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Review of "Bombing the City: Civilian Accounts of the Air War in Britain and Japan, 1939-1945" by Aaron William Moore

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Aaron William Moore. *Bombing the City: Civilian Accounts of the Air War in Britain and Japan, 1939-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 259.

Among the long list of atrocities perpetrated by the belligerents of the Second World War, the bombing of civilian populations was one of the deadliest. Both Allied and Axis powers did not hesitate to target civilians with their bombers, causing thousands of victims as well as destroying an incalculable quantity of material and buildings. Considered within political and military circles as a promising strategy to crush enemy war industry and the “will to fight” of its population, strategic bombing defined civilians as legitimate targets in the context of total war. The total destruction of the enemy was the ultimate objective, justifying all strategies. The use of strategic bombing in the Second World War is the object of a large historiography. The well-known cases remain the bombing of London in 1940, the Blitz, the destruction of Dresden and the dropping of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Scholars usually discuss two arguments: 1) the efficiency of this terror strategy to win the war and 2) its moral legitimacy considering that bombers killed mostly women, children and the elderly.¹ Surprisingly, little has been written about how civilians reacted to this strategy and how bombing shaped their wartime experience and opinions on total war. Such history from below the bombs is exactly what Aaron William Moore proposes in his recent fascinating book, *Bombing the City*.

In *Bombing the City*, Moore, Handa Chair of Japanese-Chinese Relations at the University of Edinburgh, examines the impact of strategic bombing on what he calls “ordinary urban people” during the Second World War in Great Britain and Japan (p. 1). Although these two countries were enemies and their populations the target of different kinds of bombing campaign, this comparative study shows the similar experiences of British and Japanese people. By looking at different opinions expressed by common people—builders, workers,

¹ For instance, some interesting works are Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); A.C. Crayling, *Among the Dead Cities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007); Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe, 1939-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2013); and Dietmar Süß, *Death from the Skies: How the British and Germans Survived Bombing in World War II*, trans. Lesley Sharpe and Jeremy Noakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

housewives and students—on the destruction and death caused by enemy bombers, Moore argues that ordinary people, though victims of bombers, continued to support the use of this strategy on the enemy. The targeting of non-combatants was perceived by non-combatants themselves as a normal wartime practice. According to Moore, such levels of destruction in the Second World War were made possible and morally acceptable by common people. Without significant gender, class or age differences, British and Japanese populations embraced the killing of innocent civilians for the purpose of total victory.

This argument is an interesting contribution to the voluminous historiography on strategic bombing, especially to the debate on the social and psychological effects of this strategy on civilian populations. Moore questions the collective memory of the Second World War as a “good war.” He claims that the experience of common people suffering bombing does not fit in the traditional Manichean narratives of “good and evil” between Allied and Axis, but rather made both camps victims of aggression (p. 5). Moreover, the popular postwar narratives of heroic victims of bombing is unsatisfactory to understand the complex impact of this wartime strategy and the acceptance by the British and Japanese populations of the “total war” idea promoted by authorities. Although the bombing of Britain and Japan had important national contexts, Moore shows the similarities of the civilian experience, especially in urban areas, as a transnational consequence of total war. By examining the cases of several cities, he shows that British and Japanese civilians expressed both their confidence in their cities’ capacity to protect them as well as their weakness and vulnerability under bombing.

In order to understand the perspective of the victims and provide a history from below the bombers, Moore examines writings produced by a heterogeneous group of civilians representing British and Japanese wartime societies. In particular, he looks at personal diaries, letters and memoirs and analyses how people depicted and reflected on aerial bombardments according to class, gender and age. Each chapter discusses events related to bombing as it was described by featured British and Japanese diarists. As explained by Moore, diarists were selected for being observant of the destruction caused by bombing, their assessments of the moral implication of such attacks and for representing a wide geographical spread. The first chapter stresses how the bombing created concerns for families, not only because of the destruction, but also because of the state’s

response to enemy bombers. As the war progressed and the bombing effects intensified, British and Japanese authorities intervened in their populations' lives. For instance, diarists commented on the separation of family members due to the evacuation of children and labour mobilisation. At the same time, diarists maintained their trust in patriotism and their support for the war effort. Among the death and destruction, family survival remained a priority for common people.

The second chapter discusses how diarists expressed terror, anger and faith. Such strong emotional responses were a psychological reaction, described by Moore as a mass demonstration of "fear and panic," to enemy bombers (p. 73). In cities under attack, destruction, death, deprivation and chaos made life particularly difficult for civilians. Diarists also supported retaliation against the enemy. As anxiety and desperation grew among the population, some people even held faith that different "supernatural forces" could save them (p. 96). The following chapter examines descriptions by diarists of the physical destruction of their cities and the collapse of the urban system. It was not only a loss of housing, but of the complete environment of urban life, community and infrastructure. Hospitals, transport infrastructures, food markets and amusements were targeted and destroyed by the bombers. Confronted with this destruction, diarists describe the civilian response—a willingness to save their city and the systems that supplied urban centres—by performing different forms of sacrifice such as volunteering for fire-watching and home guard service. The last chapter explores how the bombing affected the way of life in British and Japanese societies. In particular, Moore exposes the impact of bombers on people and socio-economic structures according to gender, age and class discrimination and inequalities present in British and Japanese wartime societies. He claims that the perception of and reflection on sacrifice, suffering and total war differed for ordinary workers, women, children, teenagers and seniors.

Moore concludes with a discussion on collective memory and the postwar pacifist narrative, which needs to be nuanced according to him. For Moore, people who endured the destruction caused by bombers embraced and supported the killing of enemy civilians and, in a certain way, the total war discourse. This argument challenges the popular anti-war tale proposed by survivors of bombing after 1945. By doing so, he not only questions historians whom uncritically deconstructed the myth of national unity promoted by states in the

context of total war, but also questions the memory of the Second World War as a “good war” still presented in public discourse and historiographies in Allied countries. Finally, on a local level, Moore notes that the memory of bombing, which usually focuses on London, Tokyo and Hiroshima, should be re-examined as a larger experience in order to provide a nuanced reflection on this past. For all these aspects, the contribution of this book to our understanding of wartime atrocities committed against non-combatants and their impacts on “ordinary people” is innovative.

The reading of *Bombing the City* is enthralling. Examples and quotes are numerous and meaningful and the text is well written. However, the absence of general descriptions of the bombing campaigns made it difficult to contextualise opinions and comments expressed by diarists between 1940 and 1945. Further explanation concerning sources and diarists would have been interesting for readers to better understand the approach used by Moore. In general, this study lacks a clearly defined démarche and methodology, especially in the introduction, which makes the argument difficult to follow for non-academic readers. This book is likely addressed to graduate students and academics and less for the general public. Nevertheless, the contribution of this book to the existing literature on the impact of strategic bombing and total war on civilian populations is significant. Not only does Moore’s argument explore a shared perspective by ordinary people in Britain and Japan, but his approach is innovative by entangling Allied and Axis societies, showing a transnational consequence of this strategy. Moore’s fascinating study shows that war casualties and suffering from bombing were not a one-sided effect in the Second World War. The total war rhetoric was a global process among nations and peoples. *Bombing the City* is thus recommended for anyone interested in the history of aerial bombardment and civilian experiences of total war.

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