



## *The Bomber Mafia: A Dream, a Temptation, and the Longest Night of the Second World War* by Malcolm Gladwell.

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The full title of *The Bomber Mafia* by best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell is intentionally unrevealing and mysterious. A prospective reader may guess the book concerns World War II, but that guess is only partly right. The phrase “Bomber Mafia” (capitalized throughout) is cryptic. The “dream” and the “temptation” are unidentified. The equally obscure “longest night” hints at the 9/10 March 1945 firebomb raid on Tokyo. The war itself remains unparalleled in scale, duration, and horrific violence. It began two decades after an armistice ended the putative “war to end all wars.” Unlike the First World War, the Second encompassed the whole world. Both sides brutally laid waste to most of the civilized world.

The United States was the only major power spared the unprecedented carnage inflicted on noncombatant men, women, and children of other countries. From 9 March to 14 August 1945, low-flying US B-29’s dropped thousands of tons of napalm-loaded incendiary bombs on ordinary people in sixty-seven Japanese cities. The firestorms intentionally created by these raids killed, according to two official US Strategic Bombing Surveys issued in 1947, between 330,000 and 900,000 people and injured another 470,000 to 1.3 million.<sup>1</sup> Psychological casualties of such fiery horrors were not measured.

This havoc was wrought because, in the aftermath of World War I, an exclusive coterie of officers at the Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), known as the Bomber Mafia (34–40), dreamt of large-scale high-altitude precision bombing that would destroy industries and supplies that war-time enemies needed to continue making war. Their dream had two goals: the first was that such air strikes would replace extended infantry fighting with “millions and millions of people [dying] in the meat grinder of the trenches” (49). The enemy would simply lose the means to keep ground troops in the field. The second goal was to spare the enemy’s civilian populations. The facts of World War II belied that dream.

Gladwell quotes Robert Pape, author of *Bombing to Win*,<sup>2</sup> about a crucial two-day presentation at the ACTS (Apr. 1939), less than five months before the *Wehrmacht* invaded Poland. In it, the Bomber Mafia outlined hypothetically how to incapacitate New York City by bombing bridges, aqueducts, and nodes on its electrical power grid. Seventeen precisely dropped bombs could shut down all electrical power sources in the city. The presentation implicitly showed that the second goal of the dream had already been abandoned. Cutting off water and electricity to the entire civilian population of any major city would disable the devices and services essential to their urban lives; transportation into and out of the city over river bridges would cease.

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1. See *Wikipedia*, s.vv. “Air raids on Japan.”

2. Subtitle: *Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1996).

In theory, citizens of such a beleaguered city could neither flee nor receive outside aid. What they could do is surrender or die of thirst or starvation or infectious diseases. In reality, they often respond to enemy attacks and the suffering they inflict with greater resolve. Thucydides' account of the Athenian siege of Melos in 416 BC is one such cautionary tale. The people of Great Britain, Japan, and Germany in World War II never gave immediate surrender a second thought. Their suffering was long and terrible. Yet Gladwell celebrates this design throughout *The Bomber Mafia* as a humane and moral strategy. Neither he nor the presenters at the ACTS in 1939 considered that destroying the infrastructure (water, transportation, electricity) essential to life is a heinous human rights violation. Moreover, even immediate surrender by people reduced to primitive living conditions would not mitigate long-term suffering and largescale deaths.

Unlike brick and mortar European and American cities, Gladwell notes (157–58), Japanese cities were built of “wooden beams, joists, and floorboards,” oil-soaked heavy-paper ceilings, and wood or stucco walls. In short, they were tempting tinderbox targets. Gladwell also reports (225) that a *Harper's* magazine article (June 1942) pointed the way: downtown Osaka is 80 percent combustible; London only 15 percent. The areas of cities completely “turned to ash” are unimaginable: 51 percent of Tokyo and 58 percent of Yokohama, cities the size of New York and Cleveland. The United States then dropped two atomic bombs, one on Hiroshima (6 Aug. 1945) and another on Nagasaki (9 Aug. 1945). On August 14, US bombers incinerated five more cities. The next day the United States accepted the Japanese intention to surrender and called it peace.

*The Bomber Mafia* reveals what men on the side of the Allied cause did in order to incinerate hundreds of thousands of Japanese children, women, and men over a five-month period. This included perfecting the Norden bombsight (13–29) and developing napalm (151–56) for use in incendiary bombs with casings like those used to deliver mustard gas during World War I (155). Gladwell uses a Hollywood war propaganda film narrated by Ronald Reagan to describe the B-29 bomber— “one of the wonders of the world” that could fly “faster and higher and farther” (4–5, 36, 125–29). It carried payloads that turned Japanese cities into infernos. Of the first incendiary bomb raid during the “longest night” (9–10 Mar. 1945), an official report states that “probably more persons lost their lives by fire at Tokyo in a six-hour period than at any time in the history of men” (185). Some one hundred thousand people died. As airman David Bradeen put it: “Frankly, when those cities were on fire, it looked like you were looking into the mouth of hell” (185).

Gladwell describes vagaries of wind and weather, attack formations and equipment (87–89, 102–4) and the (till then) virtually unknown jet stream that passes high over Tokyo (138–44). These unanticipated factors foiled determined attempts in Germany (96–116) and Japan (146–171) to follow Gen. Haywood Hansell's strategy of high-altitude bombing of enemy factories. Targets included ball-bearing factories in Schweinfurt and Regensburg (80–84) and the Nakajima Aircraft Company in Tokyo (136–44). Hansell tried to spare enemy civilians and allied soldiers on the ground. When the Bomber Mafia failed to realize their dreams in Germany and Japan, Gen. Curtis LeMay, “never part of the Bomber Mafia circle,” (114) accepted what Gladwell (145) equates with the devil's offer to Jesus in Luke 4:1–2 and 4:5–7. Once LeMay replaced Hansell in the Pacific theater, he used low-altitude fire-bombing for five months, striking dozens of Japanese cities of no strategic value whatever.

The book's title is something of a mystery; how and why the book came into being puzzles Gladwell himself: “I've made my living writing about social psychology. But I never really wrote much about war—especially not the Second World War or, more specifically, airpower” (xii–xiii). His book provides no straightforward narrative. No enunciated thesis is explicated and brought to any logical conclusion. In that sense, it is not a history per se. It first appeared as an audiobook

based on podcasts in a series titled *Revisionist History* (241), still available online. The book evolved from Gladwell's fascination with obsessives, whom he calls

my kind of people.... I like the idea that someone could push away all the concerns and details that make up everyday life and just zero in on one thing—the thing that fits the contours of his or her imagination .... Obsessives lead us astray sometimes. Can't see the bigger picture. Serve not just the world's but also their own narrow interests. But I don't think we get progress or innovation or joy or beauty without obsessives ....” The Bomber Mafia is “a story worthy of my obsession” (xiii).

But not all obsessives foster progress, innovation, joy, or beauty. Some are moral monsters.

Gladwell's stress on the positive results of obsession discounts how Americans during their “good war” wrought the carnage we summarized earlier. *The Bomber Mafia* is a moral tale, but Gladwell rarely acknowledges moral questions. He concentrates on the actions of obsessives who are hardly tragic heroes. British Air Marshal Arthur (“Bomber”) Harris espoused a “steadfast belief in the power of ‘morale bombing’” despite the German failure to break the will of British citizens with “fifty thousand tons of high-explosive bombs and more than a million incendiary devices” in fall 1940 (60). German-born physicist Frederick Lindemann became Winston Churchill's best friend and trusted adviser. “Lindemann was a great believer in the idea that the surest way to break the will of the enemy was by bombing its cities indiscriminately” (68). This despite a dearth of evidence to support his belief. Yet Churchill took his advice. C.P. Snow (70–71) later argued that Lindemann was a sadist without human sympathy for all but a few closest friends, of whom Churchill was one. In other words, an obsessive could border on being psychopathic.

The book's chapters then offer a collection of insights into how scientists, military men, and political leaders kept making weapons that culminated in what Curtis LeMay believed to be war crimes: he told former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, “If we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals.” McNamara puts it this way: “LeMay knew what he was doing would have been thought immoral if his side had lost. What makes an act immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?”<sup>3</sup> Gladwell claims

The Bomber Mafia is a case study in how dreams go awry. And how, when some new, shiny idea drops down from the heavens, it does not land, softly, in our laps. It lands hard, on the ground and shatters. The story I'm about to tell is not really a war story. Although it mostly takes place in war-time.... It's a story about the messiness of our intentions, because we always forget the mess when we look back. (9)

A bewildering moral dissonance attends how *The Bomber Mafia* treats the realities of the London Blitz (x–xi, 60–64), Hamburg (aka Germany's Nagasaki), Dresden (73–74), Tokyo (184–85), and Yokohama as targets of aerial bombardment. The needless loss of innocent human lives because of the baseless convictions of Harris and Lindemann is much more than messy.

Gladwell writes (17–18) that the Bomber Mafia officers were responding to the horrors of World War I and its 37 million people killed or wounded.<sup>4</sup> They decided in the 1930's that “the only realistic solution was for armies to change the way they fought wars. To learn to fight ... *better* wars” (18). But he never gives statistics for World War II. That is, 85 million killed or wounded:

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3. James G. Blight and Janet (sic) Lang, *The Fog of War: Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005) 113.

4. More precise estimates give 20 million dead (9.7 million military personnel, 11 million civilian) and 21 million wounded. See “World War I Casualties” (accessible online) at the REPERES program of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.

60 million dead (15 million military, a morally horrifying 45 million civilian) and 25,000,000 wounded.<sup>5</sup>

In his conclusion (202–6), Gladwell takes solace from the belief of present-day Air Force generals that the B-2 stealth bomber has finally realized the dream of Haywood Hansell and the Bomber Mafia. We believe that *The Bomber Mafia* teaches us that dreams of controlling the horrors of war rarely come true. Instead, “we are always deep in a gigantic, colossal mess.”<sup>6</sup>

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5. Statistics from the National WW II Museum, accessible online.

6. Bob Dylan, *The Philosophy of Modern Song* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2022) 320.