

4. FIRE AWAY

Toward the end of World War II, the Allied Forces shifted tactics from the relatively ineffective high-altitude precision bombing of military targets to low-altitude firebombing of urban areas. This new form of bombing involved dropping a combination of high-explosive bombs to break windows and incendiary bombs to start fires. Over the span of eleven days in the summer of 1943, British and American forces bombed Hamburg, Germany, multiple times in a campaign codenamed “Operation Gomorrah.” During the night of 27 July, a combination of weather conditions and concentrated bombing produced a firestorm that sucked all the oxygen out of the lower atmosphere, produced winds up to 150 mph and temperatures around 1,500°F, and towered over 1,000 feet into the sky. No one had predicted a firestorm as a possible side-effect of the bombing. Over the course of Operation Gomorrah, the bombing and subsequent firestorm killed over 40,000 people, according an article about the operation in *Air Force Magazine*, 2007.

The Allies conducted a similar campaign against Dresden, Germany, during three days in February 1945, while the German army was retreating from all fronts. Previous bombing raids had been conducted against the railroad classification yards in Dresden, but this campaign targeted the inner city. On the morning of 14 February, the bombing produced a firestorm similar to the one in Hamburg, with temperatures reaching 2,700°F. German sources have the number of people killed ranging between 25,000 and 35,000. The actual number was probably closer to 45,000, according to an article called “Firebombing (Germany & Japan),” by Conrad C. Crane, on the PBS website. The attack destroyed over 90% of the city center.

In the Pacific Theater, similar bombing raids were conducted against the major cities in Japan. Operation Meetinghouse, conducted on 9–10 March 1945, killed between 90,000 and 100,000 people, and destroyed nearly 16 square miles of Tokyo, according to the PBS website. The destruction produced by Operation Meetinghouse was particularly devastating because the buildings were densely packed together and mostly made of wood. By the end of June, over 40% of Japan's six largest cities were destroyed: Tokyo, Nagoya, Kobe, Osaka, Yokohama, and Kawasaki. The combined raids against Japan severely damaged or totally destroyed 67 Japanese cities.

On the morning of 6 August 1945, U.S. forces dropped a uranium atomic bomb (nicknamed “Little Boy”) on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, killing at least 70,000 people in the blast and resulting firestorm, according to the PBS website. People died from radiation sickness for years afterward. On 9 August, U.S. forces dropped a plutonium bomb (“Fat Man”) near the city of Nagasaki, immediately killing over 75,000 people. Although Fat Man was far more powerful than Little Boy, its destructive effect was limited because it missed its target at the city center and exploded above a nearby valley. These two bombs were the first and (as of now) last uses of nuclear weapons against humans.

On 9 August 1945, speaking of the terrible responsibility for using nuclear weapons, President Harry S. Truman said “We thank God that it has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes.”

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