

Governing from the Skies: a Global History of Aerial Bombardment

Thomas Hippler

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The first use of aerial bombardment took place on 1 November 1911 in Libya. An Italian airman, Giulio Gavotti, dropped a hand-held bomb onto an Arab encampment and supposedly 'revolutionized warfare'. This was an inevitable revolution, but Gavotti has the dubious honour of having led the way. As Thomas Hippler points out, a hundred years later almost to the day, Libya was once again being bombed, this time by NATO, but still with Italian participation. In the intervening hundred years, we have seen aerial bombardment go from being primarily used as a way of policing/punishing 'native' populations in the colonies, to being unleashed as a strategic weapon on a horrific scale by the British and Americans against civilian populations in the Second World War. This culminated in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And since 1945, we have seen aerial bombardment regularly used in both roles, sometimes in the same conflict, for example in Vietnam where the United States both bombed an insurgent peasantry in the South and the country supporting that insurgency, North Vietnam.

Governing from the Skies is at its most interesting when actually focussing on the military history of aerial bombardment. His discussion of the early days of air policing, using aerial bombardment to put down rebellion and insurgency, is well done. As early as 1909, in his *Airships in Peace and War*, R P Hearne was advocating that airships be used to 'strike terror into the tribes'. They could be used 'to pour shells into points unreachable by any other means', ending within days campaigns that might otherwise drag on for months. Such bombardment 'will create the most terrifying effect on savage races, and the awful wastage of life occasioned to white troops by such expeditionary work would be avoided, whilst the cost would be considerably reduced'. The fact that such bombardment would inevitably kill non-combatants was more than compensated by the reduction in troop casualties and the comparative cheapness of the use of air power. And this seemed to be borne out by the post-World War 1 experience.

The use of air power against insurgents led by Mohammed Abdullah Hassan (known as the 'Mad Mullah' by the British) in Somalia was considered a great success. The British made use of aerial bombardment in Iraq, Egypt, Russia and the Sudan, and even considered making use of it against any revolutionary outbreaks in Britain itself. It was not just deployed against insurgents, but was also used against recalcitrant 'native' rulers. British aircraft bombed Kabul in Afghanistan in 1919 and Sanaa in Yemen in 1928. It was not so successful when used against Palestinian rebels in the late 1930s, however. At a time when German bombing of civilian targets in Spain was exciting outrage in Britain, the British machine-gunning and bombing of civilian targets in Palestine went almost completely unnoticed. 'Guernica' remains a potent

symbol of military excess to this day, but the Palestinian villages bombed by the British are forgotten.

The Second World War saw Britain and the United States embrace strategic bombing as a way of defeating Germany and Japan, inflicting a horrendous toll in civilian dead in the process. The methods that had been used against the 'natives' in the colonies were now made use of against the peoples of rival Empires. The number of civilian casualties is still a contested subject. Hippler argues that Allied bombing of Germany killed 'approximately 380,000 people', but he also refers to German estimates of 410,000 civilians killed along with 55,000 others – soldiers and police, prisoners of war and foreign workers, including, of course, slave workers. It is worth pointing out that Richard Overy, in his magisterial volume, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939-1945* (2013), which is not referenced by Hippler, gives a figure of 353,000 for German fatalities at the hands of Allied bombing, and this is likely to become the generally accepted figure. Japan suffered even more with its wooden cities devastated by incendiary bomb attacks – even before the dropping of the atomic bombs. Hippler gives a figure of 900,000 Japanese fatalities, considerably more than the number of Japanese combat fatalities (780,000). And this death toll from aerial bombardment was inflicted over only a six month period. It was without doubt one of the most horrendous military assaults on a civilian population ever.

What was the military effect of this aerial bombardment of cities and towns? Did it even shorten the war, let alone win it? Was its effect on military production and on civilian morale in any way decisive? Hippler makes the point that the Third Reich was, in the end, brought down by ground troops occupying Berlin, not by the bombing. He judges strategic bombing to have been 'militarily ineffective in Germany' and even with regard to Japan, he considers its role as 'largely exaggerated'. This is not to dismiss air power as a factor in the conflict, but rather to see it as most effectively deployed in support of ground troops, and not used in a futile attempt to defeat the enemy on its own. It is fair to say that this is the generally accepted view regarding the use of air power during the Second World War. The War was not won by Anglo-American strategic bombing, but by the Red Army.

But is it as simple as this? Certainly that was this reviewer's belief, but a recent book that appeared too late for discussion by Hippler, Phillips O'Brien's challenging *How The War Was Won* (2015), has raised some interesting points. With apologies for putting O'Brien's argument somewhat crudely, he argues that while Germany's war in the East was certainly the more labour intensive, which accounts for the Wehrmacht's huge death toll on that front, it was much more capital intensive in the West. The demands on Germany of the war in the West included the investment of material resources, of production and technology (such as the submarine war, the resources squandered on the futile development of jet aircraft and rocket technology), plus the considerable resources deployed to try and protect the Reich against Allied bombing. These

all starved the Axis powers of equipment on the Eastern front and certainly helped make the Russian success there possible. O'Brien's arguments will certainly need to be taken into account by future histories of the Second World War.

What of the post-1945 period? Surprisingly, Hippler does not discuss the use of air power in the Korean War. Here, once again, we saw aerial bombardment on a massive scale in the confident belief that it provided the key to victory. This conflict was certainly not a negligible affair. According to General Curtis LeMay, US aerial bombardment destroyed just about every city in both North and South Korea and killed over a million civilians. This is almost certainly an understatement. Surely the Korean was worth some examination by Hippler? He does look at the Vietnam War, where, once again, the United States unleashed an unprecedented aerial bombardment and the very same Curtis LeMay urged bombing North Vietnam back to the 'Stone Age'. Nevertheless, while the scale of the bombing was certainly enormous, the figures Hippler provides seem exaggerated. During Operation Linebacker alone, which lasted from May until October 1972, he says the US dropped nearly 7 million tons of bombs on Vietnam. This figure for the tons of bombs dropped is much larger than is generally accepted. According to the late Marilyn Young's authoritative account, the US dropped a total of some 8 million tons of bombs on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the high explosive equivalent of 640 Hiroshima atom bombs, killing between 2 and 4 million civilians. This aerial bombardment, the heaviest in history, is one of the greatest crimes of the post-1945 period, and the Americans still lost!

What about the British experience? The British still used aerial bombardment in their post-1945 colonial wars. How effective was it? In Malaya, the RAF dropped 35,000 tons of bombs and claimed to have killed 700 Communist guerrillas. This number of fatalities was almost certainly inflated, but even so this means that it took 5 tons of bombs to kill one guerrilla. The attempt to use air power against the small Communist guerrilla movement, hiding out in the jungle, was clearly an exercise in futility. Much the same was true of the bombing of the forests in Kenya during the Mau Mau Emergency. The suspicion remains that the use of heavy bombers on these occasions was as much about finding them something to do, as it was about any impact they might have on the course of the conflicts themselves. Instead, in both Malaya and Kenya, the outcome was determined by other factors: a successful divide and rule strategy and the patient application of overwhelming force over an extended period against a weak, poorly armed enemy, for example. Hippler does not discuss this British experience.

And what of wars to come? Hippler tells us that the wars of the future 'will be long, even interminable, decentred and lacking a national basis' so that they will 'potentially involve the whole of the world population'. This seems very much like a spin-off from the Great War on Terror mythology, itself an ideological construct to justify the exercise of global power by the United

States, rather than a serious assessment of a world where inter-Imperialist conflict seems to be once again reasserting itself. At a time when the Trump administration is threatening an attack on North Korea, which would almost certainly involve the use of nuclear weapons, and an attack on Iran as well, the future looks like business as usual. We shall see.

Given its subject matter, this is inevitably an interesting history and Hippler does have much of interest to say on particular topics. Nevertheless, the book remains unsatisfactory, disappointing, with too much philosophy and not enough military history.

John Newsinger

John Newsinger has a new book,
'Hope Lies in the Proles': Orwell and the Left,
coming out early next year.