

High explosive, damp squibs

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Governing from the Skies: a Global
History of Aerial Bombing

Thomas Hippler

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Bombing from the air is about a hundred years old. As a strategic option, it eroded the distinction between combatants and non-combatants: it was, Thomas Hippler argues in his thought-provoking history of the bombing century, the quintessential weapon of total war. Civilian populations supported war efforts in myriad ways, and so, total-war theorists argued, they were a legitimate object of attack. Bombing might bring about the collapse of the enemy's war economy, or create a sociopolitical crisis so severe that the bombed government would give up. Despite efforts to protect non-combatants under international law, civilian immunity has been and continues to be little more than an ideal.

Hippler is less concerned with the military side of bombing, and has little to say about the development of air technology, which, some would insist, has defined the nature and limits of bombing. His concern is with the political dividends that bombing was supposed to yield by undermining social cohesion and/or the general willingness to continue a war.

The model for this political conception of bombing was the colonial air policing practised principally by the British between the world wars. Hippler observes that the willingness to use air power to compel rebel "tribesmen" in Afghanistan, Iraq and Africa to cease insurgency became the paradigm for later large-scale campaigns during the Second World War, and has been reinvented in the age of asymmetric warfare against non-state insurgencies: once again in Iraq and Afghanistan – and, indeed, anywhere that a drone can reach.

The problem, as Hippler knows, is that this type of bombing does not work. A century of trying to find the right aerial platform and armament, from the German Gotha bombers of 1917 to the unmanned missile carriers of today, has not delivered the political and strategic promise that air-power theorists hoped for. Air power is at its best when it is either acting as an ancillary to surface forces or engaged in air-to-air combat. The Israeli strike against Arab air forces at the start of the 1967 war was a classic example of the efficient military use



Celestial rough justice: US bombers attack Bremen in the Allied offensive on Germany, April 1943

of air power. In the Second World War, the millions of bombs dropped on Europe produced no social upheaval, but the US decision to engage in all-out aerial counter-attack in 1944 destroyed the Luftwaffe and opened the way to the destruction of Germany's large and powerful ground forces.

The prophet of bombing as the means to a quick, decisive solution in modern war was the Italian strategist Giulio Douhet, whose intellectual biography Hippler has written. Douhet's treatise *The Command of the Air* (1921) is often cited as the founding text of modern air power. He believed that a more humane way to wage war was to use overwhelming strength in the air to eliminate the enemy's air force, and then drop bombs and chemical weapons in a devastating attack on enemy cities. The result would be immediate capitulation, avoiding another meat-grinder such as the First World War. The modern nation, he argued, was at its most fragile in the teeming industrial cities; social cohesion would collapse following a bombing campaign and any government, if it survived, would have to sue for peace.

It has to be said that these views were hardly original to Douhet. British airmen had formed similar views of aerial power's potential in 1917-18, and although the generation that commanded the British bomber offensive of 1940-45 knew very little of his thinking, they tried to put into practice what could be described as a Douhetian strategy. But Douhet and the British strategists were wrong. Achieving rapid command of the air was extremely difficult, as the Battle of Britain showed. Bombing did not create the conditions for social collapse and political

capitulation (despite colossal human losses and widespread urban destruction) either in Britain, Germany and Japan, or later in Korea and Vietnam. If Douhet's theory were to work at all, it would be under conditions of a sudden nuclear exchange.

Hippler is on surer ground with the continuity in colonial and post-colonial low-intensity conflicts. Modern asymmetric warfare, usually against non-state opponents, bears little relation to the total-war school of thinking, but it is, as Hippler stresses, the new strategy of choice in conflicts. Here too, evidently, there are limits to the bombing thesis. For all the air effort put into the conflict against Isis in Syria and Iraq, it is the slow advance on the ground that has proved all-important.

The most extraordinary paradox at the heart of Hippler's analysis is the way that most bombing has been carried out by Britain and the United States, two countries that have long claimed the moral high ground. It might be expected that these states would have respected civilian immunity more than others, yet in the Second World War alone they killed roughly 900,000 civilians from the air.

The moral relativism of democratic states over the century is compounded of claims to military necessity, an emphasis on technological innovation and demonisation of the enemy. For all the anxieties being aired about militant Islam, the new Russian nationalism and the potential power of China, it is the United States and Britain that need to be watched most closely. ●
Richard Overy's books include *"The Bombing War: Europe (1939-1945)"* (Penguin)