



The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War Over Europe 1940-1945

Richard Overy

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The ultimate history of the Allied bombing campaigns in World War II

Technology shapes the nature of all wars, and the Second World War hinged on a most unpredictable weapon: the bomb. Day and night, Britain and the United States unleashed massive fleets of bombers to kill and terrorize occupied Europe, destroying its cities. The grisly consequences call into question how “moral” a war the Allies fought.

The Bombers and the Bombed radically overhauls our understanding of World War II. It pairs the story of the civilian front line in the Allied air war alongside the political context that shaped their strategic bombing campaigns, examining the responses to bombing and being bombed with renewed clarity.

The first book to examine seriously not only the well-known attacks on Dresden and Hamburg but also the significance of the firebombing on other fronts, including Italy, where the crisis was far more severe than anything experienced in Germany, this is Richard Overy’s finest work yet. It is a rich reminder of the terrible military, technological, and ethical issues that relentlessly drove all the war’s participants into an abyss.

The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War Over Europe 1940-1945 Details

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From Reader Review The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War Over Europe 1940-1945 for online ebook

victor harris says

The quality of scholarship and analysis is excellent, but you should be advised you have to plow through mountains of statistics that belonged in an appendix. Also needed major editing, the paragraphs in many cases are intolerably lengthy, sometimes in excess of a page, and tend to lose the thread and force of the explanation.

Sojourner says

The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War Over Europe 1940-1945 is a very fascinating account of the concerted Allied air attacks over Europe during the World War II. The author Richard Overy, who is the author of The Twilight Years, discusses in detail the massive air raids pointing out that it amounted to bombing friends and enemies alike, questioning if its objective was met.

The book contains six detailed chapters, including The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Bomber Command 1939 - 1942, The Casablanca Offensive: The Allies Over Germany 1943 - 1944, The "Battle of Germany" 1944 - 1945, The Logic of Total War: German Society Under the Bombs, Italy: The War of Bombs and Words, Bombing Friends, Bombing Enemies: Germany's New Order.

While the book in itself is insightful, I am particularly fascinated by the epilogue Lessons Learned and Not Learned: Bombing into the Postwar World. Richard Overy's perceptive and shrewd understanding is a delightful lesson in history which must be read. The Preface, Notes, Maps, Prologue all make a fine addition to a better understanding of the contents of the book.

Ross Mckinney says

A very solid history of the bombing efforts in WWII. It's not a gung ho book. There were lots of decisions made that reflected mis-use of heavy bombers and probably did little to accelerate the end of the war but did clearly lead to massive numbers of civilian casualties. Bombing reflects the completion of a shift for war as a battle between soldiers to war as a battle between peoples. The goal by the end of WWII for the bombing effort was to kill Germans, and it didn't matter if they were women, children, or elderly. Dresden was example. The war was basically over, and the Russians were nearing Dresden when the bombing occurred. Something on the order of 30,000-40,000 people were killed in the fire storm, most of whom were civilians fleeing the approaching battle fronts. And the people who did the bombing knew exactly what was happening. Their hope was that killing enough civilians would ruin morale and end the war sooner. It didn't happen during the London Blitz, and it didn't happen in Germany. A sad tale, told well. It goes on a bit, since Overy is also interested in why French, Dutch, Belgian, etc, civilians were also targeted and how they reacted. Not a shining moment for humanity.

David Bird says

This book is much more for the reader looking to understand the broad picture of the offensive and defensive sides of the bombing war, than one seeking dramatic narratives of individual survival and heroism.

The bomber forces were probably the greatest instance of technology driving policy. Bombers were built based on the presumption that they would deliver knockout blows; having been built, they were used, and continued to be used even after it was clear that they were not delivering on their original objectives. Rather the objectives were redefined to make bombing successful in a bureaucratic, if not a purely military sense.

Overy's analysis is generally dispassionate, and makes a real effort to see the evolving contemporary perspectives, rather than simply offering hindsight judgments.

Dimitri says

It delivers what it promises: bombing throughout Europe. A good two-thirds is still devoted to the Blitz over England & Germany. Italy benefits most of Overy's pan-European ambition, while Western Europe more or less gets attention in descending order of damage. The section on Eastern Europe felt too short. I am not (yet) qualified to judge the strategical bombing of the Soviet Union in the context of Barbarossa. It's supposedly seldom separated from the tactical air war in the East. The conclusion and epilogue form an excellent synopsis of the book's main themes, but they are shining through the facts throughout so that the reader has a good sense of structure.

The popular image of non-stop swarms of untouchable airplanes soaring menacingly over burning cities is thoroughly debunked. It never left the realm of 1930's SF or war games. Bombers were envisioned to wreck utter an instant devastation on an almost nuclear scale, and not seldom through gas or biological agents. Society's morale was expected to plummet as fast as its architecture, helpless in the face of a bomber that "always got through". Without this lengthy exposition, it is impossible to grasp the mentality of decision making throughout 1940-1945.

The existing bomber technology was simply incapable of delivering results in accordance with pre-war expectations. The impact on the enemy war economy was limited, especially once dispersal programs gave the attacker a myriad of targets to choose from. The chief benefit was forcing the other side to invest in massive AA defense, manned by a mass of hands sorely missed in factories or at the front. In relation to this, the necessary air supremacy of the bomber fleet in enemy airspace was very hard to assert without an expansion of the fighter arm, resulting in a large-scale aerial duel that was not foreseen in the interbellum. Additionally, the range of fighter escorts virtually determined the range of the bomber offensive. The progress made in aircraft construction on this point is perhaps the best measurement of how the psychological impact of bombing spread until it affected entire countries.

Finally, the unity of the people was strengthened rather than weakened in the face of aerial attack, since the current powers-that-be were the main source of rescue and assistance. Ironically, pre-war fears had stimulated initiatives of nationwide civil defense. Britain comes off best among the democracies, while there

was a direct correlation among the dictatorships between the degree of totalitarian mobilization and preparedness. This is best illustrated by looking at the sturdiness of the public and/or private bomb shelters and their effect on morale. It scales down the story to the human level better than casualty statistics can. Plus, both the UK and the USA spent half the war building up their bomber force. It is an arm that demands a lot of industrial resources, uses spacious infrastructure & requires a lot of maintenance manpower. No war in history has enough to go around. The imminent invasion in Normandy, moreover, threatened to direct the whole air force to tactical support. In the end, it helped to blur the distinction between the two levels. It also obscured at the time an important fact: Stalin's much-desired Second Front had been in existence since 1942, thanks to the bombers that vided for the strength of the Eastern Front.

Inaccuracy continued to plague all air forces until the end of the war, in spite of considerable technological advancement in the field of (night) radar. No matter how strict the assigning of targets of proven military value, collateral damage in civilian residential areas was the inevitable consequence. In a way the decimation of the enemy labour force was counted as a compensation, but the population was never an official prime target of bombing for neither side.

The Allies did step up the numbers by perfecting the mix of high explosive & incendiary to create 'firestorms' in German cities whose medieval centers were notoriously flammable. One of the neat details in the book is the studies undertaken by amongst others the emigrated founder of the Bauhaus movement to determine which ordnance combination would work best on Germany and Italy, respectively.

In a weird way, reality vindicated the critics of Douhet: his prophesized collapse of national spirit only came true with Italians, who were prone to crack easily. While the British Blitz spirit is exaggerated in the mythology of WWII, Italian morale did plummet faster. In their defense, bombing on the peninsula didn't get heavy until after the landings at Anzio & the overthrow of Mussolini. By then the German occupation with its harsh reprisals had them caught between a rock and a hard place. The story of bombing by Italy is interesting in a 'what if ?' way. The Italian Air Force's experience in smaller wars such as Spain and Abyssinia had already shown the optimism of *Il dominio dell'aria* to be ill-grounded. The country's small industrial base prohibited an appropriate evolution in aircraft design. The persistent but inadequate bombing of Malta and the airborne assault on Crete might have been replaced with the invasion of the former and the cutting of Allied supply lines in the Mediterranean, with severe consequences for the North African front.

A similar possibility surfaced during the Blitz on Britain, where the Few in actuality met the Many in fairly comfortable numbers and more likely in a Hurricane than a Spitfire. There was an active discussion of the use of both fighters and bombers in either the counteroffensive, or as part of the fight to keep the island's supply lines open in the Battle of the Atlantic. This subject takes me back to the Atlantic charter and could've used more depth. The rest of the Blitz story holds few surprises, except the preparedness of the British government to use gas in retaliation if necessary. This would resurface with the 15th US Air Force in Italy, and remains a rather curious restraint in a war where 'retaliation' often served as an excuse for escalation.

The Germans knew the Battle of Britain was a lost cause even before it officially began, but kept it up to lull the USSR. After 1941 their side of the story plays second fiddle to the Allies', but as the 'victims' their development of countermeasures, even to the infamous 'Window' metal strips, invites a comparison with the situation on the British homeland. It is never clearly made. We do get good capsules of famous raids: Hamburg, Dresden, Schweinfurt... and Berlin, which got raided less than you'd think.

There is sometimes an overemphasis on the inter-Allied disputes over designated targets, especially towards the end, where the liberated countries of Western Europe pass the review. The pendulum had irrevocably

swung in favour of more indiscriminate bombing by late 1942, no matter how vehemently Resistance movements and governments-in-exile lamented. It is almost impossible to pose a moral verdict on the strategic bombing campaign over Europe, and Overly thankfully arguments rather than judges. Personally, I tend to side with Arthur Harris, because war has a momentum of its own.

Kent says

An amazing book.

This exhaustive, and exhausting, history solely focusing on the bombing war in Europe from its beginnings in 1939 through to 1945 and beyond is a must have and read for anyone interested in the history of World War II. The author focuses on the three major air forces in the war, the Germans, British, and Americans, and peels away all of the misconceptions, forgotten history and heroics that have over the decades built up over the actual facts of the ultimate uselessness that the bombing by all of combatants provided to the outcome of the war. Highly recommended.

The Bombing War, Europe 1939-1945 is the British edition; avoid the American edition titled The Bombers and the Bombed.

Bfisher says

The version of the book that I read was the original version, published by Allen Lane (Penguin) as “The Bombing War: Europe 1939–1945”. From what I understand, the U.S. version, published by Viking as “The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War Over Europe 1940-1945” (as indicated by the title) does not include the original version’s account of the German bombing campaigns. This is a grave weakness; in its absence, a reader of the lesser book may not fully appreciate the Allies’ political and military leadership failures as the Allied bombing campaigns developed.

It took me a very long time to read this book. It is a well-written book, but the subject matter is grim. I started to read this book in September 2014, but I could not force myself to read much of it until making a concerted effort this week, which was not coincidentally the 70th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, and shortly after the 70th anniversary of the Dresden bombings (Feb 1945). Coincidentally, it was the same week as the passing of the last Dambusters pilot, Les Munro.

Those events are significant to this book. Only with the passing of time and of the participants in the struggle of WW2 was it possible to produce and publish an objective history of the bombing war in Europe, 1939-1945. I believe that this book is that objective history, and that there are great lessons to be re-learned from it.

Annette says

Source: Free copy from Viking in exchange for a review.

Summary:

During World War II (1939-1945) "600,000 European civilians were killed by bomb attack and well over a million more were seriously injured, in some cases physically or mentally disabled for life." Page xi

It is with these sobering statistics, Richard Overy, begins a detailed overview of the bombers who bombed in order to destroy the Axis powers of World War II.

The main thrust of the book is on the bombers of the Allied forces: the Bomber Command of Great Britain and the American forces (principally the 8th Air Force).

There is limited information in the book on Germany's Blitz of England.

Germany's bomber force is also written in brief.

The civilian work on the ground in Germany is explored: volunteer firemen who put out the fires, preparing civilians for escape and shelter, destruction statistics, and rebuilding.

There is a chapter on the bombings by the Allied forces on the countries who were either the enemy or were occupied by the enemy. These countries were Bulgaria, France, Italy, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.

An in-depth study of bombs and incendiary bombs make up more than one chapter. This includes statistics on how many were dropped, where they were dropped, destruction which occurred, and a surreal survey of the destroyed cities after the war.

An ending chapter is on reflection, questioning choices which were made.

My Thoughts:

The book is lengthy, detailed, organized well. It is a text book treatise on the Allied bombers of World War II over Europe.

While reading the book I wondered why there was not information on Germany's bombings in England, only a reference is given. After reading a few comments at Amazon, I was surprised to learn the original edition of the book has a chapter on the history of the London Blitz, but this edition left out the chapter. I will not speculate on an answer.

This book is not a human interest story, there are few personal stories of those who were the bombers or the bombed. But, this was not the intention from the beginning. The author is straight forward in the preface on what his aims are.

The preface is excellent. I love the authors organization and serious nature of writing the book. One of his aims was to look at "archive sources in both countries", and not just "narratives". A point which I had not known about the cities which were bombed, "For most European societies there is no official history."

If you are looking for a human interest story, this is not a book you would want to read.

If you love to read World War II history and want a heavy study on the bombers and the bombed, then this is the book for you.

Final remarks:

In my opinion, after World War II ended, this book would not have been published. The Allied forces were glad the war was over, and they could go on with their lives. For Europe, especially for Germany, they were the defeated enemy, rebuilding the nation is what they poured their strength into. For both sides, revisiting what happened, which included mistakes made, was not an option. It's been almost 69 years since the war ended. It is with a strong conviction that I state Germany had to be defeated, as well as Italy, and Japan.

There was no plan B.

Paul says

****Won via Goodreads First Reads Giveaway ****

Bombers and Bombed is a very interesting look at both ends of the Allied bombing campaign in Europe 1940-45. I am a fan of new or little told stories from WWII and this easy read is near the top. The book is very detailed, maybe a little too detailed for the beginner history buff. You will not be disappointed with B&B and I enjoyed this book greatly. On a side note, as I read this book a bulldozer driver in Germany was killed on a construction site by an unexploded allied bomb from WWII on 1-3-2014, apparently this is not uncommon.

Maxim Pyankov says

This is a well-researched and documented book. As a WWII enthusiast, it was great to dive into a specific sub-category of the conflict via this book. I now also want to further explore, on the similar scale, the maritime aspect of the conflict, especially the U-boat and related campaigns.

The text was easy to read and to follow, and chronologically made good sense.

I wish the book had covered or given me a glimpse into the Soviet-vs.-German mutual bombing campaigns. As is, there was absolutely no information on this front. The vast majority is focused on the Allied campaigns, with a very minor pivot, almost a footnote, to the Pacific bombing campaign (of course - the book title well describes the subject matter at hand). It also would have been great to have more witness accounts as well as to have the pictures of the destruction. Other than that - easy to read text, well researched material, and an interesting topic to explore for the WWII enthusiasts.

Peter Mcloughlin says

This book is not an oral history or a collection of individual accounts but a study of the policy by the allies of bombing. It is a story that starts out with debates over restraint over civilian casualties and quickly escalates into area bombing during the war. The first half of the book covers the air war and bombing strategy by the allies. The tactics and the aims of the allies is covered well and the reader gets a good idea of how bombing was conducted plus tables and stats of bombers, losses and missions.

The second half is about how the axis targets responded the bombing and how the German war machine was able to handle the bombing and still operate up to the very end. It also covers the bombing of Italy which doesn't get a lot of coverage in histories of WWII and other countries like France, Hungary and almost every other country in Europe. Good informative history that argues that the axis was able to survive the bombing until the very end and leaves it unclear if bombing was helping the allies much.

D. says

This was a very detailed and well documented work yet was worded so as to be easy to read. It gave a real

perspective of the gigantic scope of the bombing effort put forth by the Allies in WWII. The book asked the questions, "Was the bombing effective, and did it meet its objectives." Even though I would agree to some extent with the conclusions, I would say they are negated by the fact that approximately 291,000 Americans died in the conflict and we didn't start the war. The fact that only some 250,000 German civilians died as a result of bombings is hardly a drop compared to the 6 million Jews exterminated by the Germans or the 13 million Soviets who starved or were killed by Nazis. The Germans started this war and killed millions of innocent victims so it is immaterial how many of their civilians were killed in the "fog of war". The writer was correct in his belief that the bombing did not have the desired effect on stopping Germany, however, that is an indication of the lack of accurate bombing methods and equipment. Notice how soon Japan surrendered when only two bombs of deadly accuracy and a horrific method of destruction were used. If bombs dropped on Germany had been more accurate and deadly, it would certainly have made a huge change in the German war effort.

Norman Metzger says

I took a quite personal interest in this book since as a young child living in Frankfurt a/m I was one of the "bombed". I also was one of the children evacuated to a country town near the end of the war, a program that Overy touches on tangentially. Beyond the personal side, this is indeed a very good book, and makes clear in merciless detail how ineffective the bombing campaigns often were. Entire cities were missed and even if the cities were found the targets were either not found or subject to little damage. The resilience of the Nazi regime in rebuilding factories or moving them or cleverly disguising them from aerial views is impressive, even for an evil regime. The obtuseness, esp of the British managers of the bombing campaign, is truly impressive, as they continued to view evidence that their efforts were highly flawed as facts to be ignored. Perhaps the saddest part for me was the terrible harm inflicted by our bombers on the Netherlands (think Nijmegen), Belgium, France, Denmark, in which many civilians were killed while targets were missed or marginally damaged -- and much of that happened toward the end of the war. Finally, I was startled when in the acknowledgments, normally an anodyne matter, the author calls the services of the National Archives as a "researcher's nightmare".

Tim Pendry says

Every time I walk past the statue 'honouring' the aircrews of Bomber Command in Green Park, I taste something unpleasant in my mouth.

I can imagine a decent German feeling much the same if Berlin had a major monument to the Eastern Front war dead of the Wehrmacht.

Yes, both sets of men were courageous and died for the sins of their leaders but both sets of men were complicit in appalling atrocities under orders that specifically targeted civilians.

This remarkable, well evidenced and well written book is about the use of bombing and its effects in Europe during the Second World War - at least that is its primary purpose. It is, in fact, a book about evil.

Half a million Europeans were murdered from the air either indirectly as part of the prosecution of war or directly as a deliberate strategy of area or political bombing by air power advocates.

The book is dense in places. Overy does not put statistics into foot-notes but makes sure you have them to hand when you read of this raid or that campaign - whether deaths or tonnage of bombs.

He does not go into too much detail of effects - just enough for us to be clear what bombing involves - because his interests (and ours) are the policies that led to these horrors.

This is one of those books where the complexity of issues requires that we do not try an easy summary. Overy is fair-minded. He seeks to understand and not condemn. There is no emotion here.

The final conclusions are measured and pointed. He also provides a useful coda that suggested that nothing was fundamentally learned from the experience.

He rightly points out that the area bombing of Bomber Harris - who must be the very epitome of the banality of evil if you have a soul - was of its time and could not be repeated.

He then stops any sigh of relief at this point by pointing out that these maniacs (my opinion, not his) did not need to repeat it because they soon had nuclear weaponry. We have been lucky so far.

Half a million dead over five years could now become 80million Russians in a few hours. The strategy of total war would dictate first strike in the forlorn hope of limiting the effect at home.

One should continue to think on this as a bunch of war loons try to convert crises in the Middle East or over local self-determination in the Ukraine into confrontations with well armed nuclear powers.

The point is that the area strategy was not a general one amongst the combatants but a specifically Anglo-American - indeed British one - based on the thinking of an Italian proto-fascist, Douhet.

The irony of this is not lost on Overy who points out that Allied bombing of Italians (while their Government was an ally) cost more lives than the Blitz.

One gets a shock to the system when one discovers just how evil the British as a war state had become in what was clearly an existential struggle of constant escalation with no quarter given.

Let us start by noting something uncomfortable. Although air power advocates promoted independent bombing strategies, the general view in the 1930s was that civilian bombing was a horror.

Neither the Soviets nor the Americans adopted civilian bombing as a policy directive and (surprise!) it was Hitler who attempted to outlaw it and chemical and gas weapons at the beginning of the conflict.

Of course, this does not gainsay Hitler's villainy against first the Jews and the mentally disabled and then anything that got in his way of a civilian nature in the East or in terms of reprisals.

But facts are facts. And probably because he still had a residual notion that the West Europeans were a basically civilised people, Hitler seems to have thought it uncivilised to bomb people in war.

There is, as well, multiple room for misunderstandings, sometimes wilful, in international relations with

deeply unpleasant political warfare operatives muddying the truth at every opportunity.

Overy, somewhat embarrassingly, places Guernica, Warsaw and Rotterdam in their military context and draws the critical line between what we call 'collateral damage' and deliberate terror.

This is central because we need to understand that the British not only had a strategy of terror (the only nation to do so) but, with the Americans, banked up gas bombs in Italy ready to use in the last days.

Biological weapons may have been in their infancy but it seems (from Overy's coda) that the next total war contemplated by the air power loons included advocacy of bacteriological warfare to retain assets.

So what is going on here? Certainly Churchill was troubled by the strategy of terror though unafraid to use any resource to meet political ends. As we will note, we can still see his point.

Similarly, not only the Germans and the Soviets but also the Americans may have been ruthless though happily held to the notion of tactical use of air power where civilians were unfortunate collateral damage.

The secret of evil seems to lie in its true source - the corporate mentality. The RAF was a new arm of state force and competed for budgets and resources. It positioned itself as the future.

Its chief, Bomber Harris, somewhere ceased to be a human being and became the pure will of his force. He had done a common thing, lost himself in the task and ceased to be more than the task.

Edgerton has written persuasively that last century air power was associated with the technological right and he has pointed out the ideology underpinning Liberal Militarism.

Overy does not go down this route but we should remind ourselves that the driver for techno-war was the protection of one's own people by mustering massive power targeted at the population of the other.

This reversion to a Mesopotamian attitude to the cities of your enemy also held a sub-text of fear that democracy (actually the hold of the liberal elite) could not survive another general call-up.

The solution - tanks on the front and planes in the sky - neatly converged with the institutional aspirations of the RAF to an equal or dominant role in war strategy.

Since fighters and fighter-bombers by definition were always going to be ancillary to armies fighting blow by blow across country and naval forces defending trade routes, this meant bombing.

The justification of bombing however was not easy. Aiming was poor, air crew losses were high and the equipment was very expensive. To be more than ancillary required a 'result'.

What these callous men offered was one or both of two possibilities, one taken up more reasonably by the Americans and the other - fanatically - by Bomber Harris.

The first was to claim that bombing raids directed at aeroengine works, transportation and oil facilities (and so on) could degrade the economy of the other side so that his war capacity would fail.

Naturally, given the weakness of bomb aiming equipment and the constant pressure on air crews of fear, this meant serious collateral damage to the civilian population.

Needless to say, this is what happened not only in the Blitz (which was always military in purpose in terms of economic warfare) but also in many of the major raids on Germany and all those in allied states.

Overy plausibly demonstrates that this sort of airpower was far less effective than the bombers claimed but he (and we) can give the men of the time the benefit of the doubt here.

The bombers in these cases seem to have killed a lot of people, including allied citizens to the increasing frustration of the resistance, but there was at least a theoretical case for action.

It could be reasonable in an escalating existential crisis to accept this massive collateral damage if it brought the hell to a faster end - this is the dark justification, of course, for Hiroshima.

This sort of bombing is just - just - on the right side of morality for most people: we say again, that which reasonably might be considered to be the lesser evil in an existential struggle.

Strategic area bombing of civilians to inspire terror in the dubious and unevidenced belief that this might cause panic and bring down a regime is another kettle of fish however.

There are cases where regimes were brought down by terror bombing - Italy seems to be an example - but nearly all countries appear to have adapted and even seem to have seen the regime strengthened.

The fact of bombing and disruption exposed weak and poor regimes like Mussolini's but it enabled a narrative of resistance and a politically-led popular organisation to emerge elsewhere.

Just as general tactical asset bombing oddly tended to increase production through reorganisation, substitution and determination so area bombing tended to strengthen political legitimacy.

In the first case, it might be very reasonable for strategists not to have understood that this would be the case but in the second we are faced by two new factors.

The Blitz itself should have provided sufficient evidence that regimes strengthened on existential threat while what we have here is something different - the deliberate targeting of workers.

Ah, I seem to have slipped into the unforgivable here - the values-driven business of morality!

The point is that Bomber Harris was no different from Himmler in this - the destruction of persons deliberately because of their nature, in this case as German workers, in Himmler's as Jews.

The argument that the Jews were 'innocent' and the German workers were 'guilty' is specious. To Nazis, the Jews were as 'guilty as hell' as origins of the war (yes, absurd but believed culturally).

German workers, many of whom voted social democratically in the 1932 and previous elections and who were led no less than workers anywhere by malign elites, were suffering here from collective punishment.

The deliberate firestorming of Hamburg and other cities was a war crime that the Allies knew to be so when they decided not to prosecute the Nazis at Nuremburg for their bombing atrocities.

The most notorious case, Dresden, ironically probably falls into the milder category of tactical warfare bombing in support of the Soviet push to the East. Overy is good at revising our preconceptions.

The lessons of all this are largely academic, on the old mafia saying that 'that was then and this is now'. The conditions were peculiar and unrepeatable - new atrocities entirely are for our time.

However, we can draw some lessons about the human condition, about the blind and unaccountable nature of institutional forms operating in unevidenced ways and doing bad things under unrestrained leaders.

To be fair, Churchill was a man under severe pressure to whom bombing remained a tool-at-hand and a sideshow and, though committed absolutely to success, he was neither stupid nor psychopathic.

What is worrying is that, under conditions of existential crisis, power to do great evil can be delegated so easily. This story raises very uncomfortable thoughts about other war leaders.

And not just Stalin and Hitler but Cameron and Obama. The post-war Presidents, for example, appear to have had some reasonable grip over their forces through acceptance of their authority. Are we so sure now?

One question is what happens when the 'fuhrerprinzip' sends down the line vague generalities alongside instructions that can be interpreted brutally because they were stated brutally (the Hitler/Stalin model).

But another question is what happens when a Leader is not working on full information and makes false or 'bad' judgements on the claims of the institutional pressure groups who claim to serve him.

There are signs on several occasions in this story that Bomber Command lost the ability to do two things under Bomber Harris: think beyond the interests of itself; and have reasonable moral boundaries.

The British were far from alone - the Soviets were restrained only because they were fighting a different sort of war - and the Americans soon descended into hell themselves with the Tokyo firebombing.

But bombing itself was over-egged as tool - strategic bombing in the battlefield could lead to the 'friendly fire' errors that we saw in Iraq and Afghanistan as well and often did more harm than good.

It may - given existential struggle and acceptance of the 'just war' (ho, hum!) - have had some important function in degrading the flow of materiel to the enemy front and redirecting production.

What strikes me as unconscionable, especially with political motives of pure populist revenge, is to continue with a campaign of total war against civilians long after it is clear that it is just murder.

Almost every civilian death *could* be justified by some rational explanation based on the struggle for existence by the end but, by that time, everyone has lost the moral plot.

The great lesson of all this is that war has its own remorseless logic in which (as Overy wisely notes) political conditions eventually block the chance to do the right thing.

However, you can make up your own mind. Overy is detached and clinical. The facts are all there in his book. I urge you to read it and ask where you think the boundaries of death-dealing should lie.

Emmanuel Gustin says

The title and the monumental size of this book somehow suggest a definitive, comprehensive history of the strategic bombing campaigns during WWII. But that is an enormously complex subject with a substantial body of literature already discussing it. Among these, Overy's book is a worthy contribution, but not exceptional. It is a thorough study of the politics and strategy of the bloody bombing campaigns of WWII, as dry and unemotional as such a study could be. But most of this material is not new.

The greatest merit of "The Bombing War" is its discussion of Civil Defense, that is, the various measures the involved states took, before and during the war, to protect their population, infrastructure and industry from the consequences of the enemy bombs. This is a grim subject that I have not seen elsewhere described in such detail, and it is Overy's major contribution to the topic. It gives us a different view of the bombing campaigns, as seen from the perspective of the bombed.

It leads Overy to a valuable insight: If the proponents of the bombing of enemy "morale" (for which to read: cities and civilians) expected the bombed-out people to rise against their governments or at least call for an end to the war, they often achieved the opposite. Deprived of their homes and possessions, suffering the death of friends and relatives, the bombed civilians of WWII became only more dependent on the state for support and survival. In the heavily bombed cities of Germany, the Nazi party sought to become the major provider of assistance to the needy, and thus its power and grip on the German people were strengthened rather than weakened by enemy bombing. Similar patterns emerged elsewhere, with Italy perhaps being the one significant exception.

It is a lesson that is still valid and important today for those who seek to enforce "regime change", by bombing or by less bloody means.

This is a valuable contribution to the study of air warfare during WWII. It takes time to read but is informative, and worth the effort even if you think that you already know a lot about this topic. For those who still believe that the Allied bombing campaigns targeted military targets and civilians suffered only as the result of "collateral damage", it will be an eye-opener.

Marcus says

Let me start by pointing out that this review is for the American edition from Viking Press, which apparently is "missing" several chapters, mainly those concerning German use of bombers against Great Britain in 1940-41.

On with the review then...

"The Bombers and the Bombed" is supposed to be, according to the author, the most detailed analysis of use of aerial bombing during World War 2. Its uniqueness is based on the fact that it covers in great detail both the Allied and German side of the bombing campaign against Germany itself, something the author claims hadn't been done before. Furthermore, the author also covers the bombing campaign against Italian peninsula which, with the exception of the notorious decision to bomb monastery at Monte Cassino, is indeed barely ever discussed. Final section of the book is dedicated to bombing operations against countries occupied by Germany; here (in well-established Anglo-saxon historian's tradition) the focus lies squarely on

the Western Europe with France getting the lion's share of allotted space.

While the author inserts throughout the book an occasional story or quote regarding the effects of the bombing operations on real people, this book is not about the personal experiences or 'human story' of neither the 'bombers' nor the 'bombed'. The focus is set squarely on study of politics, decision processes, statistics and economics associated with Allied bombing operations between 1940 and 1945 and their impact on Germany's ability to conduct military operations. As result, this book is filled with statistics of bomb tonnage dropped in individual raids, numbers of casualties, effects on industry output, transport capabilities, morale and work effectiveness of workers and so on. Remainder of the book is dedicated to an overview of political aspects of the campaign, military strategy, decisions and expectations and detailed, but rather broad discussion about the actual effects on population afflicted by the bombings. All this is, at least on the surface, discussed in cold, factual manner. The factual material provided by the author in this volume is of absolute top quality and detail. The perhaps less wished for side-effect of this meticulousness combined with the 'academic' writing style of the author is that this will be a very hard book to absorb for casual reader. Those expecting a narrative of the kind provided by for example Beevor or Atkinson will be sorely disappointed. On the other hand, for those who are 'initiated', the content of this book is a veritable treasure-trove of valuable information, presented in a format that is indeed quite unique and thought-provoking. Furthermore, the sections dedicated to the actions directed against Italy and countries occupied by Germany do indeed provide new and valuable information.

I must however remark that on couple of occasions I've got the distinct impression that there are certain limits to the validity of author's analysis. As long as his narrative concerns itself with dissection of pure statistics and social/political/economical aspects of the bombing offensive, it is hard to find any flaws in his train of thought, even though one may not necessarily agree with the conclusions he arrives to. But as soon as professor Overly moves over to a discussion about realities of combat over skies of Germany, then at least in my opinion he's outside his comfort zone and is no longer one hundred percent reliable. One small example of what I'm talking about is a statement he makes at one point about advantages of automatic cannons used by German fighters vs. defensive armament of American bombers. His claim is that cannons had longer range than heavy machine guns of the bombers, thus giving German fighters obvious advantages in combat. While I understand why he arrives to this conclusion, it is unfortunately without a shadow of a doubt absolutely wrong. Combination of three factors - different trajectory of heavy cannon shells, very low amount of ammunition that could be carried by German airplanes for their cannons and much lower rate of fire of the cannons - made it absolutely essential for German fighters to get very close to their targets if they were to have any chance to be effective. Also, nature of contemporary fighter airplane as a firing platform made it practically impossible to hit not only the barn's door, but the entire barn at ranges longer than 400 meters. The entire issue may be a small detail in broad content of this book (indeed, the remark I react against is a whole of two sentences long), but it is indicative to where author's true competence really lies.

Author's comparison of defensive tactics employed by RAF during 1940 and Luftwaffe against daytime operations of Allied bombers is another, maybe more serious, indication of author's limitations. In this, far more detailed, discussion the author makes the claim that Luftwaffe made grave mistake in employing large formations of fighter airplanes in attacks against American bombers. He points out to the effectiveness of Dowding's tactics of using small 'packs' of airplanes in hit-and-run attacks and states that same approach would serve Luftwaffe much better. To be perfectly honest, on this occasion I fail to see how the author arrives to this conclusion and would go as far as saying that it's complete rubbish. First and foremost, the author fails to recognize the fact that Dowding's tactics weren't a choice of convenience, they were forced on him by single factor - **available response time**. Unlike commanders of Luftwaffe in later years of war, he had literally minutes to get his fighters into position where interception of bombers was possible before they arrived over their target. German controllers on the other hand had several hours at their disposal to

recognize possible targets of American bombers, get individual tactical units in the air and group them according to the situation. Indeed, German fighters often had the luxury of gathering near American bomber formations, wait until the escort fighters had to leave, then **get in front** of bomber formations and attack them from optimal direction. Individual attacks on bombers were indeed done by smaller segments of fighters, often from different directions at the same time, but the concentration of 'big wings' against one or two American 'boxes' at a time made very much sense indeed and often caused dramatic losses, rendering entire formations unfit for further combat operations. Furthermore, as the war progressed, the tactical situation in the air also changed. American escort formations took full advantage of their superior numbers and covered tens of kilometers in all directions from bomber boxes. German fighters had to literally fight their way **through** that space before they even reached the bombers; flying in large formations under those circumstances made once again perfect sense and indeed was the only way to even get to the bombers. Author's failure to recognize changes in tactical realities of 1942-45 when compared with 1940 is, to me at least, somewhat perplexing.

So is it those observations that cause me to give this book a rating of 'only' three stars then? No, even though I feel it is important to recognize the fact that when it comes to evaluation of actual combat operations, operational doctrines and tactics employed by both sides, there are much better books out there than this volume. At the same time it has to be recognized that these topics are only of secondary importance to professor Overy's analysis and therefore not the deciding factor in regard of its quality or veracity.

The real reason why my reception of this volume is lukewarm is that I regard 'Bombers and the Bombed' to be flying under false flag. Professor Overy claims for his volume to be an objective analysis of Allied bombing operations during World War II. But... the final and perhaps the most important component of this book, indeed the red thread that binds the 'cold' analysis into coherent whole consists of the discussion about actual effectiveness as well as the morality of Allied bombing operations. This discussion of whether the effects of Allied bombing campaign were worth the horrible price paid in form of civilian casualties and destruction in urban areas is spread throughout the book and is in my opinion the actual *causus vivendi* for this volume. In simple terms, the real question that the author is trying to answer with this book is simply 'Was it worth it?'. And it is in this discussion that the author delivers his absolute and unreserved condemnation of Allied bombing campaign.

As far as I understand it, the author bases his standpoint on following conclusions:

- Allied operations were conducted in haphazard manner and without any real coordination between British and American counterparts.
- Initial expectations on technical capabilities of bombers were vastly exaggerated and, when their ineffectiveness was slowly realized, the facts were simply ignored.
- Despite the fact that the buildup of both British and American bomber force required enormous material, production and manpower resources, the intent for their use was never very clear. Therefore, the objectives of their operations were based on incorrect assumptions and expectations and as a consequence vaguely defined, often contradictory and most of the time unrealistic.
- As a result of technical limitations and faulty strategy, the individual raids seldom had real impact on German capability to conduct the war and on few occasions when it did happen, the results were very limited. Impact on industrial output could most of the time be reconstituted or handled by alternative resources.
- Despite lack of any real impact, the Allied insisted on continuation of the bombing operations, causing unnecessarily up to half a million of civilian casualties, additional suffering on millions of innocent civilian population as well as massive and often wanton material destruction of significant portion of continental Europe's urban areas.
- The barbarism of unrestricted Allied bombing practices caused the coalescence of German civilian

population's morale and will to resist as well as a lot of negative feelings toward Allied countries among populations of occupied countries. The bombing campaign was therefore having the exact opposite result to the one pursued by the Allies.

- Despite allied efforts, industrial output of Germany rose steadily throughout the period of the offensive, often by several hundreds percent.
- Based on all of the above, the bombing operations were a gigantic mistake, required enormous resources that would have much larger effect if used in other ways and cast very deep shadow on morality of Allied conduct of the war against Nazi Germany.

Here's the thing – the debate regarding different aspects of Allied bombing offensive of 1940-45 (both in Europe and against Japan) and especially its effects and morality has been raging among historians, philosophers, military theorists and politicians pretty much since the day World War 2 ended. The topic is extremely complicated, multi-faceted, booby-trapped with emotions and infected with very real human suffering of enormous proportions. If a single book is to be regarded as the definitive study of these events, what caused them and what their effect really was, it should be written by a person who really is objective. This volume aspires to be exactly that book and indeed, in many respects the conclusions of the author need to be accepted as correct ones. But in the discussion about validity of Allied approach and perhaps even more importantly, when the morality of these operations is scrutinized, if the person conducting is to be perceived as credible, he or she must be impartial to begin with.

It is in this respect that Richard Overy fails to impress me. Admittedly, he never expresses clearly his standpoint, but the manner in which he presents and comments the factual data, the way he uses the vocabulary and indeed the occasional snide remarks that sneak through in his narrative are to me at least indications that he uses the facts to support a clearly preconceived condemnation instead of (possibly) arriving to it in an impartial process.

I have other problems with author's reasoning, his dismissal of Germany's conduct in the war as a contributing factor to the escalation of Allied bombing operations and his downplaying of the very real effects on Germany's capability to conduct military operations being perhaps the two most persistent grievances of mine. But first and foremost, I cannot help but be discouraged with my impression that the author's starting position in the vital 'moral discussion' is that the events he discusses were wrong on the most elementary level. The way I see it, he uses this book to argue this stand-point and at the same time claiming impartiality. This stand strikes me simply as dishonest. That's why I'm choosing to regard this book as a very valuable collection of factual data, but refuse to accept its 'philosophical' input in the debate about this infected subject matter.

Rich Taylor says

So it took me a year to read this book - a little at a time. Obviously it is no page turner. It is, as you would expect from Overy, painstakingly researched and an extremely thorough account. The focus is on the less told tales - the civilians under the bombs, the strategies for civil defense and to a lesser extent the grand strategies of the offensive forces. Whilst an impressive and worthwhile historical text it just wasn't that interesting to read...

Peter Goodman says

“The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe, 1940-1945,” by Richard Overy (Viking, 2013). Overy wrote “Why the Allies Won,” a far better---or at least, more interesting---book. Here he examines in great detail the origins of British and American thinking about how to conduct a war in the air, how it evolved, and whether it worked at all. After WWI, most strategic thinkers felt that future wars would be decided by devastating bombing, which would destroy cities, kill civilians, and terrorize the populations into surrender. That’s what they thought, but they did not really prepare. The British bombers were pathetic: slow, poorly armed, with tiny bomb loads of small bombs and wholly inadequate bombsights. The Americans were somewhat better prepared: because of the country’s size, and its distance from potential enemies, it concentrated on big planes with long range, and heavy defensive armament. But the leaders thought blows from the air would be devastating. Overy begins with some bombing raids in Bulgaria, which accomplished little but embittered the population against the Allies. It was a Bulgarian officer who invented the contact-fuse bomb, with its oval shape and guiding fins. The first British raids were disasters; planes got lost, completely missed their targets, couldn’t hit anything close to where they aimed. When the Germans finally responded, they shot down so many planes the British were forced to fly only at night. But almost from the beginning strategists intended to hit and kill civilians—but they hid that fact, claiming civilian casualties were mistakes. Finally the British developed the Lancaster bomber, big, long-ranged, well-armed, and with an immense carrying capacity. Still the bombing did not have much of an effect in Germany. Losses were heavy, damage was light and quickly repaired. The Americans promised a lot but were a very long time getting going. They had difficulty bringing over enough aircraft and crews, logistics were a mess, the forces grew very slowly. At first the Yanks thought they could send B-17s through without fighter escort. That did not work. But they didn’t have planes with the range to accompany the bombers. Slowly the escorts appeared. The P-47, moderate range; the P-38, much longer; and finally the P-51, able to fly all the way to Vienna. It also took a long time to develop the technology and techniques: how to develop formations; how to fly in formation; how to keep control over such large forces; how to get them to the targets and back; how to utilize the fighters; how to keep the planes flying; how to train and support the crews. The war in the air was ferocious. Although at first damage was not great and the Germans were very well organized, to shelter civilians, fight fires and repair damage, slowly Americans and Brits learned to use their power. The British from the beginning---not just from “Bomber Harris”---meant to devastate cities, not just military targets. For one thing, their bombing was so inaccurate at first they barely got within five miles of the target. Even by the end there was very little precision. The Americans, flying by day, intended to hit specific targets, and their aiming was better, but nevertheless they mostly missed. The British experimented with incendiaries—what chemicals to use, how many bombs, what the best combination would be, and what weather situations were best for spreading fire. Dresden was not the first firestorm, and it wasn’t the worst. Hamburg was earlier and more devastating. The Germans eventually were forced to put more and more of their resources into air defense, which meant that the Eastern and Italian fronts were starved of artillery and fighters to help the ground troops. Eventually the Allies had complete control of the air, even though German fighter production grew and grew despite all the bombing. It was the attacks on fuel and transportation, not the bombing of the cities, that had the most effect on German war-fighting capabilities. Overy provides much detail about the infighting among the British and American commands, over the proper direction to take, the tactics and strategy, etc. He talks about how awful the experiences were for the crews: again and again, in noisy, freezing, thin-skinned planes, in the air for hours, under constant attack with very little chance of making through the required 25 missions. The men went crazy. Ultimately, however, for me as a reader, the book became mostly dry reporting of internal debates and bureaucratic organization. He does write about what it was like in the planes and on the ground, but in snippets. That is not his primary concern. The most important thing I learned is that killing civilians was not a mistake, from the beginning.

Lysergius says

This massive tome looks at aerial warfare in its offensive from every angle, leaving no stone unturned. Beginning with the bombing campaign of WWI it moves through the Spanish Civil War to address every aspect of the bombing campaigns of the British, Americans and the German air forces.

The conclusion is pretty much what you would expect, strategic area bombing is an extremely blunt object that fails miserably to deliver any of its objectives, economic, psychological or political. Why then was it pursued with such ferocity by the participants? Why was the emphasis not placed on tactical strikes under battlefield conditions?

These are some of the questions that Overy sets out address in the course of the 880 pages in the book.

Rob Kitchin says

Prior to the Second World War there was a belief, especially amongst the air forces of the various belligerents, that bombing could determine the outcome of wars, curtailing land campaigns. The subtitle of this book is 'Allied Air War Over Europe, 1940-1945' and it focuses on the Western allies attempts to test this hypothesis, charting the bombing campaigns over Germany in particular, its Axis partners, and occupied countries such as France and the Netherlands from the perspective of the bombers and those who were bombed. To a large degree it is academic in its approach, setting out a rather dry and dispassionate account based on the historical archive of documentary evidence, presenting events at a distance and with memos and statistics rather than personalities and experiences. Overy argues that the bombing campaign not only did not achieve its aims, but cost more in lives and material than it gained in strategic and tactical advances. That is not to say that the bombing campaign had no effect – it certainly led to much destruction, lives lost, disruption, and some influence on the distribution of resources, but rather than collapsing morale it often reinforced resolve and it had little impact on industrial production until near the war's end. While the book provides a broad overview of the politics and practice of bombing, from both Allied and Axis perspective, it gives little sense of the key people involved who are rather one-dimensional, or the experiences of those undertaking bombing raids or being bombed. Moreover, it provides very little coverage of the Eastern front and that of the third major allied party, Russia. I was expecting the book to circle round to a wider systemic analysis of the effects and ethics of bombing at the conclusion, but that didn't materialise. Overall, an interesting read concerning the politics and effects of a bombing campaign.
