've already been asked to join up. Everybody is very upset because we are losing a great deal of territory, but who knows? I am sure that victory will be ours. But when?³

The aerial bombings were part of the gradual implementation of the concepts of total and aerial war which radically changed the tactics and strategies of warfare. So it could be said that the First World War was the last “old” war and the Spanish Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Second World War the first “modern” wars.

Total war and aerial war

Aerial bombings were first used as a military tactic in the European colonies in the second decade of the 20th century: Italy bombed Tripoli and Abyssinia; France bombed Morocco and Syria; Spain bombed the Rif; Great Britain bombed Iraq, Burma and India; and Bulgaria and Greece also carried out air raids during the First Balkan War. However, despite the agreements of the Second Peace Conference of The Hague (1907), it was during the First World War (1914–1918) that the first bombs were dropped on European cities by German, French, English, Italian and Russian aircraft. Meanwhile, in Mexico Pancho Villa bombed the “huertistas” and the North Americans bombed Pancho Villa and his troops.⁴ The military tactics may have been new but they were used in “old” wars.

The first theories on total war and aerial war were advanced during the First World War. The German general Erich Ludendorff gave a clear definition of what he understood to be total war: “The whole country, all its men, women and children, are the workers or the victims of war”, because “total war saves nothing, respects nothing” and “it will use all weapons, particularly the cruellest ones, which are the most efficient.” According to Ludendorff, total war, “not only targets enemy armies, and military organisations and establishments, but uses bombs and propaganda to undermine the will and the force of the moral resistance of the civilian population.”⁵

3 Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario: hoy ha empezado la guerra*. Barcelona: Espasa Calpe; 2017. p.173–174.

4 Lindqvist, S. *Historia de los bombardeos*. Madrid: Turner; 2002. p. 4–19.

5 Ludendorff, E. *Der totale krieg*. München: Verlag; 1935. See Beckett, I.F.W. “Total War”. In McInnes, C. and Sheffield, G.D., editors. *Warfare in Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice*. London: Unwin Hyman;

It was also during the First World War that it was first suggested that power in the air and air warfare would be the key factor in deciding conflicts and the English mathematician Frederick W. Lanchester put forward his theories on saturation bombings.⁶ In 1916, the British general Jan Smuts wrote that it would not be long before aerial operations would so devastate enemy territory and the destruction of towns and cities would be on such a scale that they would become the main actions of warfare to which all other operations would be subordinate. Two years later, in 1918, the North-American colonel Billy Mitchel made similar claims: the time of land armies and navies had passed and air power was coming to the fore.

At the beginning of the 1920s, the Italian general Giulio Douhet clearly defined air warfare and strategic bombing as “an action of war that takes place far from the battlefield to strike, among other things, at the city” so “there are no longer any areas in which life can be led in complete safety and relative tranquillity” because “the battlefield now has no limitations” and “there is no longer any difference between combatants and non-combatants.”⁷ This theory was shared by Hugh Trenchard, the father of the RAF.

Spain was not unaware of these new theories on war. At the beginning of the 1920s the first director of the air arm of the Military Aeronautics Service and subsequent head of Franco’s Air Force, Alfredo Kindelán, gave a lecture in which he said that “a technically well-equipped air force with an offensive spirit, can engage in action at a considerable distance and in the very heart of enemy countries, weakening the rearguard and attacking major cities and industrial centres.”⁸

In the inter-war period, the advances made in military aeronautics led to the theories of total war and aerial war converging. The manufacture of large bomber planes that could transport large quantities of bombs relatively quickly over long distances paved the way to the possibility of strategic bombings. And this meant that military strategists could question the traditional division of war into the front (or battlefield) and the rearguard. From this point on, whenever

1988. p. 1–24; and Chickering, R. “Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept”. In Boemeke, M.F., Chickering, R. and Förster, S., editors. *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences 1871–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1999. p. 13–28.

6 Lanchester, F. W. *Aircraft in Warfare: The Dawn of the Fourth Arm*. London: Constable; 1916 [reprint: London: BiblioLife; 2009]; and Hearne, R. P. *Airships in peace and war*. London: John Lane; 1910.

7 Douhet, G. *El dominio del Aire*. Madrid: Instituto de Historia y Cultura Aeronáutica; 1987 [1921].

8 Kindelán, A. *Doctrina de la guerra aérea, características y modo de empleo*. In *Conferencias Teóricas: Primer curso para Jefes de unidades tácticas aéreas*. Madrid: Talleres Tipográficas Stampa; 192?. Vol. I; p. 34.

a country declared war on another, it had to be aware that the armed conflict would make the whole country its battlefield because both its population and its economy would become military targets. From the perspective of total war it was perfectly reasonable to attack the civil population and bring the enemy's economy to its knees.⁹

It was during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) that the new strategies of warfare were systematically applied for the first time and airstrikes against targets in cities in the rearguard and the civilians who lived there were “normalised”.¹⁰ Raids were no longer isolated events; rather they were constant, systematic and fully integrated into the strategy of total war, as the inhabitants of Durango, Gernika, Eibar, Madrid, Almeria, Valencia, Castelló, Sagunt, Santander, Águilas, Alicante, Alcoi, Cartagena, Albacete, Barcelona, Tarragona and Reus could vouch for.¹¹

During the Second World War, the concepts of total war and aerial war were taken to their ultimate consequences with the systematic bombing of European and Asian cities at considerable distances from the frontline. Clear examples of this are the well-known German bombings of London and other English cities – the Blitz – which killed 43,000, injured 100,000 and left 1,000,000 homeless,¹² and the less well-known allied bombings of 131 German towns and cities, from Dresden to Berlin, which killed 600,000 (most of whom

9 Davis Biddle, T. *Rhetoric and reality in air warfare: the evolution of British and American ideas about strategic bombing, 1914–1945*. Woodstock: Princeton University Press; 2002; and Pape, R.A. *Bombing to win. Air Power and Coercion in War*. Nueva York: Cornell University Press; 1996.

10 Chickering, R. “La Guerra Civil española en la era de la Guerra Total”. *Alcores*, 2007; 4:21–36; Mastrorilli, E. “Guerra Civile Spagnola, intervento italiano e guerra totale”. *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar*, 2014; 6(3):68–86; and Morley, J.W., editor. *The China Quagmire: Japan's Expansion on the Asian Continent, 1933–1941 (Japan's Road to the Pacific War)*. Columbia: University Press; 1983.

11 Solé i Sabaté, J. M. *España en llamas: la guerra civil desde el aire*. Madrid: Temas de Hoy; 2003. For the bombing of Gernika, see Irujo, X. *El Gernika de Richthofen: un ensayo de bombardeo de terror*. Gernika-Lumo: Gernikako Bakearen Museoa Fundazioa; 2012; Patterson, I. *Guernica y la guerra total*. Madrid: Turner; 2008; Bernecker, W.L. *Cincuenta años de historiografía sobre el bombardeo de Gernika*. San Sebastián: Universidad del País Vasco; 1988; Momoitio, I. and Núñez, A.T., coordinators. *El bombardeo de Gernika y su repercusión internacional*. Gernika-Lumo: Fundación Museo de La Paz de Gernika; 2012; Cava, M^a. J. et alii. *Memoria colectiva del bombardeo de Gernika*. Bilbao-Gernika-Lumo: Gernika Gogoratuz; 1996; Southwort, H. *La destrucción de Guernica: Periodismo, diplomacia, propaganda e historia*. Barcelona: Ibérica de ediciones y publicaciones; 1977; and *The crime of Guernica: we refuse to condone such atrocities by our silence*. New York: Spanish Information Bureau; [1937?]. For Durango, see Irazabal, J. 1937 martxoak 31 Durango 31 de marzo de 1937. Abadiño: Gerediaga Elkartea; 2001.

12 Bungay, S. *La batalla de Inglaterra*. Barcelona: Ariel; 2008; and McKee, A. *La batalla de Inglaterra*. Madrid: Fermín Uriarte; 1966.

were civilians) and left 7,500,000 homeless.¹³ And, of course, the first atomic bomb was dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹⁴ In fact, all the conflicts in the second half of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st have been total wars and airstrikes targeting civilians have become the norm.

The new concepts of total war and aerial war made it necessary to rethink defence systems, particularly the strategies to defend cities in the rearguard and to protect their inhabitants. The English were the first to work on developing anti-air defences although they did so on the basis of the outdated principle that gave priority to defence against gas and not against high explosives. In 1924 the Air Raid Precautions Committee was set up in England, and in 1935 it became a Home Office department. Between 1935 and 1938 it published three issues, and 500,000 copies, of the series *Air Raid Precautions Handbook for civilians*.¹⁵

At the beginning of 1936, just before the start of the Spanish Civil War, the military engineers Sánchez-Tembleque, Gámpora and García Alós pointed out the dangers of future aerial war for the civilian population and suggested that anti-air defences needed to be organised for protection.

A new type of warfare has emerged that reaches the interior of a country with no need to breach the coastal or land defence systems, or defeat the armed forces. The army of the air, reinforced with the latest offence technology, has made the whole national territory a frontier, has created the air frontier and turned all the inhabitants of a country into combatants.¹⁶

13 Sebald, W.G. *Sobre la historia natural de la destrucción*. Barcelona: Anagrama; 2003 [1990]; Andersch, A. Weis, P. *On the natural history of destruction: with essays on Alfred Andersch, Jean Améry and Peter Weiss/W.G. Sebald*. Londres: Penguin; 2004; Musgrove, F. *Dresde y los bombardeos británicos sobre Alemania*. Valladolid: AF Editores; 2005; Taylor, F. *Dresde: el bombardeo más controvertido de la Segunda Guerra Mundial*. Madrid: Temas de Hoy; 2005; Hastings, M. *Bomber Command*. London: Kindle Edition; 1999; and Friedrich, J. *El incendio. Alemania bajo los bombardeos, 1940–1945*. Madrid: Santillana; 2003.

14 *The Effects of the Atomic Bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Report of the British Mission to Japan*. London: Home Office and the Air Ministry; 1946; Hogan, M.J., editor. *Hiroshima in history and memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1996; and Weller, G. *Nagasaki: las crónicas destruidas por MacArthur*. Barcelona: Crítica; 2007.

15 Pons, J. "Presentació". In Pons, J. *Lliçons de Barcelona: informe britànic sobre el bombardeigs de la ciutat, 1938*. Barcelona: Fundació Carles Pi i Sunyer; 2004. p. 9–28.

16 Sánchez-Tembleque, L., Gámpora, J. and García Alós, J. *Defensa Antiaérea de las Poblaciones Civiles*. Segovia: Academia de Artillería e Ingenieros; 1936. p. 9.

Bombs from Majorca to Barcelona

In July 1936, the island of Majorca was taken by Franco's forces. Catalonia perceived this to be a threat although the central government did not. A Catalan expedition led by Colonel Albert Bayo was organised with the aim of winning back Majorca for the Republic.¹⁷ The expedition failed with tragic consequences for Catalonia and the Republican Mediterranean shoreline because the Italian Legionary Air Force used the aerodrome of Palma de Mallorca as a base for their Savoia S-81 and Savoia S-7 bombers while the aerodrome at Pollença became the base for the German Heinkel He-59 floatplanes and their Italian counterparts with Spanish pilots from the Brigada Hispana. The Italian and German aircraft based in Majorca were fully operative as from June 1937 and the two forces coordinated with each but often independently of the rest of Franco's aircraft based in the peninsula. Their objective was to control the air space over the Mediterranean and systematically bomb the shipping and the towns in coastal areas at little more than an hour's flying distance and at no great risk.¹⁸

The Fascist air forces had the support of Franco's espionage and information services, which provided intelligence on the targets to be bombed in Catalonia. The SIFNE (Servicio de Información de la Frontera Nordeste de España) had been functioning since 1936 with its base of operations in Biarritz and headed by leading members of the Catalan right wing. In February 1938 this service became part of the SIPM (Servicio de Información y Policía Militar).¹⁹

17 Cruells, M. *L'expedició a Mallorca: any 1936*. Barcelona: Editorial Juventud; 1971.

18 Grassia, E. *L'Aviazione Legionaria da bombardamento – Spagna 1936–1939*. Rome: IBN Editore; 2009; Emiliani, A. *La Aviación legionaria: España 1936-39*. Madrid: San Martin; 1974; Emiliani, A., Chergo, G.F., Vigna, A. *Spagna 1936-39: l'aviazione legionaria*. Milan: Intergest; 1973; Alcofar Nassaes, J.L. *La aviación Legionaria en la guerra española*. Barcelona: Editorial Euros; 1975; Rovighi, A. and Stefani, F., *La partecipazione italiana alla Guerra Civile Spagnola (1936–1939). Volume II. Documenti e Allegati*. Rome: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito. Ufficio Storico; 1993; Emiliani, A. "Mille aeroplani italiani per la Spagna". In *Ebre 38. Revista Internacional de la Guerra Civil 1936–1939*, 2008, 3:65–69; Pedrali, F. *Guerra di Spagna e aviazione italiana*. Rome: Ufficio Storico. Aeronautica Militare Italiana; 1992; Reis, K. and Ring, H. *The Legion Condor. A History of the Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War*. West Chester: Schifer Military History; 1992; Permy, R.A., O'Donnell, C. *As de Picas. La escuadrilla de hidros de la Legión Cóndor en la Guerra Civil Española, 1936–1939. La Luftwaffe en España 2*. London: Galland Books; 2008; and Schüler-Springorum, S. *La Guerra como aventura: La Legión Cóndor en la Guerra Civil española, 1936–1939*. Madrid: Alianza; 2014.

19 Bertrán i Musitu, J. *Experiencias de los servicios de información en el nordeste de España (SIFNE) durante la guerra*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe; 1940; and Soler, J.R. and López-Brea, F.J. *Soldados sin rostro. Los servicios de información, espionaje y criptografía en la Guerra Civil Española*. Barcelona: Inédita Eds.; 2008.

We should also bear in mind that as from autumn 1937, Barcelona became the functioning capital of the Spanish Republic. With 1,065,000 inhabitants and more than 250,000 refugees, it became the political centre of the Republic (the city was home to the Catalan government, the Republican government and the Basque government), and also the major city in military and economic terms. It was, therefore, the main target of the Italian and German air forces which supported Franco.

Between March 1937 and January 1939 the alarm was sounded on more than 400 occasions and 240 air raids partially or totally destroyed some 6,000 buildings, killed more than 2,750 people outright and injured more than 7,000.²⁰ Of course, the bombings disrupted daily life in Barcelona. They generated numerous material and immaterial dysfunctions because of the permanent anxiety about when the city would be targeted by another raid.

To fully comprehend the tragic horror of all the hours of endless anxiety you need to have been there and seen with absolute clarity that every minute might be the last of your life and, even worse, the last minute of the life of your loved ones. You need to have felt the serene and resplendent calm of the night torn asunder by the horrific crack of monstrously destructive bombs, while the nervous, epileptic shrillness of the anti-aircraft artillery responded exasperatingly in the sky crisscrossed with search lights.²¹

The defence of Barcelona

At the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, most people were not aware of the human and material damage that could be caused by airstrikes on the cities in the rearguard. Fortunately, both the Republican military and civil authorities were well aware of their potential for destruction so they took measures to inform and protect the Catalan population from the very start of the conflict.²² As from

20 The number of victims would exceed 4,000 if we were to count all those who died of their injuries afterwards. Much of the documentation on the Barcelona bombings and shelters is held at the Administrative Archive of Barcelona (AAB); the Salamanca Centre of Documentation for Historical Memory; the Historical Archive of the Air Force (AHEA); the CRAI of the Pavilion of the Republic at the University of Barcelona (CRAI PR-UB); the Historical Archive of the Association of Architects of Catalonia: Syndicated Collection of the Architects of Catalonia; the National Archive of Catalonia (ANC) and the Military Aeronautics History Office in Rome. Military Operations in Spain (USAM-OMS).

21 *Un tema inesgotable*. Anonymous text by the Board for the Passive Defence of Catalonia. CRAI-PR-UB.

22 Pujadó, J. *Oblits de rereguarda: els refugis antiaeris de Barcelona, 1936–1939*. Barcelona: PAM; 1998; Arnabat, R. "Refugios antiaéreos: aproximación histórica, arqueológica y patrimonial". In *Historia del*

the summer of 1936, the central government, the Catalan government and the Barcelona City Council went to considerable trouble to protect the Republican rearguard from Fascist air attacks both actively (detection and neutralisation of the attacking planes) and passively (protection of the civil population).²³ To start with, batteries of anti-aircraft guns were set up in Montjuïc and at the two ends of the city, and two yachts equipped with radios sailed up and down the coast to warn the Ministry of Defence of impending danger. As complementary measures, planes were entrusted with keeping watch on the coast from the air, and aerodromes were either constructed or improved. The first *Instruccions en cas de bombardeig aeri* (*Instructions in the event of an air raid*) were laid down by the Minister of Defence of the Catalan Government, Lieutenant Colonel Díaz Sandino, in conjunction with the Barcelona City Council, on 21 September 1936. The text was essentially a list of instructions that had to be followed in the event of air raids and the measures of prevention that could be taken: street lights had to be painted blue or the shelters to be used during air raids had to be clearly signalled. These were the first measures taken to protect the Catalan capital, the embryo of the passive and active defence strategy that would gradually adapt and respond to events and the availability of economic and material resources. In parallel, the ground floors of some blocks of flats, and railway and underground stations were converted into shelters, and the first alarm systems and camouflage were installed. Some months later, in the autumn of 1936 the poster *Instruccions a seguir en cas de bombardeig* was printed which graphically and straightforwardly explained how civilians had to behave in the event of an air raid.

In the autumn of 1936 and the winter of 1937 work began on the construction of shelters in official buildings. In May 1937, the Catalan government drew up a list of technical specifications for the construction of

Presente. 2017; 29:95–106; Arnabat, R. “La Generalitat de Catalunya pionera en la defensa passiva”. In Sobrequés (dir.) *A 80 anys del cop d'estat de Franco. La Generalitat de Catalunya i la Guerra Civil (1936–1939)*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya; 2017. p. 243–272; Arnabat, R., coord. *Els refugis antiaeris de Barcelona: criteris d'intervenció patrimonial*. Barcelona: MUHBA; 2009; Lusa, G., Roca, A. and Valentines, J., editors. *El Fons Ramon Perera: Imatges de la defensa passiva a Catalunya (1938–1939)*. VI Jornada Memorial Democràtic a la UPC. 18 de desembre de 2008. Fem memòria per fer futur. Barcelona: Càtedra UNESCO de Tècnica i Cultura-Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya; 2008; Armengou, M. and Belis, R. *Ramon Parera, l'home dels refugis*. Barcelona: Rosa dels Vents; 2008; and Contel, J. M. *Gràcia, temps de bombes, temps de refugis. El subsòl com a supervivència*. Barcelona: Taller d'Història de Gràcia; 2008.

23 Arnabat, R. and Íñiguez, D. “Atac i defensa ...” p. 153–299 and Arnabat, R. and Cabezas, A. “La defensa passiva i la defensa activa al Penedès”. In Arnabat, R., Íñiguez, Gesalí, D. and Cabezas, A. *El Penedès ...* p. 109–183.

shelters (*Normes generals i instruccions tècniques*). Barcelona City Council followed suit and, in many respects, took the initiative in the document *Refugis: instruccions elementals per a la protecció contra els atacs aeris amb bombes explosives i incendiàries*. In another attempt to tackle the issue, Barcelona City Council set up the Passive Defence Office (ODP), headed by the councillor Manuel Muñoz Díez.²⁴

During this initial period, the difficulties of protecting a city such as Barcelona, in particular, and the Catalan coast, in general, became quite clear. Passive defence involved, among other things, signing up and training civilians, implementing systems of camouflage, muting street lighting, sounding the alarm, running salvage operations and building shelters, while active defence focused largely on the military organisation to combat the threat by locating and neutralising the enemy with anti-aircraft artillery, fighter planes, ships and coastal artillery, radio transmissions, searchlights, sound-ranging equipment, coastal watchtowers, etc.

A key moment in the active defence of Republican cities was the creation of DECA (the Anti-Air Defence Authority) in March 1937 and its incorporation two months later into the new air force that had been set up as an independent entity. In October 1937, the headquarters of DECA was transferred, as was the central government, from Valencia to Barcelona which made organisation and deployment more efficient throughout Catalonia. This facilitated the emplacement of an anti-aircraft battery at the top of the Turó de la Rovira, first used in the raids of March 1938 and the centre of the active defence of the city of Barcelona until the end of the War, together with the artillery located in the Casa Antúnez, Poble Nou and Santa Coloma to cover the access to the sea.²⁵

Particularly important in terms of passive defence was the effort made by the City Council: underground stations and basements were converted into shelters for civilians; the shelters were cleaned and maintained, and provided with lighting and security; the population was informed about what they had to do in the event of an air raid, instructions were printed and distributed all over Catalonia; and courses were set up to train passive defence personnel. Of the

24 Muñoz Díez, M. *Memòria de Defensa Passiva Antiaèria*. Tasca de l'Ajuntament de Barcelona (handwritten report from August 1937), held at AAB, Local Board of Passive Defence, M-101.

25 Vera Deleito, A. and Vera Deleito, J. *Defensa Antiaèrea Republicana (1936–1939, Artillería y Refugios (Algo de valor))*. Valencia: Jorge Vera De Leito; 2000; Salas Larrazábal, J. *Guerra Aérea 1936/39*. vol. III: Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa; 2001; and *Como se defienden las ciudades del ataque aéreo. Por el Jefe de Defensa Antiaerea de Barcelona*. [Mexico?]: Editorial Proteo; 1940.

three secretariats of the Passive Defence Board of Catalonia, the Secretariat for Planning and Public Works, also known as the Secretariat for the Construction of Shelters, directed first by Santiago Pons and as from February 1938 by Ramon Perera, was entrusted not only with constructing shelters but also of studying materials, the attackers' bombs, and the destruction and damage caused to buildings, and coordinating technicians, engineers and laboratories for experimental tests.²⁶

The residents of Barcelona and the City Council went to a great deal of trouble to construct the air-raid shelters. In total, work began on 1,300 shelters, although some of them were never actually finished. The lack of economic and material resources meant that the ambitious programme of air-raid shelters in the city was not completed.²⁷ Even so, the planning and construction of the shelters was the result of a group effort between military leaders, the City Council and the Catalan government and involved engineers, surveyors, labourers and volunteers. That is to say, it was a joint project, which was not always coordinated, between civilians (building shelters in the suburbs), military leaders (making the necessary resources available and conjuring up the first rules from nothing) and civil institutions (using their equipment and technicians to supervise, print instructions and provide premises, tools, materials, etc.).

Despite all the shortcomings, it should be said that for some periods Barcelona was one of the best defended cities in Europe, and although the artillery was modest it was efficient at neutralising attacking planes.²⁸ It was also without a doubt the first modern European capital to design such a well-organised anti-aircraft defence system from practically nothing and rise to the challenge of actively defending the city against the powerful Italian and German air forces. As can be seen from the documentation produced by both attackers and defenders, and particularly from the reports written by the Italians, the anti-aircraft response was efficient and violent, which made it difficult for the

26 Valentines, J. "Redefinicions socials i espacials de l'enginyeria a la Guerra Civil a Catalunya. El Fons Ramon Perera i la defensa passiva". Lusa, G., Monforte, A., Roca, J. i Valentines, J., editors. *El Fons Ramon Perera ...*: p. 18–19.

27 Carta Arqueològica de Barcelona. Barcelona: Servei d'Arqueologia de Barcelona; 2010 [available at <http://cartaarqueologica.bcn.cat/>]. See Arnabat, R. coordinator. *Els refugis antiaeris de Barcelona...*

28 *Defensa/BCN 1936-1939. Guia d'Història Urbana*. Barcelona: MUHBA; 2011; Arnabat, R., Gesalí, D. and Íñiguez, D. "Barcelona sota les bombes franquistes". In *L'Avenç*, 2009, 344:44–52; and Arnabat, R. Barcelona 1938: guerra aèria i guerra total. In *L'Avenç*, 2018, 446:44–52; Arnabat, R. "La defensa de Barcelona: del relat històric als elements patrimonials", Arnabat, R., coordinator. *Els refugis antiaeris...* p. 27–54; and Gesalí, D. and Íñiguez, D. *La guerra aèria...* p. 197–264.

attackers to carry out the raid or intercept the Republican fighters assigned to the rearguard.²⁹

If we put the task of active defence in an international context, we can see that other countries did not have the means to defend themselves against aerial attacks in 1938 or the experience to respond to the threat. Only England would manage to do so, albeit only as from the middle of 1940 and once their advanced industry and technology had allowed them to reinforce their defence system with radar stations and a large number of fighters and anti-aircraft guns. In any case, the experience of the Republican anti-aircraft defence system was the basis on which other European countries designed their own systems during the Second World War, although the country that it had most been studied by, England, did not exploit it to its full extent because Churchill's Conservative government, in a decision that clearly discriminated between the classes, refused to build air-raid shelters for the workers.³⁰

Barcelona: Republican capital and Franco's priority target

The first Italian airstrike on the city of Barcelona was on 16 March 1937 and the notes made by the attackers contain these premonitory words: "the effect on the morale of the people has been enormous" because "the aerial offensive has gone straight to the heart of Red territory and the centre of the city, the most strongly protected area."³¹ As from that day, over the next year the Legionary Air Force bombed Barcelona on 31 occasions, killed 955 and injured 1,070, and totally or partially destroyed 133 and 534 buildings, respectively. Particularly bloody were the raids on 15, 19 and 25 and, above all, 30 January 1938 when nine tons of explosives were dropped, killing 459 people, among whom were numerous children. Some of the bombs struck the school and the air-raid shelter in Sant Felip Neri, where the shrapnel marks can still be seen in the square.³² These

29 See, for example, "8° Stormo B. V. Diario storico" [from 12 January 1938 to 31 May 1939] held at the Ufficio Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare de Roma. Operazione Militare Spagna [USAM-OMS]. Cartella 51/B.

30 Pujol, J. *Lliçons de Barcelona...*, p. 9–28.

31 Ufficio Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare. Operazione Militare Spagna (USAM-OMS), box 73.

32 All the data on the bombings in this text have been taken from the information available in the AAB. Fons de la Junta de Defensa Passiva de Barcelona (ACB-FJDPB) and USAM-OMS. See also Villarroya, J. *Els bombardeigs de Barcelona durant la Guerra Civil*. Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat; 1999; Albertí, S. and Albertí, E. *Perill de bombardeig! Barcelona sota les bombes (1936–1939)*. Barcelona: Albertí Editor; 2004; Poblet, F. *Els bombardeigs a Barcelona durant la guerra civil*. Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona; 2005. See also www.barcelonabombardejada.cat; Domènech, X. and Zenobi, L. *Quan*

attacks were the prelude to the strategic and saturation bombings of March. Pilar Dosaigües, the young girl from Barcelona, explains it in these terms:

This morning at about 9.30, when I was doing some housework, I heard the sirens and immediately afterwards the bombs. We went out onto the balcony and saw the planes flying very high, surrounded by the smoke of the missiles that the anti-aircraft guns had fired at them. Immediately we saw two columns of dense smoke coming from the houses that had been hit. At 12.30, the planes returned and dropped more bombs.³³

The January bombings in 1938 were a source of encouragement for the Italian Fascist leaders and considerable concern for the Republican government and army, the Catalan government and the Barcelona City Council. On 2 February 1938, Count Galeazzo Ciano, the Italian foreign minister, wrote about the January bombings in his memoirs: "Mussolini has ordered the coastal bombings to be stepped up; they completely undermine the spirit of the people." And on 8 February 1938 he said that after the success of the bombing on 30 January:

Mussolini planned to restart the bombing of the coastal cities to destroy any resistance by the Reds. I was given a report on the recent air raids by an eye witness, which I passed on to Il Duce. He had never read such a terrifying document even though only nine S.79s had flown and the raid had lasted a minute and a half. Buildings had been destroyed, traffic brought to a standstill and people were in a blind panic. It was a good lesson for the future. There is no point in designing anti-aircraft defences or building shelters: the only protection against an air raid is to evacuate the cities.³⁴

The air raids prompted a timid reaction from the British, French and Belgian governments. On 10 February a heavily attended meeting was held in Paris to condemn the bombings of the cities and towns in the rearguard. It was organised by Rassemblement pour la Paix, led by Víctor Basch and Professor Langevin, and it was presided over by Diego Martínez Barrio. In parallel, in the British House of Commons, the Welsh Labour MP and miner, Morgan Jones, tabled a motion that criticised the bombing of cities in the rearguard.

plovien bombes. Barcelona: ECOS; 2009; Dueñas, O. *El port de Barcelona: objectiu militar durant la Guerra Civil (1936–1939)*. Barcelona: Museu Marítim; 2016.

33 Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario...*, p. 158.

34 Ciano, G. *Diarios 1937–1943*. Barcelona: Crítica; 2003. p. 83–87.

In the opinion of this House, the growing horror of the aerial bombardment of defenceless civilians should be expressed in an international agreement by virtue of which all nations shall co-operate in its prohibition. This House urges His Majesty's Government to exert its influence to this end.³⁵

The motion was passed unanimously and was supported by the government, who declared that they were already working on the issue and would continue to do so because “unless something can be done to meet this menace the peoples of the world in the latter part of this century are going to live as troglodytes.” However, speeches aside, both the British and the French governments took a very lukewarm stand on this question.

The non-intervention policies adopted by the Western democracies led to serious problems in supplying the Republic with arms and humanitarian aid. In an attempt to reverse this trend and to generate a current of international opinion in favour of the Republic, in February 1938, the mayor of Barcelona, Hilari Salvadó, and several councillors travelled to France, Belgium and England to give their eye-witness accounts of the lethal air raids on Barcelona, seek humanitarian aid and explain the systems of passive defence that had been implemented.³⁶ In an interview published in *La Vanguardia* on his return, the Mayor said that London had been very interested in the anti-aircraft defences in Barcelona.

The part of my mission that I am most happy with, and which I believe to have been most successful, was our attempt to inform the English authorities and public opinion of the scale of the airstrikes on our city. On this issue there was a certain amount of confusion. Or rather, their impression was the same as in Paris and Brussels where they still recalled the action taken by the German planes against civilians during the Great War and assumed that the attacks by the Fascist planes on Barcelona were of a similar nature.

It did not take me too long to convince them of their error. Of course, this issue was of great interest to the authorities, and particularly to the Parliamentary Committee which is currently busily engaged in designing the anti-aircraft defence system of London, a city of enormous size. In fact, their interest was such that, after our initial conversations, they put Doctor Gispert and myself in touch with the specialists. We told them how our passive defence system was organised in the minutest detail, with particular attention to the

35 Rovira i Virgili, A. Contra els bombardeigs aeris. In *La Humanitat*, 8 February 1938. p. 1.

36 Vinyes, P. *Alcalde Hilari Salvadó de Barcelona quan plovién bombes*. Barcelona: Fundació Josep Irla; 2016. p. 139–174.

features of our air-raid shelters and the depths at which they had been built. They were greatly impressed by everything we had to say and I would not be at all surprised if, as a result, they made considerable changes to the structure of their defence system.³⁷

Just a few days later a delegation of English, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish ministers of parliament, writers and journalists visited Barcelona City Council to see *in situ* the effects of the air raids and show their solidarity with the Republican people.

The March raids: a direct order from Mussolini

According to the diaries of Galeazzo Ciano, on 16 March 1938 Benito Mussolini ordered a saturation bombing mission on the city of Barcelona. A staunch believer in Giulio Dohuet's theories of air warfare and strategic bombing, Mussolini regarded "an action of war that takes place far from the battlefield to strike, among other things, at the city" to be a good strategic option. That is to say, he believed that the bombing of cities in the Republican rearguard – in this case Barcelona –, in conjunction with the advance of Franco's troops in Aragon after the offensive that had been initiated on 9 March, would undermine the morale of the Republican civilian population and "weaken the morale of the Reds."³⁸

Any explanation of Mussolini's decision should also take into account the international context: on 8 March negotiations on the Mediterranean had begun between Italy and England in Rome; between 10 and 13 March there had been elections in France that had been won by the Popular Front and Léon Blum, who was more sympathetic to the Republic, was appointed president of the government. His intention was to reopen the border with Spain, which would make it possible for the Republic to be supplied with war materials (the border was in fact opened on 17 March); and on 12 March Austria was annexed by Germany, an action that Italy did not agree with. All of this convinced Mussolini that the time was ripe for a show of force, which prompted his order for the strategic bombing of Barcelona. He wanted "Italians to generate horror by their aggression and not pleasure by their mandolin playing" because "Our stock will go up in the eyes of the Germans, who love total and ruthless

37 El Alcalde Barcelona nos comunica sus impresiones de su viaje por Europa. In *La Vanguardia*, 27 February 1938, p. 8

38 Ciano, G. *Diarios...* p.106–109.

war.” It was also a response to the new government in France, which was more sympathetic to the Republican cause, and the immediate re-opening of the French border with Spain. What is more, just a year before, the Italian *Corpo Truppe Volontario* had been defeated by the Republicans at Guadalajara and Mussolini wanted to take advantage of the moment to take revenge for the defeat. Count Ciano says the following in his memoirs:

The truth about the Barcelona bombings is that Mussolini gave the order to Valle in the Chamber just a few minutes before giving his speech on Austria. Franco knew nothing about it and yesterday asked me to suspend operations because he feared complications abroad. Mussolini believes that these bombings are very useful to weaken the morale of the Reds while the troops advance in Aragon. And he’s right. When I told him about my conversation with Perth [the English ambassador], he did not appear to be too concerned. Rather, he was pleased by the fact that the Italians had managed to generate horror by their aggression and not pleasure by their mandolin playing. Our stock will go up in the eyes of the Germans, who love total and ruthless war.³⁹

Three days in March 1938

On the morning of Wednesday 16 March, General Valle sent a telegram to General Velardi, the head of the *Aviazione Legionaria delle Baleari* (ALB: the Balearic Legionary Air Force) with Mussolini’s orders: “Iniziare da stanotte azione violenta su Barcellona con martellamento diluito nel tempo” (Initiate an attack on Barcelona tonight and then pound the city at regular intervals).⁴⁰ The raids began that very night at 22.08 and lasted until 15.00 on Friday 18 March. In total there were 12 bombings, each one of which lasted for two minutes.

On 16 March at 22.08, five Savoia S-81s belonging to squadron 251 of the 25th Night Bombing Group of the 21 Stormo based in Palma de Mallorca dropped fifteen 250-kilo bombs and twenty-five 50-kilo bombs that struck various targets in Barcelona, Hospitalet de Llobregat and Prat de Llobregat. A second raid targeted Sant Andreu, Poble Nou, Sant Adrià and Badalona.⁴¹

The third, fourth and fifth raids were carried out at 7.36, 10.27 and 13.57 by 16 Savoia S-79s belonging to squadrons 18 and 52 of the 27th Fast Bombing

³⁹ Ciano, G. *Diarios...* p.108–109.

⁴⁰ Telegram *Urgentissimo 5626 partito da Roma il 16/03/1938*. USAM-OMS, box 75.

⁴¹ CRAI-PR-UB-JDPC 16/03/1938; AAB, F-Aj.B., M101 JLDP/5767/2.2, 2.6 and 2.4; USAM-OMS 67–92; USAM 74–26.

group of the 8 Stormo, also based in Palma de Mallorca. They dropped eight 250-kilo bombs, a hundred-and-twelve 100-kilo bombs and sixty-eight 20-kilo incendiary devices to increase the amount of damage because the explosives opened up great holes in buildings and went through several floors while the incendiaries exploited the holes to set the interiors ablaze. The bombings targeted the central areas of the city: Carrers Rocafort-Corts, Avinguda Layret, the Concepció Church, Portal Nou, Provença, Moll d'Espanya, Casp, Exposició, Can Tunis, Sant Pau Hospital, Àngels, Carme, Paral·lel, Poble Sec, Ronda Universitat, Gran Via, Plaça Universitat, Plaça Catalunya and Passeig de la Rambla. Finally, at 22:17 seven Savoia S-81s belonging to squadrons 251 and 252 dropped twenty-eight 250-kilo bombs which targeted Carrers del Camp, Marimón, Sant Gervasi, Sant Mario, Muntaner and Sapion.⁴²

In the raid that took place at 14.14 on 17 March, a bomb scored a direct hit on a Republican army truck that was driving along the Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes on the corner with Carrer Balmes, just in front of the Coliseum. The 27 soldiers in the truck were killed outright, as were all the pedestrians nearby. Their remains were spread all over the streets. The New York Times reporter, Herbert L. Matthews, reported the incident as follows:

Almost all the windows from Passeig de Gràcia to Carrer Mallorca were blown in. A little closer to the point of the explosion, the streetlights had been torn out of the ground and the trees were splintered and ablaze. A full bus near the point of impact had been reduced to a shapeless mass of junk. All over the place there were slimy masses of blood that had once been human beings. A pall of smoke and dust hung in the air for hours as did the bitter smell of gunpowder and other chemical substances.⁴³

On 18 March, the first alarm sounded at 1.14 but there was no bombing. At 4.30, the third day of air raids on Barcelona began when three Savoia S-79s belonging to squadron 10 dropped twenty-four 100-kilo bombs and twelve incendiary devices on Carrers Rosal, Carretes, Font-rodona and Barbarà. At 7.00, the second raid began when three more Savoia S-79s dropped six 250-kilo bombs, twelve 100-kilo bombs and nine 20-kilo incendiary devices on Sant Martí and Sant Andreu. The third attack, at 9.30, was executed by three Savoia S-79s belonging to squadrons 18 and 52, which dropped the same bombs as in

42 CRAI-PR-UB-JDPC 17/03/1938; AAB, F-Aj. B., M101 JLDP /5767/ 2.2, 2.4 and 2.6; USAM-OMS 17, 18-7, 19-8, 54-16, 59-48, 62-62, 63-67, 63-71, 67-92, 74-26.

43 Reproduced by Jackson, G. *La Guerra Civil española. Antología de los principales cronistas de guerra americanos en España*. Barcelona: Icària; 1984.

the previous raid on the Barceloneta, (Gasòmetre) and Montgat, Ausiàs Marc, Marina, Estació del Nord, Poble Nou, Parc, Passeig Pujades and Diputació. At 13.11, there was a fourth raid involving three more Savoia S-79s, which dropped twelve 250-kilo bombs that targeted Carrers Paral·lel, Montjuic, Floridablanca, Urgell, Borrell and Poble Sec. At 15.00, the fifth and final raid was executed by three Savoia S-79s from squadron 18. This raid released a total of six 250-kilo bombs, twelve 100-kilo bombs and nine 20-kilo incendiary devices, which targeted the industrial zone of Besós and Sant Adrià.⁴⁴

The leaders of the various airstrikes targeting Barcelona during those three days of March were the following: on 16 March, Captain Gaspare de Cecco; on 17 March, Colonel Ernesto Rossanigo (*Righelli*), Major Mari Cesar Di Carlo and Captain Ernesto Balbo di Vinadio (*Boeri*); and on 18 March, Captain Gaspare de Cecco and the lieutenants Dulio Piacentini, Generoso Faralli, Fortunato Profumi (*Polimanti*), and Paolo Zanini (*Zerilli*).⁴⁵

In total, 51 planes from the Balearic Legionary Air Force were involved: 32 Savoia S.79s known as “Falchi delle Baleari” (Balearic falcons) or “Sparviere” (sparrow hawks), and 19 Savoia S-81s known as “Pipistrelli delle Baleari” (Balearic bats), which dropped 486 bombs with a total of 50,090 kilos of explosive, as much as had been dropped on the Catalan capital in the previous 11 months. The areas most affected by the bombings were between the Carrers Entença, Còrsega and Marina, as well as Sant Gervasi, la Sagrera and Montjuic. The 41 hours that the airstrike lasted was a period of uninterrupted fear, tension, anxiety and terror, which rendered all theories on attacks from the air obsolete (see table 1).⁴⁶

44 CRAI-PR-UB-JDPC 18/03/1938; AAB, F-Aj.B., M101 JLDP/5767/2.2, 2.4, 2.6; USAM-OMS 17, 18–7, 19–8, 54–16, 59–48, 62–62, 63–67, 63–71, 74–26.

45 This information was found in several files in the *Diarios Storicos* of the squadrons and the groups taking part in the USAM-OMS

46 Langdon-Davies, J. “Bombes sobre Barcelona”. In Langdon-Davies, J. *La Setmana Tràgica de 1937 i altres vivències*. Barcelona: Edicions 62; 1987. p. 167–174; Villarroya, J., Lo Cascio, P. and Olivera, S. *Tres dies de març. Imatges: 1936–1939: bombes sobre Barcelona*. Girona: El Punt; 2008; and Grassia, E. “Barcelona, 17 e 18 marzo 1938”. In *Diacronie. Studi di storia contemporanea*, 2011, 7 [http://www.studistorici.com/2011/071/29/grassia1_numero_7].

Table 1. Summary of the Barcelona bombings of 16, 17 and 18 March 1938

Times	16 March	22.08		
	17 March	00.04; 1.37; 7.40; 10.27; 13.57; 22.17		
	18 March	04.03; 7.00; 9.30; 13.11; 15.00		
16 March	1	5 Savoia S-81	5,000 kg	15x250 + 25x50
17 March	3	14 Savoia S-81s	16,250 kg	49x250 + 80x50
17 March	3	16 Savoia S-79s	14,560 kg	8x250 + 112x100 + 68x20
18 March	5	15 Savoia S-79s	14,280 kg	30x250 + 60x100 + 39x20
Total	12	51 planes	50,090 kg	486 bombs
		32 Savoia S-79s	102x250 kg	= 25,500 kg
		19 Savoia S-81s	172x100 kg	= 17,200 kg
			105x50 kg	= 5,250 kg
			107x20 kg	= 2,140 kg

Source: Drawn up by the author from the sources cited of the USAM OMS and AAB-M.101.

In the documentary *La ciutat foradada*, Teodor Garriga explains that the RAC radio station had a record that gave warning of an impending raid on one side and sounded the all clear on the other. Those in charge of putting the record on made a mistake in March 1938, which confused the population and increased the feeling of anxiety, chaos and panic.⁴⁷

The entries made by the Italian pilots in the squadrons' logbooks clearly show that the raids were specifically designed as a strategy of saturation bombing to demoralise the Republican rearguard: "Da due giorni dura il martellamento di questa città piena di obbiettivi militari. Di giorno e di notte l'Aviazione Legionaria sta rovesciando tonnellate di esplosivo sul principale centro nemico"; "Repitere ancora l'azione su Barcellona che nello spazio di 36 hores é stata sottoposta ad un vintina di bombardimenti nella speranza di una rivolta" always with the hope that "la popolazione è demoralizzata."⁴⁸

The final outcome was 979 fatalities, 1,500 wounded and 273 damaged buildings.⁴⁹ The Barcelona City Council made a public announcement stating

⁴⁷ DVD: *History Board. La ciutat foradada*. Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona; 2005.

⁴⁸ USAM-OMS, boxes 62 and 71.

⁴⁹ The mayor, Hilari Salvadó, claimed that during the three days of the bombing 875 people had been killed – 512 men, 245 women and 118 children – and that there were approximately 1,500 wounded (*Diari de Barcelona*, 21 March 1938). *La Vanguardia* of 21 March 1938 gave the figure of 873 dead (118 children). The Passive Defence Board of Barcelona reported that 192 bombs had been dropped, which killed 551 people and wounded 1,151, totally destroyed 76 buildings and partially destroyed 97, and damaged 273 (a total of 446); these figures are the same as the ones provided by the Catalan government on 26 March 1938. Villarroya, J. *Els bombardeigs ...*, first claims that 872 people were killed (including those who died in the days following the raids) and then, a few pages later, raises the figure to 979.

that, although the only objective of the airstrike had been to “demoralise the rearguard”, there was no reason for “the people’s enthusiasm to wane” and that the Council “was undertaking the work required for the city to be duly defended and to be able to thwart the cowardly system used by the nations who engage in what they refer to as total warfare.”⁵⁰

At first, at the international level, Count Ciano attempted to convince Perth, the English ambassador in Rome, that Franco had ordered the air raids but the truth is that Mussolini had given the orders to General Valle. In fact, as a result of international pressure, Franco asked Mussolini to stop the bombings which had initially been planned with no final date in mind. Ciano himself wrote: “Franco knew nothing about them [the bombings] and yesterday [18 March] he asked me to suspend operations because of complications from abroad.”⁵¹ The telegram sent by Franco to General Garda on 18 March and forwarded to Mussolini said: “Generalissimo ordina sospendere bombardamento Barcellona. Ho avvertito in proposito superiori autorità.”⁵² In fact, the British Government Code and Cipher School was able to crack the codes of the Italian communications, particularly those of the Regia Aeronautica, during the Spanish Civil War, so the British were fully aware of the details of the airstrikes on Barcelona by the Italian bombers from Palma de Mallorca (see Alberto Santoni).⁵³

Civilian eye-witness accounts

Many of the residents of Barcelona left accounts of the bloody Fascist bombings. On 17 March, Pilar Dosaigües wrote the following:

Last night, just after I had gone to bed, I was woken by the sirens, and the noise of the anti-aircraft guns and the bombs exploding. I got up when I heard Mary, Mummy and Tere shouting. I went out on to the balcony and saw that the market very near home was on fire. The rebel criminals (I have no other words for them) were dropping incendiary bombs. What a terrible fire! It lit up the whole of Barcelona. [...]. I went back to bed but could not sleep because

50 Reproduced by Aisa, F. *L'Ajuntament de Barcelona. República, guerra i revolució (1931–1939)*. Barcelona: Editorial Base. Ajuntament de Barcelona; 2009. p.506.

51 Ciano, G. *Diarios* p. 108–109.

52 Franco's telegram 080 *urgentissimo* to Mussolini forwarded by Garda to Mussolini on 18 March 1938: from Logroño to Palma at 21.00 (USAM-OMS, box 75).

53 Santoni, A. *Ultra Intelligence e macchine. Enigma nella guerra di Spagna 1936-1939*. Milan: Mursia; 2010. p. 165–166.

of the infernal noise of the bombs and the missiles. It was so loud and there were so many of them that I was deafened. The bombing started at half past ten and stopped at three or four o'clock in the morning, with some moments of respite, although the Germans [Italians] were soon back. The Spanish would be incapable of doing such a thing. They have got so much material and so many planes they want Catalonia to surrender first and then all Spain.

It was half past seven. I was still in bed when I heard the sirens and immediately some enormous explosions. I got up in a tremendous hurry, went out on to the balcony and, well, saw two large columns of fire and smoke in front of me. They had done a lot of damage again. Later, at just after ten, I was by myself doing some sewing on the machine when I heard some more explosions. I got up and saw the whole of Barcelona enveloped in smoke, houses in ruins and what looked like a road of very thick, black smoke. [...]. I was frightened. I was shocked to see everybody, young and old alike, running as fast as they could to get to the shelter where they all crammed in.

They were back again at two o'clock when we were just about to lay the table. First, we heard the sirens so we went out on to the balcony. Then we heard the planes and, immediately afterwards, right in front of our eyes we saw two great spouts of flame from the incendiary bombs. The cobblestones, the rooftops, everything was blown away by the immense bombs. We thought it was the end of the world. In the afternoon we didn't set foot out of the house. We just waited. It's horrible! Mummy is very down, everybody is crying, they feel bad, all with headaches. We just can't carry on like this.

We're waiting to see whether they will come back tonight and whether we will be alive tomorrow. Life is so uncertain at the moment.⁵⁴

Pilar's testimony is corroborated by Francisca Rius, also from Barcelona:

Last night we had three bombings and today four. Our city is a horrific sight.

This morning I was with Núria in the Concepció market when the enemy planes dropped a bomb on the bell tower of the Concepció church.

Schools have cancelled classes. It is said that there have been a thousand victims today.⁵⁵

The following day, 18 March, Rius wrote the following:

Nothing special has happened to bring the hunger of our household to an end. [...]. Now, when the sirens go off, we go to a very well-made shelter in Carrer Igualada. But, even so, things are worse than yesterday. The enemy

54 Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario...*, p. 174–175.

55 Rius, F. *Diari íntim. La vida quotidiana a la rereguarda*. Barcelona, 1938–1939. Barcelona: PAM; 2009. p. 39.

planes come and bomb us every three hours. In just 18 hours we have had seven high-intensity bombings. Today, at two o'clock in the afternoon, Uncle Rius was in a bank when they bombed the Plaça de Catalunya. Two bombs hit the bank and the street corner and the Hotel Colón was struck three times. The Barcelona and Novetats theatres were also destroyed. The Ronda de Sant Pere and the Ronda de la Universitat are a horrible sight but the stretch of the Gran Via between the Rambla la Catalunya is where the bombing has been worst. Everybody is in a real panic and a lot of families spend the night in the underground or go into the countryside. This is the heaviest bombing we have had to endure. The markets are not getting any supplies. Instead of vegetables I have had to buy some stuff that we used to give to the rabbits. Last night we slept in our clothes and we had our bags packed just in case we had to leave in a hurry.⁵⁶

And also on 18 March, Pilar Dosaigües wrote the following:

Last night those damned pirate planes with their constant bombing wouldn't let us sleep again. I was still in bed this morning when the sirens went off. The bombs started falling immediately afterwards [...]. At ten they were back again and I watched as they dropped their bombs and raised so much smoke that it covered the sky. Everybody ran to the shelter and stayed there. At half past one they came again [...]. At half past four, the sirens sounded the alarm once more. All in all, they don't want to leave us alone.⁵⁷

The next day she wrote:

Strangely enough, the rebels haven't come today. We got quite used to them coming every three hours. According to what Franco has said on Radio Salamanca, he wants to raze the city to the ground before Sunday and he is giving all the Catalans 48 hours to get out if they want to. A lot of people are going out into the country or back to their villages.⁵⁸

The writer Josep M. Folch i Torres visited Barcelona with his son on 31 March and he recorded this impression of the city for posterity:

Poor Barcelona! What a sight! [...]. Mountains of rubble. Whole houses are completely gone. Iron doors are blown in. Even today (after 17 and 18 March) they are still searching for bodies under the rubble. It's horrifying! [...]. Poor Barcelona! The people in the street are a sorry sight. The platforms of the

56 Rius, F. *Diari íntim...*, p. 39–40.

57 Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario...*, p. 175.

58 Dosaigües, P. *Querido Diario...*, p. 176.

underground station are full of endless rows of mattresses with sad women who spend hours sitting on the ground, looking sorrowful, so sorrowful, and thinking of their children and their country.⁵⁹

These eye-witness accounts reveal the harsh reality of life in Barcelona at that time. People were living in fear and aspired only to survive, permanently anxious for their family and friends, and for the immediate future. Olga Grinyó, another inhabitant of Barcelona, explains it in these words: “We had the feeling that we were completely defenceless, we had nothing to defend ourselves because the guns, the anti-aircraft guns, were working but were not bringing anything down. We didn’t know whether the planes were German or Italian. All we heard was rumours....”⁶⁰ And the newspaper *La Humanitat* claimed that “the whole world is horrified and repulsed by the criminal bombings carried out by the Italo-German air force on the cities of Catalonia.”⁶¹

Accounts from abroad

The bombings had enormous international repercussions. The European press reported and condemned the events in Barcelona. *The Times* denounced that the bombings “did not have military targets” but “were aimed at a part of the old city where the poor lived like rabbits in their burrows.”⁶² Even *L’Observatore Romano*, the mouthpiece of the Vatican, condemned the bombings and admonished Franco although, as it turned out, the people responsible for the bombings were in Rome, next door to the Vatican:

The number of victims has now gone up even more because of the recent bombings in Barcelona. These victims are innocent. The Holy See condemns the attacks and, faithful to its mission, continues to advise moderation and caution to bring the horrors of war to an end.⁶³

The indirect response from the Cardinal Primate Isidro Gomà, three months later, was the following:

59 Folch i Torres, J. M. “El llibre blau”, reproduced by Guillamón, J. *Patufet en Guerra. La il·lusió de la normalitat*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya; 2017. p.22.

60 Reproduced by Margarit, J. “Baixar al metro”. In *Estació de França*. Madrid: Hiperión; 2006.

61 *La Humanitat*, 22 March 1938.

62 *The Times*, 18 March 1938.

63 *L’Observatore Romano*, 24 March 1938.

Indeed, the war needs to be brought to an end. But it cannot end in compromise, in agreement or in reconciliation. The hostilities must be taken to the limit and victory must be claimed by force of arms. The Reds have to surrender because they have been defeated. War is the only possible way to peace. If peace is to be organised within a Christian constitution, all the putrefaction of lay legislation must be eradicated.⁶⁴

In Barcelona, the American ambassador said that the bombs “deliberately targeted the centre, the busiest and most densely populated part of the city, where the people were eating, strolling, resting on their beds” and that “when the attacks finished, nine-hundred men, women and children had been killed, many of them blown apart or disembowelled.” And he added, “white men have never been involved in anything like this on such a terrifying scale. The bombs had no military target.”⁶⁵ The United States Senate unanimously approved a text of protest condemning the airstrikes on the civilian population. And the Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, said:

On this occasion, when the loss non-combatant civilian human lives is perhaps higher than ever before, I believe that I speak on behalf of all Americans when I express my horror of all that has occurred in Barcelona and the sincere hope that in the future clusters of civil population will not be the target of military bombings from the air.⁶⁶

During his visit to Barcelona, the British commander, Noel de Putron MacRoberts, spoke of “massive terrorism from the air.”⁶⁷ The British journalist, John Langdon-Davies, author of *Air Raid* published the article “Bombs over Barcelona” in the English journal *The Listener* on 14 July 1938.⁶⁸ The French general Camille Rougeron, who studied the role played by aircraft in the Spanish Civil War, claimed that “although at first sight it does not seem to be a perfect example of the aerial warfare described by Douhet between great industrial nations – that is to say, a series of operations in which each side attempts to

64 Statement made in Budapest on 28 June 1938, reproduced by Sueiro, D. and Díaz Nosty, B. *Historia del franquismo*. Barcelona: Sarpe; 1986. Vol. I, p. 56.

65 MacRoberts, N. de P. A.R.P. *Lessons from Barcelona. Some hints for local authorities and for the private citizen*. London: Eyre & Spottiswode; 1938, reproduced by Poblet, F. *Els bombardeigs...* p. 43–45.

66 Reproduced by Poblet, F. *Els bombardeigs ...*, p. 43–45.

67 MacRoberts, N. de P. A.R.P. *Lessons from Barcelona. Some hints for local authorities and for the private citizen*. London: Eyre & Spottiswode; 1938.

68 Langdon-Davies, J. “Bombes sobre Barcelona”, p. 167-174; and *Air Raid. The technique of silent approach, high explosive panic*. London: George Routledge & Sons; 1938.

destroy the adversary's means of production – [...] it does, however, have all the necessary elements to be regarded as such.”⁶⁹

The German ambassador in Franco's Spain, Eberhard von Stoner, wrote the following from Salamanca:

Hundreds of houses and streets have been destroyed by the bombs [...]. So far there have been 1,000 deaths, but numerous corpses are believed to be under the rubble. There are more than three thousand wounded. Apparently a bomb killed a whole queue of women waiting to buy milk, and another scored a direct hit on the entrance to an underground station, killing all the people sheltering there.

And in a subsequent report he said:

I am convinced that after the war, in both Spain and abroad, the Italians and ourselves will be severely criticised, because it was not the Spanish aircraft that bombed their own cities but the allied aircraft of Italy and Germany.⁷⁰

In July 1938 the Universal Conference against the Bombing of Open Cities and for the Peace Campaign was held in Paris, where Jaume Miravittles, Commissioner for Propaganda of the Catalan Government, presented the film *Catalunya màrtir* by Laia Films.⁷¹ In his speech, the French writer André Maurois said: “I think that all violence exercised in times of war or revolution on non-combatants – the elderly, women, children – is a crime. It is also a mistake, because hate engenders hate. And the idea that terror can bring peace is as false as it is cruel.”⁷² But nothing changed: the Fascists carried on bombing the cities in the Republican rearguard and the democratic European powers continued not to support Spanish democracy.

69 Rougeron, C. *Les enseignements aériens en la Guerre d'Espagne*. Paris: Éditions Berger-Levrault; 1939, p. 141. See also, Launoy, C. *Les bombardements de Barcelone*. Brussels: Les Editions Action et Civilisation; 1938; and *Bombardements et agressions en Espagne: juillet 1936–juillet 1938*. Paris: Comité Mondial contre le Guerre et le Fascisme; 1938.

70 Reproduced by Bowen, W.H. *Spaniards and Nazi Germany: Collaboration in the New Order*. Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000; p. 45–46.

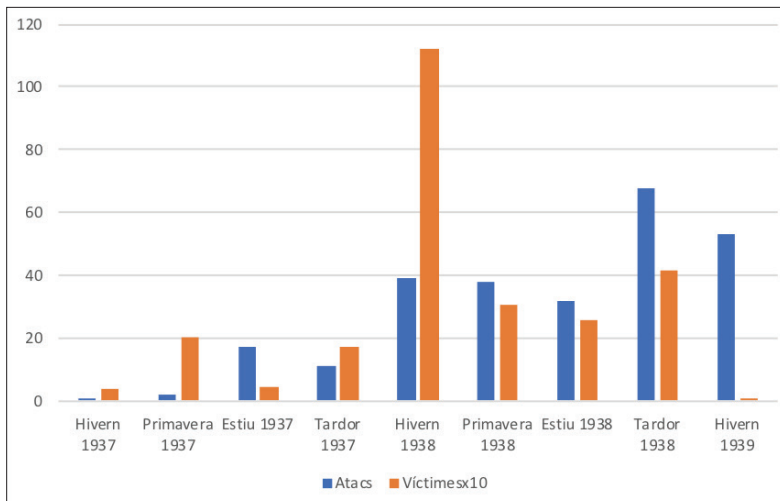
71 Jaume Miravittles i Navarra, J. *Els anys de joventut (1906–1939)*. Figueres: Ajuntament de Figueres i Diputació de Girona; 2016.

72 Reproduced by Poblet, F. *Els bombardeigs...*, p. 43–45.

The following days

One of the consequences of the three days of bombings in March was that the defence systems of Barcelona were reinforced. In terms of active defence, the number of anti-aircraft guns and fighters was increased so that the city could be better defended; and in terms of passive defence, the sections of the Passive Defence Office were strengthened and the construction of air-raid shelters was speeded up. The implementation of passive defence prevented thousands of deaths because, although the number of air raids and the amount of explosive dropped increased between winter 1938 and the end of the war, the number of fatalities decreased (see table 2).

Table 2. Bombings of the city of Barcelona and fatalities



Source: Drawn up by the author from the sources cited of the USAM OMS and AAB-M.101

All in all, it can be concluded that Barcelona put all its efforts into resisting the onslaught and not becoming a martyr to the systematic air raids by the Fascists, who were putting into practice the new theories on total war and strategic bombing. It was precisely the ability of the inhabitants of Barcelona to resist that the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, spoke of in a speech in the House of Commons on 18 June 1940: "I do not at all underrate the severity of the ordeal which lies before us, but I believe our countrymen will show themselves capable of standing up to it, like the brave men of Barcelona."⁷³

⁷³ Churchill, W. *La Segunda Guerra Mundial*. Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros; 2014.

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Destruction caused in the center of Barcelona by the bombings of March 16, 17 and 18, 1938.
(Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid)

CHAPTER 3

Dresden: 13, 14 and 15 February 1945

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Dresden after February 1945 bombings (Bundesarchiv).

The bombing of Dresden¹ on 13, 14 and 15 February 1945

On 13 February 1945, Shrove Tuesday, at 10.15 p.m., the first wave of Avro Lancaster heavy bombers of the Royal Air Force (RAF) accompanied by de Havilland Mosquito fighter bombers flew over the city of Dresden, the capital of Saxony, and dropped tons of high-explosive bombs – some of which weighed almost two tons – and thousands of incendiary devices of all sizes. First, an advance party consisting of a few Lancasters known as Pathfinders dropped flares, in the light of which the Mosquitoes, flying low, dropped their target indicators. They were immediately followed by the main bomber force, which released its load. After 25 minutes, the first wave withdrew leaving a considerable trail of destruction in its wake and thousands of fires. Three hours later, at 1.20 a.m. on 14 February, Ash Wednesday, a second wave of RAF planes, once again consisting of Lancasters accompanied by Mosquitoes, dropped yet another load of bombs. This time they flew largely blind thanks to the column of fire and smoke produced by the previous wave. A total of 772 Lancasters took part in the two waves and dropped 2,659.3 tons of bombs, of which 1,477.7 tons

¹ The lecture and the text that we present here are largely based on the extraordinary collective book edited by Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden*, which, over 10 years ago now, quite brilliantly focused on many of the topics and historical controversies surrounding the bombing of Dresden. Likewise, we have used the book by Taylor *Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945*, the basic bibliography on the Allied bombings of Germany and the memoirs of the events' protagonists. We have also had recourse to two archive sources: the documents United States Air Force Historical Division–Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden" 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>; and Tustin, J.P. "Headquarters US Air Forces in Europe. Why Dresden Was Bombed. A Review of Reasons and Reactions." 11 December 1954. Available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2013/May/23/2001329959/-1/-1/0/Dresden%20again.pdf>>; Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006; and Taylor, F. *Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945*. London: Bloomsbury; 2004.

were high explosives and 1,181.6 were incendiary devices.² The latter literally added fuel to the fires that had already broken out and in the Altstadt, the old quarter of the city of Dresden, created a devastating firestorm. That is to say, a fire that is sustained by oxygen being sucked into the spaces created by the flames caught in the updraft, feeding the combustion and creating such high temperatures that many civilians burned to death despite not coming into direct contact with the flames³ while others died from asphyxia after inhaling carbon anhydride. As Sönke Neitzel has explained, many of the people in the area of the city that was targeted were obliged to take refuge in the basements of their own homes, which is where they met their fate, because the city only had a few air-raid shelters – all reserved for the authorities – and it was the only option available to them. The only action that the local authorities had taken with respect to these impromptu shelters had been to ensure that they were all connected up⁴ so that the people could move from one to another if any particular building should collapse. However, after the doors and windows of the buildings had imploded, allowing the firestorm to penetrate the interior, this underground system allowed the carbon anhydride to flow freely through the passageways, poisoning all the people sheltering there.

Those who did manage to get out found themselves roasting in an open-air oven. In fact, many people who threw themselves into ponds or water tanks ended up being boiled alive while those who tried to run away were trapped in the asphalt that had turned into a sticky glue. When the sun rose on 14 February, its rays could not pierce the enormous column of smoke billowing above the city and which could be seen from over 100 kilometres away.

A few hours later, at 1.20 in the afternoon, after some of the city's firemen had been killed by the second British attack, a third wave approached the city. This time it was the United States Air Force (USAF) with their Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses. Their main target was the city's railway yard but the lack of visibility meant that they had to release their loads indiscriminately. And on the following day, 15 February 1945, there was yet another American incursion of B-17s. In all, 527 heavy bombers took part and in the second and third raids a

2 United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden". 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>.

3 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Cragg, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. pp. 74–75, 70.

4 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Cragg, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. pp. 74–75, 69.

further 1,247.6 tons of bombs – 953.3 tons of high explosives and 294.3 tons of incendiaries – were dropped on Dresden.⁵

The most recent official statistic, from 2010, sets the loss of human life at about 25,000. This figure coincides with the official, rigorously calculated, Nazi estimations of the time even though the Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels proffered estimations that were much higher. In the immediate aftermath, on 15 February, the local SS informed of 18,375 deaths, 2,212 serious injuries and 13,718 minor injuries. And the last official Nazi report known to be published before the fall of the regime gave a figure of 22,096 deaths. Dresden cemetery records 21,271 corpses, and a further 1,858 were found at various moments after the end of the war. It is unlikely that the figure of 25,000 will increase any more and, if it does, it will not increase by much.⁶ So the final death toll is a long way from the 250,000 that Goebbels insisted on making public, adding a 0 to the real figure as part of the propaganda campaign he launched in response to the raids. Even so, the figures of 250,000 and even 300,000 have become fully accepted in some historiography, as we shall see below. In his attempts at deception, Goebbels resorted first to the press of neutral countries such as Sweden and Switzerland, to whom he leaked his figures so as to ensure much wider circulation than if he had used the domestic press.

As Söre Neitzel states, the true figure of 25,000 deaths, out of a total population of 650,000 inhabitants, is particularly striking if it is compared with the casualties caused by other Allied bombings of more populated German cities, such as Berlin, located in the heart of industrial areas. But it is striking precisely because the figures in the other cities are considerably lower. This is probably due to the fact that they were well protected with radar, anti-aircraft artillery and squadrons of interception fighters. In the case of Berlin, the 19 major air strikes the city suffered between August 1943 and March 1944 caused 9,390 fatalities, and the massive bombing of Cologne in 1942 only 500. And in Essen, a city of 320,000 inhabitants in the industrial zone of the Ruhr, which had air-raid shelters for the population, the raid by 1,000 British aircraft on 11 March caused 482 deaths.⁷ On the other hand, the raid on Hamburg in

5 United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden, 1945". Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>. p. 8>.

6 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. pp. 74–75.

7 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 76.

July 1943, which created a firestorm that was bigger than the one in Dresden, caused 40,000 fatalities because there were no air-raid shelters for the general population.

The differences in terms of lethal impact on the bombed cities, then, seems to depend not only on the effective protection provided by networks of air-raid shelters for the population as a whole but also on effective anti-aircraft defences, prevention and warning systems, and an active response by the Luftwaffe. All of these features were present to a much greater extent in the major western cities and in the more industrialised areas of Germany than in the more eastern cities which, until the end of 1944 were thought to be safe from large-scale air attacks because of their distance from the Allied bases and because in the past they had only been subject to isolated raids. On top of this, in eastern Germany the lack of large-scale raids before the beginning of 1945 meant that many of the anti-aircraft guns located there had been sent to the Eastern Front to be used as anti-tank guns in an attempt to halt the advance of the Soviet forces in Poland. In fact, Dresden had never had more than 52 anti-aircraft batteries – a number that after 1942 was reduced quite considerably – as opposed to, for example, the 436 in Berlin.⁸

To sum up, the cities, towns, railways, synthetic fuel production plants and military industries throughout eastern Germany were highly vulnerable when the Allies decided to attack at the beginning of 1945. The extent of their vulnerability obviously depended on the information that their secret services were able to supply, which was often lacking, in the sense that it was insufficient. In this regard, Dresden was no exception. During the aerial offensive of the last four months of the war on German soil, the most extreme case of loss of human life was in Pforzheim, a small city in the south with an important precision machining industry: on 23 and 24 February 1945 it lost approximately one-third of its 65,000 inhabitants.⁹ Other bombings that caused a great loss of life with respect to the size of the towns were the raids in February on Kassel and Darmstadt, each of which suffered 10,000 fatalities. Dresden was important but, as can be seen, it was just one of many other similar cases.

As far as material damage was concerned, the bombing of the city destroyed 75,000 flats (a third of the total) as well as 85% of the old quarter or Altstadt,

8 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 67.

9 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 77.

although some suburbs were hardly touched. Many schools and hospitals were razed to the ground. It was a cultural and artistic city – known as the German Florence or Florence-on-the-Elbe – and of its 30 emblematic buildings two were completely obliterated (the *Frauenkirche* and the *Semperoper*) and 21 were damaged. A total of 136 of the 200 factories, including three belonging to the Zeiss-Ikon company, were totally devastated, as were the railway yards and the two stations, the communications centres and the transport centre for the whole area.¹⁰ The railway bridge over the River Elbe was also hit. However, rail communications were partly re-established shortly afterwards. Even so, the Allied raids on Dresden were a success in that they temporarily interrupted the full capacity to send men and material to the Eastern Front from the city or for rail transport to pass through it.¹¹ At the same time they aggravated the refugee situation, which had already got considerably worse in the previous months because thousands of people had arrived in the city fleeing from the Soviet advance. Thus, they made a further contribution to disrupting the economic and daily life of the city.

Dresden and the new Allied strategy of bombing Germany: January/February 1945¹²

The bombing of Dresden must be studied as an example of a new strategy of Allied airstrikes designed in the summer of 1944, but implemented at the end of January and during February 1945 in the middle of a wave of pessimism in the high command about the state of the land operations on the Western Front and the long-awaited end of the war in Germany. As Sebastian Cox explains the German offensive in the Ardennes and the subsequent battle (16 December 1944–25 January 1945) had put an end to the optimism that had prevailed up to that point and raised fears that the conflict on German soil would not

10 United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden". 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>; Tustin, J.P. "Headquarters US Air Forces in Europe. Why Dresden Was Bombed. A Review of Reasons and Reactions." 11 December 1954. Available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2013/May/23/2001329959/-1/-1/0/Dresden%20again.pdf>>.

11 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. pp. 57–58.

12 United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Volume 2A: Statistical Appendix to Over-All Report (European War), Chart 1 (<<http://www.wwiarchives.net/servlet/action/document/page/113/12/0>>); Richards, D. and Saunders, H.S.G. *The Royal Air Force 1939–45 (vol. III)*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office; 1954.

be over before the summer but would last throughout 1945. The difficulties encountered by the British and American forces in the north of France, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg highlighted the need to provide some sort of decisive assistance to the Soviets who were advancing on the Eastern Front.¹³ This meant that the aim of the aerial bombings was not only to destroy all communications in East Germany but also to continue with and step up the strategy of destroying industrial complexes – with particular focus on plants manufacturing synthetic fuels – and railways. In addition to this, the bombings were to target cities of all types in an attempt to increase the confusion and the number of refugees inside the country, and, therefore, weaken the country's resolve and ability to resist. The first idea was to launch an all-out attack on Berlin, with the alternative options of Dresden, Chemnitz and Leipzig.¹⁴

This new strategy involved a change in the doctrine advanced by the Americans since 1939 – and put into practice as soon as they entered the War in December 1941 – of focusing bombings on military targets, carrying them out with maximum precision and avoiding the indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations. This doctrine never changed but the practice did: now there was going to be greater flexibility in an attempt to bring the war to a quick end and prevent Allied casualties, which had been increasing at an alarming rate in previous months. On the other hand, the British doctrine – or rather, the actual approach to bombing adopted by the head of Bomber Command, General Sir Arthur T. Harris – had always been much more aggressive and had targeted not only rail yards and railways, factories and oil companies but also as many German cities as possible in the belief that this would make a decisive contribution to the end of resistance.

Generally speaking, by this stage of the War all restrictions on using tactics that involved civilian casualties had been abandoned and it was now accepted that all available means had to be used to bring the conflict to a speedy end and prevent Allied casualties. It should not be forgotten that only in February and March 1945 the Allies had had 96,000 casualties, while the Soviet casualties on the Eastern Front were much higher.¹⁵ Neither should it be forgotten that the

13 United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden". 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>.

14 Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How" In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 61.

15 Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 58–60.

atmospheric conditions in East Germany were hardly conducive to precision attacks, most of which had to be carried out at night because of the extent to which the bombers had to penetrate into the country.

According to Sebastian Cox, the origins of the new strategy can be traced back to a memorandum sent by Sir Charles Portal, chief of staff of the British air force, in August 1944, which proposed that Berlin, or another similar city, should be subject to a bombing of such enormous proportions that it would force the Germans to surrender. The plan eventually came to be known by the code word Thunderclap, but it was put to one side for four months because the Allies were making inroads on the Western Front and the end of the War seemed imminent. At the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, however, the situation changed. The Battle of the Bulge coincided with the increasingly frequent use of the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighter and the launching of V-2 missiles over England. This led to the period of pessimism already mentioned and the activation of Thunderclap, albeit with a different target: now the aim was not to make Germany surrender after an airstrike on a major city but to make it easier for the Soviets to advance on the Eastern Front.¹⁶ Thus, the focus of the massive bombings turned to eastern Germany and a massive bombing offensive was launched against synthetic fuel plants, military factories, railway lines and stations, communication centres and cities such as the capital of the Reich itself and Dresden, Leipzig and Chemnitz. Harris insisted that these last three cities should be included as options as well as other cities that had not been targeted to date. The new strategy also included targets that were not on German soil, but in Germany the aim was to prevent troops and supplies from reaching the Eastern Front and for the bombings to cause such a flow of refugees that the resulting chaos would be to the benefit of the Red Army.

The plan was accepted by the Allied high command and received the support of the British prime minister Sir Winston Churchill just when he was about to set off for the Yalta conference via the island of Malta.¹⁷ In Yalta, during the fourth of the three-party plenary sessions on 4 February 1945, the Soviet general Antonov asked for attacks to be made on East German rail centres in

¹⁶ Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 22.

¹⁷ United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden". 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>; Tustin, J.P. "Headquarters US Air Forces in Europe. Why Dresden Was Bombed. A Review of Reasons and Reactions". 11 December 1954. Available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2013/May/23/2001329959/-1/-1/0/Dresden%20again.pdf>>).

order to prevent German reinforcements from easily reaching positions in the north and the east, and in Poland. The idea met with the immediate approval of the Western allies, who had already discussed the issue. The Soviet demands coincided with British-United States plans so they went on to draw up a list of ten possible targets. Dresden was in second place, after Berlin.¹⁸

The joint Anglo-American air-force high command set to work at once. The reason they opted to attack Dresden on 13, 14 and 15 February was that the atmospheric conditions and night-time visibility were better. The attack was carried out in conjunction with an attack on the oil plant in Bohlen near Leipzig. Dresden was home to military factories and a major administrative and rail communication centre. The Allies ranked it as the twentieth most important city in terms of the support it gave to the war effort. We now know from German sources (from 1944) that its military importance was much greater than that. A total of 127 factories manufacturing military goods were located in the city, among which were the Zeiss-Ikon factories mentioned above.¹⁹ As we have pointed out, the bombing of the city aimed not only to destroy these factories but also to sow panic and chaos, demoralise the civilian population and hinder the transport of reinforcements to the Eastern Front.

Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that at the time the major effort of the Red Army on the Eastern Front was not focused on the region of Saxony, of which Dresden was the capital. Western Silesia was under attack, certainly, but fighting was fiercest further north in Posen/Poznan, a major communications centre, and in Pomerania. This, however, did not prevent the Russians from being interested in interrupting supplies and reinforcements to the whole of the Eastern Front.

The bombing of Dresden: only a minor controversy during the II World War

As Tami Davis Biddle states, unusually, the bombing of Dresden raised some controversy even at the time, although only on a minor scale and it was soon forgotten. Dresden, then, was unlike the massive air raids that were launched on Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne (not to mention the destruction of Tokyo

¹⁸ Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 29.

¹⁹ Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 54.

with incendiary bombs at the beginning of March 1945). In the days prior to the attacks on the capital of Saxony there had been differences of opinion – which had gone unnoticed by the general public – among the officers responsible for the bombing: the American general, James H. Doolittle, and the British general, Sir Arthur T. Harris. However, a press conference and its subsequent interpretation by an American journalist sparked the most important controversy of the time although, as we have said, it soon petered out. In fact, the news published immediately after the raids by the Allied press had not generated any controversy at all: the general public had been told of the British and American attacks on the city of Dresden because it was a major communications centre, home to factories that were fundamental to the war effort and key to the Russian offensive on the Eastern Front.²⁰ No attempts were made to conceal the destruction of many of the city's cultural treasures and the details were readily available in the press, particularly the *New York Times*.²¹ What is more, on 26 February *Newsweek* stated that Dresden, despite all its architectural beauty, had been attacked because of its strategic position, which “unfortunately, lay in the path of Marshal Ivan S. Koneff’s First Ukrainian Army”.²² But it was the press conference given by Air Commodore Grierson of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) that sparked the controversy. Grierson said that the objective of the Dresden bombing was the same as that of all other raids on towns and cities: they forced the Germans to find solutions to the problems of supplies, transportation of refugees and other issues, all of which contributed to the disruption of the economy. One of the journalists at the press conference, Howard Cowan from the news agency Associated Press, sent a report – which inexplicably managed to get past the censor – stating that the Allies had taken the decision, after long discussions, to carry out “deliberate terror bombings”²³ on German cities. Saying that Dresden was quite specifically targeted was not exactly true and neither was the use of the word “terror” but the journalist was correct about the major targets being communications centres and factories that were essential to the war effort. The report had also mentioned causing chaos in the rearguard with new masses of

20 Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 97.

21 *New York Times*, 16 February, 1945. p. 22.

22 *Newsweek*, 26 February, 1945, p. 37.

23 Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 106.

refugees and supply problems, all part of the strategic aim to assist the Soviet advance on Germany.

So, there had been a change – albeit not explicitly stated – in the intent to avoid mass harm to the civilian population, and this is what Cowan had picked up on. As we have already mentioned, this change in strategy had come about because of the predicament of the Allied armies on the Western Front and the desire to use whatever methods necessary to bring the conflict to a speedy end and prevent Allied casualties. By no means had they adopted a specific and explicit strategy of “deliberate terror bombing” but they had not discounted it either, as had just been witnessed by the destruction of much of Dresden, and as would be seen with the bombings that were still to come.

According to Tami Davis Biddle this first controversy sparked some debate in the American media – in the United Kingdom orders were issued not to discuss it – and the high command responded by confirming that the doctrine on airstrikes was still that which had been expressed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1939: the aim was to carry out precision bombings, not target the civilian population. They pointed out that the bombings of East Germany were targeting synthetic fuel production plants, factories that were key to the war effort and railroad centres, and that their main aim was to help the Soviets. As we have just seen, this was not entirely true and the American high command was approving and taking part in attacks that, despite being largely British initiatives, they accepted despite all the civilian deaths they involved.

In the following weeks the intensity of the bombings was scaled up. A policy of massive night strikes with incendiary bombs was implemented against Japan and, in Germany, Operation Clarion was initiated, the large-scale, general bombardment of railroad centres, ports and factories, which led to the destruction of many towns and cities that had been left untouched until then.²⁴

The only sign of public controversy in Great Britain at the time was the occasional question in Parliament. However, internally – and quite exceptionally – it was Prime Minister Churchill who, on 28 March 1945, made the first complaint about the events in Dresden. He wrote to those responsible for planning the raids, saying that perhaps it was time that the attacks on cities “simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts,

²⁴ Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 112.

should be reviewed.”²⁵ The commanders involved were outraged because they were still very aware of the pressure they had been put under by the Prime Minister before Yalta. What is more, they did not believe they were engaged in deliberately spreading terror; the campaign was more complex and had priority military objectives although these objectives necessarily had an impact on the German civilian population.

For their part, the Nazis successfully exploited the bombing to create controversy. As we have seen, they used the press of some neutral countries to publish highly exaggerated numbers of victims. They also used shortwave radio broadcasts, which could be listened to all over the world, accusing the Allies of acting like criminals and cowards for bombing Dresden and other German cities full of refugees. But quite unexpectedly the bombing of the capital of Saxony prompted various leading Nazis in Germany – for example, Dr Robert Ley, the head of the organisation *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy) – to publish articles claiming that the destruction of Dresden had released the country “from the burden of its freethinking, humanist past” so that now it could be reconstructed along the lines of Nazi ideology with no architectural reminders of the past.²⁶

The Dresden controversy and historical revisionism

According to Richard Overy the controversy surrounding Dresden in 1945 had little impact although in the 1960s it resurfaced with greater force and is still with us today. But in the early post-war period it disappeared from the public scene. It re-emerged in the United States in 1953 when a Republican representative for Illinois, Fred E. Busbey, claimed that the attack had caused 250,000 deaths and that it was an example of terror bombing. However, he had been influenced by the hysteria generated by McCarthy’s anti-Communist witch hunt in the middle of the Cold War (that is to say, in the confrontation between the former Allies of the II World War that had been going on since 1947-48). With his claims, Busbey was attempting to show that Dresden had been nothing more than a trick played by the USSR to deceive the high

25 Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 114.

26 Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 118–119.

command of the American air force.²⁷ The government responded by making public an official USAF report that denied that it had been a trick and refused to accept the figures put forward by the representative. It explained that Dresden had been bombed because it was a “primary communications and important industrial and manufacturing center.”²⁸

The bombing was also subject to interpretation by the Soviet bloc: some historians from the German Democratic Republic, for example, claimed that the objective of the raids on Dresden had been to destroy it so that it would be of no use to the Soviets once it had been occupied, United States capitalism would subsequently be in a position of greater strength and the Soviets – impressed by a show of force that was on a parallel with Hiroshima and Nagasaki – would feel obliged to their Western allies in the peace process, thus paving the way for the United States’ imperialist domination of the world. In fact, a tourist guide in Dresden at the end of 1070 claimed that the city had been destroyed because it had been assigned to the Soviet-occupied zone.²⁹

In the United Kingdom, however, more light was shed on the reasons underlying the raids on Dresden in 1961 when the official history of the British aerial bombing offensive was published.³⁰ This publication revealed details about the attitude of Churchill himself – who as we have seen was against the attack – and denied that the city had been attacked gratuitously and with no military objectives. In fact, it claimed that the raids had been designed to make a contribution to the Soviet war effort in the east of Germany and to ensure its economic defeat.

27 Overy, R. “The Post-War Debate”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 132.

28 Overy, R. “The Post-War Debate”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 129. See also the 1954 report, surely drafted for this reason, Tustin, J.P. “Headquarters US Air Forces in Europe. Why Dresden Was Bombed. A Review of Reasons and Reactions”. 11 December 1954. Available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2013/May/23/2001329959/1/-1/0/Dresden%20again.pdf>>).

29 Overy, R. “The Post-War Debate.” In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 134–135.

30 Webster, S. Ch. and Frankland, N. *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939–1945* (4 vols). London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office; 1961. See also Andrew Knapp, “The horror and the glory: Bomber Command in British memories since 1945”, *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*. Available at <<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/horror-and-glory-bomber-command-british-memories-1945>>, ISSN 1961-9898. Wilson, K. *Journey’s End. Bomber Command’s Battle from Arnhem to Dresden and Beyond*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 2010.

But the fact that Dresden was an uncomfortable issue can be seen in the reluctance of Churchill³¹ and the supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe, Dwight E. Eisenhower³² to discuss it in the memoirs they published in these years. General Harris did discuss the bombing in his own memoirs where he vehemently argued that the city was number 22 on the list of the top 100 cities to be bombed because of their military importance and that by the time the raids were carried out it “had become the main centre of communications on the southern half of the Eastern front As a large centre of war industry it was also of the highest importance.”³³

As Richard Overy explains, a major controversy broke out in 1963 when the non-academic English historian David Irving published the book *The Destruction of Dresden*³⁴ in which he described the bombing of the city as a deliberate massacre and set the number of deaths at between 100,000 and 250,000. Subsequently he settled on a more precise 135,000. At that time, books also came out in the two Germanies comparing the massacre of Dresden with the Nazi concentration camps. In fact, in 1991 Irving himself claimed that there had been five times more deaths in Dresden than in Auschwitz. This was the beginning of a line of interpretation that was soon picked up by others: the air raids perpetrated by the Allies had been an attempt at the genocide of the German people.

The bombing of Dresden also re-emerged as a matter of public debate thanks to the publication in the United States of the famous anti-war novel *Slaughterhouse Five*,³⁵ by Kurt Vonnegut, who had witnessed the bombing and taken part in excavating bodies from the rubble in Dresden as a prisoner of war captured in the Ardennes. The novel came out in 1969, when the Vietnam War was in full swing and it gave figures of casualties in Dresden that were far higher than the real ones.

In the following decade, and after the regulations on land warfare had been modified by the Hague Convention of 1977, an article by the Swedish expert on bombings, Hans Blix, revived the Dresden case and reproduced the figures given by Irving, pointing out that the raids had been more deadly than

31 Churchill, W. S. *The Second World War*. London: Cassell & Co. Ltd; 1948–54.

32 Eisenhower, D. E. *Crusade in Europe*. New York: Doubleday; 1948.

33 Harris, S. A. “Bomber Offensive”. London: Collins; 1947. Overy, R. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 128.

34 Irving, D. *The Destruction of Dresden*. London: William Kimber; 1963.

35 Vonnegut, K. *Slaughterhouse Five*. New York: Dell Publishing; 1969.

the atom bombs that had been dropped on Japan and comparable in terms of the excessive use of force with the raids on Hamburg and Tokyo.³⁶ These references and other subsequent ones tended not only to exaggerate the number of fatalities – it is quite common to read that there were between 250,000 and 300,000 – but also to make comments along the lines that, at the time of the bombing, the War had virtually been won so Dresden could by no means be regarded as a military target.

But in 1977 the German historian Götz Bergander³⁷ once again argued that it had been a military target after consulting the documentation on file in the archives of the German Democratic Republic. In his study, he stated that Dresden was a legitimate military target because of the importance of the factories based there and the fact that it was a major communications centre, although he also believed that the means used by the Allies to neutralise the city's threat had been exaggerated and ineffective.³⁸

In these years there was no let up in the publication of invented stories: for example, the alleged machine-gunning of a group of people by United States planes when they were taking shelter on the banks of the River Elbe between the waves of day-time bombings. Of course, these biased accounts – and particularly Irving's, which evolved to such an extent that he became a Holocaust denier and openly pro-Nazi – made no mention of the context of the first two months of 1945 nor of the Allies' tactical and strategic objectives in East Germany at a time of extreme pessimism among the High Command. The stories portrayed the Germans as victims, just as the Jews themselves had been, in an attempt to place the two opposing sides in the War on the same level. In some cases, it was claimed that the Third Reich was not responsible for the War.

These versions have been largely rejected by most German historians but they have been turned into arguments by the far right, which uses the inflated figures of casualties in Dresden to support the false idea that it was the worst massacre of the World War, much worse than the destruction caused by the atom bombs and with more victims than Auschwitz.

36 Overy, R. "The Post-War Debate". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 124.

37 Bergander, G. *Dresden in Luftkrieg*. Berlin: Medimops; 1977.

38 Overy, R. "The Post-War Debate". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 126.

In terms of historiography, in recent years books such as Frederick Taylor's *Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945* was published in 2004,³⁹ *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden*, edited by Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang, came out in 2006, and the report by the commission of historians who worked at the request of the mayor of Dresden was published in 2010. All these studies have put an end to the controversy, at least as far as the number of deaths is concerned (we have seen the importance that this figure has had): it was 25,000.⁴⁰ As Richard Overy says in one of them, what seems to be clear is that the indiscriminate bombings during the last stage of the War on German soil – one of which was Dresden – by no means decided how the War was to end. Neither were they a deliberate crime, but links in an inadequate and ineffective campaign which lowered the moral standards according to which the Allied hoped to conduct the War against the Nazis and the Japanese, who they were constantly accusing of barbaric behaviour.⁴¹

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Dresden is that, alongside other major events of the War, it was one of the reasons for the 1977 revision of the Geneva Conventions on the rules governing warfare, in particular the so-called Protocol I, which adds clarifications and new dispositions – articles 51 and 54 – which make indiscriminate attacks on the civil population and civilian targets illegal.

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³⁹ Taylor, F. *Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945*. London: Bloomsbury; 2004.

⁴⁰ Figure cited in *La Vanguardia*, 19 March 2010. It matches the United States report in 1945 drafted by the United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden. 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>.

⁴¹ Overy, R. "The Post-War Debate". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 126.

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United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Volume 2A: Statistical Appendix to Overall Report (European War), Chart 1 (<<http://www.wwiarchives.net/servlet/action/document/page/113/12/0>>);

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Press

New York Times, 16 February, 1945. p. 22.

Newsweek, 26 February, 1945, p. 37.



Dresden after February 1945 bombings (Bundesarchiv).

Sometimes tragedies that have little to distinguish them from a wide range of similar events and which can make no claim to record numbers of casualties or destructive impact go down in history as fundamental and emblematic. This is the case of two of the airstrikes discussed in this volume: Barcelona and Dresden. Other tragedies, however, are sometimes obscured by circumstances elsewhere. This is the case of the “other Guernicas”: that is to say, the bombings of Otxandio, Durango and Elorrio in Biscay. They are good examples not only of the brutality inherent in all wars and of how methods of combat become increasingly barbaric as conflicts wear on but also of the way in which some circumstances push events to the forefront of history and make them emblematic.