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HITLER'S DESTRUCTION OF GUERNICA

Practicing Blitzkrieg in Basque Country

By Jörg Diehl

The attack quickly became the symbol of senseless destruction and for Nazi brutality: Exactly 70 years ago, the Condor Legion rained death down on the Spanish town of Guernica. For the Germans, it was little more than a training run.

"Guernica, city with 5,000 residents," the commander of the Condor Legion, Wolfram von Richthofen, noted curtly in his journal, "has been literally razed to the ground. Bomb craters can be seen in the streets. Simply wonderful." Not a word was written about the hundreds of dead.

PHOTO GALLERY: THE DESTRUCTION OF GUERNICA



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April 26, 1937 was a Monday, a market day. Thousands of people were out on the streets of the Basque town of Guernica when around 4:30 in the afternoon, the bells suddenly began ringing. Air raid alarm! The first airplane appeared on the horizon, a German Heinkel 111 bomber -- in the cockpit was Lieutenant Rudolf von Moreau. When he was over the city center, von Moreau opened his bomb bay doors -- and death rained down on the city.

Waves of bombers and fighter planes followed. They dropped explosives, fragmentation bombs and incendiaries, a total of 31 tons of munitions fell on Guernica that day. For two and a half hours, the bombs rained down on the city from German and Italian warplanes -- "with a brutality that had never been seen before," as the president of the Basque "Autonomous Republic" Jose Antonio de Aguirre said three days later. "They scorched the city and fired machine guns at the women and children who fled in panic, resulting in numerous deaths."

Herding the people to slaughter

Eyewitness Juan Guezureya recalled the devastating afternoon in a 1974 conversation with two British reporters: "The two planes flew back and forth at a height of about 30 meters, like flying German Shepards driving the herd of people to the slaughter."

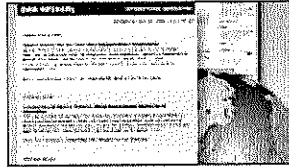
According to war reporter George L. Steer in the London daily the *Times* two days later, the strategy seemed clear. First, he wrote, came the heavy bombs and grenades to drive the population into panic. Then came the machine-gun strafing to drive them underground. Finally, came the incendiary bombs to destroy their hiding places.

The consequences of the attack were horrifying. Almost three-quarters of the city's buildings were destroyed and the center was almost completely wiped out. "When I entered Guernica after midnight," Steer wrote in his report, "houses were crashing on either side, and it was utterly impossible even for firemen to enter the center of the town. The hospitals of Josefinas and Convento de Santa Clara were glowing heaps of embers, all the churches except that of Santa Maria were destroyed, and the few houses which still stood were doomed. When I revisited Guernica this afternoon most of the town was still burning and new fires had broken out. About

30 dead were laid out in a ruined hospital."

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The number of victims can only be guessed at. The Basque government said that 1,654 residents had been killed with a further 889 injured. Later investigations assume a much lower total -- 200 to 300 victims. What is clear, however, is that Guernica was one of the first cities ever to be destroyed by a bombing attack -- an attack carried out with no regard for women, children or the elderly. Three years before the destruction of Coventry and eight years before the bombing of Dresden, the pilots of Germany's Condor Legion broke with the basic military precept of doing no harm to civilians.

Blatant violation

"For the German air force, Guernica was a trial run on how one can spread horror and distress through attacks on cities and towns," Wolfgang Schmidt, air force expert at the Military History Research Institute in Potsdam, told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "Of course the bombing of Guernica was a blatant violation of human rights and had a terrorist character. It was accepted that civilians would be harmed."

Reporter Steer chose more explicit words to describe the raid: "The raid on Guernica is unparalleled in military history," he wrote in his *Times* report. "Guernica was not a military objective. A factory producing war material lay outside the town and was untouched. The object of the bombardment was seemingly the demoralization of the civil population and the destruction of the cradle of the Basque race."

The international reaction that followed the attack was intense. The entire world wanted to know who was responsible for the shameful act. The nationalist camp, led by subsequent Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, claimed that retreating Republicans had destroyed the city. When Nazi Defense Minister Werner von Blomberg asked the leadership of the Condor Legion who participated in the raid, he was greeted with the audacious reply: "No Germans."

But at the same time, the military sent specialists to the occupied city to collect suspicious leftovers from the hail of bombs. The pilots were also ordered to say nothing about the raid. In an effort to complete the deceit, the commander of the German expeditionary force unofficially aiding Franco radioed Berlin with a message indicating that the Condor Legion had fired on retreating enemy troops in the Guernica region and in the town itself.

Testing tactics under realistic conditions

When the deception failed to convince, the German army pled that the attack had been a tactical necessity. The aim of the operation, they said after the fact, had merely been to destroy bridges in the city to cut off the retreat of enemy soldiers. But as the world learned from then air force head Hermann Göring during the post-war Nuremberg Trials, the army's mission in Spain had also been to gain experience and to practice. There was an "opportunity to test under fire whether the materiel had been adequately developed," Göring said. In 2003, DER SPIEGEL published a document long thought to have been lost which proved that the primary reason the Germans were fighting on the Iberian Peninsula was to test out modern war materiel and tactics under realistic conditions.

The secret document was produced by Joachim von Richthofen, not related to his commander of the same name. He wrote a report for the Condor Legion as to the efficacy of German, Spanish and Italian bombs and provided suggestions as to how their performance could be enhanced. He described Guernica as a planned operation: "First came the incendiary bombs which set a number of roofs on fire." After that, he wrote, "followed the 250-kilogram heavy explosives" in order to "destroy water pipes thus hindering the extinguishing of the fires." He complained that the number of direct hits wasn't terribly high and could be improved. He said nothing, however, about

the fact that numerous bridges and factories survived the raid unharmed.

Since then, it has been clear that the Germans saw the Spanish Civil War merely as a gigantic training camp. Some 19,000 soldiers -- officially all were volunteers -- were cycled through the war zone by the Nazis. "Two years of combat experience are more useful than 10 years of peacetime training," a German general summarized.

The commander of Condor Legion, Wolfram von Richthofen, eventually rose to the position of field marshal in Hitler's military machine. He died just weeks after the end of World War II. In his journal about the Spanish operation, he noted on April 28, 1937: "In the evening came the report that Guernica had been razed to the ground. No plans so far for tomorrow."

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