

CHAPTER I

Introduction: A Century of Aerial Warfare

For many centuries humanity had dreamt of flight, of the wonders of a speedy and expansive mobility above land and sea. This feat was finally accomplished during the early years of the twentieth century, when the Wright brothers and Louis Bleriot took to the air in powered flight. But celebration was soon tarnished by the onset of aerial warfare and its frightening implications. Two bombing events initiated the era of modern air warfare. Both occurred during the Ottoman Wars and before the beginning of the First World War of 1914–18. One was the bombing of Libya by the Italians in 1911; the other was the Bulgarian bombing of Turkey in 1912.

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The first air raid of the twentieth century was loosely directed at a rural target. In early November 1911, the Italian pilot Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti flew his German-made biplane over the Ain Zara oasis in Libya, dropping four 'grenade-style bombs' onto the desert floor below. Although it was a modest event, killing nobody, this was the beginning of the history of aerial warfare.¹ Italy was engaged in a war against the Ottoman Turkish Empire in North Africa in order to build a little empire of its own to challenge those of other European countries. The following year the Balkan League countries, Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia, rose up against the Turkish Empire in the Balkan War of 1912–13. During this conflict, the Bulgarians perfected the first fit-for-purpose bomb and deployed it on a civilian building:

The modern aerial bomb, with its distinctive elongated shape, stabilising fins and nose-fitted detonator, is a Bulgarian invention. [A] Bulgarian army captain, Simeon Petrov, adapted and enlarged a number of grenades for use from an aeroplane. They were dropped on a Turkish railway station on 16 October 1912 from an Albatross F.2 biplane piloted by Radal Milkov.²

The Balkan War witnessed the first bombing runs on enemy targets, the earliest shooting down of an aeroplane, and the first air-naval operation in military history, all part of an early, emergent synthesis of air power with ground and sea forces. In the German strategic bombing campaign during the First World War of 1914–18, Western European countries were bombed from zeppelin air ships, and from biplanes. Military leaders consciously planned for strategic bombing campaigns against military targets, targets that in a rapidly urbanising continent were often situated near to towns and cities.

Bombing was a new and terrible feature of the emergence of 'total war'. During the First World War combatant countries witnessed the militarisation of everyday life. Those who did not don a military uniform and go to fight on the front instead served on the 'Home Front'. Civilians were now essential to the winning of wars, producing food, industrial goods and munitions, and serving in variety of voluntary civil defence, emergency and medical services to minimise the impact of air raids. It is also noteworthy that the St Paul's Watch was formed in 1915, by a team of employees of the cathedral, and volunteers, to ensure the iconic place of worship was not damaged by fire, thus handing a propaganda coup to the enemy.³

Following the industrialised carnage in the trenches and battlefields of the First World War, the leaders of Britain, France and the USA met at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The Treaty of Versailles established the League of Nations in order to promote international cooperation to prevent war. The Treaty also severely circumscribed the German military, forbidding both an air force and aviation activities from its much-diminished Navy.⁴ This 'air disarmament' confirmed that air power was now a threat to everyone involved in national and international hostilities, leading to a new culture of planning for air raids on civilians.⁵ As chapter two demonstrates, the leading industrial nations, particularly in the context of growing international tensions in Europe, improved their air forces for aerial warfare, while promoting a civil defence apparatus to minimise death and destruction, and to maintain, as far as possible, civilian morale. In the face of the emerging terror of air wars between 1918 and 1939, millions of people became not only air-minded, but threat-minded. As chapter two also argues, the later 1930s

witnessed a number of terrible air raids on civilians which literally brought air war into the home. And from September 1939, the world was pitched into a prolonged global conflict in which air power played a crucial, tragic and yet nuanced role in shaping both civilian experiences in total wars, and in the outcome of the war itself.

Chapters three, four and five cover the first and most sustained global interface between civilian populations and the technology of aerial warfare during the twentieth century. This was the Second World War. Britain is given particular focus in chapter three for the simple reason that it sustained the longest air raid of any European city during the twentieth century, on London from 1940–41. The Blitz has been much debated by historians. How civilians behaved during the Blitz, their collective morale, and the performance of civil defence and emergency services, have been the subject of many controversial and conflicting interpretations. Moreover, contemporary government and media propaganda about heroic tales of civilian endurance and the ultimate triumph over mass bombing, gave rise to a national story of wartime unity and the ‘Blitz spirit’ that was invoked by the Labour Party in the general election campaign of 1945.

Populations in other countries suffered to a far greater extent than the British, however. The Allied strategic bombing campaign against German cities from 1942–5 was initially viewed, from the perspective of the victorious allies at least, as Germany reaping what it sowed. But recent decades have seen a profound questioning of the morality or otherwise of the bombing of Germany. And countries across continental Europe all suffered air raids that, with the benefit of hindsight, have been criticised as causing unnecessary suffering to innocent children, women and men. Many of those air raids were conducted by the German Luftwaffe, some with support

from the *Regia Aeronautica*, the Royal Italian Air Force. Many others were initiated by the Allies, including the Soviet Union, to liberate Europe from fascism. The impact of air raids on civilians across continental Europe is explored in chapter four.

In tandem with Germany and Italy, Japan was the third Axis Power pitched against the Allies. Its decision to attack Pearl Harbor in December 1941 created a powerful nemesis, triggering American entry into the war. Japan would be subjected to heavy conventional bombing by the Allies from late 1944, but the most lethally destructive bombing events of the twentieth century were visited by the Americans upon Japan in August 1945. Victory over Europe or 'VE Day' had been declared by the Allies on Sunday 8 May 1945, but for months afterwards the Japanese continued to fight their American enemies. The decision by US President Harry S. Truman and his military and scientific advisors to drop the atomic bomb on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a momentous one in the history not only of warfare, but for human affairs since. Chapter five assesses the scale of the bombing of Japan, the reasons for unleashing the atomic bomb, its terrible impact on the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the debates over the legitimacy of a nuclear catastrophe that brought the flailing but defiant Japanese war to an abrupt end.

Once the war was over, previous conflict areas lay in ruins, devastated by bombing and fire. Millions of people had seen their homes damaged or completely destroyed, while commercial and industrial premises, and road, rail and communications networks were in urgent need of replacement or repair. Pressure to rebuild towns and cities across the world initiated the era of reconstruction, which lasted from 1945 to the later 1950s. Focusing upon Britain, Germany and Japan, chapter six draws upon some highly original and mostly recent scholarship in social, urban and town

planning history – as the reconstruction of the built environment was accompanied by propagandist and politicised narratives of national renewal. The war had generated strong myths of national unity across internal class, regional and sectional divides, which were now mobilised by post-war governments to promote a vision of social renewal within the physical reconstruction of the nation. Physical reconstruction, however, was often bedevilled by practical problems and political constraints. Many bold visions for the future were curtailed.

Peace since 1945 proved fragile, and was often disrupted by conflict. The Cold War between the capitalist West and Soviet and Chinese Communism became embroiled with uprisings across former colonial territories of South East Asia. Significant nationalist movements ignited by the Second World War led to further conflict in Korea and Vietnam. Initially these conflicts were challenges to the legacy of imperialism. The United Nations (UN) and communist forces confronted each other in the Korean War of 1950–3. And the United States led the fight against communism in the Vietnam War from 1954–75. Each of these bloody conflicts witnessed strategic bombing campaigns which both drew upon, and ignored, lessons learned by air forces during the previous world war. As chapter seven argues, the Korean and Vietnamese wars brought extensive misery and suffering to civilian populations. Heavy and sustained bombing also wrought profound historical consequences, not simply for those enduring the conflict, but for the history of those countries following the ceasefire. The image and reputation of the United States, furthermore, as the major combatant on behalf of NATO and the UN, was severely damaged. Critics have attacked American bombing policy from the Korean War of 1950–3 to the present century as essentially a demonstration of ruthless imperialism.

The civilian experience of bombing within the post-war context of commemoration is discussed in chapter eight. Warfare has long led to commemoration and memorialisation. For centuries, combatants in military uniform were celebrated in friezes, illustrations, marble or stone memorials, stories, carvings and tombs, culminating in the plethora of memorials erected to the war dead of the First World War in cities, towns and villages across Britain and Europe. Total war, however, involved entire societies mobilising against the military apparatus of other societies. Contemporaneously with the heroic victories or deaths of uniformed combatants, hundreds of thousands of civilians were slaughtered, injured, made homeless and even stateless by the onslaught of mass bombing. How were they to be remembered? Bombed-out cities became sites of memory – *lieux de memoire* – while memorials were erected to the dead of the air raids in the Second World War. Memorials are both sites and carriers of memory, and sources of information about the war. So too are photography, film, literature, autobiographies, memoirs and oral testimony. They evoke the atmosphere of wartime air raids, and images and memories of air warfare on civilians and cities, promoting bombed towns and cities as *lieux de memoire*.

Chapter nine covers the sources and resources available to students and anyone interested in the history of air raids on cities and civilians.

Key Themes and Questions

One hundred years after it was first bombed, Libya was again under attack from the air. Beginning in March 2011, a NATO coalition force involving Britain, France and the United States bombed Libyan cities in order to depose the brutal dictatorship

of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. The Italians joined in soon afterwards. In the short term, at least, the attack on Libya was successful. Gaddafi was brutally killed on 20 October, and for a brief period optimism reigned as democratic forces and a diverse range of young Libyans looked forward to a more affluent and democratic future.

During the years since the 2011 bombing campaign, however, Libya imploded. Many comparisons were made with Iraq, bombed into regime change in 2003 by the USA with assistance from Britain. Initial successes in aerial bombardment were unravelled by the vicious civil war that unfolded in the former dictatorship. This explains the hesitancy in 2015-16, among nervous NATO member countries, about military involvement in Syria, a country wracked with internal conflict under the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Then the Russians began bombing Syrian cities in 2015 in defence of Assad. With the exception of surgical strikes and drone attacks by the USA, NATO members were reluctant to throw air power at the problem until France, reeling from mass murder in Paris by Islamic State (ISIS) militants on 13 November 2015, declared war on ISIS and began bombing ISIS strongholds in Syria.⁶ The British government and some of Her Majesty's Opposition, fearful lest they be seen to franchising their defence against Islamic extremism to France, began bombing soon afterwards.⁷ Those opposed to the bombing, notably the socialist Stop the War Coalition (STWC), argued that history proved that aerial bombardment was misguided and morally repugnant because it killed innocent civilians and was militarily unsuccessful.⁸

They were only partly right about that. As this book argues, any blanket denunciation of bombing campaigns as essentially immoral and militarily unsuccessful ignores historical realities. While many air raids were indeed notoriously brutal and led to

unnecessary civilian casualties, other air campaigns did assist in defeating dictatorships. So for example, while the air raids on London and other major British cities during the Second World War ultimately failed to defeat the British, the atomic bombing by the USA of Japan in August 1945 may be judged to have hastened the end of the war in the Pacific. In other cases the historical judgment is less clear cut. Allied air raids on German cities by the British and the Americans from 1942 have increasingly been criticised for causing unnecessary casualties. Many millions of words have also been written to prove that American bombing campaigns from the Korean War of 1950–3, through the Vietnam War to the recent air strikes in countries in the Middle East, have largely been unsuccessful, and even downright immoral. Yet some critics of American air power remained relatively silent on the bombing of Syria by Russian forces from 2015–17, or about recent Russian expansionism in the Ukraine.

The Blitz Companion assesses the causes and nature of aerial warfare during the last century and the early decades of the present one. Its major theme, however, is the targeting of civilians, and the consequences of air raids upon urban populations. The British experience of air raids forms a significant chunk of the book. When understood comparatively, however, Britain suffered less from air raids than other countries. But it was Britain that hosted the paradigmatic Blitz of the twentieth century, from 1940–1. Across Europe during the Second World War, capital cities and major provincial urban areas were attacked, and Germany sustained many more casualties and significantly greater levels of environmental destruction. In Japan, the conventional and atomic bombing of its main cities eclipsed the magnitude of death and damage in many European urban centres. Hence much of the *Blitz Companion* focuses on air raids

and their aftermath in Britain, Germany and Japan, drawing wider comparative conclusions.

The Second World War was the catalyst for the Cold War between Western capitalism and the Communist eastern bloc. During the post-war era, the American bombing of Korea and Vietnam caused widespread death and devastation, within national and historical contexts that were quite different to the popular experience of aerial bombing during the Second World War. And the end of the Cold War in no way brought about the much-heralded 'end of history'. During the 1990s and into the present century, civilians have also been killed and injured in small wars, during the Balkan Civil Wars, in Afghanistan, and in the Middle East, notably Iraq, Libya and Syria. These conflicts were on a smaller scale than the Second World War, but they were a reminder of the cruel lesson learnt in earlier total wars: air power was here to stay, and civilians were going to die.

The bombing of these countries, and of the other civilian populations discussed in this book, leads to some hugely important questions that apply to all air raids on all societies, no matter where or when in time. Among the most important are the following:

- In what ways did sorties over urban centres in previous decades provide dress rehearsals or practical lessons for later air campaigns?
- How did those military and political authorities planning air raids anticipate the effects on civilians of the bombing?
- How did civilians react during air raids? What preparations were made by governments and local authorities to

minimise the impact and consequences of aerial bombardment, and how effective were they?

- Did bombing campaigns, large and small, achieve their intentions to degrade or defeat the civilian population?
- How resilient were cities and their residents during air raids and in the aftermath of destruction?
- How have societies come to terms with the death and destruction caused by the bombing of men, women and children?

The focus on civilians and aerial warfare is deliberately chosen for its emotive and moral dimensions. In the aftermath of the First World War military strategists and politicians soon understood that with the onset of air power civilians were no longer marginal to the process of conflict, but now bound up with it. And in spite of the Hague and United Nations conventions on military conduct to restrict civilian casualties, the spatial containment of war from the air to specific theatres of combat was increasingly irrelevant. During the interwar years, in the long shadow of the First World War that had cost so many young lives, pacifist organisations were formed to call for an end to war, and for negotiation henceforth to become the only path to avoiding war, or for peace and reconciliation. They were the forerunners of the anti-war and anti-bomb campaigning organisations of the post-war years. During the 1950s this was manifested in the formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in Britain, and in the rise of peace activism during the Vietnam War. And as conflict in the Middle East raged following the attack on the Twin Towers in September 2001, the aforementioned Stop the War Coalition was formed. Unfortunately, many of the leading personnel of these

global peace movements shared political beliefs that distorted a more balanced appraisal of air warfare. Another intention of *The Blitz Companion*, therefore, is to critically engage with the current range of anti-war pacifist websites, and with critics of air power who fail to do justice to the complex intentions and consequences of air raids.