

## From Guernica to Aleppo: the Price of Civilian Bombing in the Spanish Civil War

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Prior to the 18th century in Europe, unless they were in the path of an army, civilians played a minimal role in war. However, the advent of nationalist movements and increasing logistical and manpower demands made civilian support during wartime indispensable to modern armies. By the start of World War I, technological advances and the growing importance of military manufacturing led countries to adopt the ideology of total war, devoting all domestic resources to the war effort. Civilian workers, their cities, and their industries thereby became more essential to their countries than ever before and as a result, combatants came to regard them as legitimate military targets.<sup>1</sup> The Spanish Civil War, waged from 1936 to 1939 between the supporters of the republican government and the rebellious nationalists led by Francisco Franco, witnessed the introduction of a new kind of warfare that recognized the growing value of civilians: Franco and his German and Italian allies attempted to break the spirit of Loyalist noncombatant populations and impair their contributions to the war effort through indiscriminate bombing of urban centers. Though it resulted in devastating physical and mental damage to the Spanish population, the deliberate bombing of civilians and cities in the Spanish Civil War was ultimately an ineffective military strategy because the aerial attacks inflamed rather than broke enemy morale and provoked widespread global revulsion against the aggressors.

The ideology of total war and the rapid advances in air power allowed armies to attack civilians and cities as well as military bases at long range and with ease. Communication, production,

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<sup>1</sup> K. V. R. T., "Aerial Warfare and International Law" *Virginia Law Review* 28, no. 4 (1942): 526, doi:10.2307/1068775.

and transportation centers, mainly found in cities, were all essential to an army's ability to fight, and civilian industrial and agricultural workers became valuable resources contributing to the war effort.<sup>2</sup> Relatively new aerial technology allowed air forces to bomb where they wanted but without the accuracy needed to hit specific buildings. In the Spanish Civil War, Franco and the air forces of his German and Italian allies began conducting air raids on Republican territories. They concentrated mainly on cities, such as Madrid and Barcelona, and centers of civilian or industrial support. News reports of the time identified the purpose of these raids as the destruction of the Republicans' economic and transportation systems.<sup>3</sup> Although these early tests were aimed at centers of communication and manufacturing, they were also conducted for the purpose of observing the effects of terror bombing on civilians.<sup>4</sup>

One of the first and most devastating instances of experimental aerial raids was the bombing of Guernica on April 26, 1937. The attack, carried out by the Condor Legion of the Luftwaffe under Colonel Wolfram von Richthofen, was deliberate and carefully orchestrated; over the course of three and a half hours, approximately 31 to 41 tons of bombs were dropped over Guernica, destroying practically all the physical structures—only five buildings in the town were left standing—and causing hundreds of civilian casualties.<sup>5</sup> The plan began with a small-scale bombing attack to arouse panic, followed by machine-gun strafing by fighter planes to force the population into the town center.<sup>6</sup> Guernica was then drenched in explosive and incendiary bombs in a second, large-scale

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Spanish Rebels Bomb City and Front Line", 1937; ALBA; 019; Box 3; Folder 26; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 421.

<sup>5</sup> Xabier Irujo Ametzaga, "The nature and rationale of the Gernika bombing," *The Volunteer*, December 19, 2013.; "The Destruction of Guernica" 1937; ALBA; 019; Box 3; Folder 26; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<sup>6</sup> Ametzaga, "The nature and rationale of the Gernika bombing."

attack that set all of the town aflame and left trapped civilians to die of incineration, asphyxiation, or be crushed under rubble.<sup>7</sup> The specific strafing technique utilized in Guernica, a mixture of saturation bombing and continuous shuttle bombing, was a plan of attack that the Luftwaffe was soon to implement elsewhere in Europe during World War II.<sup>8</sup> This points to the undeniable conclusion that the primary objective of the Guernica attack was to maximize civilian casualties as Germany prepared for the upcoming war. Even more damning is the fact that the 20 meter long Erreterria bridge—the supposed military target of the operation—was untouched after the hours of bombing.<sup>9</sup>

The Nationalist goal to terrorize civilian populations was ostensibly successful: the bombings ravaged the cities and caused severe psychological harm to their inhabitants. Descriptions of the siege of Madrid and its frequent air raids illustrate the terror the victims felt. Louis Delaprée, a French journalist, in a piece titled *Bombs Over Madrid*, called the bombs a “rain of killer meteorites” and described the sobbing women, children, and men “[seeking] refuge against the wrath from the sky.”<sup>10</sup> Psychologically, air raids ruined their victims, even if the bombs didn’t kill them. Slippery Sliwon, an American volunteer in the International Brigades, recounted in a letter an aerial attack on the city of Albacete and how children, including those who had experienced bombings before, panicked. He described the total fear felt by everyone in the city’s center, orphanage, and hospital and how he himself experienced a nervous breakdown.<sup>11</sup> Bombings destroyed civilians’ lives as no military method had ever before.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Delaprée, “Bombs Over Madrid,” *The Volunteer*, (November 23, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> “Letter from Slippery Sliwon to Samuel,” ALBA Resources, accessed May 15, 2018, <http://resources.alba-valb.org/primary-materials-letters-and-text/>.

Child victims of the war especially exemplify the trauma caused by aerial attacks. They were among the first groups of victims to receive international aid, and many were relocated out of Spain into either foster homes or children's colonies. Their reactions to bombing were studied closely and many received therapy to deal with their trauma.<sup>12</sup> Art therapy was first used during the Spanish Civil War in order to understand and alleviate the psychological effects of terror bombing. It remains today an effective method for helping children to cope with the horrors of war.<sup>13</sup> The drawings by Spanish children depicting striking images of swastika-tagged planes and falling bombs emphasized these new weapons' prominence in children's consciousness. In a 1938 introduction to a collection of these Spanish children's drawings, entitled *They Still Draw Pictures*, Aldous Huxley highlighted the destructive impact that the bomb and machine gun-laden planes of modern warfare had on children's sense of normality.<sup>14</sup> He called for an end to the extensive violence and sought increased international aid for the children. The therapies developed to deal with the mental effects of the war on children signified a growing awareness of the human tragedy resulting from what was becoming an increasingly common strategy in war.

However, the military objective of targeting civilians to break the enemy's morale backfired: the bombing instead incensed victims and strengthened their resolve to fight back. Following the bombing attacks during the siege of Madrid in late 1937, Americans in the city witnessed the reaction of the Spanish people and government to the destruction. Congressman Jerry J. O'Connell and President of the Workers Alliance Party David Lasser both noted in radio broadcasts the

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<sup>12</sup> "Children's Drawings of the Spanish Civil War," Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Spanish Civil War History and Education: The War in Spain, accessed May 13, 2018, <http://www.alba-valb.org/resources/lessons/they-still-draw-pictures-1/childrens-drawings-of-the-spanish-civil-war>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Aldous Huxley, *They Still Draw Pictures* (New York: Spanish Child Welfare Association of America for the American Friends Service Committee, 1938).

resilience of the Spanish people in the face of tragedy. O’Connell stated that the rebels were “badly mistaken” if they believed that their bombing had demoralized the city, and both he and Lasser recounted how Madrid’s day-to-day life had resumed quickly despite continued fighting.<sup>15</sup> Later, in March 1938, the American journalist Albert Rhys Williams observed similar resilience, adding that Madrilenos had only become more determined and driven in their opposition to attacks.<sup>16</sup> Even civilians who had previously not been involved in combat, including women and children, prepared barricades and makeshift weapons to resist the Nationalists, indicating that the bombing of civilians caused new combatants to join the fight.<sup>17</sup> The scientist J. B. S. Haldane described this occurrence and stated that, “these raids were defeated by a new phenomenon—mass heroism.”<sup>18</sup> At the time a correspondent for *The New York Times*, Ernest Hemingway described on May 23, 1937 how many Madrilenos became desensitized to the terror around them and fought back despite the constant threat of aerial bombs. He used his chauffeur Hipolito, who was unfazed by a shell hitting the street next to him, as the exemplar of this quality.<sup>19</sup> The Italian bombing of Barcelona had a similar effect, fortifying the resistance of the Republicans.<sup>20</sup>

Air raids on Republican cities by the Nationalists and their German and Italian allies during the Spanish Civil War also aroused public outrage across the world, strengthening popular hostility towards the fascist nations and the ideology itself. Mikhail Koltsov, a Russian correspondent for *Pravda*, noted the international attention on the attacks on Madrid and condemned the Germans,

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<sup>15</sup> Jerry J. O’Connell Address over Station EAR, October 22, 1937, ALBA, 019, Box 8, Folder 15, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.; David Lasser Address over EAR, October 13th, 1937, ALBA, 019, Box 8, Folder 15, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Rhys Williams Speech on Madrid, March 8, 1938, ALBA, 019, Box 8, Folder 15, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<sup>17</sup> Robert T. Elson, *Prelude to War* (Morristown, NJ: Time-Life Books, 1976), pg 171.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rhodes, *Hell and Good Company* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Hemingway, “Spanish Fatalism Typified by Driver,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1937.

<sup>20</sup> James S. Corum, “The Spanish Civil War: Lessons Learned and Not Learned by the Great Powers,” *The Journal of Military History* 62, no. 2 (1998): 321, accessed May 13, 2018, doi:10.2307/120719.

stating that “fascist murderers before the eyes of the whole world are destroying an enormous European capital city.”<sup>21</sup> After the attack on Guernica and during the siege of Madrid, images and stories of victims flooded American media: *Life* magazine published a photograph of a father carrying a boy out from rubble; the *New York Times* printed daily pieces on Guernica for a week after the attack; and magazines that had previously contained commercial aviation articles began publishing pieces describing the devastation that bombing caused.<sup>22</sup> Even President Roosevelt explicitly denounced the targeting of non-combatants in a 1937 speech: “civilians, including vast numbers of women and children, are being ruthlessly murdered with bombs from the air...cruelly sacrificed to a greed for power and supremacy which is devoid of all sense of justice.”<sup>23</sup> Implicit in Roosevelt’s denunciation was a condemnation of fascists for perpetrating this horror. This sentiment reflected widespread public opinion—Americans considered the air raids barbaric and blamed the perpetrators. The idea that innocent civilians were being slaughtered was shocking to these outside observers. Those who were not swayed to oppose Franco and his allies on an ideological basis were now compelled to by humanitarian obligation. Roosevelt’s speech, often called the “Quarantine Speech,” marked a slight shift in the American government’s position on foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> While not a direct request for intervention, Roosevelt’s speech did call for America and other world powers to uphold peace in the world, suggesting a gradual process of moving away from isolationism and neutrality largely based on the atrocities perpetrated by the fascist powers.

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<sup>21</sup> Rhodes, *Hell and Good Company*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> *LIFE Goes To War*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), 12-15; Herbert Rutledge Southworth, *Guernica! Guernica! A Study of Journalism, Diplomacy, Propaganda, and History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 186.; George E Hopkins, "Bombing and the American Conscience During World War II" *The Historian* 28, no. 3 (1966): 453. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24438615>.

<sup>23</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, "Quarantine Speech," ALBA Educational Resources, accessed May 14, 2018, <http://www.alba-valb.org/resources/lessons/the-spanish-civil-war-u.s.-foreign-policy-individual-conscience-between-the-world-wars/roosevelt2019s-201cquarantine-speech201d>.

<sup>24</sup> “The Neutrality Acts, 1930s,” Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/neutrality-acts>, accessed June 17, 2018.

Reactions to the bombing of children epitomized the growing antipathy towards the fascist nations and inspired international fundraising efforts on behalf of civilian bombing victims. Many of the most iconic and widespread images of the Spanish Civil War, such as Picasso's *Guernica*, depicted violence towards civilians and prominently featured dead or harmed children. A photograph of a dead girl positioned with planes behind her was published as a poster and widely reproduced in neutral countries.<sup>25</sup> Aiding the children traumatized by war soon became an international cause arousing support from a number of American, British and French organizations that helped to place orphaned or displaced children in foster homes or newly established children's colonies in France and Spain.<sup>26</sup> While some of these groups attempted to remain politically neutral, many garnered support by calling out the Fascist side in particular and blaming them for the harm done to the children.<sup>27</sup> Promotional information for one children's colony, Las Planas, stated that "what Fascist warfare has stolen from these children... the generous American people are endeavoring to replace," and emphasized the Americans' part in helping children.<sup>28</sup> While the media politicized the bombings and accused the perpetrators of war crimes, children were notably depoliticized and portrayed as innocent victims. This provided an accessible ideology-free motivation for people—and, in some cases, governments—to turn neutrality into action. The officially non-interventionist British government, following considerable public outcry at the cruelty in Guernica, took in almost 4,000 child refugees from the Basque region.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "Madrid: The military practice of the Rebels," 1937, Library of Congress, accessed May 14, 2018, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/spcw/item/99615791/>.

<sup>26</sup> "Caring in a Nightmare: The Children of Spain are Calling" by William Allen White, August 1938; ALBA; 019; Box 8; Folder 31; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<sup>27</sup> The Association to Save the Children of Spain Mission Statement, no date; ALBA; 019; Box 8; Folder 31; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<sup>28</sup> Las Planas Children's Colony Photographs, no date; ALBA; 019; Box 8; Folder 31; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<sup>29</sup> Rhodes, *Hell and Good Company*, 169-170.

As the Spanish Civil War wore on, this emerging humanitarian indignation and widespread anti-fascism soon translated into a desire for revenge against the Axis powers and a growing awareness that a new world war was likely unavoidable. Ironically, as the allies took up arms against the fascists, they soon came to believe that the bombing of cities and civilians was a necessary evil.<sup>30</sup> The constant exposure of the public to news stories of bombing atrocities in Europe and Asia simultaneously desensitized Americans to bombing atrocities in Europe and Asia and fuelled their hatred of the enemy.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, after 1939, retaliating in kind against Germany, Italy, and Japan seemed the only way to avenge the innocent civilian victims in Spain and China. In a letter to fellow Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans, American Manny Harriman echoed this sentiment, describing dropping bombs on Italy in 1944 as “the first installment in payment for Spain.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, by bombing Republican civilians in the Spanish Civil War, the Axis Powers indirectly armed their enemy with later justification for the same strategy, and paid the price in Berlin, Hamburg, and Dresden.

In addition to providing emotional fuel for allied retaliation, German bombing in the Spanish Civil War secured the place of civilian bombing in military strategy from the Second World War to the present day. International rules established before the Spanish Civil War to prevent the aerial bombing of civilians and cities have been widely disregarded ever since. When aerial technology was still limited, international bodies did attempt to agree upon rules to govern how bombing by air could be utilized in war. The Hague Convention of 1907 definitively and succinctly prohibited the air bombardment of undefended cities, towns, and residential areas, excluding only

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<sup>30</sup> Hopkins, "Bombing and the American Conscience During World War II," 458.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Manny Harriman, "Manny Harriman, Letter to the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (VALB)," ALBA Educational Resources, accessed May 14, 2018, <http://albavallbresources.omeka.net/exhibits/show/originswwii/harrimantovalb>.



military targets and war-related factories from this prohibition.<sup>33</sup> During World War I, the destructive potential of aerial bombardment had not yet been fully realized, but the threat of future technology was clear. Therefore, in 1922, a Commission of Jurists from major global powers, including the U.S., Britain, and Japan, drafted the Rules of Warfare for Aircraft, outlining specific bans on bombing any non-military objective or non-combatant population.<sup>34</sup> However, these rules were never widely ratified and were accepted only as guidelines by both the Allies and the Axis. Without agreed-upon legal barriers in place, the lack of official regulation allowed for civilian bombing to continue and grow.<sup>35</sup> Once it became a common strategy in the Spanish Civil War, not only did civilian bombing become normalized in the public consciousness, but there was little official interest in controlling its use in war.

Although the aerial raids on civilian targets had failed to break loyalist spirit in Spain, all the major powers bombed cities and civilians throughout the Second World War. In general, the strategy once again proved unsuccessful. Although officers in the American Army had recognized that the strategic bombing of non-military targets had been counterproductive in Spain, the aerial bombing of non-military targets in World War II was conducted on a larger and even more destructive scale than it had been in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>36</sup> In 1940 and 1941, throughout the London Blitz, the English carried on as usual and even boosted war production in spite of the constant air raids. In Germany, military production was almost unaffected by the extremely destructive attacks on the

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<sup>33</sup> Paul J. Goda, "The Protection of Civilians from Bombardment by Aircraft: The Ineffectiveness of the International Law of War," 1.1.1966, accessed April 30, 2018, 95.

<sup>34</sup> Richard H. Wyman, "The First Rules of Air Warfare," *Air University Review* (March-April 1984): 97.

<sup>35</sup> Goda, "The Protection of Civilians from Bombardment by Aircraft," 97.

<sup>36</sup> Corum, "The Spanish Civil War: Lessons Learned and Not Learned by the Great Powers," 321.

country's industrial centers.<sup>37</sup> In sum, the bombing throughout the war generally did not weaken the morale but in fact incited calls for revenge, from British during the Blitz and the Germans following the devastating firebombing of Dresden and Hamburg.<sup>38</sup>

The precedent set in the Spanish Civil War and World War II of area bombing as military practice has proven to have consequences in later conflicts as well. America's involvement in the Vietnam War exemplified both the persistence of the practice in warfare and its continued counterproductive nature. In 1965, the United States launched massive air raids on North Vietnam as part of the Rolling Thunder campaign, in order to force Hanoi to negotiate for peace.<sup>39</sup> Thousands were killed by napalm, white phosphorus, and cluster bombs, yet Rolling Thunder failed to turn the tide of the war or influence the United States' position in any significant way.<sup>40</sup> By the end of America's involvement in the war in 1973, the tonnage of the explosives used by the United States was three times the total tonnage of bombs dropped in World War II.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, a study of American aerial bombing in Vietnam concluded that the bombing of civilians actually shifted control of population and territory in favor of the Viet Cong insurgents by motivating civilians to fight for the insurgency.<sup>42</sup> American aerial attacks had even further repercussions in Cambodia; the bombing severely destabilized the region and allowed the Khmer Rouge to seize power. As was true in the

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<sup>37</sup> Review of *The Bombing War: Europe 1939-1945*, by Richard Overy, *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2013/09/21/a-costly-brutal-failure>; W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, (New York: Random House, 2003), 17.

<sup>38</sup> "Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe 1940-1945," Exeter Centre for the Study of War, State and Society, accessed June 17, 2018. <https://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/history/research/centres/warstateandsociety/projects/bombing/germany/>.

<sup>39</sup> "Vietnam: The Vietnam War," Mass Atrocity Endings, August 7, 2015, accessed June 18, 2018, <https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/vietnam-vietnam-war/>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1792—1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 1995), 225.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Adam Kocher, Thomas B. Pepinsky, and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 2 (2011): 201-18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23025046>.

Spanish Civil War and in World War II, the bombing of civilians and cities did little to help the cause of the aggressors. In the case of Vietnam, it even helped expand the anti-war movement in the United States itself.

Thus, strategic bombing was unsuccessful on two critical counts: the practice failed to achieve its primary purpose of incapacitating an enemy by systematically destroying its infrastructure and morale, and it backfired by inspiring civilian resistance and provoking global outrage. The bombing of cities and civilians, introduced by fascists in the 1930s during the Spanish Civil War, has had far reaching consequences for the entire world—targeting civilians has become a normal expectation in wartime, regardless of the lack of proven success. Indeed, the ongoing Syrian conflict exemplifies the permanence of this convention, as the Syrian government continues to launch air strikes on civilian targets in cities such as Aleppo. While the bombing of non-combatants has been ineffective in its goal of demoralizing an enemy population, it does provide the illusion of progress for the perpetrators, who are likely motivated in part by a desire for revenge. Attacking an enemy's civilians may satisfy this need for revenge and in turn can create the appearance of military success, but it blinds the attackers to the injustice, immorality, and likely failure of the strategy.

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