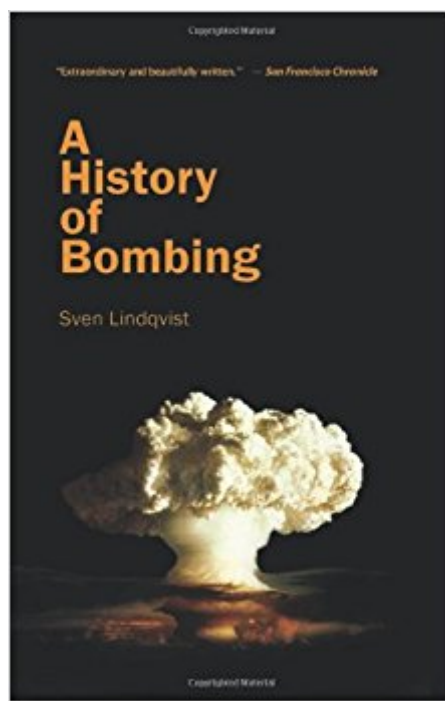


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A History Of Bombing



Synopsis

Continuously interesting, often fascinating.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

As the translator of the book, I probably don't count as an unbiased reviewer. But I learned a great deal in reading and translating it, and I think it is quite ingenious and also devastating. An important book. I wanted to say that the book's English title is considerably more sedate and formal than the Swedish title. Readers like the ones expecting a traditional military history might have been misled by the publisher's decision to omit the Swedish title: "Bang! You're Dead! The Century of Bombing" in favor of a more graspable "The History of Bombing." You may judge for yourself the impact of the

original title versus the changed one.

Lindqvist's work on a history of bombing is a major achievement of the human mind. The greatest about Lindqvist's books is his use of such a wide perspective and view on history from so many different perspectives. Many regular historians are so caught up in their own subject and narrow perspective, that they don't see beyond the narrow limits of the traditional role of the academic historian.

Lindqvist uses fiction literature to give us a view of how ideas of extermination and mass destruction were widely spread and a part of the basis of western thought in the period 1850-1950. This is a powerful insight, because many of us today deny this and say it was just a minority who shared those beliefs, when in fact it was the opposite, the majority accepted those ideas only a tiny minority spoke out against them. By using fiction literature Lindqvist shows that the ideas of genocide were not anti-western, it was an integrated part in the western civilization. With his different perspective and use of fiction, it is always refreshing to read his books. In a history of bombing you follow the terrible history of bombing from its beginnings in colonial warfare, by those who set out to civilize inferior peoples. But in Europe it was still taboo to use the same methods of warfare against civilized Europeans. But then those ideas which came from the subjection of non-European peoples around the world, arrived in Europe. In the ultimate nightmare of modern warfare, in the second world war, bombing of civilians became a legitimate form of warfare. Hitler's new empire was ruled on the basis of a colonial empire, racial imperialism. Germany would use eastern Europe as a vast colonial empire, where racially inferior people would work for the new masters. Hitler was crushed in with him the idea of racial imperialism. But as Lindqvist shows in the environment of the escalating cold war, and the colonies struggle to gain independence barbaric acts of bombing continued. Mass bombing continued in the colonies, but was stopped when the public in the western world realized its horrors. As Lindqvist writes, bombing of civilians could not stand the view of the public eye. In Korea and Vietnam, mass bombing of civilians became a way for the US to contain communism. But as protests against the bombing in Vietnam intensified the United States lost its public support abroad and at home. Now with recent events in the Gulf war and after, Lindqvist's survey of bombing history is needed. Today, as in the old days there are those who once again claim that bombing could be an efficient way to wage low cost wars without casualties. A view of the history of the horrors of mass bombing should be a refreshment to the memory, and will hopefully put the supporters of the bombs in minority status, should they gain momentum once again then you are dead, like the millions before you.

This is a book I read a long time ago and it stuck with me afterwards - it's got an unusual nonlinear structure (the short segments are arranged roughly chronologically, but you read them non-sequentially as the author mixes history, personal anecdote, etc). This structure could be seen as a gimmick, but I felt it worked well to create a work whose whole felt greater than the sum of its parts. Other reviewers have faulted the book as a "History of Bombing" - but the intention was not to write a history as such. As a rumination on the human predilection for war, past, present, and (sadly) future it's a worthwhile journey.

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