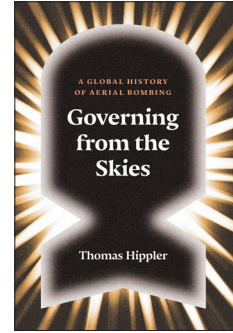


## Book Reviews

# GOVERNING FROM THE SKIES: A GLOBAL HISTORY OF AERIAL BOMBING



BY THOMAS HIPPLER

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REVIEWED BY GROUP CAPTAIN JOHN ALEXANDER

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**Biography:** John Alexander is a part-time historian at the Royal Air Force's Air Historical Branch, and also works on national security in Whitehall and is an RAF Reserve. As a regular he specialised in air/land integration, including in the Falklands and various Middle Eastern campaigns, was twice a Chief of the Air Staff's Fellow, conceptualised future conflict for the UK MOD, and spent his final six years in the Service in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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### INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hippler, the French philosopher and historian, argues in his 2017 book *Governing from the Skies: A Global History of Aerial Bombing*, that the history of war over the past century is a history of the aerial bombing of civilian populations. Though early twentieth century philosophers, such as H G Wells, dreamt that air power would enable perpetual peace between nations, air power has instead (according to Hippler) been used to target non-combatants. First to cow colonial populations, then later to target European and Japanese peoples' support for their nations' war effort, and now to enforce world governance under United States' hegemony. In Hippler's view, aerial bombing is now used for 'perpetual low-intensity war', in places such as Yemen and Pakistan, and for the 'imperial neo-Douhetism' used in Iraq in 1991 and 2003, Kosovo in 1999 and Libya in 2011. This radical view is worth understanding.

The book is organised chronologically, with the apparent symmetry of starting with the first ever air raid by Italian Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti on the Libyan oasis of Ain Zara on 1 November 1911 (dropping grenades on the guerrillas and civilians there), and concluding with the end of NATO air operations over Libya on 31 October 2011.

In between, the book's 218 pages sweep through early thinking on the bombing of civilians: its use in the First World War, for colonial policing, in the Second World War, Cold War, and post-Cold War. For such a short book, the chapters are broad ranging, with an eclectic cast list: the chapters' introductions alone include: H G Wells, Franz Kafka, First World War aces, the Mad Mullah of Somaliland, Arthur Harris, Jan Smuts, Operation Gomorrah, Operation Linebacker, and George W Bush. The book, perhaps unsurprisingly for a philosopher, focuses on the history of thought, rather than the history of events.

The book is a challenging and interesting read, particularly because of its engagement with the development of air power thinking, drawing on Hippler's comprehensive and highly regarded study of Douhet's air power concepts, *Bombing the People: Giulio Douhet and the Foundations of Air-Power Strategy, 1884–1939* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). *Governing from the Skies* is more of a polemic than a history, however, as it argues from a critical perspective while failing to acknowledge the broader and recent historiography. There are many examples of this. Hippler repeats the trope that the British used poison gas in Mandate Iraq (p. 67) when, although the use of tear gas was considered, it was not used for practical and policy reasons. Furthermore, the policy of air control used in Iraq was far more nuanced than Hippler's account of 'proscription bombing', as Sebastian Ritchie's 2011 Air Historical Branch Narrative *The RAF, Small Wars and Insurgencies in the Middle East, 1919–1939* (RAFCAPS, 2011) makes clear. Moreover, Hippler's claim that during the Second World War 'strategic bombing proved militarily ineffective in Germany, as even without bombing, the war would have ended in the same way at the same time' (p. 143) ignores the evidence that the Anglo-American Combined Bomber Offensive, notwithstanding its strategic and ethical controversies and amongst many other effects, totally deprived German armies of air support from 1943 onward (see the review of O'Brien's *How the War was Won* in the Spring 2018 edition of this Journal).

Though titled a 'Global History' the book seems focused on Anglo-American bombing. The suggestion that John Warden, like Douhet, proposed the targeting of civilians, and that these theories were used in post-Cold War interventions, is simplistic. The timing of Hippler's book, published in French in 2014 and in English in 2017, may explain why the indiscriminate use of Russian air power in Syria or the almost total reduction in US 'drone' strikes in Pakistan since the Pakistan military moved into Waziristan in late 2014 are not mentioned, but the result is the book already seems dated.

*Governing from the Skies: A Global History of Aerial Bombing* is, nevertheless, worth engaging with because it portrays a 'critical' view which all students of air power should understand. It is an attempt to place air power thinking amongst the major themes of the past century from a historical sociology perspective: the nationalization of societies and war, democracy and totalitarianism, colonialism and decolonization,

Third World-ism and globalization, and the welfare state and its decline in the face of neoliberalism, rather than a narrow operational view. Hippler's book, however, is neither truly global or a thorough history for the reasons outlined above, or a history of aerial bombing, as it ignores air power's utility against military targets.



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