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The Morality of
Obliteration Bombing

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THE MEANING OF OBLITERATION BOMBING

In general the term obliteration bombing is used as the opposite of precision bombing. In precision bombing very definite, limited targets, such as airfields, munitions factories, railroad bridges, etc. are picked out and aimed at. But in obliteration bombing, the target is not a well-defined military objective, as that term has been understood in the past. The target is a large area, for instance, a whole city, or all the built-up part of a city, or at least a very large section of the total built-up area, often including by design residential districts.

In the early days of the present war the British did not make use of obliteration bombing; the government insisted that only military objectives in the narrow sense were to be aimed at.¹ It was such insistence by the British government that led Canon E. J. Mahoney to justify the Catholic pilot or bombardier ordered by his commanding officers to drop bombs on Continental targets.² Churchill, on Jan. 27, 1940, had condemned Germany's policy of indiscriminate bombing as a "new and odious form of warfare."³ But with the appointment of Sir Arthur Travers Harris to the control of the Bomber Command, on March 3, 1942, the RAF changed its policy and took up obliteration bombing.⁴ According to *Time*, the men responsible for the new policy were Sir Arthur Harris, Chief of the RAF Bomber Command, and Major General Clarence Eaker, commander of the United States Eighth Air Force.⁵

The leaders in England acknowledged the new policy. Churchill no longer condemned this "odious form of warfare," and promised the House of Commons on June 2, 1942, that Germany was to be subjected to an "ordeal the like of which has never been experienced by any country." In July, 1943, he spoke of "the systematic shattering of German cities." On Sept. 21, 1943, he said in the House of Commons: "There are no sacrifices we will not make, no lengths in violence to which we will not go."⁶ Brendan Bracken, Minister of Information, speaking to the press in Quebec (August, 1943) echoed the leader, saying: "Our plans are to bomb, burn, and ruthlessly destroy in every way available to us the people responsible for creating the war."⁷ And when Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air, was asked in the House of Commons (March 31, 1943) whether on any occasion instructions had been given to British airmen to engage in area bombing rather than limit their attention to purely military targets, he replied: "The targets of Bomber Command are always military, but night bombing of military objectives necessarily involves bombing the area in which they are situated."⁸ Area bombing is another name for obliteration bombing.

Leaders in the United States have approved the bombings. President Roosevelt, replying through his secretary, Mr. Stephen Early, to protests against the bombing did not deny that area or obliteration bombing was the present policy, and defended the kind of bombing going on in Germany on the ground that it is shortening the war.⁹ A *New York Times* dispatch quotes Chief of Army Air Forces, General H. H. Arnold, as saying that the combined chiefs of staff at the Casablanca Conference had directed American and British Air Forces to destroy the German military, industrial, and economic systems and to undermine the morale of the people. General Arnold is quoted further:

I remember a day in the summer of 1941, the day a letter from President Roosevelt came to my desk, a letter written to the Secretary of War, asking us to determine what would be required to defeat Germany if we should become involved in the war. The plan drawn up by the air force in response to that letter is in substance the plan we are successfully carrying out right now. (May 23, 1944.)¹⁰

Because of our bombsight, most of the daytime precision work is assigned to American bombers, while the RAF does the obliteration by night.¹¹ But the whole strategic plan of wiping out the German cities is agreed on by the leaders of both countries, and the American Air Force on occasion acts interchangeably with the British in obliteration attacks.¹² Accordingly, the moral responsibility for the attacks is shared by both British and American leaders.

I have mentioned the "strategic plan of wiping out German cities"; for the bombing under discussion is strategic as distinct from tactical. The distinction between strategic and tactical operations is not always clear. Sometimes it is said that strategy is the plan of war, tactics the execution of the plan; or, strategy involves the planning and operations which prepare more remotely for the actual combat, the joining in battle. When the battle is joined the operations in support of it are tactical. Thus the bombing of Monte Cassino was clearly a tactical operation, in support of the infantry and artillery. The bombing of the installations along the coast of France on D-Day was clearly a tactical operation in support of the invasion battle. But the bombing of Berlin, Hamburg, and the other eighty-eight industrial centers marked for destruction is clearly a strategic operation. This paper deals only with strategic obliteration bombing. We have nothing to say about the use of tactical bombing as an immediate preparation for battle, or in support of a battle already in progress.¹³

The purpose of this strategic bombing is described by those in charge of it as follows: "The bombing of Germany that is now going on has two main objectives. One is, of course, the destruction of Germany's major industrial cities, with Berlin as the main target because it is the largest as well as the most important of those cities. The other main target is the fighter aircraft factories and all related factories. . . ." Thus [said] Sir Arthur Harris, the organizer and chief executive of the obliteration attack.¹⁴ Another purpose is the destruction of railroads and communications generally.¹⁵ And no secret is made of the direct intent to wipe out residential districts where workmen live with their wives and children, so that absenteeism will interfere with industrial production.¹⁶ The leaders have clearly declared their purpose to bomb very large sections of ninety German cities, with the direct intent of wiping out, if possible, not only the industrial but also the residential built-up

districts of these cities. In a speech made on November 6, 1943, Sir Arthur Harris said: "We propose entirely to emasculate every center of enemy production, forty of which are centers vital to [this] war effort and fifty that can be termed considerably important. We are well on the way to their destruction."¹⁷ And writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, April 16, 1944, the same leader declares: "There are only thirty industrial towns in Germany with a population over 200,000. . . . Of these thirty major cities there are now only five . . . which have not been seriously damaged. Twelve of them, not including Berlin, . . . now have had their capacity to produce destroyed." He also tells us: "Many cases involve destruction of about half the total built-up area in a city. . . . But many of these industrial towns which have been knocked out of the war are as much as two-thirds or three-quarters devastated." He calls it a "mass destruction of industrial cities."¹⁸

Charles J. V. Murphy assures us: "In recent months journalists have become aware of the 'blue-book' at Harris' headquarters. . . . In it are vertical maps of every one of the ninety industrial towns and cities of Germany which Harris has marked for 'emasulation'. . . . The industrial areas which include the built-up workers' districts are carefully marked off with a red line. As these are progressively disposed of they are 'blued' out."¹⁹ Murphy also tells us that "Harris' technique . . . is primarily based upon the 'de-housing' of the German worker." And Harris himself reminds us that "in a blitzed town there is at least much loss of production as a result of absenteeism because armament workers have lost their houses and all public transport services are disorganized."²⁰

It requires only a little imagination to picture the agonies which this obliteration bombing has inflicted on the civil populations. Since the bombs, including incendiaries, are aimed at whole areas, and aimed at residential districts on purpose, and over these districts are dropped blindly and indiscriminately, deaths of civilians, men, women, and children, have been very numerous. At times the bombs have been dropped through heavy banks of clouds so that the target (that is, the city) could not be seen at all. When the navigation instruments told them they were over the city, they dropped their enormous bomb loads.²¹ (According to a press report, the Allies dropped 147,000 tons of explosives on Europe during the month of May, 1944.)

The details of injuries and death to civilians and their property are described at great length by Vera Brittain in the article cited above. She quotes a member of the German Government Statistics Office in Berlin, that over a million German civilians were killed, or reported missing (believed killed) in air raids from the beginning of the war up to October 1, 1943. These figures cannot be verified, and some believe they are unreliable German propaganda.²² All we can say is that the loss of civilian life has been very great, and that in the interval since October 1, 1943, the combined air forces of Britain and the United States have done much more obliteration bombing than they did before that date. Compared with what we have done, the German blitz over England seems paltry. The words of John Gordon, editor of the *Sunday Express*, in which he welcomed the new policy of obliteration, have been literally fulfilled: "Germany, the originator of war by air terror, is now finding that terror recoiling on herself with an intensity that even Hitler in his most sadistic dreams never thought possible."²³ . . .

The following discussion of the morality of obliteration bombing does not depend altogether on the truth of the facts alleged by Vera Brittain. . . . I have given these facts and many more . . . in order that the phrase obliteration bombing might be given a definite meaning. That definite meaning (or definition) I couch in the following terms: *Obliteration bombing is the strategic bombing, by means of incendiaries and explosives, of industrial centers of population in which the target to be wiped out is not a definite factory, bridge, or similar object, but a large area of a whole city, comprising one-third to two-thirds of its whole built-up area, and including by design the residential districts of workingmen and their families.* If this kind of bombing is not taking place, so much the better. But we have such compelling reasons for thinking it does, that the following discussion of its morality is necessary.

THE MORAL PROBLEM RAISED BY OBLITERATION BOMBING

I do not intend to discuss here the question: Can any modern war be morally justified? The overwhelming majority of Catholic theologians would answer, I am sure, that there can

be a justifiable modern war. And the practically unanimous voice of American Catholicism, including that of the hierarchy, assures us that we are fighting a just war at present. I accept that position. Our question deals rather with the morality of a given means made use of in the prosecution of a war which itself is justified.

However, it cannot be denied that this question leads us close to the more general one as to the possibility of a just modern war; for obliteration bombing includes the bombing of civilians, and is a practice which can be called typical of "total" war. If it is a necessary part of total war, and if all modern war must be total, then a condemnation of obliteration bombing would logically lead to a condemnation of all modern war. With Father Ulpian Lopez, of the Gregorian University, I do not intend to go that far.²⁴ I believe that it is possible for modern war to be waged within the limits set by the laws of morality, and that the resort to obliteration bombing is not an essential part of it, even when war is waged against an enemy who has no scruples in the matter. But I call attention to the close connection between the two questions to show that I am not unaware of the implications. If anyone were to declare that modern war is necessarily total, and necessarily involves direct attack on the life of innocent civilians, and, therefore, that obliteration bombing is justified, my reply would be: So much the worse for modern war. If it necessarily includes such means, it is necessarily immoral itself.

The morality of obliteration bombing can be looked at from the point of view of the bombardier who asks in confession whether he may execute the orders of his military leaders, or it may be looked at from the viewpoint of the leaders who are responsible for the adoption of obliteration bombing as a recognized instrument of the general strategy of war. The present paper takes the latter viewpoint. It is not aimed at settling difficulties of the individual soldier's conscience.

Of course, there is an unavoidable logical connection between the morality of the whole plan and the morality of the act of the bombardier who executes the plan. If the plan is immoral, the execution of it is immoral. And nobody is allowed to execute orders to do something intrinsically wrong on the plea that he did it under orders. But when the priest in

the confessional is presented with a comparatively new problem like this one—a problem which may involve tremendous upheavals in the consciences of many individuals, and on which ecclesiastical authorities have not laid down definite norms—he will necessarily hesitate before refusing absolution. When he has, besides, a well-established rule based on the presumption which favors civil authorities, and which in ordinary cases justifies subordinates in carrying out orders, his hesitation will increase. I believe that as far as confessional practice is concerned, the rule I suggested in 1941 (before we entered the war) is a safe one: “The application of our moral principles to modern war leaves so much to be desired that we are not in a position to impose obligations on the conscience of the individual, whether he be a soldier with a bayonet, or a conscientious objector, *except in the cases where violation of natural law is clear.*”²⁵ A clear violation of natural law can be known to the ordinary individual soldier in a case of this kind through the definite pronouncement of the Church, or of the hierarchy, or even through a consensus of moral theologians over a period of time. On the question of obliteration bombing we have no such norms. The present article obviously does not supply the need. Hence, I believe the confessor is justified in absolving the bombardier who feels forced to carry out orders to take part in obliteration bombing, unless the penitent himself is convinced (as I am) of the immorality of the practice.

The present paper attempts to deal with the problem on a larger scale. The Popes have condemned as immoral some of the procedures of modern war, but they have abstained, as far as I know, from using terms which would put a clear, direct burden on the conscience of the individual subordinate in a new matter like the present one. Later on I shall attempt to show that obliteration bombing must be one of the procedures which Pius XII has condemned as immoral. But my viewpoint at present is that of one trying to solve the general moral problem, not of teaching confessors at what point they must draw the line and refuse absolution. Incidentally, I do not believe a discussion of probabilism, or of what is probably allowable in this matter of bombing, would be fruitful, once one takes the larger point of view. Probabilism is the necessary resort of those who cannot find the truth with certainty, and yet must act. In confessional practice one must rely on it

in some form or other. But to approach a major moral question probabilistically would be to confess at the start that the truth is unattainable. Such a state of mind would not be likely to contribute to the science of morality. My object is to make the small beginning of such a contribution.

The principal moral problem raised by obliteration bombing, then, is that of the rights of non-combatants to their lives in war time. Rights are protected by laws. The laws in question are the international law, the law of humanity, and the natural law. These distinct names are heard continually, especially in the documents of the present Pope.²⁶ But they do not always stand for distinct things. Sometimes international law coincides with and reinforces natural law, or the laws of humanity. And so of the others. The ideas often overlap. But, insofar as they are distinct from one another, that distinction may be briefly indicated and illustrated as follows.

The rights which are protected by mere international law, are derived from positive compacts or treaties between governments, binding in justice, but ceasing to bind when the other party to the contract has ceased to observe it. For instance, certain laws that deal in detail with the treatment to be accorded prisoners are in this category. (I do not mean to imply that a single breach of an international engagement, or of a part of one, by one of the governments immediately releases the other government from all its contractual obligations to the first.)

The laws of humanity are rather vague norms based on more or less universal feelings of what decency, or fair play, or an educated human sympathy demand, but not based on compacts, and not clearly—as to particulars at any rate—contained within the dictates of the natural law. And sometimes the laws of humanity mean the laws of Christian charity, made known to us through the Christian revelation and exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ. For instance, the use of poison gas, or the spreading of disease germs among enemy combatants, if not forbidden already by international law, would be forbidden at least by the laws of humanity. It is not so clear, though, that such methods of putting the enemy soldiers out of the fight would be against the natural law.

I say that this is an example of what is meant by the law of humanity, insofar as this law is distinct from natural or

international law. Actually, when the laws of humanity are mentioned, some precept of natural law is often involved. And it has been the task of international law, too, under the nourishing influence of the Christian religion, to protect the natural rights of combatants and non-combatants alike. International agreements have led to a clarification of natural precepts, and made certain what the laws of humanity would leave uncertain, and made definite and particular what the law of nature contained only in a general way. The widespread abandonment of international law which characterizes the conduct of total war, the retrogression towards barbarism in every direction, is one of the most frightening developments in modern times. It is a disease that can destroy civilization.²⁷

The present paper, though not excluding considerations based on international law and the law of humanity, will deal principally with the natural-law rights of non-combatants.²⁸ And our chief concern will be the right of the non-combatant to life and limb. His right not to have his property taken or destroyed (or his family torn asunder) is also pertinent, but will be mentioned only incidentally. Hence, we can put the moral problem raised by obliteration bombing in the form of the following questions, which the rest of the paper will try to answer:

- 1) Do the majority of civilians in a modern nation at war enjoy a natural-law right of immunity from violent repression?
- 2) Does obliteration bombing necessarily involve a violation of the rights of innocent civilians?

COMBATANTS AND NON-COMBATANTS

It is fundamental in the Catholic view that to take the life of an innocent person is always intrinsically wrong, that is, forbidden absolutely by natural law. Neither the state nor any private individual can thus dispose of the lives of the innocent. The killing of enemy soldiers in warfare was justified by older writers on the theory that they were not innocent but guilty. They were guilty of unjust aggression, or of a violation of rights which could be forcibly vindicated. The individual

enemy soldiers might be only materially guilty, but it was this guilt, and their immediate cooperation in violent unjust acts that made them legitimate objects of direct killing. As far as I know, this distinction between the innocent and guilty has never been abandoned by Catholic theologians. They still maintain that it is always intrinsically wrong to kill directly the innocent civilians of the enemy country.

But in the course of time the terms innocent and guilty have been replaced by the terms non-combatant and combatant, or by civilian and soldier.²⁹ And the definitions of these terms have been clarified by conventions of international law.³⁰ Writing in 1910 Mr. J. M. Spaight said:

The separation of armies and peaceful inhabitants into two distinct groups is perhaps the greatest triumph of international Law. Its effect in mitigating the evils of war has been incalculable. One must read the history of ancient wars, or savage wars of modern times—such as Chaka's campaigns, by which he made the Zulu name terrible throughout the northern Natal—to appreciate the immense gain to the world from the distinction between combatants and non-combatants.³¹

The contribution of international law has been to make precise the definition of combatant and non-combatant and to determine just who is a legitimate object of lethal attack and who is not. Thus the natural-law distinction between innocent and guilty received the sanction of explicit pacts. Furthermore, the term non-combatant included *all* who were not bearing arms, whether they were strictly "innocent" or not, and so the number of those who were immune from attack was increased. The present immunity from direct violence, which the entire civilian population enjoys (theoretically), is based partly on natural law and partly on international law.

I do not believe any Catholic theologian, in the face of papal and conciliar pronouncements, and the universal consensus of moralists for such a long time, would have the hardihood to state that innocent non-combatants can be put to death without violating natural law. I believe that there is unanimity in Catholic teaching on this point, and that even in the circumstances of a modern war every Catholic theologian would condemn as intrinsically immoral the direct killing of

End, East Boston, South Boston, Dorchester, Charlestown, Everett, Chelsea, Brighton, parts of Brookline, Cambridge, Hingham, Quincy, etc. Perhaps the number of munitions workers and "warlike" workers in these districts forms a higher percentage. It is impossible to find out. (Nor would the Germans bother to find out if they could take up obliteration bombing against us, as we have against them.) In any event, to say that two-thirds of the civil population liable to this kind of bombing is innocent is to make a conservative estimate. . . .

And lest anyone be surprised at this result, we should always remember that fifty per cent of the population throughout the United States is female, and about fifteen per cent are male children and old men. Facts and common sense tell us to guard carefully against the total-war fallacy that the whole nation is arrayed in arms against the whole enemy nation.

These figures are for typical centers of industry in the United States. What the figures would be in Germany no one can tell. But even in Germany in 1939 only about one-half of the total population was listed by the census as gainfully employed. And of these almost one-half were engaged in agriculture, trade, and domestic service. Allowing for higher percentages in the industrial centers (comparable to Boston), now that the war has been going on five years, we are still safe in estimating that the majority of the inhabitants even in the centers of war production marked for devastation and obliteration are innocent civilians.³⁸

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE DOUBLE EFFECT

And so the immorality of obliteration bombing, its violation of the rights of these innocent civilians to life, bodily integrity, and property would be crystal clear, and would not be subject to dispute, at least amongst Catholics, were it not for the appeal to the principle of the double effect. This principle can be worded as follows: The foreseen evil effect of a man's action is not morally imputable to him, provided that (1) the action in itself is directed immediately to some other result, (2) the evil effect is not willed either in itself or as a means to the other result, (3) the permitting of the evil effect is justified by reasons of proportionate weight.

Applying the principle to obliteration bombing, it would be argued: The bombing has a good effect, the destruction of

war industries, communications, and military installations, leading to the defeat of the enemy; it also has an evil effect, the injury and death of innocent civilians (and the destruction of their property). The damage to civilian life (and property) is not intentional; it is not a means to the production of the good effect, but is merely its incidental accompaniment. Furthermore, the slaughter, maiming, and destruction can be permitted because there are sufficiently weighty excusing causes, such as shortening the war, military necessity, saving our own soldiers' lives, etc. This viewpoint, therefore, would find a simple solution to the moral problem merely by advising the air strategist to let go his bombs, but withhold his intention. In what follows I shall attempt to show that this is an unwarranted application of the principle of the double effect.

The principle of the double effect, though basic in scientific Catholic morality, is not, however, a mathematical formula, nor an analytical principle. It is a practical formula which synthesizes an immense amount of moral experience, and serves as an efficient guide in countless perplexing cases. But just because it is called into play to solve the more difficult cases, it is liable to sophistical abuse. Some applications of it can only be called casuistical in the bad sense of that word.³⁹ It is a truism among moralists that, though the principle is clear in itself, its application requires "sound moral judgment." It seems to me that the following are the points which require a moral, rather than a mathematical or merely verbal, interpretation of the principle, when it is applied in practice.

First, when is it possible, psychologically and honestly, for one to avoid the direct willing of an evil effect immediately consequent upon one's action; or to put it another way, when can an action, estimated morally, be considered really twofold in its immediate efficiency? Secondly, when is the evil effect to be considered only incidental to the main result, and not a means made use of implicitly or explicitly to produce it? To arrive at a sound moral estimate in these matters, it is often helpful to consider the physical proximity of the good and evil effects, or the inevitable and immediate character of the evil effect in the physical order, to consider its extent or size by comparison with the good effect immediately produced, and to consider especially whether the evil effect *de facto* contributes to the ultimate good desired, even if not explicitly

willed as a means. And, of course, a careful estimate must be made of the proportionate excusing cause, in the light of all the circumstances that have a bearing on the case. Perhaps this is only saying that without common sense the principle of the double effect may lead to casuistical conclusions; but I believe I am saying more than that. I am pointing out that the principle is not an ultimate guide in difficult cases, because it is only a practical formula and has to be applied by a hand well practiced in moral principles and moral solutions.

THE QUESTION OF INTENTION

As to obliteration bombing, then, is it possible to employ this procedure without directly intending the damage to innocent civilians and their property? Obviously, the destruction of property is directly intended. The leaders acknowledge it as an objective. And on this score alone one could argue with reason against the morality of the practice. But since the property of civilians is not so absolutely immune as their persons and lives from direct attack in war time, I prefer to deal mainly with the latter.

Looking at obliteration bombing as it actually takes place, can we say that the maiming and death of hundreds of thousands of innocent persons, which are its immediate result, are not directly intended, but merely permitted? Is it possible psychologically and honestly for the leaders who have developed and ordered the employment of this strategy to say they do not intend any harm to innocent civilians? To many, I am sure, the distinction between the material fabric of a city, especially the densely populated residential areas, and the hundreds of thousands of human inhabitants of such areas, will seem very unreal and casuistical.⁴⁰ They will consider it merely playing with words to say that in dropping a bomb on a man's house, knowing he is there with his family, the intent is merely to destroy the house and interfere with enemy production (through absenteeism), while permitting the injury and death of the family.

Dr. John K. Ryan of Catholic University wrote on this point as follows (after the present war started, but before we entered it):

The actual physical situation in great modern cities is not such that they can be subjected to attack on the principle

that only industrial, military, administrative and traffic centers are being attacked directly, while the damage done to non-combatants is only incidental and not an object of direct volition. Modern cities are not as compact and fortresslike as were those of the past. Their residential sections are so extensive, so clearly defined, and so discernible, that it is for the most part idle to attempt to apply the principle of indirection to attacks on these districts. Thus to rain explosives and incendiary bombs upon the vast residential tracts of say, Chicago, or Brooklyn, the Bronx, and the suburbs of New York City, on the score that this is only incidental to attack on munition plants and administrative headquarters in other parts of the city, cannot stand the slightest critical examination either moral or logic, as an instance of the principle of the double effect. In such an argument is contained the explicit distinction between groups and sections that may be made the object of direct attack and other groups and sections that are immune from such attack. But incendiary and explosive bombs would hardly respect this distinction, for they destroy with equal impartiality either group. When an entire city is destroyed by such means the military objectives are destroyed indirectly and incidentally as parts of a great civil center, rather than vice versa. It is a case of the good effect coming along with, or better after and on account of the evil, instead of a case where the evil is incidental to the attainment of a good. . . . It is hardly correct to think and speak of the damage done to life and property in such situations as being 'incidental destruction.' Rather it is the realistic interpretation of this situation to hold that any good gained is incidental to the evil, and that the phrase 'wholesale destruction of property and civilian life' indicates the true relation between the good and evil effects involved. The evil effect is first, immediate and direct, while any military advantage comes through and after it in a secondary, derivative, and dependent way. As far as the principle of the double effect is concerned, an attack upon a large city with the weapons of modern warfare is the direct opposite of such an attack with the weapons of earlier days. . . . The general civil suffering from the immediate effects of total war cannot be justified on the score that it is indirect. Justification for the infliction of

such suffering must be sought by other means, and it is doubtful if even war-time propaganda can present the new warfare as other than it is—a direct and intended offensive against the non-combatant population of the nations at war, especially as concentrated in large numbers in the great capital and industrial cities.⁴¹

Obliteration bombing would come squarely under the condemnation of this argument.⁴² It is enough to recall that in a single raid on Cologne (according to Mr. J. M. Spaight, one of the most enthusiastic and articulate defenders of the bombing), 5000 acres of the built-up part of the city was wiped out.⁴³ That means a territory eight miles square. And the American Army Air Forces' official story of the first year of bombing says of Hamburg: "Well over 2200 British and American aircraft dropped more than 7000 tons of high explosive and incendiaries on a city the size of Detroit. To quote an official report: 'There is nothing in the world to which this concentrated devastation of Hamburg can be compared, for an inferno of this scale in a town of this size has never been experienced, hardly even imagined, before.'"⁴⁴ The total weight of the bombs dropped on Hamburg in seven days equaled the tonnage dropped on London during the whole of the 1940–1941 blitz.⁴⁵ Mr. Spaight informs us: "What the effect was may be inferred from the ejaculations of one German radio commentator (Dr. Carl Hofman): 'Terror . . . terror . . . terror . . . pure, naked, bloody terror.'"⁴⁶

More than nine square miles of Hamburg (77 per cent of its built-up area), including the largest workers' district in the city, were completely wiped out, according to British reports of the raids.⁴⁷ An RAF commentator said: "To all intents and purposes a city of 1,800,000 inhabitants lies in absolute ruins. . . . It is probably the most complete blotting-out of a city that ever happened."⁴⁸ This kind of thing is still going on. In July, 1944, General H. H. Arnold, commanding general of our Army Air Forces, announced that latest reports indicated that 40 to 50 per cent of the central portion of Berlin is "burned out. . . . Berlin is a ruined city." The bomber chief also stated that the Army Air Force plans to continue its air offensive against Germany, "burning out" its industries and war centers.⁴⁹

If these are the facts, what is to be said of the contention that the damage to civilian property and especially to civilian

life is only incidental? Is it psychologically and honestly possible for the air strategist in circumstances like these to let go his bombs, and withhold his intention as far as the innocent are concerned? I have grave doubts of the possibility.

But there is another reason for excluding the possibility of such merely indirect intent. At the Casablanca conference, the combined chiefs of staff ordered a joint British-United States air offensive to accomplish "the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system and *the undermining of the morale of the German people* to the point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened."⁵⁰ *Target: Germany*, an official publication of the air forces, tells us that "the two bomber commands lost no time in setting about the job. To the RAF fell the task of destroying Germany's great cities, of silencing the iron heart-beat of the Ruhr, of *dispossessing the working population, of breaking the morale of the people*. The mission of VIII Bomber Command was the destruction of the key industries by which the German military machine was sustained."⁵¹ This same authoritative publication (presented with a foreword by General Arnold himself) makes it clear that the terrorization of civilians is part of our bombing strategy. "Bombs behind the fighting fronts may rob armies of their vital supplies and make war so terrible that civilian populations will refuse to support the armed forces in the field. . . . *The physical attrition of warfare is no longer limited to the fighting forces*. Heretofore the home front has remained relatively secure; armies fought, civil populations worked and waited. This conflict's early air attacks were the first portents of a changing order." And after saying that we now follow the "bloody instructions" given us by the Nazis, and after describing the destruction of Hamburg and other industrial cities, this official account says: "Here, then, we have *terror and devastation* carried to the core of a warring nation."⁵²

Now I contend that it is impossible to make civilian terrorization, or the undermining of civilian morale, an object of bombing without having a direct intent to injure and kill civilians. The principal cause of civilian terror, the principal cause of the loss of morale, is the danger to life and limb which accompanies the raids. If one intends the end, terror, one cannot escape intending the principal means of obtaining that end, namely, the injury and death of civilians.

Both from the nature of the obliteration operation itself,⁵³ then, and from the professed objective of undermining morale, I conclude that it is impossible to adopt this strategy without having the direct intent of violating the rights of innocent civilians. This intent is, of course, gravely immoral.

On the question of direct intent it is well to remember, too, that it would be altogether naive to suppose that our military and political leaders were thinking in terms of a distinction between direct and indirect. Without impeaching their moral characters in the least, it is only common sense to recognize that their practical guiding norms in a matter of this kind are military necessity and political expediency. This is not to deny that they have consciences and follow them, but it is to doubt whether their consciences are sufficiently delicate to give them any trouble when this type of decision has to be made. When our forces bombed Rome, the officials took extreme care to hit only military objectives. And they took even greater care to broadcast the precautions they had taken, and to get statements from Catholic pilots defending the operation. Now if this solicitude had been due to a sincere regard for the morality of aiming at non-military targets, or for the necessity of avoiding direct intentional injury of the innocent, they would exercise the same care in every city they bombed, or at least in every comparable case. But I do not think it is cynical to believe that they were more interested in religious *feelings* and world reaction than they were in the morality of killing the innocent whether directly or indirectly, and of destroying non-military property. The present bombing of Germany confirms this view. From the moral point of view, the lives of the innocent inhabitants of Germany or any other country are far more precious than the religious monuments of Rome, or the real estate of the Holy Father. But we hear nothing of a week's preliminary briefing to insure the safety of non-military targets in Berlin. We hear just the opposite. We hear the word obliterate.

Furthermore, we continually hear the argument: "They did it first," as a justification of our bombing of Germany. The argument is that since the Germans have attacked our innocent civilian populations on purpose, we can do the same thing to them.⁵⁴ Mr. Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, who has interested himself in the subject of obliteration bombing, apparently believes that any proce-

sure whatever, no matter how brutal, is moral and legitimate for us to adopt once the enemy adopts it: "Once the enemy starts it [poison gas, and even, it seems, indiscriminate bacteriological warfare] it becomes no longer a moral but a military question, no longer a matter of argument but a matter of action."⁵⁵ Mr. Churchill's appeal to the popular revenge motive has been public.⁵⁶ At the present time there are numerous calls for revenge of the robot bombing. An editorial in the *Boston Herald* asks: "Why not go all out on bombings? . . . *Why be nice about the undefended towns and cities?* . . . The time-honored system of tit for tat is the only one which Hitler and his Germans can understand."⁵⁷ The *New York Times* had an editorial along the same lines.⁵⁸ And in a letter to that paper one Carl Beck demands an ultimatum from the chiefs of the four United Nations, threatening Germany that "for every prisoner murdered we will take ten German lives, for all civilian mass murder we will take an equivalent number of Germans the minute we reach their soil—we ourselves will treat all prisoners according to civilized warfare."⁵⁹

Naturally one does not expect political leaders to assert definitely that they intend to kill women and children.⁶⁰ The feelings of the whole civilized world are so completely in accord with the traditional distinction between innocent and guilty, and such a very large number of people (with votes) everywhere consider themselves to be among the innocent, that it would probably be political suicide to announce explicitly such a policy; and even from the military point of view it would provide the enemy with priceless propaganda. Any attack on the innocent civil population will always be covered up by a euphemistic name, like "area" bombing, or simply written off under the general absolution of "military necessity." My point, therefore, is to indicate that we have good grounds for suspecting that the *de facto* intent of the air strategists is not governed by the morality of direct and indirect intent at all, and that it is naive and unrealistic to imagine them conforming themselves to the principle of the double effect on this score.

THE QUESTION OF A PROPORTIONATELY GRAVE CAUSE

But furthermore, the question of direct or indirect intent is not decisive in the application of the principle of the double

great sections of cities, including whole districts of workers' residences, means the abandonment of that distinction as an effective moral norm. When the innocent civil population can be wiped out on such a large scale very little is left practically of the rights of the innocent. Each new and more terrifying procedure, with more and more loss of innocent life, can always be defended as a mere extension of the principle, justified by the desperate military necessities of the case. The wiping out of whole cities is a reversion to barbarism as far as civilian rights are concerned. Already there is talk of using gas when we go into the Far East. The present demands of legislators, editors, and others for the indiscriminate bombing of *non-industrial* towns in Germany is a clear example of an inevitable tendency—once you get used to the idea of obliteration, and justify it.

This is another way of saying that the recognition of obliteration bombing will easily and quickly lead to the recognition of total war itself. Some may say, of course, that we recognize total war already and are waging it. But that would be a gross exaggeration. Dr. Guido Gonella tells us: "The totality of war is generally understood in a three-fold sense. It applies to the *persons* by whom and against whom warlike action is exercised, to the *means* which are employed in war, and to the *places* where warlike action takes place. (The term war-like action is taken in the broadest sense, including not only military action but also every form of manifestation of hostility, for example, by economic blockade, by the war of nerves etc. . . .)" And again: "If total war is defended as a war which is fought without regard to any limitations affecting persons, or means of warfare, or places," then it must be condemned as immoral.⁷⁵ All Catholics, following the lead of the Pope, the hierarchy, and firmly established moral principles, condemn total war in this, its fullest, sense. To say that war need know no restraint in these matters is equivalent to asserting that men at war are no longer bound by the natural law at all. And so the elimination of total war was one of the main objectives of the Holy Father's Christmas message of 1941.

I do not think any American or British statesman or leader believes we are waging, or should wage war in this utterly unrestrained and barbaric manner. But I do think the theory of total war, proclaimed unashamedly by some of our enemies, has made an impression on leaders and on the popular mind. The phrase has been tossed about like the phrase

"military necessity," and it becomes a cover-all to hide and excuse practices which would otherwise be readily recognized as immoral. The false notion that today whole peoples are waging war against whole peoples is insinuated or openly propagated, and the conclusion is drawn that whole peoples are legitimate objects of attack.⁷⁶

Now the air bombardment of civilian centers is a symbol of total war in its worst sense. It is the first thing that comes to mind when the phrase "total war" is heard. The air bombardment of great centers of population lets down the bars, and opens up enormous categories of persons, hitherto immune, against whom war-like action can now be taken; it changes the scene of war-like activity from the battlefield to the city, and not only to the war factories but to the residential districts of the workers; and it uses explosives and incendiaries to a hitherto unheard of degree, leaving only one more step to go to the use of poison gas or bacteriological war. This means that obliteration bombing has taken us a long step in the direction of immoral total war. To justify it, will, I believe, make it exceedingly difficult to draw the line at further barbarities in practice. If the leaders of the world were well educated in moral matters and conscientious in the application of Christian moral principles to the waging of war, the danger might not be so real. But half of them are not Christian at all and worship material force as an ultimate, while almost all of them are immersed in a completely secularized tradition. If *moralists* grant them the vast horrors of obliteration bombing, what will stop them from that point on? If one were merely applying the principle of the double effect to the act of an individual bombardier dropping a bomb, such considerations would not be very much to the point; but when the question is the whole strategy of obliteration, these larger considerations, the thought of future consequences for the whole civilized world, are the most important elements to be remembered in estimating proportionate cause. . . .

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this paper can be stated briefly. Obliteration bombing, as defined, is an immoral attack on the rights of

the innocent. It includes a direct intent to do them injury. Even if this were not true, it would still be immoral, because no proportionate cause could justify the evil done; and to make it legitimate would soon lead the world to the immoral barbarity of total war. . . .

NOTES

1. J. M. Spaight, *Bombing Vindicated* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944), p. 67; also Vera Brittain, "Massacre by Bombing," *Fellowship*, X (March, 1944), 51.
2. E. J. Mahoney, "Reprisals," *Clergy Review*, XIX (Dec., 1940), 471.
3. Vera Brittain, *loc. cit.*
4. Vera Brittain, *loc. cit.*; J. M. Spaight, *loc. cit.*; Charles J. V. Murphy, "The Airmen and the Invasion," *Life*, XVI (Apr. 10, 1944), 95.
5. "Highroad to Hell," *Time*, July 7, 1943.
6. A week or two later, Mr. Churchill, in a message to Bomber Command, described the process as "beating the life out of Germany." Also on Sept. 21, 1943, he told the House of Commons: "The almost total systematic destruction of many of the centers of German war effort continues on a greater scale and at a greater pace. The havoc wrought is indescribable and the effect upon the German war production in all its forms . . . is matched by that wrought upon the life and economy of the whole of that guilty organization . . ." (Vera Brittain, *op. cit.*, p. 52); cf. also Charles J. V. Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
7. Vera Brittain, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
8. *Loc. cit.*
9. *New York Herald Tribune*, Apr. 26, 1944; Vera Brittain's reply to President Roosevelt, "Not Made in Germany," appears in *Fellowship*, X (June, 1944), 106.
10. May 23, 1944.
11. Sir Arthur Travers Harris, "The Score," *New York Times Magazine*, Apr. 16, 1944, p. 35; cf. also *Target: Germany*, The Army Air Force's Official Story of the VIII Bomber Command's First Year over Europe (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943), pp. 19-20.
12. *Target: Germany, loc. cit.*
13. J. M. Spaight, *Bombing Vindicated*, pp. 24 ff.
14. "The Score," *op. cit.*, p. 35.
15. *Target: Germany*, pp. 19, 115.
16. Charles J. V. Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

17. Vera Brittain, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
18. Harris, "The Score," *op. cit.*, p. 36.
19. Charles J. V. Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
22. But Vera Brittain, in "Not Made in Germany," *Fellowship*, X (June, 1944), 107, maintains the reliability of her figures against criticism by Shirer.
23. Vera Brittain, "Massacre by Bombing," p. 52.
24. "Los inocentes y la guerra," *Razon y Fe*, CXXVIII (Sept.-Oct., 1943), 183.
25. "Current Moral Theology," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, II (Dec., 1941), 556.
26. Cf. *Principles for Peace* (Washington: N.C.W.C., 1943), *passim*.
27. On this point Guido Gonella writes eloquently in *A World to Reconstruct* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1944), Chap. XII.
28. Discussion of the morality of obliteration bombing became widespread in this country with the publication of Vera Brittain's "Massacre by Bombing" in *Fellowship*, X (March, 1944), 50. The article consisted of extracts from a book which appeared in England under the title, *Seed of Chaos*. A similar but much briefer article by R. Alfred Hassler, "Slaughter of the Innocent," had appeared in *Fellowship*, Febr., 1944. The reception accorded Vera Brittain's sober recital of facts, and moral arguments, is described by James M. Gillis in "Editorial Comment," *Catholic World*, CLIX (May, 1944), 97, who believes that obliteration, on Catholic principles, is clearly immoral. But both the facts and the moral *status quaestionis* of Miss Brittain's article were almost universally ignored or misrepresented by the press. There was an almost complete evasion of the moral issues involved. Even the President's reply, made through Mr. Early, is well characterized by the author herself as "irrelevant, unjustified, and destructive of the very ideals with which the American people went to war" ("Not Made in Germany," *Fellowship*, X, June, 1944, 106). Other discussions of her article, or of the subject of obliteration bombing from the moral point of view: *Saturday Review of Literature*, X (June, 1944), 106; *Christian Century*, March 15, 1944; March 22, 1944; *The Nation*, March 18, 1944; *Newsweek*, March 20, 1944; Nicholson, "Bombing Civilian Centres," *Spectator*, June 4, 1943; W. Johnstone, "Obliteration Bombing," *Spectator*, Sept. 24, 1943; *Commonweal*, March 17, 1944; March 31, 1944 (flatly condemning obliteration bombing as murder); *America*, May 27, 1944 (urging precautions but abstaining from judgment); Thos. H. Moore, S.J., "Obliteration Bombing," *The Founder* (239 Fingerboard Road, Staten Island, N. Y.), April, 1944; *The London Tablet*, May 20, 1944; *The Labor Leader* (New York), Apr. 30, 1944.