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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

TRANSLATION VII/132

GERMAN BOMBING

OF

WARSAW AND ROTTERDAM

ISSUED BY  
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WARSAW

The operations of the Luftwaffe against Warsaw may be divided into four phases:-

- Phase 1      During the first three days of the campaign (1-3 September) attacks were made on the three airfields in Warsaw, ammunition depôts, railway stations and radio stations.
- Phase 2      From 4-8 September, to give indirect support to the Army, air attacks were made on railways, bridges and roads in the city, in order to hinder the movements of the Polish Army.
- Phase 3      From 8-13 September, the main weight of air attack was thrown against the Praga area, east of the River Weichsel (Vistula) to give direct support to the advancing Third Army.
- Phase 4      In the final phase, which ended with the capitulation of the city on 27 September, the attacks were, in the main, aimed at destroying public utilities, such as power stations, gasworks and waterworks, in order to force the surrender.

The operations of the Luftwaffe during the first three phases were, broadly speaking, confined to military objectives, and were in conformity with its appointed tasks of defeating the Polish Air Force and giving direct or indirect support to the ground forces. It is the use of air power in the final and decisive phase which is more debatable and must, therefore, be examined in some detail.

By 16 September, the German ring around Warsaw had been closed and, on Hitler's orders, a demand to surrender within six hours was sent to the Polish Commander. The latter, however, refused to receive the German emissary and leaflets were thereupon dropped, urging the civilian population to leave the city in 12 hours, unless it had capitulated in the meantime. A heavy raid was planned for the following day (17th), using the combined forces of Luftflotten 1 and 4, but it was called off, in view of a Polish request for discussions regarding the evacuation of civilians and embassy staffs. It was now apparent that the defenders did not intend to surrender and the Germans made preparations for an assault on the city. The rôle of the Luftwaffe was defined in an order issued by its Headquarters on 22 September. After quoting a directive by Hitler (Weisung No. 20) which stipulated that the main centre of resistance West of the Vistula must be in German hands by 3 October, <sup>(1)</sup> the order laid down that air attacks were to be made, in the first instance, on installations essential for the maintenance of life in the city. General von Richthofen, who was to direct the attacks, wanted to be much more ruthless and requested permission to destroy Warsaw completely, especially, as he cynically observed, it would in future be only a customs station (Grenzzollamt). It is true that this suggestion was rejected by the Chief of Air Staff, but it is worth recording as indicating the outlook of the man responsible for the subsequent attacks.

The weather was unfavourable for flying on 23 September, but on the following day, a total of 77 aircraft, mostly Stukas, bombed waterworks and power stations. More leaflets were also dropped but there was no response from the Poles, who continued to offer strong A.A. opposition to the bombers.

The final assault on the city began the next day (25th). In close collaboration with Eighth Army, the Luftwaffe carried out continuous attacks from 08.00 hours until darkness, putting up a total effort of 1150 sorties and dropping 558 tons of bombs. Some of the units were ordered to bomb

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(1) This was the date on which the Russians, who had crossed the Polish border on 17 September, were expected to reach Praga, east of the river. This area was to be handed over to the Russian troops.

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public utilities, such as gasworks and waterworks, but most of them were not given any such specific targets and carried out waves of attacks on the whole of the city area. Even Junkers 52's, normally used only for transport purposes, were pressed into service and flew over a hundred sorties, scattering incendiary bombs with such lack of precision that some fell among German troops. Numerous conflagrations were caused, the Luftflotte 4 War Diary recording that "the whole town was enveloped in a sea of smoke (Rauchmeer)".

By the following day (26th), the advance of the Eighth Army had made such progress that air support was not called for and only leaflets were dropped. The city capitulated on the morning of 27 September.

There can be little doubt that the heavy air attacks on 25 September did much to force the Polish defenders to surrender. To the German High Command, the issue was clear. In order to prevent heavy losses to their infantry, heavy artillery and air attacks were made to soften-up the defences and to break the Polish will to resist. Contemporary documents substantiate the claim made by Goering at Nuremberg that efforts were made to persuade the Polish authorities to surrender before the final assault was launched or at least to evacuate the civilian population. These efforts failed because of the determination of the Poles to defend their capital as long as it was physically possible, and it was only when the air attacks had destroyed the essential services that they were forced to bow to the inevitable. As the Chief of Staff of Luftflotte 1, General Speidel put it, in a lecture given in Prague in November 1939, "the attacks on the sources of power (Kraftquellen) proved to be the most effective means of achieving the capitulation: the lack of water forced (the defenders) to surrender the fortress." It is not true, therefore, as Goering said at Nuremberg, that the targets attacked were "first the forts, then the batteries erected within the city and the troops". The main purpose of the attacks was to undermine the Poles' will to resist and to deny them the means of existence. The indiscriminate nature of many of the attacks suggests that von Richthofen, in spite of the official rejection of his original proposals, did his best to fulfil his desire to achieve the blotting-out (Tilgung) of the city.

Sources

War diaries of Luftflotte 4

War diary of Fliegerführer z.b.V.

Text of lecture by Generalmajor Speidel in Prague 16 Nov. 1939 entitled "Der Einsatz der Luftwaffe im polischen Feldzug" (The operations of the Luftwaffe in the Polish campaign).

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ROTTERDAM

The bombing of Rotterdam on 14 May 1940 presents a problem of some complexity. There are two aspects to be considered. Firstly, the legitimate tactical use of air bombardment in support of the ground operations. Secondly, the more questionable use of air power to hasten the surrender of the town.

On the first point, the German attitude, as revealed by contemporary Army documents, was that Rotterdam could no longer be regarded as an "open city" as areas of the town had been fortified and troops were defending them against the Germans, who were, in fact, being hard pressed to hold their positions. The G.O.C. XXXIX Corps (General Schmidt) accordingly prepared an assault to be launched on 14 May, preceded by a bombing attack from 13.30 to 14.00 hours, \* for which one Stuka Geschwader (about 100 aircraft) of Fliegerkorps Putzier was allotted. Goering and Kesselring (who was commanding Luftflotte 2 at the time) in their post-war statements, have claimed that the actual attack was carried out solely as a tactical operation, but an examination of all the available evidence clearly shows that there were other considerations.

This leads us to the second point - the significance of the raid in relation to the surrender of the city. To appreciate this fully, it will be useful to give some account of the actual events.

On the evening of 13 May, Eighteenth Army sent the following order to General Schmidt:- "Resistance in Rotterdam will be broken with every means; if necessary destruction of the town will be threatened and carried out". At 10.30 the following morning, therefore, the Dutch authorities received an ultimatum which threatened the "complete destruction" of the city unless resistance ceased forthwith. The Dutch were given two hours in which to reply. At 12.10, although there was still no official answer from the Dutch, General Schmidt learnt that surrender was likely and he immediately took steps to postpone the bombing, scheduled for 13.30. The War Diary of XXXIX Corps records that "Fliegerkorps Putzier received at 12.10 hours, through 7th Parachute Division, the following order: "bombing attack Rotterdam postponed owing to surrender negotiations".

The Dutch reply was received at about 12.30 but it merely asked for the signature and rank of the officer sending the ultimatum - which had, by some chance, been omitted. The Germans interpreted this, probably correctly, as an attempt to play for time. Accordingly, Schmidt drew up the terms of surrender, which demanded that all negotiations must be completed in time for the German occupation to take place before dark. A new time-limit of 3 hours (up to 16.30) was fixed, but no threats were made. This communication was handed over to the Dutch representative, who left the meeting-place at 13.20. A few minutes later, a formation of bombers was seen approaching and General Schmidt gave the order to fire red flares as a signal to the aircraft to refrain from bombing. Nevertheless, at 13.30 the bombing started, causing large fires and considerable damage. \* Two hours later, Rotterdam formally surrendered and the German troops took possession of the city. The capitulation of the whole Dutch Army followed the next morning (15 May). It is clear, from the above evidence, that General Schmidt did his best to call off the air attack. Why, then, was it carried out when surrender negotiations were in progress? In his memoirs, Kesselring declares that he had no knowledge of these negotiations but this is hard to believe, particularly as Goering admitted at Nuremberg that there was radio communication between Rotterdam and Luftflotte 2 via his (Goering's) headquarters. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that the message from General Schmidt to the Air Corps, postponing the attack, must have been known to Kesselring and probably also to Goering. There is, unfortunately, no record of what was said /during

\* local time has been used throughout this paper

\* Contemporary estimates of casualties were greatly exaggerated. The figure given at the time was about 30,000, but it is now known that the total civilian death-roll was about 980.

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during the telephone conversation between Goering and Kesselring which, according to the latter, went on throughout the morning on the question of the air attack. However, it is unlikely that Goering would ignore the psychological effect of the attack and, with Warsaw in mind, he must have realised that a display of air power would probably hasten the Dutch surrender. He may, therefore, have decided to over-ride the Schmidt request on the ground that the surrender was not yet an accomplished fact. When the bomber force arrived over Rotterdam, about one-half saw the red flares and did not drop their bombs on the city. The other half either did not see the flares or failed to appreciate their significance, and bombed according to plan. \*

To sum up, it can fairly be said that, even if the attack was not completely indiscriminate, it was quite unnecessary, and cannot be excused, as Goering and Kesselring have suggested, on the grounds of inadequate means of communication between ground and air. We have clear evidence that the Germans were prepared to be ruthless and had threatened the destruction of the city if it did not surrender. Although complete evidence is lacking, it would appear probable that Goering decided to hasten the surrender by intimidating the defenders with a display of air power, not unmindful of the probable repercussions on the Dutch Army as a whole. In fact, as the German air attaché, Wenninger, told Kesselring, in consequence of the attack, the whole of the Dutch Army capitulated.

It is not, perhaps, without significance that, after the bombing, General Schmidt expressed his regret to the Dutch Commander in Rotterdam that the attack had been carried out.

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- \* It has been generally believed that the attack was carried out by Stukas, and the OKW communiqué of 14 May referred to "attacks by German dive-bombers". It is now established, however, that the unit concerned was Kampfgeschwader 54, which was equipped with Heinkel 111's. A total of 94 tons of bombs was dropped, suggested that some 45 to 50 aircraft, or half the Geschwader, dropped their load on the city. The use of the Heinkel, which could carry a much greater bomb-load than the Ju.87, may be an indication of Goering's desire to demonstrate the destructive powers of the Luftwaffe. It will be remembered that in the orders for the tactical use of the air arm, a Stuka Geschwader was allotted to the support of the ground forces.

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