

Bombs, Broadcasts and Treason: Allied Intervention and Domestic Opposition to the Nazi Regime in Germany during World War II

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Abstract

Can foreign media and air power turn people against their own government? Most of the historical literature is skeptical that bombs and broadcasts can instigate opposition, and some suggests that the opposite is true. In this paper, we use a high stakes setting - Germany during World War II – to show that air power and the air waves “worked” as a way of undermining regime support. We collect data on individuals tried for high treason before the People’s Court, and merge it with information on the bombing of over 1,000 German towns and cities during the peak of the Allied air offensive. Using plausibly exogenous variation in signal strength, and in the intensity of Allied bombing, we can pin down causal effects: Places that suffered more wartime destruction from the air, and with better reception of Radio London, saw markedly more opposition. Where bombing coincided with a strong BBC signal, it was particularly effective in convincing Germans to conspire against their own government. Effects on German morale extended to the armed forces: Fighter pilots from bombed-out cities performed markedly less well after raids. We see effect of bombing on resistance even if we look into very small geographic units within the city of Berlin. Finally, we investigate mechanisms using USSBS, the survey, conducted by US forces in German cities in 1945.

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