*This student example from 2016-17 received an 18/25 which is the equivalent of a 6. The following marks were earned for each Criteria:

**Criterion A:** 4/6  
**Criterion B:** 11/15  
**Criterion C:** 3/4

World War II area bombing: justified means to end a war or cruel, useless acts?
Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

The focus of this investigation will be “World War II area bombing: justified means to end a war or cruel, useless acts?” The question of whether or not area bombing performed by the Royal Air Force was necessary will be assessed. The bombings of the RAF on the German city of Dresden will be evaluated, for the bombings were deliberately on the civilians of Germany. In order to analyze both sides of the question, sources with both arguments will be evaluated.

“Extract from the official account of Bomber Command by Arthur Harris, 1945” and Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan, by Anthony Clifford Grayling are sources of particular value because of their differing perspectives.

The first source, “Extract from the official account of Bomber Command by Arthur Harris, 1945”, is a primary source that could be of significant value to historians looking for Harris’ reasoning behind the bombing of Dresden. The content of the source gives insight to the marshal’s opinion on the necessity and the results of the bombings. In regards to origin, the source is a statement directly from Arthur Harris, the commander-in-chief of bomber command from 1942 to 1945, so it is of value in the sense that the information given is given straight from the man who decided to perform the area bombings. Furthermore, Harris supported area bombings strongly, so this source gives insight to the argument that the bombing of civilians was necessary and justified.

This source also has some limitations that are caused by the source’s origin and purpose. The origin of the piece is from a governmental archive, in which Harris gave his account of the bombings of Dresden. The origin gives the source some limitations because of its author. Harris was obviously partial for his view on the necessity of the bombings on Dresden. He was the man
who made the final decision to carry out the bombing, so he needed to defend his decision in order to not receive media backlash. The purpose of the source was to give Harris’ opinion on the reasoning and effects of the bombing. The purpose introduces some limitations because of its audience. Harris was writing to the rest of the government, and possibly the public citizens; therefore, Harris had to make an argument that the bombings were positive in order to create propaganda and support for the war.

The second source, Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan by Anthony Clifford Grayling, is a secondary source that could be of particular value to historians due to its many perspectives that it gives in regard to the area bombing in World War II. The book was written in 2006 by Anthony Clifford Grayling in order to debate whether or not the area bombings of WWII were justified. For content, the author gives a detailed explanation of all perspectives, such as the bombers’, the government’s, and the citizens’ perspectives. After outlining each perspective, Grayling concludes that the area bombings in WWII were not justified. The work’s origin gives it value because of its well-known author. Anthony Clifford Grayling is a professor of philosophy at the University of London, and he is the author of many books on philosophy. The purpose of the source also gives value to the reader. The source is a novel that was written to inform the public.

The source has some limitations due to its origin. The author is from London, England, so he may have the inclination to side with the RAF. On the other hand, he provides a description of the effects of the bombings performed by Germany on London, so he has seen the effects of area bombing on a city, and he may argue against the area bombings due to this.
Section 2: Investigation

The Second World War, which started in 1939, is largely controversial due to the widespread use of area bombing. World War II was a revolutionary war, in the fact that it changed the world’s view on war. The long war between the Axis powers and the Allies eventually led to area bombing of civilians. Civilians were targeted for the first time at a grand scale, specifically by the Royal Air Force of Great Britain, which caused the morality of area bombing to be strongly questioned. While the Royal Air Force tried to justify their area bombing of Germany in World War II, it can be concluded that the area bombings were unjust because they did not attack industrial sites, and they caused tremendous damage to cities full of civilians, such as Dresden.

A large argument for the justification of the Royal Air Force’s area bombing is that they were targeting industrial cities in order to slow down Germany’s war production. However, this argument is invalid because Harris, the Marshall of the Royal Air Force, specifically targeted Germany’s morale. Only six percent of the bombs dropped in the war’s final months were targeted on areas of oil.¹ This observation shows Harris’ intentions in the latter months of the war. While his superiors were advising him to attack oil in order to halt their war production, Harris stubbornly attacked cities.² He once again attacked the already demolished city of Cologne by sending 2,131 bombers in the span of four days.³ He was not attacking industrial cities, which was the precedent for war. If industrial cities are attacked, their production will slow down or halt, causing the respectful country to weaken militarily, and eventually leading to victory. Instead, Harris attacked cities that were not industrial centers or centers for oil production. He specifically targeted cities that had many civilians in order to lower Germany’s
The area bombing of defenseless cities shows that Harris was not targeting oil, and the area bombing was unjustified.

The argument that the Royal Air Force was strictly targeting oil production is proven to be wrong because the Royal Air Force’s attempts to halt oil production was a failure. It is widely known that Bomber Command’s area bombing was a failure. The oil production did not halt, and it was not even prevented from growing; however, when the German oil production did finally halt, it was not due to the efforts of the Royal Air Force. The bulk of the progress made on destroying German oil production can be attributed to the efforts of the United States Army Air Forces, specifically the US Eighth Army Air Force and the US Fifteenth Army Air Force. The attacks on Leuna, one of the largest synthetic-oil plants in Germany, show how effective the area bombing of oil production could have been. The Royal Air Force attacked the highly productive plant only two times from the span between May and December of 1944, but the US Eighth Army Air Force attacked the plant twenty-two times. Production of the plant was an average of nine percent of its full capabilities during this span of time. The attacks on Leuna, among many more from the US Air Force, gave some wisdom to Harris after the war’s end. In his memoirs, Harris states that the victory over Germany can be greatly contributed to the attacking on oil production, and that the offensive against oil was complete. Although oil production was halted in the final weeks of the war, most of it can be attributed to the United States Army Air Force, not the Royal Air Force. While the US Air Force was crippling Germany through area bombing of oil production, Harris was focused on the area bombing of cities. Harris was stubborn and did not realize the impact of the area bombing of oil production until after the war was over. For this reason, the Royal Air Force’s area bombings can be deemed unjustified, for they were not targeting oil production.
The area bombing of non-industrial cities is the most prevalent argument for the reason that the Royal Air Force’s area bombings were not justified. One can look at the attacks on the city of Dresden. The area bombing of Dresden is of particular importance because it is a deliberate attack on civilians and historical areas, not industrial sites.\(^9\) Dresden was bombed by both the Royal Air Force and the United States; however, the United States took aim at railway marshaling yards, and the Royal Air Force took aim at a stadium in the middle of the city.\(^10\) Most of the bombs dropped by Bomber Command were incendiaries, so a firestorm ignited the city, resulting in approximately 25,000 people dying in the chaos of the firestorm.\(^11\) The firestorm also destroyed many historically significant architecture which made the city of Dresden famous. The city was famous for its Baroque architecture, but it was destroyed by these bombings.\(^12\) The area bombing of Dresden could possibly be justified if the Royal Air Force targeted an area of production; however, the deliberate targeting of civilians in a city of historical significance is unjustified.

In Sir Arthur Harris’ official account of the Dresden attacks, he claimed that the effects of the attack on Dresden were very great in regards to both the population and the nation of Germany as a whole.\(^13\) Sir Arthur Harris also describes the effect of the bombings on the moral of Germany to be similar to that of the attack on Hamburg in 1943.\(^14\) This statement by Harris shows Harris’ mentality in regards to the area bombing of Germany. It is false to say that it is justified to deliberately bomb cities of huge populations with little to no industrial significance. The area bombing of Dresden is unjustified, despite Harris’ attempts to justify it.

Morality of a population is indeed important to the outcome of a war; however, the magnitude in which the Royal Air Force and Arthur Harris targeted civilian morality is unjustified. It can be concluded that the area bombing of World War II by the Royal Air Force
was unjustified because they did not target industrial sites, and the Royal Air Force caused
epochal damage throughout multiple cities, such as Dresden. In conclusion, the area bombing of
the RAF was unjustified, and they were cruel, useless acts.

Section 3: Reflection

The completion of this investigation has certainly given me insight into the life of a
historian. The process has highlighted the methods used by historians as well as the challenges
that they face. Similar to historians, I used a primary source in order to further my understanding
of the topic. My use of the extract from Arthur Harris’ official account gave me insight into how
a primary source could be of significant value to a historian. The viewpoint of the individuals
who experienced the historical event is of particular importance in regards to evaluating a
historical question. This applied to my investigation of the morality of the area bombing in
World War Two because the bombing countries would support the bombing, while the areas
being bombed would definitely attack the morality. While analyzing a historical question, it is
necessary to evaluate all perspectives of an issue, which will require primary sources to be
analyzed.

The challenges that arose during my investigation parallel with those that historians may
experience. The process of finding a relevant primary source proved to be difficult, for there are
many primary sources regarding the historical topic of World War Two; however, not many
primary sources were relevant to the question that was being analyzed in my investigation.
Another prevalent challenge that arose during my source selection process was the challenge of
conciseness. There are endless sources about World War Two, and I had to choose the most
relevant sources that could be used towards my argument. In order to have a clear, concise
argument, a historian must choose the best sources to argue their point. Another challenge that specifically historians have is that they must rely on others in order to investigate their topic. Unlike scientists and mathematicians, they cannot perform their own experiments or proofs of their question. Instead, they have to rely on the accounts of others that lived during the historical event. The importance of primary sources is enormous, and if there is little that is documented about a particular event, it is hard to analyze it decades or centuries after it happened. This brings to light the role of the historian, which is to find and organize all of the sources about a particular topic, decide which sources are relevant to the question, and analyze how they give insight into the answer of the particular question.
Endnotes


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid, 106.

5. Ibid, 110.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


10. Ibid, 72.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.


14. Ibid.