

Teaching notes

This resource is one of a sequence of eight resources, originally planned for OCR's Unit 2 Option: Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919-1963 (Y221). The sequence focuses on the key topic 'The impact of war and defeat on Germany 1939-49'. Although the content of the resources is drawn from this particular specification, there is no reason why they couldn't be used to support the teaching of other similar courses, perhaps with some adaptation of the suggested activities.

The eight resources in the sequence are:

1. The war economy and Total War (search '25206' to find it on [Teachit History](#))
2. **The impact of bombing (this resource)**
3. Racial policies and the Final Solution (search '25208')
4. Morale (search '25209')
5. Opposition and resistance (search '25210')
6. Consequences of the Second World War (search '25211')
7. The Cold War and Potsdam (search '25212')
8. Bizonia and the Berlin Blockade (search '25213')

Each resource contains a section of reading followed by some suggested tasks. These could be completed in class or as independent homework tasks.

Background

During the First World War, air power was in its infancy and only became a significant means of waging war in the final years of the conflict. The idea of mass aerial bombing developed during the First World War, with London being attacked by a fleet of German bombers in 1918. In the inter war years, all major powers in Europe realised both the potential of air power to enhance their military strength and the reality that the next war would probably involve the bombing of their civilians. The German air force engaged in terror bombing in nearly every major campaign that Hitler fought and cities as diverse as Warsaw in Poland, Rotterdam in Holland and Coventry in Britain were bombed. However, by the end of the Second World War, allied bombing over Germany had reduced large parts of nearly every major city to ruins. The scale, intensity and duration of bombing over Germany by America and Britain was vastly greater than German attacks on Britain, though it is questionable whether the bombing did much to shorten the length of the war.

The first bombing raids

By late 1940 it was assumed by many Germans that the war had been won. The French had been defeated and the British had been forced from France at Dunkirk. It was also believed by Hitler that soon the British would see their position as hopeless and would negotiate. However, the start of bombing attacks on Berlin challenged this view, even though initially they were not particularly effective or well planned. There had previously been other attacks on smaller towns and cities resulting in a small number of fatalities, but nothing directly against the capital. The Nazi regime had assured the German population that the cities were well defended with anti-aircraft guns and that there was no possibility of the British being able to carry out bombing raids.

In the first raids over Berlin, many people did not go to the air raid shelters, assuming they were false alarms. Although little physical damage was done, many Germans were alarmed that the attacks were occurring and that Germany did not appear to have been victorious in 1940 after all. The first civilian deaths from bombing in the capital occurred on 28 August 1940, where 12 people were killed and nearly 1,000 made homeless. The regime and the Nazi press portrayed the RAF attacks as 'acts of terrorism' – raids continued over Berlin and other major cities on a daily basis for most of the rest of the war.

Britain's objectives

Unlike the Germans, the British did believe that a long term bombing strategy could wear the enemy down and degrade their ability to fight. The Bomber Command of the Royal Air force was led by Sir Arthur Harris who had two objectives:

1. to destroy the German economy and infrastructure
2. to break civilian morale.

As the conflict wore on, it appeared increasingly less likely that the first objective would be realised, so Harris focused on the second. The impact of this on the German population was a greatly increased level of civilian deaths.

Later raids

Since 1940, the British had attacked Hamburg – it was west of the Rhine and easier to reach than Berlin. In 1940 there were seventy raids on the city and in the following two years a further 137 attacks took place. By mid-1942 just over 1,400 people had been killed and 24,000 had been made homeless in a city with a population of two million. By this time the British had begun to build large four engine bombers that could carry up to four tonnes of bombs each in one raid. The first ever 1,000 bomber raid took place on 30 May 1942, destroying most of the city and killing nearly 500 people. During the raid, 135,000 residents of the city fled and 12,500 buildings were either destroyed or damaged. The raid demonstrated to the German population that massive bombing attacks were possible (though the British were unable to deploy such huge numbers of aircraft constantly).

Berlin, Staatsoper, Fire 1941

Berlin, Staatsoper, Fire 1941 / Credit: akg Images / Universal Images Group / Copyright © AKG Images / For Education Use Only. This and millions of other educational images are available through Britannica Image Quest. For a free trial, please visit www.britannica.co.uk/trial



The Combined Bomber Offensive

In January 1943, The British and Americans met at Casablanca to decide the future course of the war. Their ally, the USSR under Joseph Stalin, demanded a second front in Europe and wanted an allied cross channel invasion of France in 1943. The British under Winston Churchill were reluctant to do this, believing it would be unsuccessful, so instead Britain and America agreed to a dramatic escalation of the air war over Germany in an operation called the Combined Bombing Offensive. It would focus on destroying Germany's military and economic infrastructure. The USAAF (United States Army Air Force) 8th Air force flew daylight raids over Germany in four engined B-17 'flying fortress' bombers and the RAF flew night raids. The result was round the clock bombing of Germany. The consequences were huge:

1. The Ruhr valley, where much of Germany's industry was located was targeted.
2. The hydro-electric dams on the Eder and Moehne Rivers were destroyed in the 'dam buster raids' by the RAF, using a specially designed bouncing bomb.
3. A mass bombing raid on Hamburg on 24 July, using 791 RAF bombers, caused a fire storm through the city's streets (Hamburg was predominantly made of wooden buildings). Two further bombing attacks on 29 July and 2 August followed, with the USAAF bombing by day. The devastating attacks killed 40,000 civilians, destroyed 256,000 homes and made nearly a million people homeless. The anger of the population seemed to be directed towards the regime for their inability to stop the raids, and many believed that the Hamburg raid was evidence that the war was lost.

Air raids

As the intensity of the bombing increased, nightly visits to the air raid shelter became a reality for many Germans. Conditions inside basement shelters were often cramped and insanitary and the shelters were far from being bomb proof. In Berlin, air raid shelters were periodically hit by British bombs, collapsing and killing their inhabitants. In 1940 Hitler had planned a huge network of bunkers to be built in what was called the Sofortprogramm (emergency programme), keeping the population in most major cities safe. The bunker system planned by Hitler identified 6,000 sites for large scale bunkers and was meant to house 35 million Germans. Three 'flak towers' were built in Berlin, these were large concrete buildings, heavily armed with anti-aircraft guns that were initially meant to house 8,000 civilians. Each neighbourhood had an air raid warden who was given the task of making sure the bunkers were maintained and local residents obeyed air raid regulations. During the war large numbers of foreign workers from across Europe came to Germany to work and often found it hard to gain access to the shelters. Germany's Jews who had not yet been transported to death camps were completely unable to access shelters for Aryan Germans and had to use bunkers solely designated for the Jews.

Even with Hitler's expansion of the bunker system the shelters were still packed and overcrowded. On some occasions, later in the war, Germans died in stampedes to get inside as the raids grew in their intensity. By early 1944 Berlin was given a respite from heavy bombing as allied aircraft instead bombed roads and railways in France to prepare for D-Day.

Dresden

The final act of the bombing of Germany was the destruction of the medieval German town of Dresden. 11 weeks before the end of the Second World War in Europe, as the Red Army advanced across Eastern Germany, the RAF and the USAAF bombed Dresden. On 13-14 February, long after the outcome of the conflict was certain to all parties, the city was flooded with refugees when bombers started a firestorm. A study carried out in 2010 concluded that 20-25,000 people were killed. The bombing was seen as unnecessary, even in Britain where the popular mood was deeply anti German. It was the last mass bombing by the allies during the war and many politicians (including Churchill) questioned whether it had been necessary.

Tasks

1. Study Source A (below) and answer the following questions:
 - a) What impression does Source A give historians about the scale of bombing destruction by 1945?
 - b) How far does this image support or contradict your own knowledge of the impact of air raids?
 - c) How far does this image support the view that air raids were primarily designed to break civilian morale?
2. 'The bombing of Germany was a brutal but ineffective measure against the German people'. How valid is this statement?

Source A



Berlin, Brandenburger Gate, 1945

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