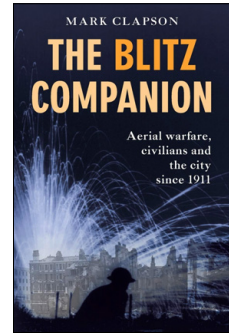


Book Review

The Blitz Companion: Aerial warfare, civilians and the city since 1911



By Professor Mark Clapson

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Reviewed by Mark Russell

Biography: Mark Russell graduated with a 2:1 in History in 1985, and has worked in professional services ever since. Following a return to academia in 2015, he graduated with an MA in Air Power: History, Theory and Evolution from the University of Birmingham in December 2017. His dissertation looked at whether the RAF was a 'learning organisation' in the period 1925-1935, with special reference to how its 'Air Exercises' helped to develop and test tactics and technology. He continues to work in professional services, but his current research interest is the RAF in the inter-war years and how the organisation managed technological change.

Introduction

The publisher describes this book as 'An introductory international reader for students, teachers and members of the public interested in the impact of air raids on civilians and cities since the birth of air warfare' and it does this job well. Building on Clapson's undergraduate modules at the University of Westminster on the Blitz (i.e. the Luftwaffe's attacks on the UK in World War Two), as the title indicates, it expands on this in both chronology and geography, starting with the first Italian air raid in Libya in 1911 right up to comments (albeit brief) on Russian bombing in Syria following their involvement from 2015.

It is not, and does not claim to be, a comprehensive history of aerial bombing; its major theme is the 'targeting of civilians, and the consequences of air raids upon urban populations.' As Clapson says in the introduction, he has been 'heavily reliant' on some key works, with some chapters owing a 'considerable debt' to other scholars. This comes through in the book, but does not necessarily reduce its value; if one wants more specifics on the bombing war in Europe, for example, one is appropriately referred to Richard Overy's 'peerless histories of the bombing war in Europe' (p. 78).

Instead, this book aims to steer a neutral path between those who claim that bombing civilians is always bad, and those who would see collateral damage as acceptable; 'any blanket denunciation of bombing ... ignores historical realities' (p. 8), but while this is the aim, one does have the sense that, if pushed, Clapson would fall into the camp condemning bombing. What he does not do is engage with the 'philosophy' of bombing in the same way that Hippler does, for example.¹ Having said this, Clapson does a good job of outlining the evolution of the debate over the rights and wrongs of bombing, especially Allied bombing in World War Two. Having outlined the debate, he clearly provides his view on those in Germany and Japan who have sought to place Allied bombing on a par with the Holocaust and other genocidal actions, describing a series of events from the twentieth century as 'examples of genocide. Allied air raids from 1940-5 are not' (p. 225).

The book is at its strongest when discussing these debates, and the historiography and evidence available to historians around the experience of being bombed. These range from contemporaneous sources such as first-hand accounts in letters and diaries, through to Mass Observation sources and then Her Majesty's Stationery Office publications soon after the Blitz, to cite UK examples, through to other sources including photography and film, and how all of these have evolved over time. The bulk of the discussion centres around the British and German experience of being bombed, although there is a fair amount on the description and commemoration in Japan of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What is not clear is whether this focus on these countries is a deliberate choice, or one forced on Clapson by lack of available sources in other countries – although Tanaka and Young, for example, have a chapter on the bombing of Chongqing by the Japanese.² While Clapson does identify common reactions to bombing (e.g. 'trekking', the wholly understandable movement by people away from locations that are being bombed) across both time and geography, this is done more by noting these common behaviours than through any analytical framework. He also does not then explicitly look across time and geography to show how civilians adapt to being bombed; one can see such a framework as being a useful tool, both now and in the future, in assessing whether air power is indeed the answer in a given situation (with the evidence suggesting not, starting in Iraq in the early 1920s right back to Iraq in this decade).

Where the book is weakest is in some of the statements and analysis around the military and political history of the bombing itself, rather than the impact on those on the ground. For example, he takes Churchill's post-Dresden comment that 'the question of bombing of

German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed' (p. 93) as a question motivated at least partly by humanitarian concerns, whereas other writers suggest this was Churchill trying to actively distance himself from Bomber Command's offensive for political reasons, something the RAF resisted in the strongest possible terms. Another example is Vietnam, where he says 'America lost the air war' (p. 162), a claim it is hard to understand unless he means that air power failed to win the war. In looking at Vietnam, he does not build on the political context around the air war examined so effectively by Clodfelter to explain both why air power was never the right answer, and why what many airmen saw as unnecessary limitations placed on them were indeed strategically appropriate at the time.³

What he perhaps does not explore as much as he could is what drove America after 1945 to adopt this reliance on bombing – why it made apparent sense both militarily and politically at the time, and hence was a rational choice rather than the choice of a bloodthirsty imperialist power who cared little for the lives of non-Americans. The book also, inevitably, feels anti-American, since it is America that has done the vast bulk of the bombing since 1945, although it is good to see that Russia's bombing in Syria and the Ukraine are acknowledged. What is not acknowledged is the impact that technology has had in making bombing more discriminate and effective, such that civilian casualties are a fraction of what they were over Vietnam (for example). And as Peter Lee has shown, the impact of these capabilities in reducing civilian casualties is taken very seriously in the RAF, for example, to an extent that would have been unthinkable in earlier decades.⁴ At the same time, the opponents in the last twenty years have had no such scruples, and this moral balance is not described; in describing the car bomb as the 'poor man's air force,' Davis is surely doing modern targeting technologies a disservice.⁵

Some factual errors exist, which as always, undermine one's faith in the rest of the book; the USAF lost 31 B-52s in the Vietnam war per McCarthy and Allison, not the 'hundreds' Clapson suggests (p. 157); it was John Hershey that wrote the 1946 book *Hiroshima*, not Henry Hersey (p. 209), it is the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo, not the Yasakuni shrine (p. 212), and so on.

In summary, this is a useful introduction to the historiography and sources around the civilian experience of being bombed; it has some interesting things to say in these areas and is a quick way to get an overview of the main debates that have taken place and where one should go for more, both on the debates and for material for further research. As a history of bombing itself, it has shortcomings, and the reader would be better advised to look at what Clapson himself acknowledges as being the leading texts in that field.

Notes

¹ Thomas Hippler translated by David Fernbach, *Governing from the Skies; A Global History of Aerial Bombing*, (Verso, London, 2017) – although this in its turn has some serious flaws as a history of bombing.

² Tanaka, Y, and Young, M. B. (eds), *Bombing Civilians: a twentieth-century history*, The New Press, London, 2009.

³ M Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Macmillan, London, 1989).

⁴ Dr P. Lee, *Reaper Force: Inside Britain's Drone Wars*, (John Blake Publishing, London, 2018).

⁵ M. Davis, *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (Verso, London, 2017).

⁶ J.R. McCarthy, James R. and G. B. Allison. *Linebacker II: A View from the Rock*. (Darby, Pennsylvania: DIANE Publishing, 1985), p. 209.

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