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BOOKSHELF

To Break an Enemy's Will

Bombing cities and inflicting civilian casualties were key to the strategy that won World War II.

By Adam Tooze

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On Dec. 29, 1940, a hail of 100,000 German incendiary bombs set the City of London ablaze. As the fire engulfed St. Paul's Cathedral, a photographer captured one of the most recognizable images of the 20th century—Sir Christopher Wren's great cathedral dome riding above the smoke.

The impression made by that night on theorists of air power was less aesthetic than practical. Since the 1930s, they had speculated about the devastating effectiveness of bombing. In 1936, the Royal Air Force had established a dedicated Bomber Command. Its motto was stark: "Strike Hard, Strike Sure." When London survived the Blitz, for Bomber Command the conclusion was simple. It must strike even harder.

THE BOMBERS AND THE BOMBED

By Richard Overy

Viking, 562 pages, \$36

Unlike the Luftwaffe, the RAF would equip itself with a fleet of purpose-built strategic bombers. Historians and engineers were brought in to analyze the inflammability of German cities. A cocktail of bombs was



An American B-17 bomber flies above Hamburg, Germany, in 1943. The Allies' campaign would practically destroy the city. GETTY IMAGES

devised: high explosives to blow off roofs and turn tenement blocks into chimneys, followed by incendiaries to light the fires and then more explosives to kill and maim fire crews. Larger bombs would disrupt water and electricity lines and demolish factories. Ahead of the January 1943 war conference in Casablanca attended by Roosevelt, Churchill and de Gaulle, Bomber Command set the goal of destroying 104 German cities and towns, from the metropolis of Berlin to sleepy Wittenberg. The result, their experts estimated, would be 900,000 civilians dead, one million injured and 25 million left homeless.

This extraordinary campaign of ultramodern violence began in 1942 with attacks on Cologne, Lübeck and Rostock. In the autumn of 1943 the RAF was joined by the U.S. Air Force. Notionally, the Americans' daytime sorties with well-defended B-17 bombers allowed for more precise targeting. But given the limits of high-altitude attacks, the Americans too soon found themselves in the business of obliterating entire cities.

Although fascist Italy, imperial Japan and Nazi Germany had initiated terror bombing in the 1930s, it was the democracies, not the dictatorships, that made long-range attacks on the enemy home front a central instrument of war. For the Axis powers, the bomber was never a truly independent strategic weapon; their aircraft were designed primarily for tactical ground-support operations. By contrast, since the 1920s the British Empire had routinely used aerial policing to suppress colonial rebellions. The officers who founded Bomber Command extended this technique to the European theater.

When the Americans began building their bomber force in the late 1930s, they too had taken a comprehensive approach, envisioning the enemy home front as an integral and legitimate target. The resulting imbalance was dramatic. Between 1940 and 1941—after which the Luftwaffe concentrated overwhelmingly on the Eastern Front—the Germans dropped 57,000 tons of high explosives and incendiaries on Britain. By comparison, at a conservative estimate, Bomber Command and the U.S. 8th Air Force alone dropped over 1.6 million tons on Germany.

Richard Overy, one of Britain's best-known historians of the war, has spent much of his life studying this drama, particularly from the German side. From his Ph.D. on Luftwaffe production, by way of "Goering: The 'Iron Man' " (1984), to "Interrogations: The Nazi Elite in Allied Hands, 1945" (2001), he has consistently stressed the strength and resilience of the Nazi war effort, leading him in one best-selling work to pose the question: Why did the Allies win? For Mr. Overy the obvious answer—that they had four times the productive capacity and, through Britain, command over a global empire—has never been enough. Given the endurance of the Nazi regime, he insists, it was a close-run thing.

It is an approach that is by turns illuminating and frustrating in its refusal to acknowledge the force of numbers. "The Bombers and the Bombed" is a case in point. Though Mr. Overy weaves together the history of both British and American bombing in Europe, it is the angst-ridden narrative of Britain's air war that provides the frame. His account begins with the Blitz and works its way through the RAF's nightly ordeal of high-cost, low-return bombing in 1942 and 1943 to culminate in the indiscriminate devastation of Europe's urban fabric late in the war, a rage of destruction symbolized by the firestorm that consumed Dresden on Feb. 13, 1945.

Through the narrative runs an undertone of frustration. At first the RAF lacked the bombers, the payload and the means of targeting to hit the Germans hard. Then in 1944, when they were in a position to pulverize entire cities, the war was already being won by armies on the ground, supported not by heavy bombers but by tactical air power. If strategic air power made any contribution, it was the U.S. Air Force that mattered, shooting the Luftwaffe out of the air in the spring of 1944 and targeting Germany's synthetic-fuel plants.

In telling the story in these terms, Mr. Overy repeats a script generated after the war by experts commissioned by the British and American governments, who worked closely with German counterparts collected in prison camps or re-employed to rebuild occupied Germany. The result is dismissive of the bombers and disconcertingly enthusiastic in its treatment of Nazi resilience. For Mr. Overy, the decisive evidence of the bombers' failure is the fact that German armaments production didn't collapse after 1942 but rose to new heights by mid-1944. He credits the so-called "armaments miracle" supposedly engineered by Albert Speer, Hitler's armaments minister and architectural impresario.

The disconnect between apparently wanton destruction and the supposed ineffectiveness of the bombers is the cornerstone of the moral critique of bombing that

began to be voiced in the 1940s and that has recently been revived by German historians such as Jörg Friedrich in his dramatic book "The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945" and by A.C. Grayling in "Among the Dead Cities." Bombing was a disproportionate, ineffectual and unjustifiable use of force, the argument goes.

Mr. Overy adds the authority of this weighty book to this familiar critique. In so doing he ignores evidence revealed by the opening of the archives in East Germany after the fall of the Wall. This has effectively debunked the self-congratulatory narrative spun by the survivors of the Third Reich. The best evidence from inside the German war machine suggests that, from 1943 onward, the Allies had the means to inflict truly devastating setbacks. German armament production didn't collapse, as the theorists of air power had once predicted. But from the moment at which British bombing of the industrial districts of the Ruhr began in 1943, armament production halted its monthly increase. It began growing again only in early 1944, after the RAF had frittered away the fall in bombing Berlin—a political, not an economic, target.

When the Allies shifted toward tactical priorities in France ahead of D-Day, they gave the German war economy a further six months of respite. By exhausting factory capacity, exploiting every able slave laborer and taking advantage of the usual benefits of mass production learning curves plus a little extra manipulation of statistical returns, Speer conjured one last burst of record production. But as soon as the full weight of strategic air power was focused again on German targets from mid-1944, the Third Reich's productive system was rapidly destroyed.

The question that Mr. Overy clearly wishes to provoke is why this bloody but ineffective campaign was continued at such great cost. It was, he seems to be suggesting, another instance of military folly, an aerial rerun of the attritional trench warfare of World War I.

But what Mr. Overy's relentless skepticism obscures are the deep foundations of the bombers' commitment. With more aircraft, heavier bomb loads, better fighter escorts and improved electronics they would, they believed, prevail. And they were right. At times their margin of superiority was uncomfortably narrow. But the Allies had already won one high-tech attritional battle, against U-boats in the Atlantic in 1943.

As in the Battle of the Atlantic, the struggle progressed in often frustratingly small increments: Victories in the Ruhr in the spring of 1943 and the devastation of Hamburg in July 1943 alternated with months of frustration over Berlin and the disappointment of American hopes for their early pinpoint raids. But once the balance of force shifted, it did so irrevocably. By the summer of 1944 German air defenses were in tatters, Allied loss rates had plummeted and the devastation wrought by the bombers was unprecedented. This pattern of a protracted and agonizing stalemate followed by a sudden collapse is not, as Mr. Overy seems to believe, evidence against the force of attritional logic. In a life-or-death struggle, this is how overwhelming material superiority makes itself felt: in a brutal clinch followed by a sudden victory.

Here the Eurocentric limits of Mr. Overy's account really bind. The story comes to an abrupt halt with V-E Day in May 1945, leaving space for no more than the most fleeting mention of the atomic-bomb program. Of course, the bomb came too late to be used in Germany. But this shouldn't obscure the fact that it was the horizon toward which the development of strategic air power was directed. The Manhattan Project was set in motion in December 1941 in conjunction with the bomber fleets that were laying waste to Germany in 1944 and 1945. If we want to understand what sustained the strategic-bombing campaign, we have to grasp that occasional dramatic successes such as Hamburg were seen not as flukes but as harbingers of this awe-inspiring future, the realization of the destructive fantasies of the 1930s. The firestorm that consumed Hamburg in a single night in August 1943 was ignited by only five kilotons. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, air power would be reckoned in megatons.

But the history of the bombers is only one part of Mr. Overy's book, and it is in the latter half, in the history of the bombed, that this book comes to life. In a series of truly original chapters he contrasts the experience of Germany with those of Italy, which switched sides in 1943; occupied France, the Netherlands and Belgium, which were all

heavily bombed in 1944; and Eastern Europe, above all Romania and Bulgaria, which were subject to short but brutal campaigns in 1944.

At the most elementary level Mr. Overy rebalances our understanding of the bombs' death toll. The usual figure of 600,000 killed in Germany turns out to have been compiled from inflated casualty figures circulated by Nazi propagandists. Mr. Overy revises this dramatically, to some 350,000. But to that number he rightly insists that we add 60,000 Italians, 53,600 French, 12,000 Belgians, 8,000 Dutch and many thousands more Bulgarians and Romanians. For the first time Mr. Overy allows us to see the history of bombing not as a German martyrdom but as a Europe-wide experience.

How many the bombers killed depended on the degree of preparation and the effectiveness of countermeasures. The Germans were able to keep casualties down not just through massive air defenses but also through elaborate early-warning systems, shelters, highly organized firefighting and speedy medical services. As Mr. Overy makes clear, they were also adept at deception. Just as the Allies used mock-up armies to mislead Rommel before D-Day, the Germans used mock factories to divert bombers from the Ruhr. In Berlin they built a fake government quarter, complete with a fake Brandenburg Gate.

On the ground the Nazi regime maintained its grip through terrifying doses of coercion. But it also resorted to subtler methods, including an offer of compensation for bomb damage. A national home-repair service mobilized thousands of craftsmen to repair the daily damage. An express mail service was created to allow bombed-out families to reassure loved ones at the front that they had survived. The truth, acknowledged by the Germans themselves, was that the Third Reich's endurance confirmed the logic of the bombers: The German home front was a legitimate target because it stood solidly behind Hitler's war.

Today it is commonplace to criticize area bombing in moral terms. But what Mr. Overy reveals is that in the last 18 months of the war the Allied bombing campaign unleashed an argument across Europe, the terms of which were less moral than political. If it was questionable to bomb German civilians, how much more problematic was it to attack cities under Nazi occupation. Should the French or the Romanians welcome the extension of Germany's air defenses to their territory? And how were the Dutch to react when they learned that the Americans had designated their cities as appropriate for target practice by inexperienced crews? Vichy France staged ceremonial funerals for the victims of the Anglo-American "sky pirates." Meanwhile, the French Resistance claimed those same victims as war heroes.

The heated arguments over rules of engagement are eerily familiar from Iraq and Afghanistan. But in the days before the remote-controlled drone, the stakes were higher. With slow-moving bombers in low-level attacks, casualties on the ground could reach 100%. When the American command decided to apologize to the Dutch population for the collateral damage with a leaflet drop, it caused deep resentment among the pilots. If they were to take the risk of crossing into German-held territory, they wanted to be dropping bombs, not paper. Though Mr. Overy's treatment of the logic of bombing may hide more than it reveals, it is in cameos such as this, in his juxtaposition of the bombers and the bombed, that his history comes truly into its own. For anyone interested in the politics of the Allied air war, this is an indispensable and eye-opening book.

Corrections & Amplifications

An American B-17 bomber is flying above the city of Hamburg in 1943 in the photograph. In an earlier version, the plane was incorrectly identified as part of a British raid.

— *Mr. Tooze, the author of "Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy," is Barton M. Biggs Professor of History at Yale.*

