

Nazi and Allied bombing campaigns morally equivalent, according to Zinn

This is an excerpt from a [review](#) of Zinn's book by Stanford University Education Professor [Sam Wineburg](#):

In his lead-up to a discussion of the atomic bomb, Zinn makes this claim: "At the start of World War II German planes dropped bombs on Rotterdam in Holland, Coventry in England, and elsewhere. Roosevelt had described these as 'inhuman barbarism that has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity.'" ¹ Zinn then adds: "These German bombings [of Rotterdam and Coventry] were very small compared with the British and American bombings of German cities." ² He then lists the names of some of the most devastating Allied bombing campaigns, including the most notorious, the firebombing of Dresden.

In a technical sense, Zinn is on solid ground. In the bombing of Rotterdam on May 14, 1940, there was an estimated loss of a thousand lives, and in the bombing of Coventry on November 14, 1940, there were approximately 550 deaths. ³ In Dresden, by comparison, somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 people lost their lives. ⁴ Zinn's point is clear: before we wag an accusing finger at the Nazis, we should take a long hard look in the mirror.

But in order to make this point, Zinn plays fast and loose with historical context. He achieves his desired effect in two stages. First, he begins his claim with the phrase "at the start of World War II," but the Dresden raid occurred five years later, in February 1945, when all bets were off and long-standing distinctions between military targets ("strategically bombing") and civilian targets ("saturation bombing") had been rendered irrelevant. If the start of the war is the point of comparison, we should focus on the activities of the Royal Air Force (the United States did not declare war on Germany until December 11, 1941, four days after Pearl Harbor). During the early months of the war, the RAF Bomber Command was restricted to dropping propaganda leaflets over Germany and trying, ineffectually, to disable the German fleet docked at Wilhelmshaven, off Germany's northern coast. ⁵ In other words, despite the phrase "at the start of World War II," Zinn's point only derives its force by violating chronology and sequence.

A closer look at the claim shows a second mechanism at work, one even more slippery than this chronological bait and switch. The claim ultimately derives its power from a single source: the

¹ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; Reissue edition, Kindle, November 17, 2015), 9086. <http://a.co/aG5aBfX>

² Zinn, *A People's History*, 9087.

³ British National Archives, "Heroes & Villains: Winston Churchill and the Bombing of Dresden," <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/heroesvillains/g1/cs1/g1cs1s1a.htm>

⁴ Zinn lists the number of deaths at Dresden as "more than 100,000 (location 9093), citing David Irving's 1965 book, *The Destruction of Dresden*. With purposes that have become easier to discern with time, Irving credulously (or calculatingly) drew on mortality figures provided by the Nazis for propagandistic purposes. More recently, a commission of 13 prominent German historians led by Rolf-Dieter Müller, scientific director of the German Armed Forces Military History Research Institute in Potsdam, conducted an exhaustive examination of the city's birth records, comparing them to lists of refugees from the firebombing. The commission identified 18,000 victims of the raids, with "a maximum of 25,000," once and for all debunking the claims long favored by Nazi sympathizers who held up the Allies' bombing of Dresden as tantamount to Nazi atrocities at Auschwitz. See Rolf-Dieter Müller, cited in Bojan Pancevski, "Dresden Bombing Death Toll Lower Than Thought," *The Telegraph* (London), October 2, 2008. See also Rolf-Dieter Müller, Nicole Schonherr, and Thomas Widerra, eds., *Die Zerstörung Dresden* [The Destruction of Dresden] (Germany: V&R Unipress, 2010). On David Irving's mendacity, see Richard J. Evans, *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

⁵ Alan J. Levine, *The Strategic Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992). <http://a.co/3K9MFGY>

expected ignorance of the reader. People familiar with the chronology of World War II immediately sense a disjuncture between the phrase “at the start of World War II” and the date of the Coventry raid.

By the time the Luftwaffe's Stukas dive-bombed Coventry, Nazi pilots were seasoned veterans with hundreds of sorties under their belts. That's because the war had begun over a year earlier, on September 1, 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland.

Eight months before striking Rotterdam and fourteen months before bombing Coventry, the Nazis unleashed Operations Waserkante, the decimation of Warsaw. Never before in the history of warfare had such a massive force taken to the skies, an assault that made Rotterdam look like a walk in the park. In a single day, September 25, 1939 (“Black Monday”), the Luftwaffe flew 1,150 sorties over Warsaw, dropping 560 tons of high explosives and 72 tons of incendiary bombs with the singular goal of turning the city into an inferno. They succeeded. Smoke billowed 10,000 feet into the sky, and fires could be seen from as far as 70 miles away. When doomed Polish troops surrendered on September 27, more than half of Warsaw's buildings had been damaged or destroyed, a small number compared with the toll in human life. Forty thousand Poles perished in the attack.⁶

But the Nazis' aims went far beyond forcing a Polish surrender. Their explicit goal was to terrorize – a policy known as Schrecklichkeit (“frightfulness”). They outfitted their dive-bombers with screechers, swooping down with ear-piercing ferocity and strafing dazed refugees as they fled the blazing city. On the eve of the Polish assault, Hitler explained that war on Poland did not fit traditional categories such as reaching a certain destination or establishing a fixed line. The goal was the “elimination of living forces,” and Hitler told his commanders to wage war with the greatest brutality and without mercy.⁷ As General Max von Schenckendorff put it, “Germans are the masters and Poles are slaves.”⁸

Zinn is silent about Poland. Instead, he approvingly cites Simone Weil, the French philosopher and social activist. At a time when the Einsatzgruppen were herding Polish Jews into the forest and mowing them down before open pits, Weil compared the difference between Nazi fascism and the democratic principles of England and the United States to a mask hiding the true character of both. Once we see through this mask, Weil argued, we will understand that the enemy is not “the one facing us across the frontier or the battlelines, which is not so much our enemy as our brother's enemy,” but the “Apparatus,” the one “that calls itself our protector and makes us its slaves.” Zinn adds that the real struggle of World War II was not between nations, but rather that the “real war was inside each nation.”⁹ Given his stance, it's no wonder that Zinn chooses to being the war not in 1939, but a full year later.

⁶ Walter J. Boyne, *The Influence of Air Power upon History* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican, 2003), 198, <http://a.co/6xMB1GE>; and E. R. Hooton, *Phoenix Triumphant: The Rise and Rise of the Luftwaffe* (London: Arms and Armour, 1994), 188, <http://a.co/8eYJp0v>.

⁷ Alexander B. Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity* (Lawrence: University Press of Arkansas, 2003), 9, <http://a.co/dN1EXqh>. Rossino is citing from the Nuremberg war trials, *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals*, vol. 10 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1951), “Fuehrer's Speech to Commanders in Chief, 22 August 1939,” 698ff, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/NTs_war-criminals.html.

⁸ Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 141.

⁹ Zinn, *A People's History*, 9070.