

ALBA Lesson in Human Rights: Bombing Civilians

Title: Bombing Civilians in World War II

Subject: U.S. History, European History, World History, Contemporary Issues, A.P. history

Grade(s): 9-12

Standards: Common Core English Language Arts Standards (Literacy in History/Social Studies, grades 11-12) *see below for specific standards addressed.*

Key words/phrases: Geneva Convention, Nazism, Nuremberg War Crimes Trial, Hague Convention, International Committee of the Red Cross, Human Rights, Holocaust

Essential Questions: How should we view the bombing of civilians in World War II? Were the aerial bombings of civilians by the Allies in World War II justified, or should they be considered war crimes as were the military acts of the Axis powers?

Synopsis: The horrors of Nazism, the Holocaust, and Japanese aggression before and during World War II have distracted attention from the targeting of civilians by the Allies during World War II. This lesson is intended to pose questions about the bombing of civilian targets during war.

Recommended Teacher Background: Teachers should watch the 10-minute introduction to the Spanish Civil War among the [ALBA teacher resources](#).

Connections to other disciplines: English Language Arts, U.S. Government.

Number of Class Periods: Two 45-minute periods.

Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2	Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7	Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9	Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Primary Sources:

- [Appeal of Franklin D. Roosevelt on Aerial Bombardment of Civilian Populations, Sept. 1, 1939](#)
- [Hague Regulation IV, 1907](#)
- Photographs of bombing of Coventry, England, Dresden, Germany, and Tokyo, Japan.

- Diaries of Alexander McKee and William L. Shirer
- Narrative accounts of bombing survivors

Procedures

1. Lead-In/Hook: Discuss with students the term, “rules of war.” Are there any? What are they? What happens when they are violated? Who should be charged with war crimes? Who agrees upon rules of war? Do rules of war only apply to those who sign an agreement to abide by them?
2. Pre-assessment and activation of prior knowledge: A pre-assessment might include finding out what students know about:
 - The history of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Geneva Convention, and their efforts to establish rules for war.
 - How aerial warfare became used in the 20th century. Where was it first used? How were bombers and fighters used in World War II? What were the targets and goals?
 - Historic attitudes toward targeting civilians in battle and after battles.
3. Step by Step:
 - a. VIDEO: Play and discuss the short video, “[Rules of War \(In a Nutshell\)](#)” from the International Committee of the Red Cross. Afterward, point out that [protection of civilian persons in time of war](#) was not added to the Geneva Convention until 1949. Yet in the 19th and early 20th centuries, targeting of civilians in battle was condemned by most nations (through common law, custom, and international agreements) even though enforcement was sometimes difficult.
 - b. Present Information: Aerial warfare became an international issue during the Spanish Civil War, when the Basque town of Guernica was bombed. Hitler’s Luftwaffe, in support of Francisco Franco’s rebel forces, carried out for the first time in history bombing of an entire city. The air attack was done not for strategic purposes, but strictly for the purpose of terrorizing civilians into submission and surrender. (See Appendix 1 for photograph of Guernica, and Picasso’s painting to memorialize and condemn the air raid.)
 - c. Investigation/Questioning/Discussion: Pass out or display some or all of the sources in the appendices to stimulate student responses about targeting civilians in war.
 - i. (Note: The use of Hague Regulation IV (Appendix 2) as a discussion point is to establish that many countries had not only avoided civilian targets as a matter of long-standing principle, but had also signed agreements to that effect.) The use of the entry from William L. Shirer’s Berlin Diary (Appendix 5) is to discuss the idea that targeting civilians in mass terror raids often did not have the desired effect of weakening the populace to continuing war. Londoners and Berliners alike were more strengthened in their resolve to resist the enemy, but perhaps for different reasons. Germans especially had been brainwashed through years of intense propaganda that cast Germany as a peace-loving country drawn to war by aggressive neighbors. Alexander McKee’s account of the “four-motor heavy bombers” (Appendix 5) can open a discussion about technology used in World War II compared to today.
 - ii. Sources can be passed out piecemeal to small groups. After reading the sources in the groups, students can decide which of the following questions are pertinent AND consider the broad questions based on the sources they read. Large-group discussion can follow.
 - d. Some Questions To Consider:
 - i. What was the prevailing attitude of the world’s countries toward targeting civilians with bombs when World War II broke out in 1939? What was the U.S. government’s attitude? Why do you think this attitude changed with British and then U.S. involvement in the war?

- ii. Why wasn't the bombing death of civilians included in the war crimes trials in Nuremberg and Tokyo following the war?
 - iii. Should the civilians of a country whose governments were responsible for starting a war be held accountable for the actions of their governments? If the targeting of civilians is to be labeled as a war crime (as it is today as a result of the Geneva Convention of 1949) should the victors also be put on trial if they are accused? If a country chooses to violate international agreements regarding the targeting of civilians, what moral responsibility does its enemy have?
 - iv. To what degree was revenge a motivation for the Allies bombing German cities? Were British citizens united in their desire for revenge? Why or why not?
 - v. Should specifically targeting and destroying things that make up a country's culture, such as famous works of architecture, paintings and sculptures in museums, be considered a war crime? (Dresden was seen as more of a German cultural city than a militarily strategic city.)
 - vi. Thinking of Alexander McKee's diary entry, what role does technology play in the "rules of war"? Does having precision bombing capability change the rules for targeting civilians? Is targeting civilians a greater crime today because we have the capability to use precision bombs to cripple an enemy's ability to wage war while leaving civilian centers and residential neighborhoods intact.
4. Closure: Conduct by countries on both sides led to the creation of two post-war documents – the Geneva Convention of 1949 and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights – that addressed the treatment of civilians. To what degree have these rights been upheld from their inception to present day?

Differentiation:

- **Advanced:** Students can research and report from the many online sources that take up the debate over the value of civilian bombing in wartime and whether or not targeting civilians should be considered a war crime. As further food for thought, two German admirals, Erich Raeder and Karl Doenitz, were sentenced to life in prison and 10 years in prison, respectively, for war crimes related not to the Holocaust, but for ordering the sinking of unarmed merchant ships. Arguably their crimes were far less heinous than the killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians by the Allies.
- **Struggling:** Read sources out loud in groups, with pauses for consideration of difficult vocabulary.

Assessment – Possible free-response or take-home questions:

- "Why can it be said that the bombing of Guernica opened the door for new forms of destructive warfare?"
- "Why did the Allies target civilians in World War II even though F.D.R. had said that targeting civilians was "inhuman barbarism" that "shocked the conscience of humanity"?"
- "Evaluate your textbook in regards to its treatment of Allied bombings. Does your textbook emphasize Axis atrocities while glossing over or eliminating similar behavior from the Allies? Give an example? Does it matter if American atrocities are excluded? Should textbooks exclude information that may dampen patriotism or American exceptionalism?"

Appendix 1: Spanish Civil War Sources

Excerpts from London Times, April 27, 1937, by George Steer

“Guernica, the most ancient town of the Basques and center of their cultural tradition, was completely destroyed yesterday afternoon by insurgent air raiders. The bombardment of this open town far behind the [front] lines occupied precisely three hours and a quarter, during which a powerful fleet of airplanes consisting of three German types, Junkers and Heinkel bombers and Heinkel fighters, did not cease unloading on the town bombs weighing from 1,000 pounds downwards and, it is calculated, more than 3,000 two-pounder aluminum incendiary projectiles. The fighters, meanwhile, plunged low...to machine-gun those of the civilian population who had taken refuge in the fields...The whole of Guernica was soon in flames... In the form of its execution and the scale of destruction it wrought, no less than in the selection of its objective, the raid on Guernica is unparalleled in military history. Guernica was not a military objective. A factory producing war material lay outside the town and was untouched. So were two barracks some distance from the town. The town lay far behind the lines. The object of the bombardment was seemingly the demoralization of the civil population and the destruction of the cradle of the Basque race....”

Aftermath of bombing of Guernica, Spain, April 1937.



Guernica, Pablo Picasso, 1937, oil on canvas, (3.5m x 7.8m), Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía



Headline from *Daily Express*, *Daily Herald*, London, April 28, 1937



Appendix 2: Hague Convention, 1907

Hague Regulation IV of 1907:

Art. 3. A belligerent party which violates the provisions of the said Regulations shall, if the case demands, be liable to pay compensation. It shall be responsible for all acts committed by persons forming part of its armed forces.

Art. 23. In addition to the prohibitions provided by special Conventions, it is especially forbidden

(e) To employ arms, projectiles, or material calculated to cause unnecessary suffering;

(g) To destroy or seize the enemy's property, unless such destruction or seizure be imperatively demanded by the necessities of war

Art. 25. The attack or bombardment, by whatever means, of towns, villages, dwellings, or buildings which are undefended is prohibited.

Signatory Nations in 1907 that ratified between 1909 and 1914: Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Denmark, El Salvador, France, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, Nicaragua, Norway, Panama, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, United States. (Notable exceptions: Spain, Italy.) Source: [Dutch government treaty database](https://www.dutchgovernment.nl/treaty-database/).

Appendix 3: Presidential Message, Franklin D. Roosevelt

Appeal of Franklin D. Roosevelt on Aerial Bombardment of Civilian Populations, Sept. 1, 1939:

The President of the United States to the Governments of France, Germany, Italy, Poland and His Britannic Majesty, September 1, 1939:

The ruthless bombing from the air of civilians in unfortified centers of population during the course of the hostilities which have raged in various quarters of the earth during the past few years, which has resulted in the maiming and in the death of thousands of defenseless men, women, and children, has sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity. If resort is had to this form of inhuman barbarism during the period of the tragic conflagration with which the world is now confronted, hundreds of thousands of innocent human beings who have no responsibility for, and who are not even remotely participating in, the hostilities which have now broken out, will lose their lives.

I am therefore addressing this urgent appeal to every government which may be engaged in hostilities publicly to affirm its determination that its armed forces shall in no event, and under no circumstances, undertake the bombardment from the air of civilian populations or of unfortified cities, upon the understanding that these same rules of warfare will be scrupulously observed by all of their opponents. I request an immediate reply. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Appendix 4: World War II Photographs

Photograph – Luftwaffe bombardment of Coventry (from BBC History, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/events/the_bltz)



Caption: *"People in Coventry walk to work past smouldering piles of rubble after a bombing raid in 1940."*

Photographs – Dresden, Germany after firebombing attack by British and American bombers, February, 1944.





Source: <http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2015/02/remembering-dresden-70-years-after-the-firebombing/385445/>

Photographs – Tokyo, Japan, after firebombing raids by American bombers, March 10, 1945.



Photo 43.—Japanese photo showing bodies of people trapped and burned as they fled through a street during the attack of 9-10 March. Note that automobiles and bicycles were also trapped and burned.

Appendix 5: Primary Texts

Diary of William L. Shirer, American radio correspondent stationed in Berlin.

Sept. 7, 1940

The [German] High Command said in its communique today: “The enemy again attacked the German capital last night, causing some damage to persons and property as a result of his indiscriminate throwing of bombs on non-military targets in the middle of the city. The German air force, as reprisal, has therefore begun to attack London with strong forces”... The statement of the High Command... deliberately perpetrates the lie that Germany has only decided to bomb London as a result of the British first bombing Berlin. And the German people will fall for this, as they fall for almost everything they’re told nowadays... And so tonight the High Command, which all good Germans believe tells only the gospel truth, issued a special communique saying that as reprisal for the British raids on Berlin, London was attacked with strong forces for the *first* time today... The German people have no inkling – because the Nazi press and radio have carefully suppressed the story – that in August alone more than one thousand English civilians were killed by the Luftwaffe’s attacks on British “military objectives”... All Sunday morning papers carry the same headline: “BIG ATTACK ON LONDON AS REPRISAL.” (William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, pp.499-501)

Narrative of a fire warden on watch in Hamburg, Germany, during the bombing of Hamburg by the RAF, July 7, 1943.

Suddenly there came a rain of fire from heaven. We tried to get out to pump but it was impossible. The air was actually filled with fire. It would have meant certain death to leave the shelter... Smoke seeped into the shelter through every crack. Every time you opened the steel doors you could see fire

all around... Then a storm started, a shrill howling in the street. It grew into a hurricane... the whole yard, the canal, in fact as far as we could see, was just a whole, great massive sea of fire.
(Source: A.C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 83.)

Letter from six Coventry citizens to the *New Statesman*.

Sir – Many citizens of Coventry who have endured the full horror of intense aerial bombardment would wish to dispute statements made in the *Daily Express* to the effect that all the people of Coventry expressed the opinion that they wished to bomb, and bomb harder, the peoples of Germany. This is certainly not the view of all or even the majority of the people of Coventry. The general feeling is, we think, that of horror, and a desire that no other peoples shall suffer as they have done. Our impression is that most people feel the hopelessness of bombing the working classes of Germany and very little satisfaction is attained by hearing that Hamburg is suffering in the same way as Coventry has suffered.

Royal Air Force internal memo preceding raid on Dresden, January 1945

“Dresden, the seventh largest city in Germany and not much smaller than Manchester, is also far the largest unbombed built-up the enemy has got. In the midst of winter with refugees pouring westwards and troops to be rested, roofs are at a premium. The intentions of the attack are to hit the enemy where he will feel it most, behind an already partially collapsed front, to prevent the use of the city in the way of further advance, and incidentally to show the Russians when they arrive what Bomber Command can do.”

World War II diary excerpts of Alexander McKee, British soldier and historian

"Lisieux and Caen are examples of the inflexibility of the four-motor heavy bombers: it cannot block a road without bringing down a city. I'm not surprised that our troops advancing between Caen and Lisieux were fired on by French civilians. No doubt many Frenchmen found it hard to be liberated by a people who seem, by their actions, to specialise in the mass murder of their friends... In Emmerich [Germany] I saw no building whatever intact... This process, when the town was an Allied one, we referred to with bitter mockery as 'Liberation.' When you said that such-and-such a place had been 'liberated,' you meant that hardly one stone still stood upon another.

Appendix 6: Secondary Texts

Was Coventry a Military Target? --from “Coventry’s Blitz,” <http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/blitz/blitz.php>

Even allowing for our manufacturing targets, the justification for the bombing methods used in this raid is questionable... The military usefulness of the raid was not great - of the factories that were destroyed, most were in or near the city centre, and comprised mainly smaller firms. The larger factories further out were generally back to full capacity within weeks, and most multiplied their output after the raid.

In support of the idea that this was primarily a terror raid, we can look at some of the bombing methods. The Luftwaffe had accurate maps of Coventry, so they would've been aware that wiping out Coventry's city centre, an area roughly half by three quarters of a mile, was largely going to destroy shops, churches and small businesses laid out around our mainly medieval street pattern. Once the initial "Pathfinder" bombers had dropped their flares and incendiaries to light up the target area, the subsequent bombers not only followed the path to the area, but actually flew in an alternate north-south then east-west pattern, to clinically and methodically raze the whole town centre to the ground.

Statistics on the Dresden firebombing:

Approximately 35,000 human deaths. Among the hundreds of destroyed buildings: 19 hospitals, 17 churches/chapels, 39 schools, and the Dresden Zoo. (Source: Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday 13 February 1945*)

From "A Forgotten Holocaust: U.S. Bombing Strategy, the Destruction of Japanese Cities & the American Way of War from World War II to Iraq," by Mark Selden

While the Nuremberg and Tokyo Tribunals clearly articulated the principle of universality, the Tribunals, both held in cities that had been obliterated by Allied bombing, famously shielded the victorious powers, above all the US, from responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Telford Taylor, chief counsel for war crimes prosecution at Nuremberg, made the point with specific reference to the bombing of cities a quarter century later:

Since both sides had played the terrible game of urban destruction—the Allies far more successfully—there was no basis for criminal charges against Germans or Japanese, and in fact no such charges were brought Aerial bombardment had been used so extensively and ruthlessly on the Allied side as well as the Axis side that neither at Nuremberg nor Tokyo was the issue made a part of the trials.

(Source: [The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus](#))