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Introduction: Perspectives on the Bombing of Civilians From World War II to the Present

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Dresden, February 1945

The articles included in this special issue on the bombing of civilians from World War II to the present represent a selection drawn from a December 2015 Paris workshop held on the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II. The workshop was organized by the Mass Violence & Resistance online journal (CERI-Sciences Po and the Center for History at Sciences Po) in partnership with the Asia-Pacific Journal and is being published simultaneously at both sites.

This bouquet of articles opens with Sheldon Garon's depiction of the transnational knowledge transfer of civil defense praxis from 1920 to 1945. The first aerial bombing occurred in 1911 in Libya. But it was the First World War which made clear its revolutionary potential. Garon offers a striking picture of the international exchanges in the realm of civil defense in the interwar years, even between countries already committed to hostile alliances, such as the United Kingdom and Germany. Japanese diplomats made use of access to British and German civil defense programs to improve Japan's defense. Britain, Germany and Japan all established wartime mass mobilization programs including mandatory enrollment in fire-fighting organizations and evacuation of children. Compulsory measures grew in all three countries during the Second World War as bombing intensified. There were nevertheless striking differences in German and Japanese approaches to civil defense. In Japan, Korean and Chinese forced laborers worked in mines and factories but were not mobilized for civil defense. By contrast, in Germany, slave laborers and concentration camp inmates were ordered into "dead zones" to remove corpses and rubble. It appears that the German icon of the "rubble women" actually refers to the post-war activity of women who removed the corpse-free debris.

Matthew Evangelista provides a grand tour d'horizon assessing the century of aerial bombing from the perspective of changing technologies including firebombing, nuclear bombing and drones on the one hand and international law and ethical, legal and political constraints on the bombing of civilians on the other. Noting that contemporary atomic weapons are one million times more powerful than the blockbuster bombs deployed in World War II, Evangelista focuses on the changing technologies and targeting by the United States as well as Russia, NATO, China, Israel and other nuclear powers since the 1940s in an

assessment of the contemporary risks of nuclear warfare. In particular he assesses changing approaches to targeting civilians from World War II through the Korean and Indochina Wars down to contemporary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the technological, ethical and legal constraints on the deployment of nuclear weapons since 1945. Looking at changing legal norms and technological changes such as the development of drone warfare as well as the narrowing of US definitions of civilians, he asks whether they have effectively constrained the United States and others from bombing civilians in the three quarters of a century since World War II. Likewise, he notes the failure of the nuclear powers to honor their agreement to reduce and ultimately eliminate nuclear weapons. Evangelista concludes that "even after a hundred years of evolution of technology and legal norms, civilians facing aerial bombardment and other forms of modern war cannot stake their survival on international law."

World War II marked the dramatic expansion of strategic bombing, initially led by Germany, Japan and Britain, but joined by the US in the final year of the war. The goal was to destroy enemy cities and their populations with bombs designed to kill thousands and destroy industry, and morale, forcing many to become refugees. Mark Selden and Marine Guillaume examine US bombing of civilians in World War II and its aftermath.

The United States criticized such bombing on the part of Germany and Japan, and into 1944 US strategic doctrine centered on the destruction of military targets such as arms factories, bridges, harbors and military bases. The invention of napalm and frustration with the limited results of tactical bombing led to a fundamental shift in the US targeting of civilians that would play out with devastating results in 1944-45. The U.S. decision to join Britain in the bombing of Dresden in February 1945 was followed almost immediately by the firebombing of 64 Japanese cities beginning with the destruction of seventeen square miles of Tokyo on the night of March 9-10. Despite the massive destruction of Japanese cities by firebombing and napalm, that experience has been virtually eradicated from US (and even Japanese) war memory by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that followed. The efficacy of bombing cities would not, however, be forgotten by military planners. As Selden notes, the firebombing and napalming of cities targeting their civilian population and sowing terror would pave the way, with modifications, for American strategies in Korea, Vietnam, and in subsequent American wars.

Focusing on the US use of napalm in bombing of city and countryside between World War II and the Indochina Wars, Marine Guillaume shows that the new weapon was "at the core of a shift in the doctrine and practice of American strategic bombing." In contrast to the lack of US popular response to the firebombing of Japanese cities earlier, the use of napalm would become a source of controversy during the Vietnam War that would discredit both the weapon and US targeting of civilians in public opinion. The result was that many in the military concluded that it was even counter-productive in focusing opposition to the US invaders and providing anti-war activists with a compelling target. This did not force the military to abandon use of weapons with characteristics similar to napalm in subsequent wars, but the weapon would remain in bad odor to the present.

The Second World War may be remembered for the development of two powerful technologies of death inflicted on civilian populations from the air. These were the firebombing/napalming and atomic bombing of cities. While both were developed with an eye to forcing German surrender, they took their heaviest toll on Japan. In the three quarters of a century since 1945, strategic thinking shaping US-Soviet

contention has centered on nuclear weapons, yet it has been firebombing and napalming from the air that would play decisive roles in subsequent US wars, in particular inflicting the most devastating punishment on US enemies in the Korean, Vietnam and subsequent wars.

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Perspectives on the Bombing of Civilians From World War II to the Present

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