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The End of Gentlemanly Warfare? Gendered Language and Great Britain's Evolving Arguments for Strategic Bombing, 1920-1945

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Historiographical discussion

- 1 My dissertation engages two historiographical sub-fields of Great Britain's military history: the development of early Royal Air Force policies, and the Royal Air Force's Strategic Bomber Offensive during World War II. It further incorporates gender history methodologies to analyze air force policy and doctrine to trace the arguments for and against strategic bombing from the end of the First World War to the end of the Second (1918-1945). By analyzing this one line of thought over thirty years, historians can gain a more nuanced understanding of the impact of social and cultural ideas on military and strategic thought, specifically in relation to strategic bombing.
- 2 Until recently, military historians have largely refrained from incorporating the methodologies introduced during the "cultural turn" of the 1970s and 1980s. With the introduction of "new military history," the study of war/warfare outside of the traditional operational histories focusing on troop movements, campaign logistics, or the great (white) men of history, historians have begun to examine the greater effect of war on society as a whole.¹ While several air power and military scholars have considered gender and other theoretical analyses in their work, they have not fully explored how gender theory can

help to explain significant decisions made by politicians, strategists, and military planners during the interwar period. My dissertation therefore demonstrates the value of incorporating gender studies methodologies to deconstruct the rhetoric surrounding strategic bombing.

Themes and methodologies

- 3 Through my research, I found several recurring themes emerging throughout my source material. One recurrent theme these individuals often invoked was the concept of chivalry –the romanticized version of the Arthurian Legend that reemerged in the Victorian Era. A Victorian gentleman was considered to be manly by showing bravery in war, showing loyalty to one's country, and, above all, defending the nation's innocent women and children.
- 4 Another important leitmotif in the source material was the culturally-constructed ideal of separate, dual spheres: the domestic sphere, where the “weaker” women in society (including children and the elderly) were in charge of running and maintaining the household, raising and educating the children, and overseeing religious instruction; and the public sphere, where the “tougher” men in society were expected to engage in the overly political, rough, and dirty world. Expanding this belief to wartime, the supposedly stronger, less emotional male population became the protector of the remaining feminized (women, children, elderly) population at home.
- 5 With these themes in mind, I adopted the theoretical link between gendered notions and the military developed by political theorist Jean Bethke Elstain in her monograph *Women and War*. For Elstain, in Western Culture, men and women accept and perpetuate certain culturally constructed roles based on customary notions of war and peace. For example:

[...] in time of war, real men and women [...] take on, in cultural memory and narrative, the personas of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls. Man constructed as violent, whether eagerly and inevitably or reluctantly and tragically; women as nonviolent, offering succor and compassion.²

- 6 In Great Britain throughout the interwar years, the master narrative of the First World War continually painted women as the innocents at home and men as the warriors at the front.³ Thus, through their writings, their arguments, and their decisions, British politicians, military officials, and social critics did their part to continue these societal tropes by continually reaffirming the ideas of wartime separate spheres.

Source material

- 7 My dissertation research began with Stanley Baldwin's famous claim that "the bomber will always get through" in 1932. Taken out of context, Baldwin's argument appeared to support the development of a strong, offensive bomber force. Yet, Baldwin's statement was made as a general call for disarmament. I then looked at Baldwin's next statement, "[t]he only defence is an offence, which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves", and was hit with several research questions.⁴ I wondered why was it so important for Baldwin to focus on the murdering of women and children to justify disarmament? How prominent and/or effective was his argument throughout the interwar years? Did Britons' concern for "the fairer sex" reach to other, non-British nations, especially when bombs started once again to fall on London in the late summer and fall of 1940? How could you explain the escalation of the RAF's bombing activity throughout the war, culminating with the firebombing of Dresden in February 1945?
- 8 I wanted to engage in both government and popular source material. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates* online archive provided a treasure trove of gendered arguments both for and against the build-up of a strong bomber force. Moreover, Cabinet and Air Ministry documents at the National Archives and the Archives at the Royal Air Force Museum gave me a first-hand look at the development and change to policies behind the scenes. I also looked at Arthur Harris' personal papers at the Royal Air Force Museum to add an interesting insight to wartime bombing strategy. Several former Air Ministry officials and strategists published books and articles throughout the interwar years as well. In addition, there were a plethora of pacifistic writings published in the same period. The international push for the League

of Nations and the Geneva Disarmament Conference meant that arguments for or against disarmament were pervasive in Great Britain. I also looked at newspaper accounts, letters, journals, propaganda, and memoirs published during the war to see how the average Briton and/or RAF pilots felt about strategic bombing in wartime.

Chapter outline

- 9 I have arranged my chapters to trace the arguments for and against strategic bombing both chronologically and thematically. The first chapter explores the lessons Britain's policy makers learned from the German Zeppelin and Gotha raids in the First World War, and how those lessons led to the institution of strategic bombing policy. Moreover, this chapter examines the perceived success of the Royal Air Force's first major experiment with strategic bombing, aerial policing in Mesopotamia and northern India. Once war was once again on the horizon, it was convenient for Air Ministry officials to look to RAF conduct in the periphery to develop the strategies to protect the metropole.
- 10 Chapters two and three cover the same time period, 1930-1939, but instead provide an in-depth focus on either side of the strategic bombing debate. The second chapter explores the emergence of a different, masculinized pacifism in the interwar years. Traditionally, arguments against war were gendered female. Society constructed women as "Beautiful Souls," the harbinger of "peace and decency," therefore the pacifistic male threatened the traditional gender roles.⁵ But after the horrors of the First World War, that view changed. Prominent, well-respected men began to take up the call to outlaw war, and particularly aerial bombardment, in favor of collective security through international treaties and institutions such as the League of Nations. The influence of pacifism on Britain's interwar policy was one of the many contributing factors to the policy of appeasement adopted by the three Prime Ministers subsequent to Adolf Hitler's reassertion of military force in 1935.⁶ The third chapter will therefore look at the militarists' gendered justifications for the continued build-up of a strong air force. Especially in the face of overwhelming masculinized pacifist rhetoric, militarists in Britain utilized the same rhetorical strategies as their pacifist contemporaries, in-

stead depicting rearmament and a large air force, not treaties and pacifist institutions, as the savior of civilization. Sadly, history would determine the militarist argument as the winner. Thus, the chapter three will end by looking at the development of Air Raid Precautions (ARP), the government's attempt to safeguard civilization in the face of enemy attack.

- 11 The outbreak of war in 1939 did not quell pacifist arguments, especially in response to the escalation of RAF bombing policy. The last two chapters therefore use a gendered analysis to study the continued arguments by government officials and the population at large as the war progressed. Chapter four examines the early years of the war, focusing specifically on the German bombing raids on London during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, July 1940 through May 1941. Chapter five analyzed government and popular responses to the strategic bombing campaign once it is the British and their allies who dominate the air war, starting in 1942. In particular, it attempts to explain how the British were able to maintain their honorable image while conducting what many, as we have seen, believed to be war crimes against the German population.

Conclusion

- 12 Unfortunately for the British, by 1939, arguments for or against air power ceased to matter. Strategic bombing did not bring about the feared knock-out blow when the next war finally erupted in September, nor did it prove to be the end of civilization. The Nazi Blitzkrieg across Europe did not bring an end to the gendered debates on strategic bombing either. With the indiscriminate attacks on civilians in Rotterdam, Warsaw, and eventually London, the Germans once again became the barbarous enemy in speeches, newspapers, and propaganda while the RAF remained the honorable force. Additionally, gendered rhetoric demonstrating Fighter Command's heroic defeat of the *Luftwaffe* and the distinct British propensity for keeping calm and carrying on during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz reinforced the images of the chivalric knights of the air, the sanctity of the private sphere, and the superiority of the British character. The mythology surrounding the Battle of Britain and the Blitz continues

to emphasize the heroic acts of the British fighter pilots and civilians in lieu of the equally heroic men of Bomber Command.

- 13 By the fall of 1940, only Bomber Command allowed for the British military to continue their crusade against Nazi tyranny on the Continent, but it was not easy. The Air Ministry quickly realized that German defenses rendered daylight attacks too dangerous and Bomber Command's scattered precision attacks against aerodromes, naval installations, and other military targets were unsuccessful. After analyzing the impact of the Blitz on British civilians, the Air Ministry accepted a strategy focusing on the dehousing of German civilians and the destruction of German cities. While the Air Ministry continued to stress that they were attacking legitimate military targets, after witnessing the large raids conducted by Arthur Harris on Cologne, Hamburg, the Ruhr, etc., even the Prime Minister began to question the bestiality of Britain's bombing policy. In the years after the Second World War, Harris would continue to argue that Bomber Command chivalrously saved countless British lives by ending the war sooner, but public memory would not waver. Despite Harris' belief that Bomber Command remained an honorable force, the escalation of Britain's strategic bombing policy, culminating in the Dresden firestorm, forever stained Britain's honorable image.

NOTES

- 1 T. D. Biddle, R. M. Cintino, "The Role of Military History in the Contemporary Academy," *The Society for Military History White Paper*, November 2014, online: <https://www.smh-hq.org/docs/SMHWhitePaper.pdf> [accessed March 15, 2021].
- 2 J. B. Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1987), 4.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 4 S. Baldwin, "Speech to the House of Commons", 10 November 1932, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th ser., vol. 270 (1932), col. 632.
- 5 Elshtain, *op. cit.*, 6.
- 6 Some of the other motivations for appeasement include anti-communism, economic difficulties, and a focus on maintaining the safety of

the empire, particularly in Asia.

ABSTRACTS

English

The increased reliance on aerial bombardment during the First World War and in peripheral engagements during the interwar years led many in Great Britain to fear, as Stanley Baldwin famously prophesized, "that the bomber would always get through." Moreover, in the lead up to the Second World War, no official laws of war specified what a military target was. Was London, the center of the British Government, considered a town open to attack? What about the plethora of munitions factories scattered across Britain? Since they were either directing or creating the weapons of war, would civilians be considered legitimate targets? Many in Britain and on the continent feared that they would; and some, like Italian General Giulio Douhet, believed that the next war's outcome would be decided by aerial attacks on civilian centers. This fear sparked a fierce debate within British society as to whether the country should promote a policy of global disarmament or promote a policy of increased aerial defense.

Both sides used gendered rhetoric to promote their argument. Outspoken proponents in the government or military emphasized the "manliness" or "chivalric" character of either the proponent for peace or the Royal Air Force (RAF) flyer. Once the drums of war began to beat yet again, RAF policymakers and official war propagandists continued to stress the heroic character of the British military strategy: the British, unlike their "barbaric" German contemporaries, would attack only military targets and protect innocent German civilians. Yet, after three years of fierce, defensive fighting and sustained civilian bombardment during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, British aerial policy appeared to change completely with the appointment of Arthur Harris to Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command in February 1942. The evolution of the air war from 1939-1945 did not alter Britain's romantic opinion of air warfare, however. My doctoral dissertation applies a gendered lens to analyze and deconstruct the rhetoric surrounding British interpretations of strategic bombing before and during the Second World War.

Français

Le recours accru aux bombardements aériens au cours de la Première Guerre mondiale et dans les engagements périphériques de l'entre-deux-guerres a conduit de nombreux Britanniques à craindre, comme l'a prophétisé Stanley Baldwin, « que le bombardier réussirait toujours à passer ». En outre, à l'approche de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, rien dans le droit de la guerre ne précisait ce qu'était une cible militaire. Londres, le centre du gouvernement britannique, pouvait-elle être prise pour cible ? Qu'en était-il des multiples usines de munitions disséminées à travers la Grande-Bretagne ? Puisque les civils concevaient ou produisaient les armes de guerre, étaient-ils considérés comme des cibles légitimes ? Nombreux sont ceux qui, en Grande-Bretagne et sur le continent, craignaient que ce soit le cas ; et certains, comme le général italien Giulio Douhet, pensaient que l'issue de la prochaine guerre serait décidée par des attaques aériennes sur des cibles civiles. Cette crainte a suscité un débat acharné au sein de la société britannique pour savoir si le pays devait promouvoir une politique de désarmement global ou une politique de défense aérienne accrue.

Les deux parties ont utilisé une rhétorique genrée pour promouvoir leurs arguments. Les partisans du gouvernement ou de l'armée soulignaient la « virilité » ou le caractère « chevaleresque » du partisan de la paix ou de l'aviateur de la *Royal Air Force* (RAF). Lorsque les tambours de la guerre se sont remis à battre, les décideurs de la RAF et les propagandistes de guerre officiels ont continué de souligner le caractère héroïque de la stratégie militaire britannique : les Britanniques, contrairement à leurs contemporains allemands « barbares », n'attaqueraient que des cibles militaires et protégeraient les civils allemands innocents. Pourtant, après trois années de combats féroces et défensifs et de bombardements civils soutenus pendant la bataille d'Angleterre et le Blitz, la politique aérienne britannique semble changer complètement avec la nomination d'Arthur Harris au poste de commandant en chef du *Bomber Command* en février 1942. L'évolution de la guerre aérienne de 1939 à 1945 n'a cependant pas modifié l'opinion romantique de la Grande-Bretagne sur la guerre aérienne. Ma thèse de doctorat applique le filtre du genre pour analyser et déconstruire la rhétorique entourant les interprétations britanniques du bombardement stratégique avant et pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale.

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Mots-clés

Bombardement stratégique, Grande Bretagne, langage genré, gentleman

Keywords

strategic bombing, Great Britain, gentleman, gendered language

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