

## THE STRATEGIC AIR WAR AGAINST GERMANY, 1939-1945:

*Report of the British Bombing Survey Unit*/with forewords by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Michael Beetham and Major General John W Huston, and an introduction by Sebastian Cox. (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

It was the Gotha summer of 1917, and the public horror of German bombing raids on London, that propelled Britain into the far reaching decision to establish the Royal Air Force, the world's first independent air arm. In his historic report on Air Organisation of August 1917 that signposted the way, General Smuts noted:

And the day may not be far off when aerial operations and their devastation of enemy lands and destruction of industrial and populous centres on a vast scale may become the principal operations of war...

This thesis grew over the next two decades, championed in Britain by Sir Hugh Trenchard, the first Chief of Air Staff, and abroad by Giulio Douhet in Italy, and Bill Mitchell in the USA. In 1932 Stanley Baldwin famously warned:

I think it is as well for the man in the street to realise that no power on earth can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through.

Air bombardment was thought of in much the same way as we regard Weapons of Mass Destruction today, and although Air Power remained largely untested, when it was used during the thirties, by the Japanese at Shanghai and the Germans at Guernica, its awesome potential seemed to be proven.

But the real test was yet to come, and in the Second World War those who pinned their hopes on the strategic bombing weapon were to have their theories tested almost to destruction. *The Strategic Air War Against Germany, the official Report of the British Bombing Survey Unit*, now published by Frank Cass, was the evaluation of that strategy, which had placed over a million tons of British bombs on the enemy, at a cost of over 55,000 aircrew lives. The *Report* weighs carefully almost every aspect of the bomber offensive, and seeks to quantify the results in terms of the contribution to final victory. Although quite separate from the far larger United States Strategic Bombing Survey, it also includes much detail of the activities of the VIII and XV United States Army Air Forces, that played such a significant role in the Combined Bomber Offensive.

By the middle of 1944 the RAF was keen to analyse in detail its strategic air campaign. There was much at

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stake: the validation of decades of Air Power theory, and the justification of an enormous financial and human investment, as well as lessons to be learnt for the future. It is, therefore, surprising that the process of conducting the survey was almost stifled by Prime Minister Churchill, who, it seems, considered it a waste of money! In the event the Air Staff and Secretary of State were able to circumvent the Prime Minister's wishes, and the survey was completed, albeit with far fewer resources than first proposed. Significantly though, Sir Solly Zuckerman, a man who had played a key role in the twists and turns of the all important targeting debates during the war, was appointed to a crucial post within the British Bombing Survey Unit, and his strong personal views clearly mark the final product. A product which, incidentally, has greatly influenced the various Official Histories, which have drawn heavily on its content, and so shaped the views of generations of subsequent historians and scholars.

The newly published *Report* is prefaced by forewords from two distinguished veterans of the Combined Bomber Offensive, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Michael Beetham, and the accomplished USAF air historian Major General John W Huston. Most



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