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## BOOK REVIEW

# *The bombing war: Europe 1939-1945*

by Richard Overy

Penguin: UK; 2014; 880 pp.; ISBN 9780141003214; RRP \$24.99 (paperback)



The Allied air campaign against Nazi Germany's industry, infrastructure and civil population in World War II involved the Royal Air Force's (RAF) Bomber Command and the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) launching thousands of raids over the occupied continent. The concept of heavy bombing raids targeting civilians had its genesis in the Italian General Douhet's pre-war theory of mass bombing raids, first practised by Germany's Luftwaffe during the Spanish Civil War.

In this monumental work, historian Richard Overy has written a masterpiece that covers every conceivable facet of the Axis and Allies bombing war. The book is in three parts: Germany's bombing war; Allied bombers over Europe; and "The Greatest Miscalculation" – that bombing would win the war but did not achieve the outcomes expected of it.

Britain and Germany had prepared for a bombing war by putting in place civil and anti-aircraft defence measures. The British population's response to the Blitzkrieg is dealt with in depth. The Blitzkrieg was a top agenda item for Churchill's cabinet. So was retaliation. Churchill ordered a bombing offensive against Germany's cities, directed by Arthur 'Bomber' Harris. His 6702 personnel in 1941 grew to 52,476 in 1945. RAF Bomber Command's aim was the destruction of towns and cities that housed workers in munitions-based industries and ports. His force initially lacked an effective bombsight, flew obsolete bombers, lacked fighter protection and suffered high losses. With the advent of the Lancaster heavy bomber, best results came from incendiary bombs used with high explosive, as in July 1943 when, in three raids, firestorms engulfed Hamburg causing 200,000 deaths. Large bomber raids desolated many key cities. Bomber Command lost 47,268 (41 per cent) killed-in-action and another 8195 in accidents. Its wartime total bombardment was 296,683 tons of a total (with USAAF) of 419,698 tons.

Once Hitler abandoned his invasion of Britain, he unleashed the Luftwaffe against Moscow and Malta. Moscow suffered 187,951 casualties. No less than 16,230 Luftwaffe sorties were recorded against Malta's airfield and docks and 7605 tons of bombs rained down for an estimated loss of 239 German aircraft.

When America declared war on Germany, its air forces joined the Commonwealth air forces in Europe – it was none too soon. Every seminal moment that defined strategy had its grand dramas: the interplay of all the major commanders – Portal, Harris, Slessor, Arnold, Spaatz, Doolittle, and Eaker; and how they massaged new policies that led to two different strategies. The RAF would bomb by night and the Americans by day. The United States employed long-range fighter aircraft

superior to the Spitfire as bomber escorts. The planning and logistics required to launch, and keep launching, large raids was enormous and involved a complicated supply chain of trained aircrew, fuel and munitions. The numbers were huge. Only the Americans could have done it.

While the German fighters enjoyed some success against the American bombers, their attrition rate and pilot losses were unsustainable. In March 1944 there were 2261 pilots and by December 1944 3561 – but they were poorly trained and no match for the aggressive American pilots.

Initially, the Ruhr and northern Germany were the prime Allied targets. As bomber and fighter ranges lengthened, Germany was compelled to move its factories eastwards towards the advancing Russians. Production levels were maintained, however, and V Weapons were developed to use against Britain for Blitzkrieg Mark 2.

Three USAAF air forces, the Ninth, Fifteenth and Twelfth operated from Mediterranean bases bombing targets in daylight in Italy and the Balkans. In a series of raids, they reduced oil production at Ploesti to one fifth of its 1942 high. Combined with the bombing from west and south of railways, tunnels, marshalling yards and similar infrastructure, it spelled the end for the enemy. The American policy was the more effective of the two. The overall cost included 85,000 Anglo-American airmen and 600,000 European civilians dead.

For the vanquished, there was at least 200 million cubic meters of rubble to clear in 50 cities. They got on with living and rebuilding their infrastructure, industry and institutions. With the inauguration of the Marshall Plan, West Germany gained an immediate economic advantage, applying its technology and expertise to create a 'miracle'. In the last chapter Overy discusses the ambiguities of the campaign, its failure as an economic model to beat an enemy and the many moral issues it created.

The subsequent Cold War turned a former ally, Russia, into an ideological enemy with atomic weapons, leading senior Allied air generals to think in terms of 'total war' with atomic weapons. The Americans devoted huge resources to develop their nuclear capability and to keep a moral and material advantage over the Eastern Block. Those Europeans who had lived through World War II, the early Cold War and the Korean War 'stand-off', however, were better able to understand the morality of a bombing campaign.

In sum, *The Bombing War* is a riveting read, and Overy's statistics tell it all.

**Alan H. Smith**