

# **Shaping His Story: Churchill and the bombing of German cities 1940 - 1945**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the ways in which Winston Churchill shaped the historiography of the strategic air offensive against Germany. Beginning with Churchill's view of history and the writing of his place in it, the paper examines his willingness to secure that place through revisionism and obscurantism, where the bomber offensive is concerned, in his *magnum opus*, *The Second World War*. This approach is reinforced by his obstruction of the post-war British bombing survey and his interference in the writing of the official history of the bomber offensive which was published in 1961. This study highlights a consistent pattern of behaviour in the way Churchill sought to shape the history of the bomber offensive to ensure as far as possible that this controversial aspect of the war would not detract from his personal standing. The analysis of Churchill's attempts to write history in his own image – or at least to his own advantage – concludes with an assessment of the extent to which he was motivated primarily by moral concern for the consequences of area bombing or by self-interested unease over future political and reputational implications.

## **Keywords**

- Churchill
- Second World War
- Bomber Offensive
- German cities
- Writing history
- Historical revisionism
- Air power historiography
- Dresden
- British bombing survey
- Official history

## Introduction

Dresden lay in smouldering ruin following the devastating RAF Bomber Command night raid on 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> February 1945. Although the US Eighth Air Force carried out follow-up daytime raids over the next 48 hours, by far the greatest proportion of damage to the city resulted from the night attack by Bomber Command. It was the climax of the night area offensive: ‘the crowning achievement in a long, arduous and relentless development of a principle of bombing which the Royal Air Force had initially adopted as a retaliatory measure... and to which the greater part of Bomber Command had subsequently always been devoted’.<sup>1</sup>

As details of the raid and its consequences spread, public and private dissenting voices increasingly questioned the morality and the effectiveness of British area bombing policy.<sup>2</sup> At that moment, Winston Churchill – Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and ultimate custodian of the area bombing policy – attempted a breathtaking *volte-face*. He sent his now infamous message to the Chiefs of Staff instructing them that ‘the moment has come when the question of bombing German cities simply for the sake of increasing terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed’.<sup>3</sup> He added that ‘the destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing... I feel the need for more precise concentration upon military objectives... rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction’.<sup>4</sup> Churchill’s sanctimonious rebuke shocked Charles Portal, then Chief of the Air Staff, who would not, could not, let the censure stand unchallenged: insisting that the statement be withdrawn and replaced by a version that was somewhat more discreet and fairly worded.<sup>5</sup> The new minute was issued on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1945, and it is from this minute that Churchill quotes two sentences in *Triumph and Tragedy*.<sup>6</sup> It concluded with the comment that ‘we must see to it that our attacks do not do more harm to ourselves in the long run than they do to the enemy’s immediate war effort’.<sup>7</sup>

There is general agreement in the historiography of the bomber offensives that the original minute should be seen as a calculated attempt to distance himself from the political and moral furore over Dresden and area bombing.<sup>8</sup> The bombing of Dresden was probably the catalyst for the formation of post-war ethical debate, even if, to the

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-1945*, (London, HMSO, 1961) [4 volumes] [hereafter referred to as *SAOG*] Volume III, p 109

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang (eds.) *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945* (London, Pimlico, 2006); David Hall, ‘Black, White and Grey: Wartime Arguments for and against the Strategic Bomber Offensive’, in *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 1998) pp. 7-19

<sup>3</sup> The National Archives of the United Kingdom [TNA] PREM 3/12 folio 25, Prime Minister to General Ismay (for Chiefs of Staff Committee) and the Chief of the Air Staff, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1945.

[Subsequent references to TNA documents will be preceded by the department code:

AIR - Air Ministry and Royal Air Force records; CAB – Cabinet Office records;

PREM – Prime Minister’s Office records]

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume III, p 117

<sup>6</sup> Winston Spencer Churchill, *The Second World War*, (London, Cassell, 1948/1954) [6 volumes] Vol. VI, *Triumph and Tragedy*, p 470

<sup>7</sup> PREM 3/12 folio 22, Prime Minister to General Ismay (for Chiefs of Staff Committee) and the Chief of the Air Staff, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1945

<sup>8</sup> See for example: Tami Davis Biddle, ‘Dresden 1945: Reality, History and Memory’ *Journal of Modern History*, Volume 72, Number 2, April 2008, pp. 413-450; David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London, Penguin, 2005), p 481; Max Hastings, *Bomber Command* (London, Michael Joseph, 1979) p 344

operational commanders and the bomber crews, it was just another raid.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as Best has suggested, the minute demonstrates that Churchill, aware of the issues likely to be raised in any future war crimes trials, sensed the need for pre-emptive action in advance of the possibility that British area bombing might, embarrassingly, be cited in a *tu quoque* defence.<sup>10</sup>

The ‘Dresden Memo’ indicated the end of Churchill’s previous advocacy of the area bombing policy; it also marked the beginning of a sustained effort by Churchill over several years to ensure that any subsequent harm to his reputation or legacy be minimised as far as possible – including through the obscuring of the memo itself. Consequently, this article will explore Churchill’s shaping of the historiography of the bomber offensive, which would, in turn, frame subsequent political, operational and moral assessments of the policy. First, Churchill’s view of history, the writing of his place in it, and his willingness to secure that place through historical revisionism and selectivity will be explored. Second, his minimal, obscurantist treatment of the bomber offensive in his own *magnum opus*, *The Second World War (SWW)* will be assessed, as will, third, his obstruction of the post-war British bombing survey. Then fourth, his interference in the writing of the official history of the bomber offensive, published in 1961, will highlight a long-standing pattern in the way he sought to shape its history. Each of these activities will be viewed through the lens of his words and actions – public and private – concerning area bombing. This analysis of Churchill’s attempts to write history in his own image – or at least to his own advantage – will conclude with an assessment of the extent to which he was motivated primarily by moral concern for the consequences of area bombing or by self-interested concern for future political and reputational implications.

### **Writing his own history**

Long before Churchill became Prime Minister he displayed a heightened awareness of history and a desire to ensure a place in it. During the 1930s in the House of Commons Churchill famously concluded an exchange with Stanley Baldwin with the words: ‘History will say that the Right Honourable Gentleman is wrong in this matter’, and then after a pause, with a broad grin on his face, ‘I know it will, because I shall write that history’.<sup>11</sup> Echoing the sentiment, in response to an observation that History would place him amongst the world’s great men, he replied: ‘That will depend on who writes the history’.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps less funny was a comment to Maurice Ashley: ‘Give me the facts Ashley, and I will twist them the way I want to suit my argument’.<sup>13</sup> It would be unfair to overly condemn Churchill for remarks that may

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Gray, ‘Dresden 1945: Just Another Raid’ *Royal Air Force Air Power Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1 Spring 2001 pp. 1-16

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness* (London, Hambledon and London, 2001) p 241

*Tu quoque* is an argument which consists of turning an argument back on the accuser.

*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002) [Fifth Edition]

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm MacDonald, *Titans and Others* (London, Collins, 1972) p 89 quoted in Ramsden, *ibid.* p 3 although not recorded in Hansard, it is nevertheless widely reported, even though it may well be apocryphal. A similar statement to Roosevelt and Stalin is attributed to Churchill in Anne Perkins, *Baldwin* (London, Haus Publishing, 2006) p 137

<sup>12</sup> John Ramsden, ‘That will depend on who writes the history’. *Winston Churchill as his own historian*. (London, Queen Mary and Westfield College, 1997) p 3

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Ashley, *Churchill as Historian* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1968) p 76

[Ashley was an historian, and served as literary assistant to Churchill between the wars. He later published a critical analysis of Churchill, and his methods as a historian, in the volume quoted]

have been laced with humour. Yet his use of humour should not be easily dismissed or trivialised – it was a powerful weapon that he wielded effectively against many political opponents.

Churchill described his multi-volume *The Second World War*, not as history, but as his case, one that he would not allow anyone else to put forward on his behalf. But if Churchill wrote in order to vindicate his role, it was only because he thought what he had done had been, on the whole, right. As he put it:

The tale is told from the standpoint of the British Prime Minister, with special responsibility, as Minister of Defence for military affairs... It would be easier to produce a series of after-thoughts, when the answers to all the riddles were known, but I must leave this to the historians, who will in due course be able to pronounce their considered judgements.<sup>14</sup>

Although motivated by the need to secure his family's financial security, and to provide the means to allow him to pursue his career as a politician, Churchill was also under no illusions about what might happen to his reputation if he were not to be one of the historians, or, as he insisted, to make his own contribution to history.<sup>15</sup> As a result, his history was heavily marked by his desire to set the record straight, and also to account for policies that turned out to be less than successful, or to justify his position on issues like the second front. He was quick off the mark, aware that public perception of the conflict would take time to set firm. He intended to be the principal architect of the history of World War II, and was determined to build on a global scale. However, the work did not exist in a vacuum because many other leading figures were beginning to write their own accounts.<sup>16</sup> Books by Butcher and Ingersoll had already emerged which had irked Churchill.<sup>17</sup> Acutely aware of his international standing he would not allow anyone else to establish an enduring record. Ideally, he needed to be first, but that would not be possible given the vast canvas on which he intended to paint.

In the preface to *The Gathering Storm*, Churchill writes that 'the author hangs the chronicle and discussion of great military and political events upon the thread of the personal experiences of an individual' observing that his book is 'a contribution to history'.<sup>18</sup> As the events of the war were unfolding Churchill was conscious of living through a heroic period of history and in many of his actions and decisions as Prime Minister he actually asked himself what the judgement of history might be.<sup>19</sup> In presenting his work as an autobiography, Churchill was consistent with the sentiment expressed in his previous multi-volume history *The World Crisis*.<sup>20</sup> However, Plumb describes *SWW* as belonging to a different category from his earlier work; part autobiography, part general history. Whereas in *The World Crisis* Churchill had to rely on external published sources after his removal from office following the failure

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<sup>14</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. IV, 'The Hinge of Fate' (London, Cassell, 1951) p ix

<sup>15</sup> Reynolds, *In Command of History*, pp.23-35

<sup>16</sup> Ashley Jackson, *Churchill* (London, Quercus, 2011) pp. 357-360

<sup>17</sup> Harry Butcher, *My Three Years with Eisenhower* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1946); and Ralph Ingersoll, *Top Secret* (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1946)

<sup>18</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. I, *The Gathering Storm*, p vii

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Ashley, 'Churchill and History' *International Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 1, January 1966 pp. 87-94

<sup>20</sup> Winston Spencer Churchill, *The World Crisis* (London, Thornton Butterworth, 1923) Volume II, p 9

of the Dardanelles campaign, shortly before leaving the wartime Prime Minister's office he arranged it so that Cabinet ministers could take with them copies of War Cabinet memorandums and other documents, could have access to Cabinet documents issued to them, and could quote from such documents.<sup>21</sup> Churchill's extraordinary feat in writing *The Second World War* was thereby achieved on the back of privileged access to highly confidential government documents, the bedrock of the entire project.<sup>22</sup>

The care with which he had his wartime documents printed and then labelled as 'Personal Minutes' or 'Personal Telegrams' suggests that Churchill acted with one eye on history.<sup>23</sup> It was certainly assumed that Churchill was writing memoranda for inclusion in future memoirs.<sup>24</sup> 'Another one for the book' became a private joke in Whitehall.<sup>25</sup> Although he would have less time for historical self-consciousness once he became Prime Minister, there is a clear suggestion that his injunction against terror bombing written in his memorandum of 28<sup>th</sup> March 1945 was written for the benefit of the historical record. Under his bargain with Sir Edward Bridges, then Cabinet Secretary, Churchill was able to remove the documents that lie at the heart of *SWW* on his departure from Downing Street in July 1945. In the 1940s it seemed unlikely that British government papers would be open to public inspection until well into the twenty-first century. It was only in 1958 that Parliament enacted a fifty-year rule, and it was only in 1967, after Churchill's death, that the time limit was reduced to thirty years.<sup>26</sup>

Churchill's narrative was therefore guaranteed to command attention for a significant period of time, reinforced by the minutes, telegrams, and directives which took up so much of the text. The documents that were included had been carefully selected for public consumption; not just to protect sensitive government information, but also, in many cases where Churchill sought to defend himself against the emerging historiography. He was anxious that future historians would judge favourably all he did and all that he said. This must have influenced his choices and conduct, both consciously and unconsciously, particularly when he set out his arguments in memoranda, which he knew would, in time, become historical documents. All of this led to an emphasis on what Churchill himself thought to be of major significance for the future.

In sum, when Churchill came to write his history of the Second World War he had the materials prepared, the concepts at hand, and the structure ready. Backed up by a substantial organisation, he was the first in the field to attempt a project of such

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<sup>21</sup> WSC memorandum, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1945, 'War Cabinet Documents' CAB 66/65/70, [formerly WP (45) 320]

<sup>22</sup> J.H. Plumb, 'The Historian' in Taylor et al, *Churchill: Four Faces and the Man* (London, Allen Lane, 1969) pp. 117-152

<sup>23</sup> CAB 66/65/70 formerly WP (45) 320. War Cabinet Documents: Memorandum. Winston Spencer Churchill. 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1945. See also CAB 21/1652 Recovery of Cabinet Documents from Ministers and ex-Ministers. Procedure. WSC to Bridges, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1945 and Brook to Bridges 18<sup>th</sup> May 1945

<sup>24</sup> Neville Chamberlain Papers (University of Birmingham Library) NC 7/11/33/132 15<sup>th</sup> January 1940. Correspondence between Chamberlain and Halifax

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, *In Command of History*, p 112. For an example of the kind of minutes which Churchill would send prior to becoming Prime Minister, see Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. I, *The Gathering Storm*, pp. 359-360

<sup>26</sup> Public Records Act 1958. See also CAB 103/621 Implementation of the thirty year rule

magnitude, a fact of which he well understood the importance. With the resources at his disposal he was able to cast his work into an almost official mould. More important is that the war, its narrative and its structure, was arranged in a deliberate way by Churchill. The phases of the war are the phases into which he divided it, and according to Plumb this deeply influenced subsequent historians.<sup>27</sup> They move down the broad avenues that he drove down, through the war's confusion and complexity. Hence, Churchill, the historian, lies at the very heart of the historiography of the Second World War, and will always remain there.

This does not absolve him from criticism; if anything it highlights the need for greater critique. Writing in 1965, Robert Rhodes James highlighted that an incomplete account, such as Churchill's narrative, was not that of an historian, but rather as one who expounded the course of events for submission to future judgement.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, writing at a time when he was still seeking further political office, Churchill was precluded from describing events in retrospect with the calm gaze of an uncommitted historian. Clear evidence of this is provided when Kelly, his literary assistant writes in a memo to Churchill: 'You may wish to reconsider at a later stage the story of the terror bombing of the German civilian population... in case you need German help and good will in the future.'<sup>29</sup> In response to such an injunction Churchill had two main options. First, complete transparency: set out the case for area bombing that he supported so assiduously during the policing of the Empire in the 1920s and throughout the war; or second, opt for obscurantism in the hope that the afterglow of victory over a heinous enemy would conceal the darker decisions and actions that contributed to the defeat Hitler and Nazism. Hence, it is a key premise of this paper that it is often the silence with respect to the question of strategic bombing which raises the most significant questions. By his omissions Churchill was also shaping the means by which political, operational and, consequently, moral assessment of his actions, and sometimes inactions, could be made; through deliberate historical revisionism he skewed the way that the bombing campaign would be perceived by subsequent generations.

### ***The Second World War and the bomber offensive***

Volume five of *SWW, Closing the Ring*, covers the period from the implementation of the *Pointblank* Directive to the commencement of preparations for Operation *Overlord*.<sup>30</sup> As described in the Air Historical Branch narrative of the period it represents the period of the execution of the full offensive by Bomber Command, supported by the expansion of the Eighth Air Force.<sup>31</sup>

One contributory reason for Churchill's failure to address pressing issues in the bomber campaign in a coherent manner was his employment of historical advisors on

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<sup>27</sup> Plumb, J.H. 'The Historian' in Taylor et al, *Churchill: Four Faces and the Man* (London, Allen Lane, 1969) pp. 117-152

<sup>28</sup> Robert Rhodes James, quoted in Ashley *Churchill as Historian* p 87

[A shortcoming of Ashley's analysis of 'Churchill as Historian' is his lack of scholarly apparatus]

<sup>29</sup> Churchill Papers, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge [hereafter referred to in footnotes as CHUR] CHUR 4/333 folio 146

<sup>30</sup> *Pointblank* was the directive for the Combined Bomber Offensive. See Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume IV, pp. 158-160. *Overlord* was the invasion of North West Europe.

<sup>31</sup> AIR 41/43 'The RAF in the Bombing Offensive Against Germany', Volume V, The Full Offensive; see also Wesley Frank Craven and James L. Cate [eds.] *The Army Air Forces in World War Two*, (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1948/1958) [7 volumes], Volume II, p 665

military and naval aspects of the conflict within the Syndicate: the team of researchers and writers brought together to help produce *SWW*. He did not have anyone engaged in researching the air war. General Henry Pownall, military consultant to Churchill in the Syndicate, kept reminding him of the gap, but Churchill procrastinated and it was not until the summer of 1950 that Air Chief Marshal Sir Guy Garrod was recruited to write drafts on the strategic bomber offensive.<sup>32</sup> In consequence, the material was finally published in volume five, *Closing the Ring*, even when it belonged chronologically in volume four, *The Hinge of Fate*. The result is a number of fragments about the air war, even though they represent some of the most important strategic debates about the conduct of the entire war.

The selection of Garrod in itself was an interesting choice. He was neither a professional historian, like Deakin, nor a staff officer accustomed to writing reports, like Pownall. Moreover, he had spent the last two years of the war in the Far East and the Mediterranean, and he lacked any first-hand knowledge of the bomber offensive. Given the passion that had been aroused by Arthur Harris this may well have been a deliberate ploy. Nevertheless, after Churchill and Garrod had lunched together on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1950, Pownall wrote to General Ismay [somewhat tongue-in-cheek] that ‘Master is now convinced that it was *most* important that the strategic bombing offensive should have proper mention’.<sup>33</sup>

Garrod’s brief was to produce about 10,000 words on ‘The Mounting Air Offensive’ to ensure that it was addressed to Churchill’s satisfaction.<sup>34</sup> In mid-December 1950 Garrod forwarded his proposed outline for the chapter on the bomber offensive to Churchill. Integral to this was an explanation of how Bomber Command had come to adopt a policy of area bombing by night, and how this clashed with the American policy of precision bombing by day.<sup>35</sup> At the end of August 1940, Churchill had arranged that the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) should work directly under the orders of the Minister of Defence. The revised role required the formulation of the details of such plans as were communicated to them by Churchill himself, although the JPC was permitted to initiate plans of its own, after reference to General Ismay.<sup>36</sup> However, in a letter to the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, Churchill commented that there was no question of the JPC ‘submitting military advice to him’. They were merely to work at plans in accordance with directives which Churchill *gave to them*.<sup>37</sup> As Best remarks, Churchill often behaved as if he were the supreme commander.<sup>38</sup> Area bombing policy occurred primarily at his behest and in accordance with his instructions.

The final text in *SWW* was reduced to a reference to prolonged and obstinate argument on the policy of night or day bombing, and the generous rivalry in trying out the opposing theories with the utmost sacrifice and heroism by both British and American crews.<sup>39</sup> But these were not the only changes imposed on Garrod’s outline.

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<sup>32</sup> Ismay Papers, 2/3 folios 159, 161 and 228. The Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College, London

<sup>33</sup> Ismay Papers 2/3 folio 237, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1950

<sup>34</sup> CHUR 4/25 folio 14

<sup>35</sup> CHUR 4/329 folios 121-130

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p 220 [Lieutenant General Sir Hastings Ismay was Chief of Staff to the Minister of Defence]

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p 220

<sup>38</sup> Geoffrey Best, *Churchill and War* (London, Hambledon and London, 2005) pp. 165-174

<sup>39</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. V, *Closing the Ring*, p 461

At Churchill's request Lord Cherwell, Churchill's erstwhile scientific expert who had advised on how to make area bombing more effective during the war, proposed a number of revisions and exclusions. Amongst the exclusions was the provision of figures on the manpower engaged in flak units, night fighter squadrons, and in the production of aircraft for defence of the German homeland. Subsequently, it has been acknowledged that this diversion of men and materials represented a primary achievement of the bombing campaign; ironically, an achievement downplayed by Churchill.<sup>40</sup>

On examination, virtually the entire section of the chapter was written by the Syndicate, with Churchill adding minor textual alterations such as the addition of the word 'courage' to the description of the German people.<sup>41</sup> When questioned by Saunders, for his recollections of Dresden in May 1950, Churchill wrote 'I cannot recall anything about it. I thought the Americans did it'.<sup>42</sup> This squeamishness on Churchill's part stands in stark, almost obscene, contrast with his oft-repeated views on the bombing of the German cities. He had earlier sought to create conditions intolerable to the mass of the German population – which went to the heart of the strategic bombing debate, as 'precision attacks' on military-industrial targets gave way to the 'terror bombing' of urban areas, designed to break civilian morale.<sup>43</sup> Churchill cut several similar remarks when editing documents for inclusion in *The Second World War*. For instance, the text of his first meeting with Stalin in the Kremlin on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1942 recorded Churchill's assurances that Britain looked upon German civilian morale as a military target and 'hoped to shatter twenty German cities, as we shattered Cologne'.<sup>44</sup> As the war went on, he added, Britain 'hoped to shatter almost every dwelling in almost every German city'. Of course, Churchill needed to sound particularly bellicose when Stalin had been accusing the British of inertia and even cowardice.<sup>45</sup> But Churchill also expressed similar sentiments in a memorandum about Italy in November 1942 in which he declared that 'all the industrial cities should be attacked in an intense fashion, every effort being made to terrorise and paralyse the population'.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the exchange with Stalin was excised from the final text when Deakin subsequently paraphrased the transcript into a more acceptable form.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Overy *The Air War 1939 – 1945* (London, Europa, 1980) p 122

<sup>41</sup> CHUR 4/372 folios 36 and 83-85

<sup>42</sup> CHUR 4/390A, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1950

Note of telephone conversation between WSC and Hilary St. George Saunders

[Along with Denis Richards, Saunders was writing a three volume popular history of the Royal Air Force in the Second World War. According to Cox, writing in Jeffrey Grey (ed.), *The Last Word: Essays on Official History in the United States and the British Commonwealth*. (Westport, Praeger, 2003) p 152, Saunders, although briefly considered a candidate to write the official history of the air offensive, was not a serious historian, and would have almost certainly produced a work of questionable academic value. Frankland goes further, suggesting that Saunders was not unduly concerned with factual accuracy and had little or no idea of historical research]

See Noble Frankland *History at War* (London, de la Mare, 1998) p 49

<sup>43</sup> CHUR 4/333 folio 146

<sup>44</sup> CHUR 4/279A-C folio 245

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> CHUR 4/287 folio 107

<sup>47</sup> Compare CHUR 4/279 folio 245 and Churchill, *The Second World War*, Volume IV, *The Hinge of Fate*, p 432

Churchill's obfuscation, selective memory even, of the events surrounding the bombings in general and the bombing of Dresden in particular contrasts markedly with the recorded comments of Sir Arthur Harris on the bomber offensive during his tenure as Commander-in-Chief. Harris had not been reticent in expressing his views on the role of Bomber Command. Yet analysis of Churchill's decisions in the early years of the war demonstrate that he was ultimately responsible for the area bombing strategy that was *already in place* before Arthur Harris was appointed Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command. In the introduction to his own official account, *Despatch on War Operations*, Harris described the main task laid upon his command as '[focused] attacks on the morale of the enemy civil population, and, in particular, of the industrial workers'.<sup>48</sup> It was his opinion that this was to be achieved by destroying, mainly by incendiary attacks, first, four large cities in the Ruhr area, and then, as opportunity offered, fourteen other industrial cities across Germany.<sup>49</sup> The aim of the attacks on town areas had already been set out in an Air Staff paper on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1941:

The ultimate aim of the attack on a town is to break the morale of the population who occupies it. To ensure this we must achieve two things: first, we must make the town physically uninhabitable, and, secondly, we must make the people conscious of constant personal danger. The immediate aim, is therefore, twofold, namely, to produce (i) destruction, and (ii) the fear of death.<sup>50</sup>

Months before Harris took command, and under the authority of Churchill, the principle of inflicting death, destruction and the fear of further death on the German population was established. Since the 1920s it had been assumed by air power theorists that such a use of air power would inevitably break the morale and will to fight of an enemy.<sup>51</sup> Reflecting later on Harris's intended memoir, Churchill wrote in a letter to Wing Commander John Lawrence, who assisted Harris with his writing, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1946, stating:

Our friend should be very careful in all that he writes not to admit anything not justified by the circumstances and the actions of the enemy in the measures we took to bomb Germany. We gave them full notice to clear out of their munition making cities. In fact, they had very good shelters and protection, and the position of the civilian population was very different from that of London, Coventry, Liverpool, etc. when they were bombed in the second year of the war. I am not quite clear about Dresden. It may be that we were asked to do this as part of some large military combination, but I am afraid the civilian losses there were unduly heavy.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Sir Arthur Harris *Despatch on War Operations: 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1942 to 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 with an introduction by Sebastian Cox*. (London, Frank Cass, 1995) p 7

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Harris, *Despatch on War Operations*, p 7

<sup>51</sup> See for example: Giulio Douhet *The Command of the Air* [translated by Dino Ferrari] (New York, Coward-McCann, 1942);

Basil Liddell Hart, *Paris, Or The Future of War* (London, Kegan Paul, 1925) pp. 43-48

<sup>52</sup> CHUR 2/150 Letter from Churchill to Lawrence, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1946 ('Most Private and Confidential') quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Never Despair* (London, Heinemann, 1988) p 259

The letter clearly demonstrates Churchill's continuing unease about Dresden, and the manner in which he continued to try and influence the judgement of history. However, the limited moral assessment he offers here is summed up in his view that the bombings were 'justified by the circumstances and the actions of the enemy'. However, he was not alone in ignoring Dresden, or glossing over his differences of opinion with Harris. Despite the public interest which was aroused after press reports of the bombing, and the interventions by Richard Stokes MP in the House of Commons and previously by George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, in the House of Lords, regarding bombing policy as it related to attacks on civilians, other wartime leaders were also careful to avoid mention of Dresden in their memoirs.<sup>53</sup> In his autobiography, 'Hap' Arnold, Commander-in-Chief of the US Army Air Force, made no mention of the raid, whilst Eisenhower, from whose Paris-based headquarters the formal orders for the raid on Dresden had come, and from where the press briefing which led to knowledge of the bombing emerging into the public domain, made no reference to the attack in his widely read memoir, *Crusade in Europe*.<sup>54</sup>

Critics of his wartime account observe that Churchill's use of documentation is incomplete, pointing out that whilst he printed many of his own appreciations and instructions, he rarely gives the answers or responses he received. Nor does he reveal what went on inside Cabinet relating to the grand strategy of the war, apart from occasions when he mentions its broad approval, or, rarely, disapproval, which he describes as obstruction. Although Churchill gives the reader his reasons for the conclusions he reached, he seldom attempts to defend them in the full light of competing contemporary perspectives or from historical retrospect. Nor does he attempt to draw an elaborate moral because he profoundly believes that history speaks for itself.<sup>55</sup> In the case of the bomber offensive, however, the references to it in *SWW* whisper rather than speak.

Churchill devoted just thirteen pages of text to the strategic bombing offensive out of the 3,597 pages that constitute the entire work: almost entirely dissociating himself from this aspect of the 'means' of victory while allowing Arthur Harris, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Bomber Command from February 1942 until September 1945, to bear the subsequent opprobrium for a campaign which the latter executed – as directed – but did not author.<sup>56</sup> This bifurcation of ends and means became more significant for Churchill as he sought to maximise his personal credit for victory while minimising his association with the application of air power that reached its nadir on that February night in Dresden. Ultimately, any misgivings Churchill had about the impact of the bomber offensive in general, and Dresden in particular, were set aside as the reviews of *The Second World War* overlooked these concerns in just the way he might have wished.

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<sup>53</sup> For examples of press coverage see *The Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1945, 'Smashing Blows on Dresden' or *New York Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1945, 'Ten Cities Bombed' For Stokes, see Hansard; HC Debate on Air Estimates, 6<sup>th</sup> March 1945, Volume 408, cc.1898-1902 and, for Bell, Bishop of Chichester, see Hansard; HL Debate on Bombing Policy, 9<sup>th</sup> February 1944, Volume 130, cc. 737-755

<sup>54</sup> H.H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York, Harper and Row, 1949); Dwight Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1948)

<sup>55</sup> Ashley, *Churchill as Historian*, p 176

<sup>56</sup> For a recent assessment of Harris's moral responsibility for the bomber offensive against Germany see Peter Lee, 'Return from the Wilderness: An Assessment of Arthur Harris' Moral Responsibility for the German City Bombings', *Air Power Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 2013) pp. 70-90

### Surveying the damage

As the war in Europe approached its conclusion there was another episode that demonstrated Churchill's awareness of history and his desire to shape it. On this occasion it was his behind-the-scenes manoeuvring rather than his words that would have long-lasting consequences for the historiography of the strategic bomber offensive.

The desire for a scientific evaluation of the results of the offensive had been in the minds of those directing the campaign from an early date.<sup>57</sup> The British had long been interested in conducting a joint survey with the Americans to assess how effective its bombing had been.<sup>58</sup> As the war progressed such suggestions were vigorously rejected. In the spring of 1944, when they were first circulated in USAAF circles, General Spaatz provided both official and bureaucratic reasons for avoiding any joint assessment.<sup>59</sup> These were largely cover for Spaatz' primary concern; that the American and British efforts would end up being merged in the public's perception, with deleterious consequences for the USA and the USAAF. This, at a time when the leadership of the USAAF was still pursuing its quest to become an independent air force. Arnold and Spaatz sought to distance the Army Air Forces in Europe from any reassessment of the roles and missions it carried out as part of any analysis of the combined bomber offensive.<sup>60</sup> In late 1944 during a debate with Eisenhower over the bombing of Berlin, Spaatz had argued to his Chief of Air Staff, General 'Hap' Arnold, that 'there is no doubt in my mind that the RAF want very much to have the US tarred with the morale bombing aftermath which we feel will be terrific'.<sup>61</sup>

The British did not appear to have appreciated the degree of American reluctance for a joint venture, and the Army Air Forces' desire to keep its inquest in American hands.<sup>62</sup> When Portal submitted his proposal to the Chiefs of Staff expressing the need for an investigation into the bombing, he was clearly thinking that the survey would be a joint one, even if the respective governments drew their own conclusions from the information obtained.<sup>63</sup> The Chiefs of Staff accepted the principle that the survey must be placed under the direction of a civilian of high position, who had no responsibilities for the formulation or execution of the policy of the strategic air offensive.<sup>64</sup> However, the task of forming a survey team was not to prove easy. There had been, and continued to be, competing interests at work in the formulation of bombing policy. Similarly, there were competing interests at work in attempting to influence the investigation of the results of the policy.<sup>65</sup> Thus, in September 1944 a

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<sup>57</sup> Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume IV, Appendix 5, pp. 40-58 'The British and United States Surveys of the Strategic Bombing Offensive'

<sup>58</sup> David MacIsaac, *Strategic Bombing in World War Two: The Story of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey* (London, Garland 1976) pp. 33-34

<sup>59</sup> Gian Peri Gentile *How Effective is Strategic Bombing? Lessons Learned from World War II to Kosovo* (New York, New York University Press, 2001) p 39

<sup>60</sup> W. Hays Parks, 'Precision and Area Bombing: Who Did Which, and When?' in Gooch, John (ed.) *Airpower Theory and Practice* (London, Cass, 1995) p 153

<sup>61</sup> Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, p 372

<sup>62</sup> Craven and Cate [eds.] *The Army Air Forces in World War Two*; 'The United States Strategic Bombing Survey' Volume III, p 789

<sup>63</sup> AIR 20/3413. Memorandum by the Chief of the Air Staff: 'Investigation of the Effect of the Combined Bomber Offensive.' 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1944.

<sup>64</sup> Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume IV, p 41

<sup>65</sup> Sebastian Cox, 'An Unwanted Child: The Struggle to Establish a British Bombing Survey' in

Bombing Analysis Unit was set up within the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), under the guidance of Professor Zuckermann, who had been, and still was, Air Chief Marshal Tedder's principal adviser on the attack on German communications. At the same time, Zuckermann wrote to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Bottomley urging the necessity of ascertaining the relative merits of area and precision bombing.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps because of competing interests, or possibly because of bureaucratic inertia, progress was slow in establishing a survey team. In mid-October, Portal addressed a minute to his Secretary of State, Sir Archibald Sinclair, outlining his proposals for a British Bombing Research Mission, with an independent and impartial head of high status to ensure that the ultimate findings of the mission will be free of all prejudice and will carry the greatest possible weight.<sup>67</sup> The Scientific Adviser to the Air Ministry pointed out 'as a matter of principle [that] the investigation of damage should not be by the people who [were] responsible for planning the attack, particularly in cases like this where there has been controversy as to the merits of some of the methods'.<sup>68</sup> The intention was apparently to present Churchill with a more or less agreed structure, and Portal clearly thought that there would be no great difficulty in obtaining approval of the scheme, which he said did not seem to him 'to be very complicated and is, so far as I know, entirely non-controversial'.<sup>69</sup>

All the greater, therefore, must have been the shock caused by Churchill's reply: an absolute refusal to sanction any scheme of the magnitude suggested.<sup>70</sup> Webster and Frankland described the refusal as a 'bombshell', and Portal and Sinclair were, as a consequence, forced to make preparations for a more modest investigative programme.<sup>71</sup> Efforts were made by Sinclair to circumvent Churchill's denial of the use of manpower and brainpower on the proposed scale. These manoeuvrings led to a new proposal being drafted for the War Cabinet by Sinclair, but once again Churchill refused to allow the paper to be placed on the agenda.<sup>72</sup> Instead, he insisted that it should first be examined by the Treasury, costed in accordance with peacetime practice, and then submitted to the three service ministers and the Chancellor of the Exchequer.<sup>73</sup>

Inviting such detailed Treasury scrutiny of the proposal, as Churchill undoubtedly well knew and intended, would impose yet further bureaucratic delay, and place even greater difficulties in the way of establishing an effective mission. This action aroused the indignation of the Air Ministry, and Portal resolved to appeal to his colleagues on the Chiefs of Staff Committee to, in turn, appeal to Churchill directly, without the

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*The Strategic Air War Against Germany: The Official Report of the British Bombing Survey* (London, Frank Cass, 1998) [pp. xvii-xxii]

<sup>66</sup> Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume IV, p 42

<sup>67</sup> AIR 20/3413. Minute from Chief of the Air Staff to Secretary of State, 17<sup>th</sup> October 1944

<sup>68</sup> Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume IV, p 43

<sup>69</sup> AIR 20/3413. Minute from Chief of the Air Staff to Secretary of State, 29<sup>th</sup> December 1944

<sup>70</sup> AIR 19/434. Minute from Prime Minister to Secretary of State, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1945

<sup>71</sup> Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume IV, p 45

<sup>72</sup> AIR 19/434. Letter from Sinclair enclosing a draft memorandum to the War Cabinet by Secretary of State for Air, First Lord of the Admiralty, Secretary of State for War, Minister of Home Security, and Minister of Economic Warfare, on the 'Investigation of the effects of the Combined Bomber Offensive'

<sup>73</sup> AIR 19/434. Minute from Prime Minister to Secretary of State, 6<sup>th</sup> March 1945

intermediary of ministers, a move to which they gave their approval. In the resulting memorandum, Portal stated:

For many years to come, unless another war supervenes, I cannot conceive that any examination of the offensive or defensive aspects of attacks on industry can fail to be influenced by the results of the bomber offensive on Germany. If we do not proceed without delay with the British Bombing Research Mission, we shall face the grave danger of Government opinion on the lessons of this war being based largely on propaganda, personal recollection, or on the results of investigations by other nations. The only body which would be adequately constituted to assess the results of the Combined Bomber Offensive and pronounce authoritatively on its value would be an American body. I should regard this as most unsatisfactory. American bombing methods have differed from our own. It is therefore only to be expected that the American report would concentrate upon those results for which the Americans have been mainly responsible and in which they would quite naturally be most interested, On the other hand, it would almost certainly ignore or obscure some of the results of Bomber Command's operations of which I consider it essential to ascertain the importance. Moreover, there would be a danger that a rather incomplete picture would be given to the world of results of an offensive in which a large proportion of British resources had been employed in this war.<sup>74</sup>

From an operational perspective all of this was true, but Churchill was adamant. For reasons that he did not make explicit, he plainly had no desire to see any detailed survey of the offensive undertaken, and was intent on placing every bureaucratic obstacle in its path. One obvious motivation, however, would be the obscuring from public eyes – or at least delaying the moment of revelation as far as possible – the minutiae of the consequences of the area bombing he advocated, implemented and supported: all the way to Dresden. Operational evaluation would inevitably be accompanied by increasingly informed moral assessment of key decisions and actions, with moral judgement also being passed on the individuals responsible: Churchill, potentially, chief among them. His reply on 8<sup>th</sup> April was to reiterate in even harsher terms his refusal to sanction an organisation on the scale proposed for what he termed a sterile task.<sup>75</sup> He offered, as he had done before, the use of thirty experts.<sup>76</sup> It was an unfortunate decision, made against the advice of all those who were able to judge the advantages of such an enquiry. It is the main reason why no authoritative pronouncement has ever been made in Britain, then, or since, on the conduct and results of the bomber offensive. It is also true that, just as Portal was afraid would happen, opinion in Britain was indeed largely based on propaganda, personal recollection, or investigations by other nations.<sup>77</sup> That does not necessarily

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<sup>74</sup> Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume IV pp. 56-58. 'Note by the Chief of the Air Staff on the British Bombing Research Mission', 30<sup>th</sup> March 1945

<sup>75</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. VI, *Triumph and Tragedy*, p 640

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.* p 651. In this minute [ostensibly on another matter] addressed to Sinclair and Bevin, Churchill wrote that: 'It is intolerable that [...] efforts should be made to find all kind of sterile jobs for people. I had the same trouble with the commission which was to examine the effects of bombing, which was to amount to a thousand persons.'

<sup>77</sup> Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume IV, p 45

mean that British opinion has been overly critical as a consequence. Churchill would have been more concerned if criticism had been intensified in his direction.

The United States Strategic Bombing Survey quite understandably focused on American efforts and downplayed the role of Bomber Command. Furthermore, its conclusions were often harsh in attitude towards the British contribution, reflecting the American's desire to distance themselves from the taint of area bombing. British bombing was portrayed in such a way as to promote the apparent effectiveness and precision of their own campaign.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the bias was so evident that the American official historians felt compelled to apologise for it, writing that 'the deprecating tone with regard to the contribution of the RAF which ran through much of the survey's work... did not reflect a judicious appraisal of the RAF effort'.<sup>79</sup>

By blocking the Air Ministry's effort to analyse the work of Bomber Command, Churchill ensured that it would not receive the full credit for its contribution – both positive and negative – to the war effort. That Portal should have been so effectively blocked by Churchill is, to some degree, surprising. But it was consistent with Churchill's occasional agonising about strategic bombing during the war.<sup>80</sup> It would also prove to be consistent with his aforementioned efforts to radically lower the profile of Bomber Command after the war. It would take the publication of Webster and Frankland's official history to correct many of the myths that were allowed to grow. However, by the time the official history was published, public perception of the bombings had been largely fixed, with Harris and the RAF at the centre of events and Churchill barely mentioned. History and popular memory developed without a proper understanding of Bomber Command's important contribution to the transportation campaign, the oil campaign, and to the general erosion of Germany's war economy and productivity: for the sake of minimizing public reference to the consequences of area bombing.<sup>81</sup> Tellingly, an outline of the American post-war analysis of bombing results, and criticism thereof was deferred to *Triumph and Tragedy* but did not appear in the final text.<sup>82</sup> Churchill had no intention of raising questions about the methods, or effectiveness, of the bombing offensive.

By the end of January 1951 Garrod had produced eighteen pages of typescript for Churchill's consideration.<sup>83</sup> Pownall then set to work on Garrod's draft and condensed it to just two and a half pages, amounting to 4000 words, which was, he said, what Churchill had in mind.<sup>84</sup> Behind the scenes, Cherwell and Garrod engaged in much debate about German industrial production in 1944.<sup>85</sup> To admit that Cherwell was correct in his belief that production actually rose would have cast doubt on the entire premise of the bomber offensive, with its proclaimed aim of destroying German industrial capacity and morale. In the final text a compromise was reached, acknowledging Speer's brilliant control of factory and forced labour to mobilise with

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<sup>78</sup> Hays Parks, 'Precision and Area Bombing: Who Did Which, and When?' pp. 145-174

<sup>79</sup> Craven and Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War Two*, Volume III, p 791

<sup>80</sup> Christopher Harmon *Are We Beasts: Churchill and the Moral Question of World War Two 'Area Bombing'* (Newport Papers, Naval War College, 1991)

<sup>81</sup> Tami Davis Biddle, 'Churchill and Portal: Their Wartime Relationship' in Gray and Cox (eds.) *Air Power Leadership: Theory and Practice* (London, HMSO, 2002) p 197

<sup>82</sup> CHUR 4/329 folios 118-120

<sup>83</sup> CHUR 4/329 folios 132-149

<sup>84</sup> CHUR 4/333 folio 142

<sup>85</sup> CHUR 4/329 folios 9, 119, 193 and 207

extraordinary speed and efficiency.<sup>86</sup> In so doing, Churchill sought to ensure that the Russians were not encouraged to believe that bombing had been ineffective, a not insignificant factor given that he was writing at the, then, height of the Cold War.<sup>87</sup>

Churchill claimed in the opening paragraphs of 'The Mounting Air Offensive' that Bomber Command eventually made a decisive contribution to victory.<sup>88</sup> That said, the remainder of the chapter sees him pulling his punches about the bomber offensive. Giving his views on the initial drafts, Sir Norman Brook commented diplomatically that 'The Mounting Offensive' was a rather flat statement of an endeavour on which vast resources and many lives had been expended. He suggested that the chapter was disproportionately short, and that it represented a bare summary of the story. He opined that, in revision, it would be expanded substantially. He urged Churchill to praise the bomber crews, and also to highlight the comparative merits of Bomber Command and the Eighth Air Force as regards efficiency, paying particular attention to the slow build-up of the American offensive.<sup>89</sup> However, this idea was dropped when statistics from the Air Ministry revealed that the RAF had lost 54,000 men, killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner, compared with an American figure of over 94,000. Most significantly, however, when Brook asked Churchill if he was prepared to offer a judgement on the value of strategic bombing, the response, boldly written in red ink, was 'Not in this volume'.<sup>90</sup> In fact, his judgement of the contribution to victory of strategic air power was reduced to a single paragraph in the final volume, *Triumph and Tragedy*.<sup>91</sup>

### **Obstructing an official history**

It was not just as official censors that the Cabinet Office assisted Churchill. Sir Norman Brook, in particular, spent much time advising on the prose and argument, as well as writing whole passages for inclusion in the text. Like Bridges, Brook saw himself as helping to expedite a quasi-official account of Britain's war. To them *SWW* was regarded as *the* British official history of the war, written by the man most qualified to do so.<sup>92</sup> In this respect it is hard to judge that Churchill had written a mere memoir. But it is possible to suggest that in his selection of documents, and in the construction of the narrative, Churchill and the Syndicate were editing to obscure where they felt it necessary. Setting aside the desire to obtain financial security, Churchill's deepest objective in writing *SWW* was the search for vindication. He wanted to show that he was right, both in terms of the judgements he made and the justice of his actions. In this lies the seeds of revisionism – or perhaps blatant,

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<sup>86</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. V, *Closing the Ring*, p 465

<sup>87</sup> It should be remembered that *SWW* was written shortly after Churchill's famous 'Iron Curtain' speech in Fulton, Missouri (5<sup>th</sup> March 1946) and the Korean War would be fought during the period of the writing of the six volumes, a conflict that raised fears of the possible further use of an atomic bomb. The Cuban Missile Crisis was still some way off in the future.

<sup>88</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. V, *Closing the Ring*, p 456

<sup>89</sup> CHUR 4/329 folio 29. This was typical of Brook's approach to Churchill, as one might expect of the Cabinet Secretary; tactful, subtle, skilful in negotiation.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. VI, *Triumph and Tragedy*, p 471

<sup>92</sup> Reynolds, *In Command of History*, p 499

It would be 1956 before the first two volumes of *Grand Strategy*, [J.R.M. Butler, (ed.)] written by John Ehrman, (London, HMSO, 1956) [volumes V and VI], part of the British official history of the Second World War, would appear. These volumes covered the period from August 1943 to the end of the war. Michael Howard's Volume IV covering the early period of the combined bomber offensive was not published until 1972.

intentional revisionism – and it is therefore prudent to look at the way he shaped access to official documents and impeded attempts to create an official history of the bomber offensive.

When Churchill was writing *SWW* academic historians were still barred from access to government documents covering the war years. The only exception was for those writing the official histories of the British war effort under the auspices of the Cabinet Office. In 1947, Churchill agreed that the official historians could have access to his ‘personal minutes and telegrams’ but he wished ‘to be shown beforehand any extracts which it [was] proposed to publish’.<sup>93</sup> By 1951 this proviso had been expanded to include his approval before ‘substantial use is made of information from those papers which [are] not on official record elsewhere’.<sup>94</sup> The sense of frustration felt by the historians had already been summed up by A.B. Acheson, Secretary to the Advisory Panel for the Official Military Histories of the War, when he wrote to Brook that it seemed to Professor Butler that Sir Winston has no interest in the official histories ‘except to obstruct them’ and that so far he had been doing so with considerable success.<sup>95</sup>

When Sir Charles Webster was initially nominated to write the official history of the strategic air offensive, he did not, at first sight, appear to be an ideal candidate. Unlike R.B. Wernham, the first historian approached by the Cabinet Office advisory panel set up under Professor J.R.M. Butler, he had no experience of the RAF or its operations, but he possessed a formidable intellect, and equally important, was a determined, independent, and forceful character, who would brook no interference with his work.<sup>96</sup> There is probably no clearer example of his determination to write the official history on his own terms than in a memo he sent to Butler with regard to Churchill’s attempts to obstruct Webster and Frankland in their efforts to produce what was always likely to be a difficult and controversial work:<sup>97</sup>

I must express my astonishment that any individual should be allowed to make conditions concerning the text of the histories. I do not know what the attitude of the government would be to such an attempt, but I am quite sure that the reaction of Parliament and public opinion would be if the fact were known... it is quite wrong that any individual, however eminent, should have been given the power to cause indefinite delay and frustration in the conduct of public service.<sup>98</sup>

In an article on Churchill as chronicler, Webster had praised the frankness with which Churchill had presented his history of the Second World War. Tellingly, he went on to say that ‘the same licence must be allowed others, and those engaged in writing the

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<sup>93</sup> CAB 103/422 WSC to Bridges, 17<sup>th</sup> July 1947

<sup>94</sup> CAB 103/422 Minute of meeting of the Military Histories Committee, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1951

<sup>95</sup> CAB 103/534 Acheson to Brook, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1955

<sup>96</sup> For a full description of the process by which Webster and Frankland were appointed as the official historians of the strategic air offensive against Germany see Cox, ‘Setting the Historical Agenda: Webster and Frankland and the Debate over the Strategic Bombing of Germany, 1939-1945’ in Grey, (ed.) *The Last Word?* pp. 147-173

<sup>97</sup> Frankland, *History at War*, p 47

<sup>98</sup> CAB 140/68 Webster to Butler, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1955

war histories must be given the opportunity to use the secret documents with the same candour and regard for truth as Sir Winston himself has shown'.<sup>99</sup>

As the first draft of Webster and Frankland's work approached its conclusion, they were permitted to show it to a restricted audience to seek useful criticism. At this stage the manuscript was to remain secret until cleared for publication by the Cabinet Office.<sup>100</sup> In April 1956 they received Sir Ian Jacob's comments on the strategic role of Bomber Command between January 1943 and February 1944. Jacob said that he found Frankland fair to all the individuals concerned, but he took issue with the disclosure of the minute that Churchill had written condemning the bombing of Dresden, and then, under pressure from Portal, withdrawn.<sup>101</sup> Significantly, this was the controversial minute that had asked whether the moment had come to question the bombing of Germany simply for the sake of terror. The official history described it as, perhaps amongst the least felicitous of the Prime Minister's long series of wartime minutes.<sup>102</sup> As Frankland observed, a minute withdrawn may, and in this case, did, say more about a process of thought than a revised one.<sup>103</sup>

Sir Ian Jacob was a member of Butler's panel of advisors and according to Frankland was vastly experienced, shrewd, intelligent, helpful, and reasonable. Personally he stood outside of the issues relating to the bomber offensive, with one exception; he had been charged by Churchill to look after his interests in matters of this sort. In Frankland's words, Churchill, the great war-leader, still very much alive, wished history in its every detail to come out his way.<sup>104</sup> Aware of Churchill's capacity for interference and obstruction in defending his own interests – as well as the conditions he imposed on the use of his papers – the official historians had foregone using Churchill's own papers in preparing their text. Webster's prudence was rewarded when, as he predicted, they were able to discover all they wanted to know about Churchill and the bombing offensive from the Cabinet, Air Ministry, and Bomber Command files.<sup>105</sup> Thus, when Jacob raised the issue of the controversial minute, Webster and Frankland regarded it as a mere straw in the wind, and rightly presumed that Jacob was well aware of the arguments the historians might advance. Nevertheless, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany* had been subjected to attempts by Churchill to ensure his legacy, but Churchill had no authority to prevent full access to the other disparate files used by the official historians.

In the preamble to Michael Howard's review of *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany* he remarks that the term 'Official History' is self-contradictory; it rests on the assumption that the government cares to reveal the full extent of the muddle, inefficiency and waste inseparable from war's conduct, and that perhaps no government should.<sup>106</sup> He continues: 'Official History should be marmoreal monuments to the heroism of the men who died in the campaigns they chronicle, blasting no reputations and offending no survivors.' It is an assessment with which

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Frankland, *History at War*, p 97

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Webster and Frankland, *SAOG*, Volume III, p 112

<sup>103</sup> Frankland, *History at War*, p 97

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.* p 98

<sup>106</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1961, 'The Bomber Gets Through'

Churchill might well have concurred. However, it was not a purpose with which Sir Charles Webster and Dr. Noble Frankland could agree. Howard describes Webster as one of the most honest and pugnacious scholars who has ever written history, and one formidably impatient of cant. As a work of individual, or more accurately, dual, scholarship, Howard considered *SAOG* to be an achievement possibly without parallel in military history.<sup>107</sup> Unlike Churchill's cursory treatment, the judgments that the authors reached are not easily to be questioned after the painstaking sifting of thousands of documents, unless by those who are prepared to make themselves equally expert; and of those, there can be few. And so it is remarkable that the publication of *SAOG* should have prompted so much controversy.

Amongst the controversies that featured in *SAOG* there was the doctrinal debate between Harris and other senior commanders, both British and American, about issues such as the tactical bombing support of land forces during the preparation for *Overlord*, and attacks on oil and communications targets in the autumn of 1944.<sup>108</sup> Not surprisingly, Portal and Harris were not anxious to have their dirty linen aired in public, and Frankland subsequently referred to what he called an 'unholy alliance' between them to prevent publication of any reference to their debate about bombing policy towards the end of 1944.<sup>109</sup> And yet, if the likelihood of ensuing controversy was a cause for concern for Churchill and the principal military commanders, they might well have been reassured by the assurance given by Brook to Prime Minister Macmillan that 'official histories do not normally attract much public interest'.<sup>110</sup> This was not a view with which Sir Charles Webster concurred. Frankland recalls that before his death, Webster had felt that they would not be ignored, and that their work would attract a great deal of attention.<sup>111</sup> Although official histories might occasionally attract reviews outside of scholarly journals, they were not usually the subject of newspaper articles in the so-called quality press, let alone in the popular press, or on television. *SAOG* proved to be a striking exception to this generality.<sup>112</sup> Following in the wake of the publication of *SAOG* and the related press coverage, renewed interest in the strategic bomber offensive was indicated by the expanding historiography, and the subsequent debate. No longer was Churchill in a position to influence the growing body of literature. The work of Webster and Frankland was of such an irrefutably high standard that it had the effect of defining subsequent debate and the historiography.

In his careful selection of documents for public consumption lay Churchill's *de facto* revisionism. Many of his wartime colleagues were irritated by the one-sided nature of his account, and as the 1950s progressed some of them started to speak out.<sup>113</sup> Because academic historians were still denied access to government documents, and with many documents still considered to be personal minutes and telegrams, Churchill was shielded from the prospect of dissenting voices. Furthermore, Portal was an

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Christina Goulter, 'British Official Histories of the Air War' in Jeffrey Grey, (ed.) *The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and British Commonwealth.* (Westport, Praeger, 2003) pp. 141-146

<sup>109</sup> Frankland, *History at War*, p 88

<sup>110</sup> CAB 103/544 Brook to Prime Minister, 27<sup>th</sup> January 1960

<sup>111</sup> Frankland, *History at War*, p 114

<sup>112</sup> The extent to which this was the case is described at length in Frankland, *ibid.* pp. 114-135

<sup>113</sup> For example see the biography of Alanbrooke by Arthur Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide* (London, Collins, 1957)

intensely private man who never wrote his memoirs, while Harris expressly declined from publishing anything without the approval of Churchill himself. The revision of history had commenced before the publication of the official history, when Churchill sought to set the record straight in a manner of his choosing. So it would fall to the authors of the official history to complete the first major counter-revision to the historiography of the strategic bomber offensive from the narrative presented in *SWW*. As Reynolds remarks, in 1943 Churchill was on the defensive strategically; by 1950 he was trying to defend himself against the historiography.<sup>114</sup>

## Conclusion

There are a number of possible motivations for Churchill's actions in downplaying the harsh reality of area bombing once victory was in sight and Britain was no longer facing an existential threat. He may have been stricken with moral qualm about the events he ordered and authorised. As the end of the war approached, members of parliament, bishops of the Church of England, and many others – for moral reasons – had been increasing the pressure on Churchill to adopt more discriminating methods of deploying the bomber force at his disposal. However, indications of moral doubt are exceedingly rare from a man who wrote and said so much and about whom so much has been written and spoken. In contrast, his support for bombing of the harshest kind was evident long before the Second World War started and he became Prime Minister and Defence Secretary. The man who crossed the floor of the House of Commons, twice, had also long demonstrated a capacity for self-interested political manoeuvring.

Political ambition and a concern for history appear to have been the two most powerful motivations for Churchill. His sustained obfuscation of the detail of the bomber offensive and his part in it are much more likely to have been motivated by *realpolitik* and self-interest than moral outrage. As the end of the war approached, the great wartime leader was plotting not only the future shape of Europe, but planning his own place in history as well as further political office. As the end of the war neared there was a rapidly growing concern amongst the Western Allies over what a post-war Europe might look like. Rehabilitating and rebuilding Germany – and protecting it from Soviet expansionism – was a key strategic aim. Raking over the bombing damage, literally and metaphorically, would delay the building of sustainable peace and harmony between former enemies. Furthermore, increased public awareness of the detail of the bombings would only fuel the anger and judgement of the voices already raised against him at home. Also problematic was the post-war descent into what would become the Cold War. While Germans might have complained about the destructiveness of area bombing and Churchill's critics passed a harsher moral judgement on his part in area bombing, Churchill would also have been keen to avoid giving the Soviets any indication of the limits of the effectiveness of Britain's bombing capability: all of which could have emerged from a detailed post-war bombing survey.

Aware that the first major account of the war – especially from his unique vantage point – would have a significant impact on the assessments and commentaries to follow, Churchill was able, at least to some degree, to fashion history in his own image: enlightening and concealing as he saw fit. He would subsequently not allow –

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<sup>114</sup> Reynolds, *In Command of History*, p 364

as far as he was able – the controversy over the bomber offensive to detract from his personal legacy, downplaying its significance in his *magnum opus: The Second World War*. In addition, through deliberate obstruction, obfuscation and procrastination, Churchill would ensure that detailed analysis of the efficiency and effectiveness, and therefore the related morality, of the strategic air offensive against Germany through a comprehensive bombing survey, would be delayed for many years. As a result, his personal recollections and *de facto* revisionism would unduly impact upon the historiography of Britain's Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany until Webster and Frankland's four-volume work of that name was published in 1961: a work that he would most likely have impeded further if it has been within his abilities to do so.

Churchill had made countless monumental decisions in which thousands, tens of thousands of lives and more were saved or sacrificed in the pursuit of victory: he stood by them and took maximum credit where possible. Yet his readiness to obscure the detail of the German city bombings and leave others to bear a disproportionate burden of blame is morally cowardly. In the oft-overlooked shadows of every plaudit Churchill received, and continues to receive for his wartime leadership, stands the practical and moral assessment of his decisions and actions, especially with regard to the bombing of the German cities. His choices were always understandable, usually necessary, and most often balanced on the side of justice. Throughout it all and subsequently, however, responsibility was always his more than anyone else's to bear. His desire to write history in his favour should not be treated with humour and indulgence given his propensity not merely to avoid unwelcome blame or responsibility where he saw fit, but to relocate it elsewhere. None of the above necessarily detracts from Churchill's popular standing as the greatest Briton of the twentieth century. However, it is presented as another reminder – if one were needed – that this great Briton was not a saint who should not be subjected to critical scrutiny, but an occasionally brilliant, flawed, temperamental, and deeply self-regarding individual whose achievements should not be viewed on his own terms through his rose-tinted historical revisionism. Churchill's place in history is assured, but it is not for him to decide where that should be.