

## Apocalypse Then

*Starting in the 1920s, the world more and more came to fear the bomber as an agent of the Apocalypse, poised to turn cities into instant infernos. This was the doing of an Italian Army general, Giulio Douhet. "The Command of the Air," his 34,000-word essay of 1921, was the first comprehensive analysis of airpower. (He added an 18,000-word coda in 1926.) Douhet was at his most vivid when describing how bombers would leap national borders and terrorize populations with fires, poison gas, and more. Ever after, critics linked Douhet—and airpower generally—with mass murder. Douhet himself conceded that his preferred form of war "cannot but disturb the coolest minds."*

**T**he prevailing forms of social organization have given war a character of national totality—that is, the entire population and all the resources of a nation are sucked into the maw of war. ...

Chemistry, which has already provided us with the most powerful of explosives, will now furnish us with poison gases even more potent, and bacteriology may give us even more formidable ones. To get an idea of the nature of future wars, one need only imagine what power of destruction that nation would possess whose bacteriologists should discover the means of spreading epidemics in the enemy's country and at the same time immunize its own people. Airpower makes it possible. ...

Only a minority of the peoples involved [in the World War] actually fought and died. ... But that situation is a thing of the past; for now it is possible to go far behind the fortified lines of defense without first breaking through them. It is airpower which makes this possible. ...

The battlefield will be limited only by the boundaries of the nations at war, and all of their citizens will become combatants, since all of them will be exposed to the aerial offensives of the enemy. ...

In general, aerial offensives will be directed against such targets as peacetime industrial and commercial establishments; important buildings, private and public; transportation arteries and centers; and certain designated areas of civilian population as well. To destroy these targets three kinds of bombs are needed—explosive, incendiary, and poison gas—apportioned as the situation may require. The explosives will demolish the target, the incendiaries set fire to it, and the poison-gas bombs prevent firefighters from extinguishing the fires.

Gas attacks must be so planned as to leave the target permeated with gas which will last over a period of time, whole days, indeed, a result which can be attained either by the quality of the gases used or by using bombs with varying delayed-action fuses. It is easy to see how the use of this method, even with limited supplies of explosive and incendiary bombs, could completely wreck large areas. ...

This same offensive power, the possibility of which was not even dreamed of 15 years ago, is increasing daily, precisely because the building and development of large, heavy planes goes on all the time. The same thing is true of new explosives, incendiaries, and especially poison gases. ...

How could a country go on living and working under this constant threat, oppressed by the nightmare of imminent destruction and death? How indeed! We should always keep in mind that aerial

### "The Command of the Air"

("Il Dominio dell' Aria")  
Brig. Gen. Giulio Douhet  
Royal Army of Italy  
Rome, 1921

Find the full text on the  
*Air Force Magazine's* website  
[www.airforcemag.com](http://www.airforcemag.com)  
"Keeper File"

offensives can be directed not only against objectives of least physical resistance, but against those of least moral resistance as well. ... When the working personnel of a factory see one of its machine shops destroyed, even with a minimum loss of life, it quickly breaks up and the plant ceases to function. ...

By bombing the most vital civilian centers it [an air force] could spread terror through the nation and quickly break down [that nation's] material and moral resistance. ...

I have no doubt that its impact upon the people would be terrible. Here is what would be likely to happen to the center of the city within a radius of about 250 meters: Within a few minutes some 20 tons of high-explosive, incendiary, and gas bombs would rain down. First would come explosions, then fires, then deadly gases floating on the surface and preventing any approach to the stricken area. As the hours passed and night advanced, the fires would spread while the poison gas paralyzed all life. ...

What could happen to a single city in a single day could also happen to 10, 20, 50 cities. And, since news travels fast, even without telegraph, telephone, or radio, what, I ask you, would be the effect upon civilians of other cities, not yet stricken but equally subject to bombing attacks? What civil or military authority could keep order, public services functioning, and production going under such a threat? ... Normal life would be impossible in this constant nightmare of imminent death and destruction. ...

A complete breakdown of the social structure cannot but take place in a country subjected to this kind of merciless pounding from the air. The time would soon come when, to put an end to horror and suffering, the people themselves, driven by the instinct of self-preservation, would rise up and demand an end to the war. ...

Even in this brief resume we can catch a glimpse of the heights of atrocity to which aerial warfare may reach. ...

The decision in this kind of war must depend upon smashing the material and moral resources of a people caught up in a frightful cataclysm which haunts them everywhere without cease until the final collapse of all social organization. Mercifully, the decision will be quick in this kind of war, since the decisive blows will be directed at civilians, that element of the countries at war least able to sustain them. ...

I see in the reality of tomorrow something which cannot but disturb the coolest minds. ■