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# The Strategic Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945

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intelligence operations. This is a book rich with insights; not least among them is its blunt reminder that it is always a mistake to assume your channels of communication are secure.

I.B. HOLLEY, JR.  
Duke University

Levine, Alan J. *The Strategic Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945*. New York: Praeger, 1992. 235pp.

Dr. Levine is a historian specializing primarily in Russian history and international relations. Though he is not a specialist in the subject of airpower in World War II, he has produced a worthwhile, compact account of the air war over Germany. Despite the subject's exceeding complexity, Levine has managed to address virtually all of the significant strategic, operational, tactical, and technical issues that arose, as well as the constant interplay between them.

*The Strategic Bombing of Germany* concerns one of the most controversial campaigns of the war. Fifty years later, this campaign still provokes passionate arguments, because the issues it raised remain central to the debate that has raged incessantly since the 1920s over the proper role of airpower in national military strategy. This debate is once more crucial to current arguments over what kinds of post-Cold War forces the United States needs.

Levine presents a multilevel overview of the British and American bombing campaigns against Germany. After an introductory discussion of all three countries' airpower doctrines and

capabilities, the author describes the generally ineffective British area bombardment campaigns through March 1944, which resulted in heavy losses without commensurate effect on the German war effort, and also the equally dismal "12 o'Clock High" period of the American "precision" bombing campaign. He notes the shift of emphasis from industrial bombing (read city-smashing) to D-Day invasion support and finishes with the ultimately successful campaigns against transportation and oil production systems.

Levine argues that strategically the central question was what the air campaign could achieve, hence what resources should be allocated to it and at what cost in opportunities foregone. Many British and American airpower enthusiasts—followers of Douhet, Trenchard, and Mitchell—were convinced that airpower by itself could defeat Germany and render major ground fighting unnecessary. Even as late as March 1944, the United States Army Air Force's General Carl Spaatz did not believe that the D-Day invasion could succeed, remarking, "After it fails, we can show them how we can win by bombing." Of course it did not hurt the airpower case that between 1940 and 1943 there was little else that could be done to engage the Germans directly. Their views prevailed to the extent that a disproportionate amount of Britain's war effort went to support Bomber Command, while the crucial Battle of the Atlantic hung in the balance as late as spring 1943 due in large part to the reluctance of the air

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chiefs to release even a handful of long-range bombers to support antisubmarine efforts.

The author argues that much of the strategic bombing campaign was marked by failure. Its goal was to destroy Germany's war-making potential through destruction of key industries and, ideally, of civilian morale. The former was not accomplished until near the end of the war, the latter never. The planners were unable to determine the "right" target sets, not least because of fundamental flaws in their economic intelligence. One of the huge postwar surprises was the revelation that Germany had not fully mobilized its economy for war until well into 1942, with the consequence that there had been considerable slack to ameliorate the limited effects of bomb damage. Searching for targets that were vulnerable—i.e., whose destruction bombers could actually achieve and the loss of which the Germans could not work around—Allied planners mistakenly chose industrial sectors like aircraft and ball-bearing production, of which those things were not true. At the same time, for much of the war they ignored true bottlenecks, such as electrical generation, tank transmission factories, and the western inland water transportation system. When such truly vulnerable targets were on occasion attacked, it was usually for an insufficient time and with insufficient force, and by the time they were re-engaged, the Germans had had time to react. During the last year of the war, air planners finally went after two key sectors, transportation and oil

production, with marked effect. By that time, however, Soviet and Western ground forces were closing in on the Reich, and it is hard to say what real value these last bombing campaigns had.

On the technical level, Levine notes that throughout there were significant disparities between what planners wanted to do and what the capabilities of their weapons allowed them to do. Early in the war for example, poor aircraft design, weak ordnance, and abominable navigation drove the British from daylight precision bombing to night area bombing. Later in the war, the Americans had scarcely better results in terms of bomber defense and bombing accuracy, the famed Flying Fortress and Norden bombsight notwithstanding. Adequate bomber defense, crucial to the ability to conduct daytime bombing effectively, became possible only after the long-delayed introduction of long-range, high-performance fighters.

The author then compares what the strategic bombing campaign actually accomplished to its proponents' *a priori* claims. It almost certainly failed in its stated goal of destroying German war industry and breaking civilian morale. However, apart from accomplishing the political objective of engaging Germany militarily *somewhere* before Western ground forces could invade Europe, it undoubtedly forced the diversion of major German resources to defend against air attacks and repair bomb damage, effectively destroyed the Luftwaffe through attrition, delayed deployment

of the V-weapons, and materially aided the ground campaign by its destruction of the transportation and oil production sectors in 1944-45.

Though written primarily as a campaign history, this book is a worthwhile case study of the way an earlier "military-technical revolution" developed and how military leaders a half-century ago groped for ways to use new capabilities and ideas effectively. The tantalizing question for historians of the air campaign is—as is now said about socialism by its friends—whether the idea was wrong or whether it was merely executed badly. Could airpower by itself have been decisive if the "right" target sets had been chosen and the technology had been up to the task? The same question is particularly germane today as airpower proponents bask in the afterglow of undoubted successes in Desert Storm while defense planners engage in fundamental discussions about future service roles and missions. "Smart" ordnance has taken care of the bombing accuracy problem and the need for huge streams of bombers. But is there a "right" set of targets, and is their destruction decisive in war termination? The campaign of fifty years ago is a sobering reminder that there is a high cost in guessing wrong.

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Gelb, Norman. *Desperate Venture: The Story of Operation Torch, the Allied Invasion of North Africa*. New York: William Morrow, 1992. 366pp. \$25

The year 1942 was a worrisome one for the United States and its beleaguered allies. Still reeling from the Axis onslaught and short of resources on every front, the Allies had yet to agree on a coordinated, war-winning offensive strategy. Although the U.S. Navy (supported by public opinion) urged an all-out campaign against Japan, President Roosevelt (backed by General Marshall) eventually sided with Churchill and Stalin: Germany, the more dangerous enemy, had to be defeated first.

Agreement on "Germany first," however, settled only half the strategic debate. With the Russians hard pressed all along the Eastern Front, Stalin was demanding that his allies quickly open a second front in Europe. Roosevelt favored a massive cross-Channel assault—but not until 1943, at the earliest. Churchill, fearful of another Dunkirk, much preferred to attack Hitler's "soft underbelly" in the Mediterranean. It is against this background that historian Norman Gelb opens his account of Operation TORCH, the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942.

The book's title comes from a statement of General George S. Patton as his task force prepared to embark for French Morocco: "The job I am going on is about as desperate a venture as has ever been undertaken by any force in the world's history." Patton had a talent for self-dramatization, but this time he was not exaggerating.

Patton's anxieties began with the Anglo-American differences over how best to defeat Germany. Like most senior U.S. officers, he felt strongly that