

BOOK REVIEWS

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

by **Richard Overy**

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Reviewed by **Peter J. Williams**

Even though almost seven decades have passed since the end of the Second World War, one of its most controversial episodes, the Allied strategic bombing campaign, still rests uneasy in the memory of many, including those future generations who have written about it. As I have declared elsewhere, wherein I have written reviews of books about aspects of the campaign, I had an uncle killed while serving as a mid-upper gunner on a *Lancaster* during a raid on Munich in April 1944, and therefore, I am not a totally disinterested commentator. To that end, it was with great interest that I learned of this book by noted British military historian Richard Overy, who, himself, is no stranger to writing of the Allied bombing campaign in Europe.¹

My own library on this subject is quite extensive, and I wondered what could be new about this particular work. Quite early on, Mr. Overy states what distinguishes his work from others on the subject. First, it covers all Europe, including bombing in France, Scandinavia, the low Countries, Italy, and even Bulgaria, the latter being an event of which I was previously unaware, whose purpose was to knock that country out of the war, and which Overy uses quite deftly to examine the assumptions Allied leaders made in deciding to conduct bombing of this German ally. Second, despite popular myths to the contrary, the author offers: “Bombing in Europe was never a war winning strategy, and the other services knew it.”² Finally, this book provides detailed perspectives both from those who did the bombing and those who endured it, whereas many accounts deal either with ‘the bombers,’ or ‘the bombed.’

The book is arranged largely chronologically, initially describing the evolution of the Royal Air Force (RAF) Bomber Command early in the war, a force which had already decided prior to 1939 that strategic bombing would be taken for granted in any future war. Chapters are then devoted to its efforts against Germany, at first alone, then combined with the United States against targets in Axis Europe.

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The perspective of the Germans who lived under the bombing is then covered in perhaps what is one of the more revelatory sections of the book. The German organization to combat the effects of the bombing was quite comprehensive. Indeed, when the United Kingdom formed its first national fire service in 1941, it chose the German model upon which to base its operations. What I also found somewhat surprising was that the German government, at least initially, compensated its citizens who had lost property as a result of the bombing. Indeed, one conclusion reached by the Allies after the war was that rather than cause 'the bombed' to rise up against their overlords, as was hoped would be a collateral effect of the bombing, in the German case, the population became increasingly dependent upon the Nazi state. Interestingly, a Dutch woman who decided to write to King George VI, asking for compensation as a result of her house being destroyed by an Allied air raid, was rebuffed by the Air Ministry, which decided that to accede to such a request would 'open the floodgates' for similar requests.

Chapters are devoted to the bombing of Italy (which received six times the bomb tonnage of Britain during the so-called 'Blitz'), as well as occupied Allied nations, and another chapter is devoted to British and American efforts at measuring the effectiveness of their respective campaigns. Overy concludes with what he refers to as lessons learned and not learned, highlighting that the post-war, nuclear age doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD) was shaped to a great extent by the Allied strategic bombing campaign.

Overy has cast his research widely and has consulted archival sources, not only in the United Kingdom, but also in the United States, France, Italy, Malta, and Russia, the latter whose holdings include many German wartime records. Given Canada's contribution to the bombing effort (Number 6 Group of RAF Bomber Command, was a Royal Canadian Air Force [RCAF] formation), I would have expected our own archives would have been consulted, although perhaps RAF records in the United Kingdom contain RCAF documents. That said, the RCAF does merit some entries in the index, although the bibliography of secondary works is somewhat bereft of Canadian sources.

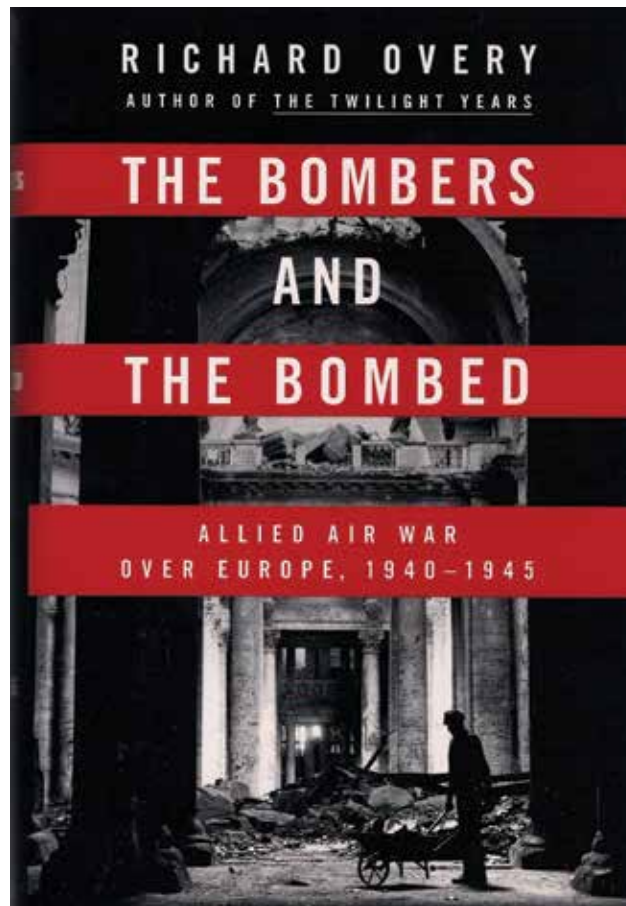
Good history, as my former Royal Military College (RMC) professor, the late Dr Barry Hunt used to say, should teach us something new, and to an extent, present somewhat of a revisionist view of things, a view which can only come with time.

Indeed, it seemed to me that in writing this book, Overy was himself reassessing his view of the campaign. Whereas some of his earlier works referenced elsewhere in this review claim that strategic bombing was, "...one of the decisive elements explaining Allied victory,"³ or that, "...the one area where Britain's military effort made a difference was the bombing war against Germany,"⁴ here he appears to distance himself somewhat from those earlier views, concluding, *inter alia*, that, "Bombing was a blunt instrument, as the Allies knew full well."⁵ Doubtless, this will not be the last word on this highly emotive campaign, but it is perhaps one of the most comprehensive to date, and Overy is to be commended for describing many hitherto unknown or little explored facets of it.

As our own historians now come to write the history of our engagement in Afghanistan, a campaign not without its own controversy, they may wish to bear in mind that the history of those events will be recounted

by many authors after them as well, and will doubtless undergo several reassessments as new information is unearthed. Highly recommended.

Colonel P.J. Williams is currently serving as Director Arms Control Verification on the Strategic Joint Staff.



NOTES

1. "The Means to Victory: Bombers and Bombing," in Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, (London: Pimlico, 2006), pp. 123-163., and Introduction by Richard Overy to *What Britain Has Done 1939-45: A Selection of Outstanding Facts and Figures* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).
2. Richard Overy, *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe, 1940-1945* (New York: Viking, 2013), p. xiii.
3. Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, p. 163
4. *What Britain Has Done 1939-45: A Selection of Outstanding Facts and Figures*, p. xv.
5. Richard Overy, *The Bombers*, p. 248.