



Bombing the City: Civilian Accounts of the Air War in Britain and Japan, 1939–1945 by Aaron William Moore.

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In *Bombing the City*, historian Aaron William Moore (Univ. of Edinburgh) embarks on the difficult task of comparing the wartime experiences of urban civilians bombed during the most destructive conflict in human history. The volume's four substantial chapters (plus introduction and conclusion) draw heavily on firsthand accounts of three Japanese and three British diarists, as well as many other diaries and memoirs in a stirring account of the tribulations of those who suffered and endured horrific aerial bombardments by Axis and Allied powers.

While much has been written about the military efficacy and morality of the Second World War's strategic bombing campaigns, Moore aims specifically to resurrect the human experience itself. His introduction summarizes the prewar urbanization trends in Britain and Japan, then moves quickly through the debates about aerial bombardment and reaches the simple conclusion that "the attraction to aggressive bombing of civilians ... was too difficult to resist" (13).

Throughout, Moore stresses two central propositions: first, despite social and cultural disparities between Britons and Japanese, their experiences on the ground were fundamentally similar. Second, civilian populations consistently supported their government's bombing campaigns, even to their own dreadful detriment.

In chapter 1, Moore describes the jolting effects of urban bombing on immediate and extended families in Britain and Japan, capturing their extreme and complicated emotions, which ranged from utter jubilation after accounting for family members amid the rubble of air raids to the agony of losing relatives or abandoning childhood homes under government evacuation orders. For many, the pull between familial and state loyalties became untenable: "Our diarists gradually understood that war did not simply ask for the purchase of bonds or the donation of metals, but the deconstruction of the family itself" (21).

Chapter 2 contains a section titled "Bad News Travels Fast: Anxiety and the Illusion of Preparation," in which Moore vividly details how mere anxiety gave way to hysteria, rampant rumors, and irrational fears over the course of the war:

In both Britain and Japan ... mass bombings began as an almost preternaturally beautiful experience. The lights, colours, and sounds of the first stage of attack commanded the attention of the people, who certainly suspected it preceded violent assault, but were momentarily seduced by its deceptively festive pyrotechnics. (66)

Besides the suffering and ruin it inflicted, aerial bombardment, also fostered a newfound spiritual faith in its victims: "The people called out to various gods to save them, and they did so with different languages, dialects, and regional accents.... These acts, however ineffective, gave suffering people a fleeting feeling of empowerment" (89).

The book's final chapters concern most British and Japanese citizens' sustained support for the war effort even as it demanded unparalleled levels of sacrifice. Disturbed by this nationalist

loyalty, Moore reflects that “in a sense, the city called on them to die for its own survival” (97). He also clarifies the bombings’ disproportionate effects relevant to gender, class, and age.

The author concludes with a sharp critique of notions of the conflict as a “good war” and mounts a spirited plea for pacifism. He writes that “the first and foremost victory of the Second World War ... was creating a citizenry who harboured a deep-seated hatred of war” (204). Yet, in the same discussion, he acknowledges that

The lesson that citizens in victorious countries such as Britain, Russia, and the United States learn in school is not entirely wrong: the appalling atrocities committed by Axis powers in the East and West had to be stopped, and the war was fundamentally won through the sacrifices of ordinary men and women. For Axis “losers” of the war, like Japan, the death of unrestrained militarism and the birth of post-war economic growth, which catapulted the nation into a position of wealth, were some of the most satisfying victories they have enjoyed. (203)

The author demonstrates that the heavy moral baggage of the war—in this case stemming from the aerial bombing of cities—rests not only with statesmen and generals, because it was “enabled by popular support” (16). He highlights the transnational experience of civilians under air bombardment: explosives from above have no regard for nationality.

In stylistic terms, *Bombing the City* sometimes reads like a catalogue of firsthand accounts rather than a coherent, well constructed study of its subject. An overreliance on quotations, intended to ensure authenticity, fails to give readers a larger appreciation for the contexts and evolution of the war. The author rightly warns against the dangers of a “good war” hypnosis, but errs in presuming that Allied and Axis forces operated on the same moral tier.

In the final tally, Aaron Moore delivers a richly descriptive account of what many thousands of British and Japanese civilians endured in 1939–45. His book forcefully evokes the dire circumstances of life in the targeted cities of the war in a tale of pain, relief, heroism, loss, grief, and ultimate survival. But his vehement distaste for the cruelties of war clouds his broader judgment. He delivers a wrenching and tragic tale of what the war did *to* ordinary people, but not what the war did *for* them. Only by contemplating both outcomes can we approach an objective and comprehensive treatment of the Second World War.