



Dropping Their Eggs

by Patrick Wright

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A History of Bombing by Sven Lindqvist trans. Linda Haverty Rugg · Granta, 233 pp, £14.99
The Bomber War: Arthur Harris and the Allied Bomber Offensive 1939-45 by Robin Niellands · John Murray, 448 pp, £25.00
Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War by Frances FitzGerald · Touchstone, 592 pp, US \$17.00

I cannot recall taking a single piss during my childhood, whether outside or at home in the outhouse, when I didn't choose a target and bomb it. At five years of age I was already a seasoned bombardier.' This is an unusual way of embarking on an analysis of modern warfare and its technologies, but then Sven Lindqvist has long been writing history in his own way. Oral historians know him as the author of *Dig Where You Stand: How to Research a Job*, a combined manifesto and manual published in 1978, based on the premise that no history has been more hidden or distorted than that of modern business. Shareholders and directors enjoy history in the form of capital, but aren't in the least curious about the past itself. Researching the Swedish cement industry, for which his grandfather had worked, Lindqvist found nothing except crudely argued assumptions that management was always right and the shareholders always vastly more important than the workers, whose main contribution was to obstruct growth and progress. His response was to encourage people to research the history of their own workplaces to recover the information ignored in the managerial version. Within a few years of the book's appearance, ten thousand researchers were using material from their own working lives to make history 'dangerous' again.

Lindqvist is a citizen-writer with socialist roots and an open mind. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he wrote a remarkable trilogy of books enquiring into Western colonialism. His approach was autobiographical as well as archival, premised on a rejection of the academic convention that expects writers to stay outside the frame of their own investigations. 'I have never created a more fictional character than the researching "I" in my doctorate,' he wrote, 'a self that begins in pretended ignorance and then slowly arrives at knowledge, not at all in the fitful, chancy way I myself arrived at it, but step by step, proof by proof, according to the rules.' The trilogy opens with *Bänkpress* (1988), so far untranslated into English, in which Lindqvist's body-building exercises prompt him to re-examine his adolescent dreams of strength and power. For the sequels, *Desert Divers* (1990) and *Exterminate All the Brutes* (1992), he goes to Africa and reflects on his own identity, not in the context of a European homeland, but in relation to the dislodged 'fragments of childhood' that come to mind as he sifts his way through the eerie, intermittently beautiful Sahara desert, where the history of colonialism - adventurous, romantic, vicious, genocidal - can still be read in the lives of people and their places.

Throughout the trilogy, Lindqvist writes in short numbered passages, mostly less than a page long. Ask him about this, and he will mention various influences: Nietzsche;



British Parliamentary reports of the kind that once ruled the world with their numbered paragraphs; role-playing games which give participants short specific descriptions of the situations they are to enact. He mixes geology with dreams, history with personal reminiscence, literary criticism (much of it directed at the works that first stirred visions of Africa in his adolescent mind) with the study of power and colonial administration. The result is certainly a kind of travel writing, yet it is tougher and more purposeful than Claudio Magris and more penetrating than Bruce Chatwin, who wasn't one for burrowing in the archives.

Since completing the trilogy Lindqvist has reconfigured his interests rather than simply moved on. *The Skull Measurer's Mistake* (1995) was concerned with 22 19th-century figures who resisted racist thinking. *A History of Bombing* is similarly related to the trilogy, and not just in the figurative sense that it shows the desert, which Lindqvist had earlier discussed as a Western creation as well as an African reality, brought to the heart of European cities or visited on Korea, Cambodia or Vietnam. In 1869 Charles Dilke wrote that 'the gradual extinction of the inferior races is not only a law of nature, but a blessing to mankind,' and with ghoulish eugenist fervour praised Anglo-Saxons as 'the only extirpating race on earth'. Bombing was first thought of in these imperialist, exterminatory terms: 'fantasies of genocide lay in wait for the first airplane to arrive,' Lindqvist writes. 'The dream of solving all the problems of the world through mass destruction from the air was already in place before the first bomb was dropped.'

Joseph Conrad was describing the British naval bombardment of African coastal settlements when, in *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), he wrote of 'the invisible whites' who 'dealt death from afar'. In Lindqvist's history, too, aerial bombardment appears as a novel kind of punitive raid. The first bomb ever to be dropped from a plane - an Italian monoplane piloted by Lieutenant Giulio Cavotti - landed among troops encamped at an oasis outside Tripoli on 1 November 1911. It was reported to have had 'a wonderful effect on the morale of the Arabs'. The Spanish practised the technique in Morocco, as did the French - who also dropped bombs on Syria and even designed a special 'colonial' plane which allowed its airmen to 'sit in the shade with plenty of space for their machine guns and shoot the indigenes in comfort'. The British bombed revolutionaries in Egypt and Pathans on India's North-West Frontier in 1915. After the First World War, the future of the British Air Force was guaranteed by Mohammed Abdille Hassan, the troublesome 'mad Mullah' of Somaliland, who was bombed into submission within a week. Arthur (Bomber) Harris was a squadron leader in the Third Afghan war of 1919, and pioneered the strategy of 'control without occupation' in Iraq, which entailed sprinkling fire on straw-roofed huts: 'within forty-five minutes,' Harris reported, 'a full-sized village . . . can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines which offer them no real target.'

Although bombing didn't determine the outcome of the First World War, it had already become central to military thinking. In *The Aircraft in Warfare* (1915), the British mathematician F.W. Lanchester suggested that the critical aim of an act of warfare was to overwhelm 'the fire-extinguishing appliances of the community', after which 'the city may be destroyed in toto.' Lanchester also came up with the idea of deterrence, predicting that, where bombing was concerned, the 'threat of reprisal' would always be more effective than 'pseudo-legal' prohibition under international

law. The Zeppelins bombed civilian areas, and so, too, did the British Air Force under the command of Hugh Trenchard, who once assured enquiring officials that, far from accurately concentrating on targets like railway stations, his pilots 'drop their eggs well into the middle of the town generally'. The idea of 'strategic bombing', which would later support the 'bomber dream' of resolving wars from the air alone by laying waste civilian areas, found its prophet in the Italian Giulio Douhet, author of *Dominion of the Skies* (1921) - though such bombing had already been defined as a war crime under the Hague Conventions of 1907.

For General Douhet, it was crucial that war be regarded 'unemotionally, like a science'. This, as Lindqvist says, is the approach taken by the people who have sat in their laboratories working out how to make napalm burn deeper. In order to establish his own contrary perspective, Lindqvist includes a great deal of autobiography in his history. In 1932, the year of his birth, Stanley Baldwin announced that offence was now the only effective form of defence: 'you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves.' On Lindqvist's tenth birthday, 28 March 1942, Bomber Harris launched his offensive against German residential areas, striking Lübeck at night with incendiary bombs. As Lindqvist turned 13, Churchill wrote to his chiefs of staff, arguing that Bomber Command's raids should now be concentrated on 'military objectives' rather than on 'mere acts of terror and wanton destruction'.

In 1957 he's helping a former Russian aristocrat, Father Nikon, back to his hermit's hut on the Athos peninsula, when he looks up and sees the first Sputnik coursing across the sky. When J.F. Kennedy assumes the US Presidency in 1961, Lindqvist is studying in Peking, living near Communist Party HQ, and only vaguely aware of the numerous US hydrogen bombs then targeted on him. In 1964, his wife is pregnant and his dissertation in comparative literature is just coming together, so he hardly notices the opening strikes of the Vietnam War. In 1970, a car veers out of control and crashes into his garden, narrowly missing his infant daughter, and forcing Lindqvist into a retreat from wider reality: 'the threat of the extermination of humankind and the sight of burning children in Vietnam and all the other fears and indignation . . . paled before the sudden threat to my own daughter.' He remembers childhood games - 'Bang, you're dead' - while standing at his father's deathbed, and steps in to remark, of the Korean War, that, had he been an American soldier, he, too, would have wanted the conflict to be as free of risk as possible, even if that meant a bombing campaign that responded massively to every attack on American troops and killed hundreds of thousands of civilians.

Lindqvist uses his autobiography to establish a human scale against which to measure these catastrophic events in which whole cities disappear and the dead pile up as abstracted digits in a heap of zeros. It allows him to see through the strategic justifications, the spooky calculations of the technologists, to the person quaking on the ground beneath the planes. More or less absent from Robin Neillands's *The Bomber War*, a defence of Bomber Harris, the victims keep appearing here, crowding out the ingenious scientists and the heroic airmen. Some are hardened corpses, melted in their own blackened fat in the shelters or laid out in rows 'liked grilled chickens'. 'There were people on the roadway, some already dead, some lying alive but stuck in the asphalt. They must have rushed onto the roadway without thinking,' a survivor of the Hamburg fire-bombing recorded. 'Their feet had got stuck and they had put out



their hands to get out again. They were on their hands and knees, screaming.' The victims may be found peeling off their own skins in the ruins of Hiroshima or speaking back with polite firmness, like the Korean Pak Jong Dae, who sat in front of an American historian, saying through the remnants of a face burned away by napalm: 'I do not think there should be any more victims like me in this world.'

A History of Bombing consists of 399 short numbered passages - all less than a page long and organised chronologically. Yet Lindqvist is plainly reluctant to portray history as a six-lane motorway surging forward, with bombs burning more brightly and more effectively along the way. Having established his chronological sequence, he sets about disturbing it, throwing zigzag paths across it and even joining lanes that would normally be running in opposite directions.

The result is a labyrinth, every one of the first 22 passages representing an entrance. At the conclusion of each is an arrow, indicating the next passage to be read, often far into the book. Once embarked on one of these 'narratives', each of which casts a distinct perspective on the wider history, the reader will almost certainly get lost. Every section either runs on to its sequel or ends with a little sign telling you where to go next. Whatever its concern - international law, futuristic prophecy or rocket science - the thread goes only forward, even as it loops back and forth through the entire length of the book. There is no way of retracing one's route - or of working out, when you've got to the end of the book, how much of the damned thing you have actually read.

The method has been likened to that of Julio Cortázar in *Hopscotch*, but the similarity is both coincidental and superficial. In Cortázar's novel, the interchangeability of chapters reflects psychological derangement: Lindqvist's labyrinth is not an attempt to embody the chaos of war. By ensuring that every passage is surrounded by strange passages drawn from the same period, Lindqvist is able to insist on the easily forgotten otherness of the past, and thereby guarantee that bombing is understood in its cultural and political as well as its technological dimensions. As his narratives intersect, the book becomes a theatre of unexpected juxtapositions freeing history from the rationalisations usually imposed on it. Airmen are found next to their carbonised civilian victims, bomber politicians are thrown up against resisters. Rocket scientists have their place, but so, too, does the anthropologist Margaret Mead, arguing that the idea of the family shelter was actually a retreat from the American ideal of a safe country. The reader may expect to find Guernica, but Lindqvist places it next to the barely remembered town of Chechaouen in Morocco. Similarly sized and similarly undefended, Chechaouen was the sacred capital of the Jibala people, but there was no Picasso to notice when it was bombed out of existence by American volunteers flying under French command in 1925, at a time when all the local men capable of bearing arms were known to be away. Lindqvist's book is partly a history, but it is also an anti-war monument that places its hopes, despite all the difficulties, in the machinery of international humanitarian law.

He is interested not just in the history of bombing, but also in its subsequent reconfiguration in a standardised form of public memory which is little better than 'a collective denial of the past'. He does not record his thoughts on the Hardware Hall at the Imperial War Museum (informally known, even inside the IWM, as the largest boy's bedroom in Britain), but having toured Britain's war museums in the summer of



1998, he draws a more general conclusion: 'Even today there is no hint in any British museum of the systematic attacks on German civilians in their homes, no hint that these attacks constituted crimes under international humanitarian law for the protection of civilians.' In Japan's Yasukuni Temple, the Pacific War is portrayed not as 'a war of aggression but just the opposite': a 'holy war to liberate the world from Communism'. The six thousand or so kamikaze pilots who died as 'human torpedoes' are celebrated for the 'tragic bravery' with which they 'struck terror in the hearts of our foes'. In 1995, acting under pressure from military organisations, the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington DC resolved to display the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 from which the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima 50 years earlier. The director, Martin Harwit, wanted an exhibition that would place the bombing of Hiroshima in context, showing what it did and giving arguments for and against. There was a great storm of protest from veterans, who felt they were being depicted as 'war criminals'. After a fierce argument, the exhibit was cancelled, leaving only the 'proudly and patriotically' displayed plane, which Lindqvist rededicates as a monument to the 'voluntary cerebral haemorrhage' that can follow when a nation lacks the courage to face its own feelings of guilt.

Most striking perhaps is a series of six narratives - a 'History of the Future' - concerned to trace the cultural moment associated with each stage of the history of bombing: anticipating it, reacting against it in horror, dreaming it forward into new expressions of monstrosity and destruction. Lindqvist draws on an extraordinary array of apocalyptic novels, starting with William D. Hay's *Three Hundred Years Hence*, published in 1881. 'I know what is going to happen to you, since for me it has already happened,' Professor Meister, its visionary hero, insists. The future on which he reports is to be one of massive population growth and increasing scarcity of food. Having combined under the banner of United Man, the white nations will take measures to control the inferior races - primarily Chinese and Africans - and eventually to annihilate them, using airplanes to unleash 'a rain of awful death to every breathing thing, a rain that exterminates the hopeless race'. The pointy-headed professor in Samuel W. Odell's novel *The Last War, or the Triumph of the English Tongue* (1898) also reports from a distant future, this one a United States of the World, in which the English race has conquered the globe and extinguished languages such as French, German and Chinese with the help of 1500 airships laden with bombs and a primitive 'fire that could not be quenched'. In Stanley Waterloo's *Armageddon* (1898), the Slavs feature as the inferior race to be destroyed, and a new order is secured thanks to an aerial weapon of such destructive power that resistance would mean 'death to all'.

Similar fantasies of air-enforced dominion are extended into space in *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (1898) by Garrett Serviss, in which a plane equipped with a weapon called the Disintegrator renders the Martians helpless. The same idea, if not the precise belief that 'to be human is to be English,' turns up a little later in Jack London's 'The Unparalleled Invasion'. Here the 'disgusting ocean of life' that is China is drained by means of diseases dropped in glass tubes from the air. The yellow hordes try to escape infection, but the Western powers terminate their frantic flight at the border, where 'the slaughter of refugees is unprecedented.'

In some Edwardian fictions the superweapon is construed as a humane instrument, a benign preventer of war - as in two books published in 1908, the year of the first



exhibition of airplane flight over Paris and New York. In Roy Norton's *The Vanishing Fleets*, gigantic planes, powered by radioactivity and known as Peacemakers, patrol the skies as terrifying guarantors of American power over China and Japan. *The Man who Ended War*, by Hollis Godfrey, features a radioactive beam that can 'dissolve' whole navies, but which is harmless against the human body and no threat to civilisation. Kipling also imagined 'the mass destruction that delivers happiness'. In 'As Easy as ABC' (1912), he shows the world governed by an all-powerful Aerial Board of Control, which has reduced the teeming population by beaming down sterilising rays, and takes the view that the people will soon learn that they don't like democracy. 'Administer us directly!' they will say. 'Down with the People!'

The Zeppelin raids of the First World War were sufficiently shocking to prompt fictions in which fire and devastation were repatriated from outer space and the colonies. Cicely Hamilton's *Theodore Savage* (1922) envisages England bombed back into the stone age. In *The Collapse of Homo Sapiens* (1923) Anderson Graham has Britain pulverised by African and Asian bombers whose technological superiority is reviled as the fruit of the deluded British universities that accepted foreign students. The same racist fantasies are displayed in Desmond Shaw's *Ragnarok* (1926), in which the French attack London with gas and fire-bombs, while their black African allies - fictional relations of those that had caused such resentment in Germany when France occupied the Ruhr - wait in the countryside to rape and slaughter the fleeing Londoners. In Neil Bell's *Valiant Clay* (1934), the entire world is lost in a gas attack that opens with a German attack on Poland. In Macilraith and Connolly's *Invasion from the Air* (1934), the workforce, demoralised by endless bombings, rises up - prompting the authorities to form an alliance with the Nazis in order to suppress this proletarian barbarism.

Over and again, the fictions and mythologies of warfare turn out to be not secondary reflections but intrinsic to the reality they shape and help to drive, proving that the unthinkable has really been thinkable all along - and warning that terrible things are yet to come. Culture, in the form either of systematic amnesia or of racial stereotyping, is what enables bombing to 'stand up to the public gaze. Domination from the air could be practised only when the victims were anonymous, invisible and speechless.'

In its attention to the cultural dimensions of modern warfare, Lindqvist's book belongs on the same shelf as *Way Out There in the Blue*, Frances FitzGerald's brilliant study of Star Wars and the 'high narrative gloss' that continues to attend its development. When the Strategic Defence Initiative was launched by Reagan in March 1983, it was a technologically impossible idea: 'a science-fiction solution' boosted by the memory of old movies. (In the 1940 Warner Brothers movie *Murder in the Air*, Reagan himself played a US secret agent charged with guarding the Inertia Projector, a new superweapon capable of destroying enemy planes in the air.) As a fantasy, however, it confirmed the evangelical Protestant outlook of Midwestern Republicanism, with its strong distrust of the non-American world, and its interest in the semi-magical idea of 'exerting power while remaining isolated'. Reagan first had the idea in 1979 when the Hollywood screenwriter and producer Douglas Morrow arranged a visit to the North American Aerospace Defense Command base in Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado, where Reagan was informed that America had nothing with which to stop incoming missiles. Yet, as FitzGerald argues, Star Wars prevailed because it was also 'perfectly



liturgical' in its appeal to the salvation doctrine of 'the American civil religion', in which America is a 'shining city' where the sacred fire of freedom is kept.

John Keegan recently announced, in the course of a television debate in which I also took part, that to allow 'cultural history' onto the protected turf of war studies is to issue a chaotic licence to mavericks who will write about 'anything at all'. Yet culture is in the mix of warfare: leading it forward and extending its imagination as much as reacting to it. And the military, at least, know this very well. After all, they spend most of their time waiting for the next outbreak of history: the moment of combat on which the chroniclers of war tend to concentrate, but which, in many military careers, never actually arrives. They may indeed spend some of that time manoeuvring on assault courses and parade grounds, having haircuts, attending courses, and coming to terms, reluctantly or not, with their role as 'peace-keepers' under international law. Yet they also read books (when I visited the US Army Armor Center in Fort Knox, the colonel in charge of training recommended Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* as 'pinsharp' on 'the ethics and morality' of the future soldiery) and step into plastic cabinets made by Jacuzzi to simulate warfare as it might be fought by 'the Army after Next'. Meanwhile, the software consultants move between military technology and the world of computer games - a circulation that is a defining feature of the current military-industrial-entertainment complex.

Had he been in one of the concentration camps near Dresden, Lindqvist tells us, he, too, would have been heartened to watch the flames consume the city and so many of its inhabitants. He also understands that men who were flying bombers at the age of twenty will want to believe in the rightness of what they did. Yet to read Neillands's widely praised book in the light of Lindqvist's is to confront the inadequacy of writing the history of a war from the point of view of the veterans. Neillands lionises the young fliers, and sturdily sets aside complicating considerations such as international law - reminding us instead that 'there was a war on.' He does everything he can to minimise the difference - which Lindqvist on the contrary stresses - between British area bombing, carried out at night with incendiary bombs, and the high-explosive precision bombs used by Americans in daylight raids against military targets. Having exonerated Harris, Neillands condemns his postwar critics as strutting moralists 'obsessed with self-conscious virtue' and wilfully ignorant of the context in which decisions were made. Lindqvist devotes relatively few of his unnumbered pages to the Second World War, but it is in his book rather than Neillands's that one encounters the nuclear physicist Freeman Dyson, who worked with Bomber Harris and his officers as a young operations analyst at the time of the Hamburg raid. Dyson must have heard many of the justifications rehearsed by Neillands - that the bombing 'brought the war home to Germany' and was the necessary 'price of peace' - but they didn't prevent him from wondering guiltily about the difference between himself and bureaucrats like Eichmann: 'They had sat in their offices, writing memoranda and calculating how to murder people efficiently, just like me. The main difference was that they were sent to jail or hanged as war criminals, while I went free.'

The veterans' perspective has to be respected, and Neillands has recovered it efficiently, even though he should be more interested in its doubts and dissensions. To write about war from this point of view alone is to appoint yourself its apologist, which is a curious thing to do after more than half a century. Faith Winter's statue of Bomber Harris was unveiled at the RAF church of St Clement Dane by the Queen



Mother in 1992. Neillands notes that protesters later daubed this concrete snapshot with red paint. He doesn't recall the concerns that were voiced in Germany at the time, nor the fact that the unveiling of Winter's piece of delayed-action ordnance was supported by a rhetoric that seemed intent on rekindling the fires of Hamburg, Dresden and Cologne somewhere near Maastricht.



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