

Extracts from a secret government memorandum dated July 24th 1943 relating to Hamburg

Catalogue ref: PREM 3/11/08

Extract a

2. Before we can express any opinion I think we must clear up a question of fact.

At 'X' of his minute Sir Henry Tizard says that apart from submarines and shipping Hamburg is not industrially important.

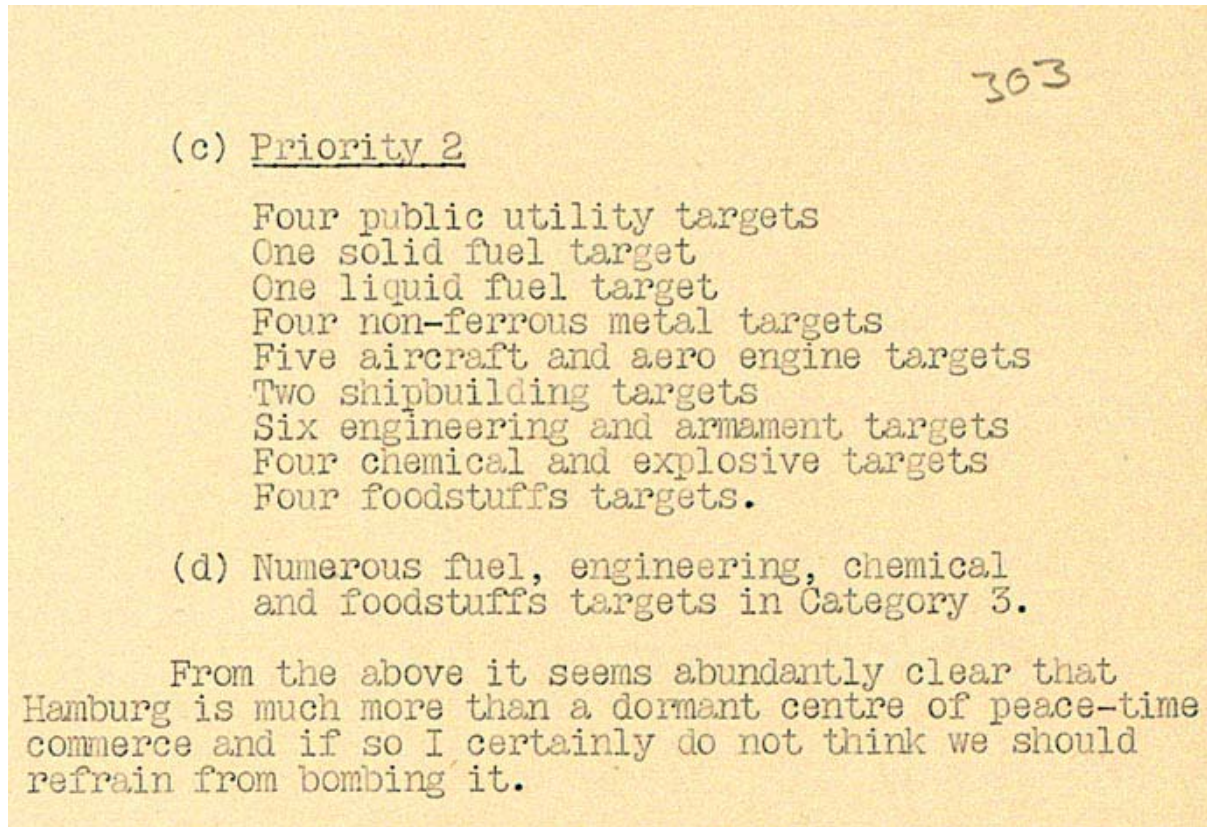
The Ministry of Economic Warfare on the other hand rate the "overall economic importance", i.e. the contribution to the war effort, of Hamburg as being fourth of all the cities of Germany, the first three being Berlin, Duisburg and Bochum/Gelsenkirchen. The M.E.W. give Hamburg the following key points:-

(a) Priority 1+ (highest possible)

One liquid fuel (or substitute) target
Two ship building targets

(b) Priority 1

Four transportation targets
One public utility target
Two liquid fuel targets
Two non-ferrous metal targets
One shipbuilding target
One engineering and armament target
One textile target, and
One rubber target.

Extract b

What is this source?

This source is a secret government memorandum. It is a document sent from one government department to another.

What's the background to this source?

The war began in 1939 and went well for Germany at first. By 1940 Hitler controlled most of Western Europe, apart from Britain. He then attacked the USSR in the summer of 1941. This became the main campaign of the war. However, Britain was anxious to try and help her Soviet allies. Britain did not have the resources to attack Germany on the ground but they did have a fleet of heavy bombers that could attack Germany by air.

WESTERN EUROPE 1939-1945: HAMBURG

When the USA joined the war in December 1941 they also had heavy bombers. From 1942 until the end of the war they pounded German targets. The bombing continued even after the D-Day landings in June 1944.

It's worth knowing that...

Hamburg was an important target for many reasons. Within Hamburg's submarine pens, U boats, so dangerous to British ships, were built and repaired. Hamburg was also comparatively near to Britain and was therefore an easier target.

Perhaps the main reason to use area bombing against Hamburg was that precision bombing was so inaccurate. A report in 1941 showed that most bombs did not fall within five miles of their target. Also, daylight raids on well defended targets led to huge losses of aircraft and aircrew. As a result, the RAF Bomber Command chief Sir Arthur Harris decided to use area bombing. Basically, this meant destroying the whole city so that the industrial targets would be destroyed and so would civilian housing.

How does this source help us to understand why the RAF bombed German cities?

1. Were the British officials all agreed that Hamburg was a good target?
2. Do you find the arguments convincing that Hamburg played a key role in the German war effort?
3. Instead of destroying the entire city do you think that the RAF should have tried to destroy just the targets listed? What were the problems with this approach? (Study the notes)
4. Can this source be used to support any of the viewpoints A-D for your debate?