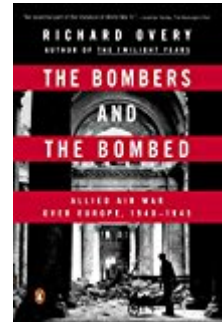


Richard Overy. *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe 1940-1945.* New York: Viking Penguin, 2014. 592 pp. \$18.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-14-312624-9.



Richard Overy. *The Bombing War, Europe 1939-1945.* London: Allen Lane, 2013. Maps, 852 pp. n.p., cloth, ISBN 978-0-7139-9561-9.



Reviewed by Stephen Bourque

Published on H-War (December, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Following four years of bloody infantry combat in the Great War of 1914-18, soldiers and politicians began searching for ways to avoid its repetition. By the early 1930s the views of such aviation theorists as Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, and William “Billy” Mitchell were well known by those seeking to redesign their armed forces for the next war. Although forced by army generals and politicians to divert resources to providing air support to ground troops or air defense to the homeland, American and British aviators had their eyes set on the promise of the heavy bomber. While these allies would develop different operational and tactical approaches, they

shared a vision of fleets of massed bombers flying far beyond the plodding ground soldier and delivering decisive blows to the enemy’s heartland. These bomber enthusiasts firmly believed that if they did it right, the ground war might be unnecessary and the loss of friendly life minimal.

For the inheritors of this bombing vision, those who planned and commanded air operations for the Second World War, the air war in Europe was a sobering experience. British air marshals Charles Portal and Arthur Harris, and American generals Henry Arnold and Carl Spaatz discovered that they could not fight the war as they had intended. In the face of German offensive

power, the Royal Air Force Bomber Command was singularly ineffective during both the Battles of France and Britain. German fighter and antiaircraft fire forced it to bomb at night, if there was any hope of the bombers getting through. The United States Eighth Air Force began operations from English bases in August 1942 and found itself faced with the hard realities of modern combat. High aircraft loss rates, such as 20 percent of the aircraft dispatched on the two Schweinfurt missions in the summer and fall of 1943, forced changes in tactics and operations. Over the winter, the strategic air forces made adjustments, and by the spring of 1944 executed operation POINT-BLANK, the air campaign against Germany, with renewed effectiveness. The air barons' march to victory was again interrupted by war's reality, as the British prime minister, Winston S. Churchill demanded the destruction of Adolf Hitler's vengeance weapon installations and the U.S. president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, demanded that the heavy bombers support the ground operation in France.

Richard Overy believes that this classic story, well known to those who study war and aviation, is incomplete. His goal in *The Bombing War* is to provide the first full narrative history of the strategic bombing campaign in Europe. He argues that seventy years after the war, it is time to present a comprehensive narrative incorporating the totality of the scholarship to emerge in the last seventy years. He argues that his book is the first because it covers all of Europe, not just the air war against the German heartland, which is the standard narrative. His work also strives to integrate the air operation within the context of the overall strategic war against Germany. Finally, and a major consideration, he wants to begin a discussion of the political, social, and cultural consequences of those the Allies bombed. Overy thinks it is time for a new history, which revisits and evaluates the narratives that have become so well known by the aviation and historical community. Finally, he intends his book to give a voice to

those being bombed, for whom there are few collections of official records or organized advocacy groups. In all of this, he succeeds admirably.

The author's credentials should be familiar to most military historians. A professor of history at the University of Exeter, he also taught at King's College, and has written more than twenty-five books on the Second World War. He is one of the period's preeminent experts and well suited to provide the perspective for a comprehensive narrative. Overy was the lead researcher for the Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe, 1940-1945 project, conducted at the University of Exeter, that produced a host of groundbreaking studies of the effects of bombing on the European occupied powers. *The Bombing War* represents the culmination of over forty years of investigation into this complex topic. Born in the United Kingdom shortly after the war, Overy has a natural interest in not only the bombers but also the fate of those being bombed.

The author confines his book to examining only one aspect of air operations during the war, strategic bombing. These are essentially those actions independent of tactical operations on land and sea. Several key issues emerge from his study. Most important, in a theme that describes modern decision makers, he notes how casually politicians could decide on bombing operations "whose effectiveness they were scarcely in a position to judge from a strategic or operational point of view." And that "temptation to reach for air power when other means of exerting direct violent pressure were absent was hard to resist" (p. 13). Another theme involves technological change. Each national air force, primarily the United States Strategic Air Forces and Royal Air Force's Bomber Command, experienced a long, and sometimes steep, learning curve as it struggled to overcome the whole range of inherent problems and limitations it encountered during the war. Another aspect is the human dimension, those who lived under the bombs. In many ways the prewar theorists and

politicians were right, the bombers did always get through. Perhaps not all, but more than enough to wreak havoc on the ground. During the war, no city in Europe was safe from bombardment, as civilian society was another frontline. City bombings also created another problem for politicians who had to consider how to keep up war fighting zeal when the civilian society was under attack.

Overy begins his study with a prologue illustrating, in one chapter, the nature of the topic. Few in the West know of the American bombing attacks directed against Bulgaria in 1944. Conducted far from their airfields, heavy bombers attacked targets independent of any ground campaign. In this case, Allied leaders directed the bombing in order to induce the government in Sofia to reconsider its support of the Germans in its war with the Soviet Union. It was the kind of campaign bomber theorists had been dreaming of since the end of the previous conflict. Here the author outlines his thesis that any description of a bombing campaign must go beyond simplistic descriptions of bombers departing on missions, fighting through enemy antiaircraft fire and fighter attacks, and then returning wounded and depleted. The bombing narrative must “address the psychological, social and cultural response as well as the conventional military reality: the view from below as well as the view from above” (p. 16).

He finishes his opening section with a survey of the view of strategic bombing, in theory, fact, and fiction, before the war. It is a comprehensive analysis that is essential to appreciating what the later generation of bomber commanders wanted to accomplish and why they were, often, incapable of doing so. In the next two sections, he compares the German and Allied bombing campaigns. As expected, the German section concentrates on the 1940 offensive against England in preparation for Operation SEALION and the misguided terror bombing of British cities. Both of these sections represent detailed scholarship that

informs the reader and also destroys many of the myths associated with the Blitz that have developed over seventy years since the war. The issue of bomb shelters became a serious problem. For example, one of the most common images of the war is of London’s residents hiding inside subway stations. In the early days, residents actually had to buy tickets to go inside and hide for the night. The government was opposed to developing bombing shelters for the residents. Of course, citizens took matters into their own hands and Churchill’s government had to follow and adapt. An unexpected aspect in the book is a discussion of the bombing war in the Soviet Union. The German Luftwaffe, as most historians know, was not a strategic force and tied most missions to supporting ground operations. In general, its bombing beyond the frontlines were ineffective as Soviet records indicate. However, these attacks did kill or wound approximately 188,000 civilians, the Luftwaffe’s highest civilian toll in any of its previous operations.

The author then arrives at the main event, the bombing war from the Allied perspective, and beginning with the relatively ineffective operations of Bomber Command from 1939 to 1942. He describes in detail the problems of identifying targets, hitting the targets with any accuracy, and hitting civilian areas rather than the identified target. By 1943, this had all changed with the arrival of American forces in significant numbers and the development of the Casablanca decision to begin Operation POINTBLANK, aimed at the destruction of German industry. He continues by reevaluating the part of the war that many Anglo-Americans understand. He contributes to destroying the myth that the strategic bombers only went after targets in Germany. Until the middle of 1944, most bombs fell on the occupied people of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark. The Allies continued to attack targets in Italy long after they had surrendered to Eisenhower in 1943. The cost was at least 75,000 friendly civilian dead, thousands wounded, and whole cities need-

lessly ravished. Those enamored by the effectiveness of bombing campaigns should reevaluate their perspective when reading his section "France: Bombed into Freedom" (p. 556). In his discussion of the bomber war against Germany, he investigates the issues that have continued to linger after the war: Why not bomb Auschwitz? Why Dresden? Why the firebombing? He explores each topic methodically and introduces the best evidence accumulated in the seventy years since the end of the war.

In his closing, Overy seeks to make sense out of the bombing war. He argues that all of the bombing offensives were "relative failures in their own terms" (p. 611). None of them produced the results the bombing commanders promised. Enemy factories continued to produce war material, governments adjusted to the political necessity of mobilizing and supporting the population, and civilians recovered after the first missions and did not remain panicked. Most important for modern policymakers, bombing seldom produced the political dividends politicians expected. In addition, the use of strategic bombers for tactical missions, something bomber commanders wanted nothing to do with, seldom produced results. The bombing of Monte Cassino in Italy and Aachen in Germany, just two of many examples, did not speed the movement of the ground forces. Of course, there were successes, as the Allied bombers forced Germany to establish a huge anti-aircraft organization, divert more resources to civil defense, and pull most fighters to the western front, thus allowing the Soviets to operate under enemy-free skies for the last year of the war. However, Overy argues that "the historical narrative of the bombing war ... confirms that there existed throughout the conflict a wide gap between what was claimed for bombing and what it actually achieved in material and military terms" (p. 633). Now that the evidence is in, and those with a personal stake in making arguments have departed the scene, the effectiveness of the bombing war

in Europe is not what it appeared at the end of the war.

In sum, this is the definitive discussion of the use of strategic bombers in Europe during the Second World War. Excellent maps, a list of abbreviations, and a masterful collection of primary sources support his magnificent prose. Overy does what scholars should strive for, using primary sources in their original language. The book is thoroughly indexed and useful as a source on any aspect of the war. *The Bombing War* should be in the hands of every scholar interested in the Second World War and every library. It should also be required reading for those who teach the use of force in the modern world. It is a cautionary tale that should not be ignored by politicians and soldiers alike.

There is a postscript to this review. Several months after the release of *The Bombing War, 1939-1945* in the United Kingdom and Canada, Penguin Group, the overall corporate publisher, published a partially abridged version in the United States with the title *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War 1940-1945*. Apparently, to meet the whims of the publisher, Overy had to slash almost one-third, over two hundred pages, from his manuscript. Gone is the original first chapter on bombing before 1940. Missing is the entire first part on Germany's bombing war, including British life under the Blitz and the bombing war in Russia. Missing also is his articulate final chapter on the balance sheet of the bombing war. Having read both volumes, I find this modified edition extremely unsatisfying. My recommendation is to ignore the American edition and go to the original, *The Bombing War*, available for purchase from various Internet sources. You will not be disappointed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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Citation: Stephen Bourque. Review of Overy, Richard. *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe 1940-1945*. ; Overy, Richard. *The Bombing War, Europe 1939-1945*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2014.

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