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Richard Overy, *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe, 1940-1945*. New York: Viking, 2014. Pp. xxviii, 562. ISBN 978-0-670-02515-2.

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Richard Overy (Exeter Univ.) has given us the first comprehensive treatment of the British and American war in the air against Nazi Germany—its strategy, operations, technologies, political and cultural backgrounds, but also the responses of the governments and peoples under air attack. His book analyzes what the bombing campaigns were supposed to do and what they in fact did to military targets and civilian lives and property. It complements rather than duplicates earlier studies¹ that stress the men who flew the planes and dropped the bombs.

As Overy demonstrates, strategic bombing was harder to implement effectively than is often thought. British and American efforts abounded in misunderstandings, mistakes, failures, and inflexibility. Both air forces ran up against intrinsic limits, especially in technology; they wasted resources, injured or killed friendly civilians, and very often missed their targets altogether. The two allies' disagreements over targets persisted into the last year of the war, when the bombers finally lived up to earlier expectations.

Giulio Douhet, in his revolutionary *The Command of the Air*,² claimed that a thoroughgoing, independent bombing campaign could almost by itself compel an enemy to surrender. Though his ideas did not directly influence British and American proponents of air power, he articulated concepts they shared and made errors in judgment that they repeated. For example, Douhet candidly conceded that air warfare would inevitably kill and injure civilians but thought that such casualties would hasten the end of a war. The experience of Allied air forces in World War II would prove otherwise.

Despite the creation of Bomber Command, which itself indicated a faith in strategic air war, Britain entered World War II with inadequate equipment: its best medium bomber, the Vickers Wellington, could not deliver enough payload to cause significant damage on the ground and its crews lacked effective navigational instruments. Bomber Command's missions in 1940 did little harm to its industrial targets and may have invited German retaliation in the form of the Blitz, which in turn led the British to attack civilian and area targets in Germany.

The author clarifies stages in the evolution of British bombing policy. Initially, civilian casualties were seen as a regrettable but unavoidable byproduct of attacks on factories. But strategists soon adopted a settled policy of targeting not just industrial plants but also their employees, both on their jobs and in their homes. The hope was to so compromise workers' morale that they would not come to work, thus curtailing industrial production. This shift in philosophy then extended to attacking whole residential areas and, indeed, entire cities. In this environment, concerns about accuracy became moot, as aircraft simply dropped their bombs, especially incendiary bombs, onto a built-up zone, with the object of incinerating as much of it as possible. Bomber fleets now often flew at night, the better to avoid detection. Nonetheless, Bomber Command saw no improvement in 1941 over the previous year's results. The air war had reached a crisis point when 1942 arrived. Even Winston Churchill, a (sometimes) strong advocate of the bombing campaign, grew disillusioned.

General (later Air Marshal) Arthur "Bomber" Harris took charge of Bomber Command in February 1942. He authorized relentless area bombing in defiance of arguments and evidence against its efficacy, with no concern about civilian deaths, whatever their numbers. Overy calls Harris the "Haig" of the air war, an un-

1. E.g., Donald L. Miller, *Masters of the Air: America's Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War against Nazi Germany* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

2. Originally published in Italian—*Dominio dell'aria: Saggio dell'arte della guerra aerea* (Rome: L'Amministrazione Della Guerra, 1921)—the book has been widely translated and often reprinted.

flattering allusion to the commander of the British Expeditionary Force in World War I. But Harris did make Bomber Command a more effective strategic tool in 1942 and especially 1943, when four-engine heavy bombers, like the Avro Lancaster, come into service. Raids by up to a thousand bombers at a time caused enough destruction in the cities of the Rhineland to make German authorities take Bomber Command seriously for the first time. But Harris could not sustain this level of action throughout 1942; besides, problems of inaccuracy stubbornly persisted, even after the shift to area bombing and night expeditions. The year ended as had 1941, without any prospect of decisive victory in the air war.

The US Army Air Force entered the war in Europe in 1942, brimming with confidence and enthusiasm. Overy praises the Americans' clearer thinking about target selection, specifically the firm concept of attacking "vital centers" in order to deprive the enemy of the means to make war. American commanders identified 154 such targets,³ for the most part industrial and communications centers and facilities. This strategy necessitated bombing only in daylight, when bombardiers could see what they were trying to hit, using the celebrated Norden bombsight. American high-altitude, four-engine B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers outclassed the British Wellingtons and their siblings. These US "self-defending" aircraft could in theory fight their way to a target and return to base with few losses. One group commander even promised his crews they would end the war in 1943, because there was no viable defense against the B-17 Flying Fortresses.

In the event, such optimism was dashed in 1943. To be sure, as Bomber Command acquired more aircraft, Harris returned to the Rhineland, with horrifying results for its towns and cities. Elsewhere, he burned Hamburg to its foundations, killing almost forty thousand civilians, and attacked Berlin itself. The Americans struck the Ploesti (present-day Ploiești) oil fields in Romania and ball-bearing and aircraft factories at Schweinfurt and Regensburg in Germany. But both Allied air forces sustained unacceptably high losses, the Norden bomb sight failed to deliver hoped-for precision, and morale declined among the flight crews. Moreover, bombed-out factories recovered quickly, and burned cities struggled up from the rubble—Hamburg recovered surprisingly well within six months, while Berlin had suffered relatively minor damage to begin with. Meanwhile, workers continued to show up at their factories, and economic production peaked in 1943 and stayed high in 1944, contrary to Allied expectations. Overy argues, however, that the bombing raids nonetheless forced the Germans to divert valuable resources to their air defenses, resources they could otherwise have used against the Soviets on the eastern front. Then, too, weapons production would, he maintains, have been higher but for the bombing. Even so, the strategic campaign had, for the third straight year, failed to make good the promises of its adherents.

Some historians have contended that the air campaign was hampered by the Allies' need to spread their air resources within and across two theaters of operations. The Americans had hardly arrived in the United Kingdom when they had to send bombers to North Africa, far from Germany and its vital centers. The British wasted resources in a futile effort to destroy submarine pens on the Atlantic coast of France, and the Americans went after V-weapon sites in northern Europe, which were hard to bomb effectively. Controversially, both Bomber Command and the US 8th and 15th Air Forces suspended strategic warfare in 1944 to bomb tactical targets in France in support of the Normandy invasion. Moreover, the two bomber forces never agreed on just how to wage war in the air—whether by night or by day and what targets to hit. Even after the Casablanca Conference (January 1943) mandated a combined around-the-clock bombing offensive, coordination between the Allies remained problematic or nonexistent and Harris continued to wage war more or less on his own.

Giulio Douhet, like succeeding air power theorists, underestimated the value of air defense measures in combating bombing campaigns. In the Second World War, the Germans' formidable defensive barrier consisted of radar warning systems, radio communications, efficient deployment of high-quality fighter aircraft, and harrowing gauntlets of anti-aircraft artillery. This much is well known, but Overy breaks new ground in examining the Reich's civil defense programs and the responses of the German people themselves to the bombing. Although they had to adapt as the air war intensified, civil defense authorities taught civil-

3. The number was later increased to 177, then condensed to 76.

ians how to protect themselves in their homes and when and where to seek shelter. Monitors and wardens attended to compliance, but civilians obeyed voluntarily without much compulsion. Civil defense was, Overy observes, a community effort.

The National Socialist government, for its part, pumped out propaganda to keep spirits up and, more consequentially, supported the victims of bombing. State agencies provided shelter, food, clothing, and even some money to compensate victims for lost property and wages. Ad hoc squads of workmen repaired homes as best they could. The government also built huge bunkers and flak towers to protect cities and civilian populations. To mitigate the economic effects of the bombing, the Germans dispersed industrial facilities all over their central European Reich, stopped producing goods not needed for the war, and exploited foreign and captive labor. Women worked, too, though never to the extent of their Allied opposite numbers. Since air defenses made factories reasonably safe, at least for a time, workers had less reason to stay at home. The protection services held up well until late 1944 and even into 1945, although not nearly as well as before. By then, the Western Allies had at last achieved complete air supremacy.

Overy credits new American commanders with the ingenuity that led to victory in the air. In January 1944, Maj. Gen. James Doolittle assumed command of the celebrated 8th Air Force, the largest air component in the European theater, and Maj. Gen. Carl Spaatz became Commander of the US Strategic Air Forces in Europe—the 8th and the 15th Air Forces. Against conventional wisdom (including Douhet's), Spaatz and Doolittle believed in the value of long-range fighters that could escort bombers all the way to Berlin, in this case, the newly available P-51 Mustangs. They also expressly concentrated on eliminating the German fighter force and aircraft factories, dispersed though they were. From the winter of 1944, swarms of Mustangs and other fighters had it out with the Luftwaffe, while bombers attacked aircraft factories. Although the enemy never ran short of airplanes, high casualties among German fighter pilots meant untrained men had to fill the cockpits, with dismal results. The Americans now realized the best way to defeat German air power was to destroy not just the factories that built the planes but the sources of oil and gasoline that kept them flying. Sprawling refineries and synthetic oil facilities could not be dispersed and made easy targets. The decisive defeat of the Luftwaffe by depriving it of both pilots and fuel was “an American achievement” (184) in Overy's generous assessment. By June 1944, the Allies had achieved definitive air supremacy, just in time for D-Day.

The real ordeal for Germany began in September 1944. Despite opposing anti-aircraft artillery, Allied bombers inflicted horrendous damage on German cities, including the still defended Berlin. This was the whole point of the British area bombing strategy, of course. The American air fleets overcame poor visibility in the winter by using electronics that allowed them to deliver payloads through the clouds, with little need for precision bombing. The period of around-the-clock raids climaxed with the notorious fire-bombing of Dresden (13–14 February 1945), which incinerated the entire city center and killed twenty-five thousand people. Overy concludes that the raid was “needlessly destructive and strategically unnecessary” (210). In Britain, it provoked fierce criticism of the city bombing campaign, which had been building up for some time. At last (18 April 1945), Harris was told to cease and desist, and the Americans soon did the same.

In a fresh analysis of the evidence, Overy reckons bombing fatalities in Germany at 353,000, including POWs and captive laborers. This number is substantially lower than the generally accepted 600,000 plus. Totalling civilian casualties in Germany and elsewhere poses thorny methodological problems.

Before the war, some had held that the onslaught of aerial bombardment would cause populations to rise against their governments. Others maintained it would inspire them to fight all the harder. In the event, neither scenario materialized. Overy thinks the Nazis had sufficient power to quell any rebellion and, in any case, surviving bombed-out civilians sank into demoralization and anomie, struggling simply to survive. A US postwar bombing survey, based on numerous interviews with German officials, concluded that area bombing of cities had been useless, while attacks on oil refineries, aircraft factories, and the communications grid had actually won the air war. A British survey reached the same conclusion. Both surveys can be seen as self-serving, of course, and may reflect wartime intramural disagreements.

The book concludes with two long chapters on bombing in Italy, France,⁴ the Low Countries, Denmark, and Eastern Europe. Air defenses and protection services in these areas fell below British and German standards, with the result that civilian losses and property damages were excessive. Estimates for fatalities in Italy range from 60,000 to 130,000, with Overy again preferring the lower figure. Most of these deaths occurred as a result of the US campaign, which largely took over from the British. Since the Germans occupied Italy in 1943 and made it a base of operations, the Luftwaffe caused some deaths too. The Americans, faithful to their doctrine, targeted railroads, bridges, and factories and inevitably damaged not only these targets but unrelated buildings in Rome, Florence, Venice, and other famous Italian cities. For this reason, Italians greeted Liberation with less euphoria than might have been expected. Among industrial workers, the conquests of the Red Army enjoyed more support than the bombing of the Anglo-American air forces, a mentality that increased support for the Communist party after 1945.

Italy, first an ally of the Third Reich, later became a largely occupied country and a German base of operations. France, the Low Countries, Norway, and Denmark were occupied from 1940 on and were for that reason presumed to be friendly to the Allies. But strategic bombing placed their citizens in the same terrible jeopardy as the Germans. Fully 30 percent of Allied bombs fell upon non-belligerents, killing some 75,000 of them, mostly in France.

British Bomber Command attacked selected targets in France, mostly factories. When the Americans joined the campaign, the target list grew, putting more civilians at risk, an inevitable outcome of air commanders' "awkward decisions" (363). Imprecise high-altitude bombing caused most of the civilian deaths and injuries, while doing little harm to German interests. In 1943, French public opinion naturally came down strongly against the raids, especially those conducted by the Americans. Still, touchingly, French people attended funerals for American airmen, flouting German orders forbidding them to do so. Besides, the Resistance supported the attacks, costly as they were. Although opinion softened as the Allies succeeded in the Mediterranean and Liberation seemed nearer, great damage was inflicted in 1944–45 on cities like St.-Lô, Le Havre, Cherbourg, Caen, Royan, among others. Evidence of the devastation in these places is still visible in the contrast between early postwar construction around train stations and the traditional architecture where no bombs fell. Overy regards this destruction as disproportionately high and sides for once with Harris (and Spaatz), who never thought their heavy bombers suitable for such missions. Tactical air might have done better. Again, it is difficult to say how many died in the bombing. Contemporary and postwar figures vary widely. Overy settles for a toll of 53,000–54,000.⁵

In the Netherlands, too, inaccurate or indiscriminate bombing killed many inhabitants of Rotterdam, Antwerp, Nijmegen, The Hague, and other cities, some hit by tragic accident. More than those in France, however, the Dutch sites sheltered industries that fed the German war machine, including the infamous V-weapons. By contrast, fresh raids all but obliterated the oil works at Ploëști in 1944. Overy does not believe attacking the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps would have helped stop the genocide.

The Bombers and the Bombed is not a polemic. Overy is aware that the ethics of bombing were complicated: there were no perfect choices, often not even good ones. Allied commanders were confronting a fearsome opponent they could not be sure of defeating. For many months, strategic bombing was the only real weapons at their disposal. Even as the war neared its end, there were fears that Germany might at the last minute deploy chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons. After all, German engineers had developed the V-1 and V-2 rockets and the world's first jet aircraft.

The Allied victory in the air war was narrower than it seemed as the Third Reich lay in ruins on V-E Day. That said, Overy deplores the civilian deaths inflicted in Germany by area bombing and the bombing of Dresden. He believes the air campaign lasted too long and was needlessly intensified in the war's last weeks. Many historians have argued that political considerations contaminated military planning and that

4. Overy draws heavily on Claudia Baldoli and Andrew Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy under Allied Air Attack, 1940–1945* (NY: Continuum, 2012), although he has conducted his own archival research as well. See also Eddy Florentin, *Quand les alliés bombardèrent la France* (Paris: Perrin, 1997).

5. Baldosi and Knapp (*ibid.*) reckon 60,000.

the Allies could have waged war at a lower cost in human lives. Overy gives these criticisms more weight by stressing the horrific results on the ground.

In short, Richard Overy has given readers a long overdue corrective study of the air war in Europe by balancing the perspective of its victims against that of bombing strategists and analysts. *The Bombers and the Bombed* is a major scholarly achievement and should be read by anyone interested in the history of the Second World War.