

The Great Tokyo Air Raid and the Bombing of Civilians in World War II 東京大空襲—「戦略爆撃」という狂気

The Asahi Shimbun Culture Research Center

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The Asahi Shimbun

The firebombing of Tokyo on the night of March 9-10, 1945 touched off the wave of firebombing that destroyed 64 Japanese cities and culminated in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been deeply engraved on the consciousness of humanity and commemorated in monuments, museums, films, novels and textbooks, the firebombing and napalming of civilians of many other Japanese and Asian cities has largely disappeared from consciousness, except for the victims. The bombing of March 9-10 took the lives of 100,000 Tokyoites and leveled sixteen square miles of the city in the most devastating raid in human history to that time . . . according to Japanese and US Strategic Bombing Survey figures, and may have taken the lives of many more. In recent years commemorative efforts have begun to remember the events and the victims, and lawsuits have been filed seeking damages for victims. The Asia-Pacific Journal

Wednesday marked the 65th anniversary of the Great Tokyo Air Raid that obliterated neighborhoods of eastern Tokyo and killed 100,000 people, mainly civilians.



B-29s drop firebombs and napalm on Tokyo

U.S. bombers staged the raid at night and dropped 300,000 incendiary bombs so as to cut off all escape routes. Updrafts from the firestorms caused one B-29 bomber weighing 60 tons to be thrust upward by 600 meters.



Tokyo March 10, 1945 after the firebombing

The March 10 raid represented a switch in U.S. strategy. Instead of bombing military targets on the Japanese mainland, U.S. forces set out to destroy entire cities. Two days after the Tokyo raid, U.S. bombers targeted Nagoya. Osaka was bombed the next day and Kobe four days later. The death toll from the raids is estimated in the range of 300,000.



Charred remains in Tokyo March 10, 1945.

Civilian deaths due to war surged in the 20th century. Strategic bombings were a primary cause.

But it was not a tactic developed by the United States. The bombing of Guernica in which 1,600 people were killed by German forces during the Spanish Civil War in 1937 is well documented.

Air raids on urban areas were carried out on an even greater scale by Japanese forces on the Chinese city of Chongqing during the second Sino-Japanese War. In the five years from 1938, more than 10,000 people were killed.

Later, tactics aimed at dampening the enemy's will became the hallmark of air raids on urban areas in World War II. London experienced the Blitz. The German city of Dresden was reduced to rubble. A huge number of victims resulted from those actions.

And just before the end of the war, U.S. forces dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The scenes of devastation were beyond description.

Chongqing was the provisional capital of the Kuomintang government. The horrors of the bombings were reported to the world by American journalists such as Edgar Snow (1905-1972). However, in postwar China, it was difficult for survivors to speak out and it was only during recent years that their voices have been heard.

Survivors of the air raids on Tokyo and Chongqing have each filed a group action lawsuit against the Japanese government. Chongqing is seeking a judgment on Japan's responsibility, while the Tokyo plaintiffs are taking issue with the government's decision to give up claims for damages from the United States.

Survivors in Tokyo are members of an aggressor nation from the viewpoint of Chongqing. Even so, they have managed to transcend their differences. Among their complaints is that no thorough study has been made of the damage that occurred.

Last year-end, the Tokyo District Court rejected claims for damages incurred by the Great Tokyo Air Raid. It said any settlement must be achieved through legislation. Referring to a survey of actual conditions, the ruling stated that the state has "a moral duty to keep alive the memories of damage caused by war to pass on to future generations."

The ruling carries weight.

With the advancement of precision-guided weapons in recent years, it has become possible to pinpoint attacks on targets in urban areas from far away.

Large nuclear arsenals still exist and there is growing danger of proliferation. The grotesque thinking that gave rise to strategic bombing has yet to become obsolete.

What happened in Tokyo 65 years ago? Who were the victims? Squarely looking at what happened should surely cause us to think about the issue of war and peace in this current age.

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See the special issue on The Firebombing of Tokyo: Views from the Ground edited by Bret Fisk and Cary Karacas [here](#).

See also Mark Selden, Bombs Bursting in Air: State and citizen responses to the US firebombing and Atomic bombing of Japan [here](#).