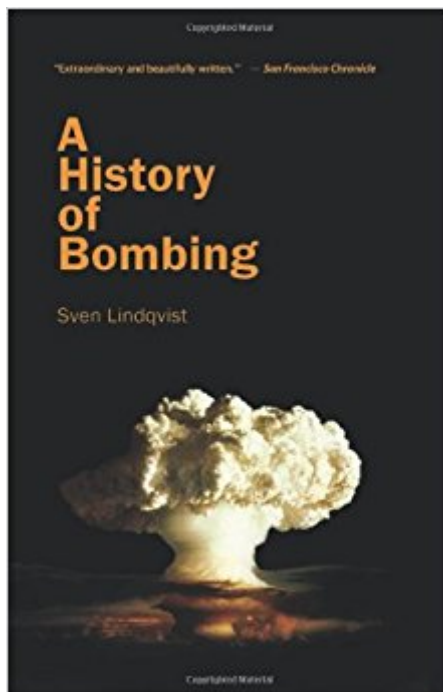


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A History Of Bombing



Synopsis

Continuously interesting, often fascinating.

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Customer Reviews

Describing genocide as part of the "master story" of Western civilizations, Swedish author and political activist Lindqvist (*The Skull Measurer's Mistake*) argues that before the development of powered flight, bombs delivered from the air were regarded as an efficient way to kill large groups of people at a safe distance. What the bombs and rockets have from the beginning been intended to do, he continues, is slaughter "others" and "outsiders"--"peoples of color" who will not submit to imperialism, or who are just somehow in the way. Lindqvist offers here a work whose format is more striking than its contents. The book, translated by Berkeley Scandinavian studies professor Linda Haverty Rugg, is composed of excerpts and vignettes, drawn from remarkably diverse sources on aerial bombardment, and numbered 1 to 399, proceeding chronologically from the A.D. 762 to 1999, but mostly concerning the 20th century. (Number 155 begins, "During the 1920s, novels about the future often dealt with a time of barbarism.") Most intriguingly, according to Lindqvist, the widespread use of aerial bombardment by Western states against each other in the two world wars was an anomaly made possible not by dehumanizing, but by "dewesternizing" the targets. The end of the Cold War stripped away the mask; Kosovo was only the first stage of an aerial reign of terror. Lindqvist's case, too simplistic and too overstated to be convincing, is nevertheless powerful. His juxtaposition of fact-based history with passages taken from survivalist fiction, racist fantasies like *The Turner Diaries* and dystopian future-war predictions demonstrates the extent to which aerial

bombing is regarded as an ultimate weapon for destroying the opposition. Anyone who thought twice about what happened in the Gulf War or Kosovo will find this intentionally fragmentary analysis compelling; others will be less sympathetic. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A profound litany of what might someday be considered among the most counterproductive military actions ever taken. -- The Nation An original work, written with a moral passion that is uncommon. -- Sunday Times [London] Continuously interesting, often fascinating. -- Financial Times Extraordinary and beautifully written. -- San Francisco Chronicle Impassioned, wide-ranging. -- The Times [London] Lindqvist plots a clear path towards the ever more horrendous holocausts that lie ahead. It is gripping stuff. -- New Statesman Profoundly disquieting, but that obviously is Lindqvist's ultimate purpose. -- Associated Press

This is a great book, but very hard to take. I found I could only be swallowed in small doses. But I promise you, no matter how much you think you know about the military history of the 20th century, you will be faced with a lot of new, and very disturbing material. Probably should be required reading in the US and UK. As one reviewer pointed out, it is a bit like bull fighting from behind the barricades, but that really only applies to the first couple years of WWII. Admittedly Churchill was faced with an almost hopeless situation in 1939-41, and probably gets a pass on his decisions in that window, but that is a very small portion of the material covered in this book. Those interested in the question of how Britain and Germany initiated bombing of one another's cities, should read RV Jones' great book *The Wizard War: British Scientific Intelligence, 1939-1945* (titled *The Most Secret War* in UK), which gives a somewhat different take on how that decision took place. In his telling Hitler made a terrible mistake in shifting from tactical bombing of British airfields, which was taking a serious toll on the RAF, to bombing London and other cities. If he had kept pounding the fighter bases, he might have won the Battle of Britain.

Sven Lindqvist's "A History of Bombing" is a commentary on the social, historical, political and military developments that led to the rise of aerial bombing in the 20th century. Lindqvist's pastiche of historical sources, literature, and his own autobiographical story is a terrific alternate vision of the 20th century and the powers that dominated it, with bombing the main power they used. The first thing you need to know about "A History of Bombing" is about the way it is written: it is a unique format of different threads that weave and connect through the 186 page frame. The book itself is

divided into 386 short sections, entangled and jumbled throughout. After you read Section 1, it directs you to Section 166. So you flip there, read that section, then continue down the line. The reason is to show all the twisted strands of logic: political and military, social and literary, that led to the acceptance and development of brutal aerial bombing as the status quo. You could also just read it back to front, which is what I did the second time because I missed several sections. The book describes - and this I didn't know much about - how after World War I the European powers bombed colony after colony to continue to assert their dominance across the globe. For example, in 1919 a British government administrator by the name of Winston Churchill was delighted to crush a rebellion in Somaliland, estimated to take a year by the army, in a week's time at the cost of only 77,000 pounds. Later, Churchill is concerned when the Air Force summarizes a raid in modern day Iraq in which they are happy that many of native families: "...jumped into a lake, thus making a good target for the machine guns." This is at the beginning of the long tradition of European using brutal aerial bombing missions to target "uncivilized" savages that happen to reside in the colonies they are desperate to keep. From there Lindqvist continues through the 20th century, describing the theories that preceded World War II and the actions before and immediately thereafter. Here he expands his theory that aerial bombing is an extension of racist ideologies - that the horrors of bombing are normalized by making the victims subhuman: whether the uncivilized savages throughout Indochina and Africa, the Nazis bombing the subhuman Slavs of Soviet Union, Japan bombing China or the United States firebombing Japan. He continues to describe the inadequacy of bombing campaigns in the second half of the 20th century - the misery of Korea, the loss by France and England of Kenya/Vietnam/Algeria/Malaysia/et al despite very successful bombing campaigns, and the quagmire of Vietnam. Lindqvist touches on what Alistair Horne best describe in "A Savage War of Peace," that each of those bombing campaigns in British and French colonies did more to create terrorist and to counteract positive political than to "win the war." The wars had become protracted guerrilla campaigns, with military successes and political and social losses. The First World can keep bombing, and continue losing. In the background Lindqvist tracks the growth of nuclear arms to the point of Mutually Assured Destruction, and all the insanity of military planning at the height of the Cold War. Lindqvist ends on a warning note, that the First World lifestyle is not sustainable and the genocides of the 21st century lie in the disparities of wealth that now exist. Some important things to mention. First off, Lindqvist is much harsher on Western powers than Eastern powers. I assume because of lack of archival information, he does not touch on bombing campaigns of the Soviet Union and Red China, and only briefly mentions the Japanese blitz bombing of Shanghai in 1933. That doesn't lend itself to a fair balanced account of the 20th century.

Did the Soviet and China not use aerial bombing to put down rebellions in their own territory? Secondly, and this is important to American readers, Lindqvist is critical of American and British military planners to the point of calling them war criminals. Specifically, he blames them for the adoption of area bombing of residential centers rather than the precision bombing of industrial targets. This led to the catastrophic destruction and decimation of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo and many others. Sure, it is clear now that precision bombing of Germany's industries would have led to their surrender sooner; specifically ball bearing factories and lubricant plants that were the nuts and bolts of the Wehrmacht's Panzers. But hindsight is always 20-20; these planners didn't ask for this war, and clearly they thought what they were doing was best. That's where my belief differs slightly from Lindqvist. If you start a fight with a stranger in a bar, can you blame him if he pulls a knife and stabs you? Obviously that wouldn't hold up in a court of law, but the idea is that once you open Pandora's Box, you can't freak out when some monsters come out. Yes, it was clear to some that area bombing civilians would not hasten the end of the war. But it's war! Things are stressful, bad decisions are made, terrible strategies are pursued. Let's not group the military planners of countries that were not the aggressors with the Tojos and Mussolinis and Hitlers of the world, that actively pursued death and destruction for material and political gain. I don't agree with the Western Power's use of bombing throughout the Third World, but who is more at fault for Tokyo being firebombed? The Americans that dropped the bombs, or the Japanese that started the war. The other thing to mention is Lindqvist's dissection of end of the world literature. This did not do much for me, and did not interest me. I also didn't think it added much strength to any of his arguments - was much more interested in things that actually happened rather than some crazy literature from the 1920's. My caveats aside, "A History of Bombing" is a unique treatise that breaks down the development and rise of aerial bombing from 1911 to today. Now it has become the staple of our military, possible in "Call Of Duty" and shown on CNN via cruise missile gonzo footage. Read it to learn more about the wars of the 20th Century, including the stuff that didn't make your high school history book. Lindqvist is a smart man and does a great job showing how the 20th century became a bombing century and how "global violence is the hard core of our existence."

A History of Bombing by Sven Lindqvist This book explores the history of bombing with a focus on those who were bombed, and the attitudes of those who did the bombing. It is not a technical history, but rather a moral history, along the lines of Jonathan Glover's book *Humanity*, although their emphases and styles are very different. He draws from many sources to put together a view which is very unique, combining military history, literary history, and political history (especially of

European colonies) with analyses of the development of international law regulating warfare and of politicians and officer's views of war. He also adds in autobiographical elements of his fear of attacks as a child during WWII. He follows the development of technologies of bombing, and the techniques of bombing that came along with them (localized to strategic to area bombing, with nuclear bombing of civilians being the culmination of this). He looks at many futuristic novels to see what people's attitudes were toward war and the massive annihilation possible through bombing, and finds much racism, and also many predictions of how destructive bombing would become. He looks at many military theoreticians and shapers of international law, both before and since the advent of planes and bombing, to see what has formed our views of what is acceptable in warfare, and how these laws have been bent and broken. One of Lindqvist's main points is the element of racism in bombing, and how bombing was initially acceptable only when conducted against those who were not civilized, or less than human. Europeans became used to the idea of bombing in the colonies, and this paved the way for the massive bombing which first took place in "civilized lands" in WWII. He does not shy away from criticizing those groups who are supposed to be the vanguard of civilization, such as the British and Americans. He discusses colonial interventions, and how bombing was integrated into the general program to civilize the "savages" of Africa and Asia. He points out how little value was given to the life of one of the colonized as opposed to one of the colonizers. Only with this inequality could bombing could be used as a police action (i.e., to put down rebellions) which was cheaper, in terms of money and lives--but only in terms of lives of the colonizers. This inequality also comes up when looking at international law. The laws concerning warfare, such as the Geneva conventions, were shaped during the period when Europeans held colonies. Even though these laws were put in universal terms, in practice they were only thought to apply to fighting between "civilized" countries, and not to what goes on in the colonies. Again, this inequality comes up with regard to national sovereignty, and the wars in Korea and Vietnam. A large part of the book focuses on WWII, and he criticizes many of the choices of the Allied powers, such as area bombing and firebombing in Germany, firebombing and nuclear bombing in Japan. Some people may therefore find this book one-sided, but remember that this is the side that historically has not been heard. Also, he places WWI and WWII against the history of imperialism, of the Europeans and the Japanese, which makes it clear that he is not a supporter of any specific country, but concerned with the effects of warfare on people at large, whoever and wherever they may be, and even if they are citizens of an enemy country. P.S. The structure of the book is really interesting. It is split into many short sections that have more or less a single point, and are centered around an event or person. These are placed in chronological order, but the book only makes sense

if you read it following one of 23 strands he identifies, each focusing on different aspects of the history (i.e., "Bombing the Savages", "Hamburg, Auschwitz, Dresden", "Massive Retaliation", etc.). In this way, as you move through history, forward and backward, you flip through the book, which helps emphasize the historical placement of the events and ideas, and allows him to touch on a lot of different topics without the book becoming a mess.

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