



Dual Review of Jörg Friedrich. *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945.* Trans. by Allison Brown. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 532 pp. Editorial remarks, afterword, photographs,

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Introduction by **Antoine Capet**, Université de Rouen (France)

Reviewed by **Gerhard L. Weinberg**, University of North Carolina Emeritus, and **Wilfried Wilms**, University of Denver

Introduction by **Antoine Capet**, Université de Rouen (France)

Subscribers to H-Diplo will be aware that one of the fastest-growing “lines” in publishing on the Second World War – admittedly catching up on lost time – is the debate on the bombing of Germany. I was going to say “by the Allies” – but in fact only by the two major Western Allies, especially the Royal Air Force – since in this field the Red Air Force is absolved from all “war crimes” (this is the expression now used by some critics like the British philosopher A.C. Grayling,¹ though generally with a question mark – but for how long?) The debate has been going on for a long time among military historians on the respective merits of daylight “precision” bombing as supposedly practiced by the USAAF (United States Army Air Forces) versus “area” or “carpet” night-time bombing favored by the Royal Air Force.²

What is new is that the discussion has now shifted from the purely “technical” ground – in which victims were simply mathematical statistics providing arguments for or against a given bombing technique, like the ratio between the forces engaged (including the losses of personnel and aircraft) and the result in terms of casualties – to the high moral ground

¹ Grayling, Anthony C. *Among the dead Cities : Was the Allied Bombing of Civilians in WWII a Necessity or a Crime?* London : Bloomsbury, 2006 (*Among the dead Cities : The History and moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan.* New York : Walker & Company, 2006. *Die toten Städte : Waren die alliierten Bombenangriffe Kriegsverbrechen ?* München : Bertelsmann, 2007). Interestingly, the idea of ‘war crimes’ is totally absent from the title of the American edition, while it is there in full in the German translation.

² Arguably starting (if we discount pre-war pioneer authors who based their theories on extrapolations from the Great War and the Spanish Civil War) with De Seversky, (Major) Alexander ProcofiEFF. *Victory through Air Power.* London & New York : Hutchinson & Co., Ltd, 1942 (to which a critique was promptly addressed: Stewart, Edith Helen Vane Tempest (Marchioness of Londonderry). *The Fleet of the Future : An important Examination of Major Alexander Seversky's famous 'Victory through Air Power'.* London : Hutchinson & Co., Ltd, 1943). More recent technical discussions will be found in Tami Davis Biddle's Ph.D. Thesis (Yale University, 1995), ‘Rhetoric and reality in air warfare : The evolution of British and American ideas about strategic bombing, 1917-1945’, now published in book form, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare : The Evolution of British and American Ideas about strategic Bombing, 1914-1945.* Princeton Studies in International History and Politics. Princeton : University Press, 2002.

of justification³ in the etymological sense: was the Allied air war a “just” war? The trend started by seminal works like those of Sebald⁴ was taken up most successfully in terms of impact and sales in Germany (and among the commentators who could read German) by Jörg Friedrich, with his 2002 book, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*.⁵ The work was immediately perceived as highly problematic when it was first published in German, as a number of important reviews testify.⁶

Now that this English translation has appeared, making the book accessible to those who do not read German, it seemed appropriate for the H-Diplo editors to start a discussion in

³ This is made perfectly clear in the title of a German book which appeared in the spring: Fritze, Lothar. *Die Moral des Bombenterrors: Alliierte Flächenbombardements im Zweiten Weltkrieg*. München: Olzog, 2007. The “blurb” naturally insists on the “right-and-wrong” dimension of the bombing campaign: “Der Denkansatz des Buches beruht auf einem unstrittigen Grundsatz: nämlich, dass auch ein gerechtfertigter Verteidiger bei seiner Verteidigung Regeln zu beachten hat. Diese Regeln sind teils völkerrechtlicher, teils moralischer Natur [...] Das Anliegen des Buches ist es, am Beispiel der westalliierten Flächenbombardements auf Deutschland die Begründungslast aufzuzeigen, die zu tragen hat, wer die alliierte Kriegführung pauschal als legitim betrachtet”.

⁴ Sebald, W.G. *Luftkrieg und Literatur – Mit einem Essay zu Alfred Andersch*. München: Karl Hanser Verlag, 1999 (Originally published in German by Hanser as *Luftkrieg und Literatur* in 1999 and in slightly different form: *On the natural History of Destruction: With Essays on Alfred Andersch, Jean Améry and Peter Weiss*. Translated from the German by Anthea Bell. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003).

⁵ Friedrich, Jörg. *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*. München: Propyläen, 2002.

⁶ Notably, in chronological order:
-Arnold, Jörg. ‘Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945. 11th edition. Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2002’. *H-German* (2003). Online on:

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=280291070845163>

This is now part of a wider forum on H-German (with contributions by Carole Anne Costabile-Heming, Scott Denham, Gerald Fetz, Charles Maier, Douglas Peifer and Julia Torrie), online on:

http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWII_bombing/WWII-bombing_index.htm

-Ebbinghaus, Angelika. ‘*Deutschland im Bombenkrieg: Ein missglücktes Buch über ein wichtiges Thema*’. *Social Geschichte: Zeitschrift für Historische Analyse des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* 18-2 (2003): 101-122.

-Naumann, Klaus. ‘Bombenkrieg – Totaler Krieg – Massaker: Jörg Friedrichs Buch “Der Brand” in der Diskussion’. *Mittelweg* 36 (4/2003): 49-60.

-Peifer, Douglas. *H-German* (2003). Online on:

<http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/reviewsw159.htm>

-Schütze, Christian. ‘On That Terrible Night . . .’ *London Review of Books* 25-16 (2003). Online on:

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/lrb/articles/0,6109,1030343,00.html>

-Süß, Dietmar. ‘“Massaker und Mongolensturm”: Anmerkungen zu Jörg Friedrichs umstrittenem Buch *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*’. *Historisches Jahrbuch* 124 (2004): 521-543.

-Wilms, Wilfried & Rasch, William [Editors]. *Bombs Away! Representing the Air War over Europe and Japan*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. Notably Fulda, Daniel. ‘Abschied von der Zentralperspektive: Der nicht nur literarische Geschichtsdiskurs im Nachwende-Deutschland als Dispositiv für Jörg Friedrichs *Brand*’, pp. 45-64

-Jeffries, Stuart. ‘Fanning the flames’. *The Guardian* (23 December 2006): 25-26 [Review article on American translation]. Visible on:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,1977920,00.html>

which a wider scholarly community will be able to participate. Some specialists of the subject who had originally agreed to give their views have finally preferred to withdraw, for various personal reasons – but H-Diplo is proud to publish the reactions which two scholars coming from different generations of Second World War historians have agreed to offer.

Review by **Gerhard L. Weinberg**,
University of North Carolina Emeritus

Before entering my comments on the book, I need to disclose two prior personal connections with the book and its author. Most importantly, when consulted by another university press about the advisability of publishing a translation of the 2002 original German edition, I advised against doing so on the basis that the work did not advance knowledge sufficiently to merit publication by a university press.¹

Since there is no useful background provided in the book, it may be helpful to offer a brief survey. Germany had introduced two new methods of warfare in World War I: the bombing of cities far removed from the fighting front and the use of poison gas at the front. Since the Allies were unenthusiastic about these innovations, both were prohibited to Germany by the peace treaty. As the government of imperial Germany had done what it could to assist the Bolsheviks in gaining power in Russia, it was perhaps appropriate that in the 1920's the latter assisted the Germans in evading the treaty provisions. After Hitler came to power in Germany, his government continued development in both fields but would eventually refrain from the employment of gas for fear of retaliation.

Bombing of cities, however, was to become a critical element in German war planning at the same time as others increasingly turned away from it. It was while initiating the burning down of their own cities in November 1938 by setting fire to Jewish houses of worship all over the country that the Germans made an important discovery about the potential role of fire in air raids. As Hans Rumpf, who would be in charge of fire-fighting in the war, noted in his early survey of the fire bombing of German cities, *Der Hochrote Hahn*² it was the number of fires started simultaneous in larger cities that, though not fought under the circumstances, showed how quickly the fire fighting facilities of a community could be overwhelmed.

When Germany started World War II, President Roosevelt asked the belligerents not to bomb cities; an appeal that was answered by the dropping of a bomb on the grounds of the American embassy in Warsaw. As the recent publication of the German Historical Institute in Warsaw explains, the opening act of the German campaign was an early morning air attack on the undefended Polish town of Wilun, in which 1,200 civilians were

¹ Also, I was designated as commentator at a session of the 2004 annual meeting of the German Studies Association that included a paper by the author. At the last moment, and with no prior notice, the author failed to appear and thus could not present his paper, entitled "Der Bombenkrieg - Das Ende Historischer Städte" (The Bombing War -- the End of Historic Cities" - my translation). Nonetheless, the panel went ahead.

² Darmstadt: Mittler, 1952, pp. 24-26.

killed.³ In spite of this and other such attacks on Polish cities, described as “terror attacks” in his diary by the chief of the German army general staff, the British air force was restricted by the government in London to the dropping of leaflets on German cities. The Germans thought this a preposterous way of waging war. They insisted on dropping bombs, not leaflets, on British towns, like the summer resort and boarding school center of Swanage where I then lived and survived because a large bomb dropped on the school grounds did not explode.

It was in response to the German invasion of a series of neutral countries in the spring and summer of 1940, accompanied by the bombing of cities, the machine-gunning of fleeing refugees, and attacks on cities in the United Kingdom, that the restrictions on the Royal Air Force were lifted. If this was the sort of war that Germany wanted, Britain would oblige them. A further element came to be included in the British calculations. If the German people, not just their government, were to move in new directions after Allied victory, then they needed to see in World War II what they had not seen in World War I, namely that devastation in modern war was not going to be restricted to the cities and countryside of others. What came to be called “reeducation” was to begin during hostilities. The significance of this for postwar Germany is analyzed in Konrad H. Jarausch’s recent book, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995*.⁴ There is only a minimal reference to this issue on Friedrich’s book (p. 353).

The bulk of the book is devoted to a very confused and confusing set of accounts of various air raids on cities in different portions of Germany. There is a mixture of technical detail and human stories, but there is neither a chronological structure nor any indication of general impact. Such critical contextual and historical issues as the so-called “euthanasia” program (pp. 388-89), the distribution of Jewish property to those bombed out (p. 389), and the lynching of Allied airmen (pp. 433-34) are barely touched on. Errors are scattered through the book. Scholars who have used either the original German World War II records in Freiburg or the microfilms of them in the United States or elsewhere will be astonished to learn that they were “all” destroyed (p. 474). On the other hand, the author does offer sensible comments on the issues of looting and denunciations with the punishments inflicted on those charged with looting or improper truths. The details of shelter and bunker construction and the problems of underground connectors between cellars will be of interest to those concerned with these more technical issues. They will, unfortunately, not gain much insight into the broader issues of the air war or its impact on Germany’s population and general war effort. As the book by the German Historical Institute in Warsaw cited above mentions in its introduction to the air war on Poland: “When Allied bombers years later flew above German cities, the air war that the German armed forces themselves had begun in Poland returned to

³ Jochen Böehler (ed.), „Grösste Härte . . .” *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht in Polen September / Oktober 1939* (Hamburg: Grindeldruck, 2005), p. 69.

⁴ Trans. by Brandon Hunziger; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Germany.”⁵ On September 1, 1939, there were no four-engine bombers in either the British or the American air force. Perhaps the old saying that people in glass houses should not throw stones ought to be supplemented by the suggestion that they should also not throw bombs.

Gerhard L. Weinberg is William Rand Kenan, Jr. Professor Emeritus of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Weinberg's first book was the *Guide to Captured German Documents*, (1952). He is the author of many works, including the two-volume history of Hitler's diplomatic preparations for war: *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany* (1970 and 1980; republished 1994). The first volume of *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany* received the George Louis Beer Prize of the American Historical Association in 1971. Weinberg has published dozens of articles on the war and volumes of collected essays such as *World in the Balance: Behind the Scenes of World War II* (1981). He capped these studies with his 1000-page history of the Second World War, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (1994; republished in 2005). His most recent publications are *Hitler's Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler* (2003) *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (2005) and the forthcoming re-publication of *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944* (2007).

⁵ Böhler, p. 64 (my translation).

The Doers of their Deeds

Review by **Wilfried Wilms**

University of Denver

Pasts that are no longer talked about vanish. The ruined remnants of cities turn into stones that are no longer grasped (*begriffen*, as the German has it so accurately) in physical terms – that is, once they have been replaced by new structures, we do not, or cannot, comprehend their meaning any longer. But neither are they grasped in an epistemological sense, because we have already learned, presumably, all there is to learn about the bloodiest conflict of the 20th century, at least in terms of right and wrong, good and bad, perpetrators, victims, and liberators.

In *The Fire*, however, Jörg Friedrich transforms rubble that was left ‘un-grasped’ for decades into perfectly graspable landscapes. Under Friedrich’s barrage, what becomes clear is how the moralistic squabble surrounding right and wrong is of secondary importance in the face of so much willful destruction and death. It is well worth following Friedrich on this journey through Europe’s darkest chapter at the end of which stands, among other dark monuments, an Anglo-European *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the scientific mass destruction of civilians and historic habitat from the air, perfected and delivered, between 1940 and 1945 – and this is what certainly won’t sit well with many readers of his tome – primarily by US and British Air Forces. For anybody familiar with heroic tales of freedom and liberation sent from the blue yonder this book will be a bitter pill. Friedrich’s *Fire* can be painful indeed.

His language, an odd mixture of sobriety and pathos on which I comment further below, burns into the readers’ skin. Excesses (or deformities) of his approach, however, that spring from that very pathos, as well as an embitterment we sense reverberating throughout the chapters, may simply fatigue readers. His language of destruction rumbles over the reader – and over something we may want to call ‘established etiquette’ – like a freight train. It challenges, even provokes, on nearly every page. But that, in my mind, does not disqualify the book in any strictly academic sense. It is engagingly written, passionate in its many moments of utter dismay and disbelief, and forceful in its criticism of what he observes on *both* sides of the conflict: the sheer will to destroy life and habitation, often largely independent of military necessity and the custom of warfare. And here it matters little to him that Hitler’s Nazi-Germany only invited “destructive revenge” for its own “destructive rage” (203). What lingers is destruction and eternal loss he deems ‘un-grasped.’ Yet, despite its linguistically gift-wrapped infatuation with human callousness in times of total war, *The Fire* by no means jettisons scholarly standards, and Friedrich is perfectly capable of providing a balanced account. Friedrich doesn’t fabricate or leave gaping holes, and he does succeed in shedding light on German intentions and (mis)deeds for as long as they have to do with the actual subject matter at hand: the killing of civilians from the air in total war and, more to the point, the planning, execution, and experience of the strategic bombing campaign. Friedrich doesn’t fail to

mention Warsaw and Rotterdam, and he describes at length German attacks on England during the *Blitz*; he explains the gruesome and indiscriminate nature of V1 and V2, recalls the lynching of Allied personnel shot down over Germany by outraged mobs with a “seething hunger for revenge” and full of “hatred” for the British attacker who now needed to be “exterminated” (427). When necessary he reminds readers of the appalling treatment Jews received and of slave laborers forced to support the German war machine, and describes hardcore Nazis (“martial combat commanders” and “fanatics,” 142, 134) defending their positions with absurd eagerness – Friedrich, in short, provides it all. One thing, however, that he doesn’t do is to simply fall back on the familiar schoolyard fray of the ‘you started it’ or ‘you had it coming to you’ kind that had put a public lid on the Allied bombing campaign for a long time.¹ So what if the Germans were the pioneers of air attacks on civilians? (they weren’t, but that is beside the point and *is* schoolyard material). Would that make it obsolete to investigate – and evaluate – the Allied air campaign? And if not obsolete: how about inappropriate, or even immoral? Or undesirable? Dangerous? That strategic bombing was embraced as a military doctrine primarily by England and the United States after the Great War, and that during the Second World War it was perfected and carried out by these two air powers over dozens upon dozens of German cities (as well as other European cities and of course Japan) until these had simply vanished, is hardly Friedrich’s fault.

That and the manner in which, when *The Fire* appeared in its German original as *Der Brand* in 2002, some critics found fault with Jörg Friedrich nevertheless, is more interesting than the book itself anyway. Friedrich doesn’t unearth anything truly new. Specialized studies by historians of many nationalities have been telling audiences about the air war for many years now and the development of both strategy and weapon itself in the interwar years. Think, for instance, of the many good contributions by Rumpf, Groehler, Garrett, Schaffer, Middlebrook, McKee, Lindquist, Longmate, Kennett, and, more recently, Grayling. Anyone who cares to could read up on punitive bombing missions by the British in their colonies years ago, or about ‘Douhetism’ and its advocates Hugh Trenchard (in England) or Billy Mitchell (in the U.S.). Or about German Zeppelins over London during the First World War. It’s all there. But also true is that not one of these authors provide what we may call a *Hausbuch* of Germany during the air war. Friedrich, who even decided to have parts of his book printed upfront by Germany’s notorious tabloid *Bild*, chose a more popular venue for *his* contribution. And outside the hands of historians, that is, outside a rigorously scholastic context, his tome indeed became a public event. In this respect, *The Fire* is unique. The fact that it is now available in English translation may be even more significant than its immense impact on the German public sphere. To be perfectly blunt: Americans need the book more than did the

¹ In 1990, Warner Brothers re-supplied an ill-informed American public after a hiatus from the air war for many decades with a hopelessly sanitized version of the bombing war with *Memphis Belle*, starring Matthew Modine. Early examples of (mis)representations like *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (1944), *Command Decision* (1948), or *Twelve O’Clock High* (1949) were long forgotten, but have begun to reappear in recent years on *Turner Classic Movies* and elsewhere.

Germans. American involvement in the strategic air campaign over Europe and Japan is disgracefully underrepresented in the sacred memory of the ‘good war.’ Here, America relies on an astonishing forgetfulness of its involvement as the systematic bombing and killing represents a part of America’s history it prefers to ignore. One need only remember the illuminating debate around the *Enola Gay* exhibit in the Smithsonian Museum a decade ago.² With *The Fire* now available in English, the air war over European and Japanese cities will become a little harder to disregard.

Friedrich lists – especially in the third chapter, *Land* – city after city, attack after attack, and does so in a way that the reading experience itself begins to mimic the very “mindless grinding down to the stump of cities” (218) he criticizes. The reader can’t help but repeat that process every time s/he turns the page. And it’s brilliant. The intentionally painful process aims to penetrate our imagination until we *grasp* how approximately 500.000 civilians, among them tens of thousands of slave laborers and Allied POWs, not to mention children (about 75.000 under the age of 14), were blown to smithereens, burned, suffocated, and boiled within the remains of a long and rich German history. German culture had found expression in architecture heavy with stone and wood – cultural treasures that also could not evade the explosive and incendiary bombs that rained upon them until they were no more. The last chapter – *Stone* – is a logical third step in Friedrich’s account of the air war as “Leideform” (the English translation has it as “the suffering on the ground” 481). *The Fire* is all about how the bombs were endured, received, suffered, absorbed (all possible translations of ‘erleiden’) by the community (chapter 3: *We*), by the individual (chapter 4: *I*) and, finally, by the habitat itself (chapter 5: *Stone*). The community disintegrates along with central features of civilization, losing all concern for those near and dear; the individual disintegrates physically (literally, that is, crushed, pulverized, burned ...); the habitat – houses, churches, squares, archives, monuments, etc. – returns irreparably to dust, and with it historical depth and origin. Chapter 5 might be Friedrich’s most passionate and vivid.

Nothing but the stones have passed on the familiarity of distant places. They were found, transformed, left behind, and they set – in addition to a lifespan – a second measure of time. Stone gave it a physicality and structure. The fifteenth-century city hall, with slated Renaissance gables and set on angular columns; the Old Castle at Brandplatz, the castle of the Hessian landgrave with a keep from the fourteenth century that became a royal court in the nineteenth century and was later covered with Renaissance elements; the Burgmannen House of 1349, one of Hesse’s oldest half-timbered buildings; the classicist Old Clinic of 1819; the art nouveau theater of 1906 – they all communicated their origins. Forms and patinas were communicative even before any academic interpretation. They generated a sound the people could simply hear. Bomber Command eliminated this resonance in the stone all across the country. Now it is missing. (467)

So, if Friedrich’s book is indeed less remarkable for *what* it tells than for *how* it does so, what seems to be at stake that it evokes such strong unease? Richard Bernstein – who

² For a lucid summary of the events, see Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt: *History Wars. The Enola Gay and other Battles for the American Past*. New York: Holt 1996.

reviewed Friedrich's meticulously detailed and emotively articulated blow by blow, almost bomb by bomb account of the air war in 2003 for the *New York Times* – expressed concern about the German public's reception of the book.³ “But the reaction to Mr. Friedrich's book,” he wrote,

is something special, more visceral and widespread, and it brings questions to mind: Is there a danger that the Germans will conflate their suffering with the vastly greater and more unforgivable suffering they inflicted on millions of others, including both the genocidal slaughter of the Jews and the bombing raids on London, Coventry, Warsaw and Rotterdam? Have the Germans attached themselves to Mr. Friedrich's book...because it gives them a rare and intoxicating taste of the moral high ground?⁴

Moral high ground, as Americans well know, is valuable real estate. What is interesting here is not who gets to charge the rent, but why a discussion of English and American bombing policy need be conducted on that particular plot of contested turf. One can include moral/ethical viewpoints in discussions about the history and human costs of military and political decisions without thereby claiming to be the king of this or that hill. Or more to the point: one can examine what those human and cultural costs actually were (especially in relation to their “gains”) and whether they would be ever worth repeating. Such questions seem to concern neither Mr. Bernstein nor many of Friedrich's initial critics in Germany. *Ein Volk von Opfern?*⁵ (*A People of Victims?*), a collection of dissonant voices responding to Friedrich, provides easy access to representative positions. One finds, for instance, the occasional positive assessment. Twisting the “inability to mourn” trope into a shape it was not designed to take, Cora Stephan praised the book as “an act of love, an homage to a history, the loss of which the postwar generation of Germans were not allowed to mourn.” She also reverses the trajectory of culpability: “The undeniable guilt of the Germans has made it possible for their neighbors to ignore their own involvement. Now, however, the various evasions are starting to be noticed.” Ultimately, Stephan hoped that *The Fire* might aid a future “retreat from moral certainty, which the enemy used to justify its terrifying means of waging war”⁶ – an apparent attempt not to occupy the moral high ground, but to leave it permanently vacant. Wolfgang Sofsky refers to the ‘you started it’ mentality and specious claims that the bombing war was in some way a direct response to or retribution for the Holocaust as the

³ Friedrich's book was a bestseller from the start, certainly in part due to the upfront publication of excerpts in Germany's most widely distributed tabloid *Bild*, and aided by extensive discussion in newspapers and magazines. TV specials followed soon thereafter.

⁴ Lothar Kettenacker (ed.): *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940-45*. Berlin: Rowohl 2003 [translations are my own].

⁵ Richard Bernstein: “Germans Revisit War's Agony, Ending a Taboo.” *New York Times*, March 15, 2003.

⁶ Cora Stephan: “Wie man eine Stadt anzündet.” In: Kettenacker: *Ein Volk von Opfern?*: Pp. 95-102 (here 98, 101).

“confused logic” of a “Sunday School morality” (“Kindermoral”). “Between air war and genocide neither a causal nor premeditated connection existed.” We could therefore say that Friedrich’s study actually shows structural rigor by doing without excessive references to Germany’s war of aggression or, as is common in publications of this sort, the Holocaust. No matter how cruel the Nazis were, Sofsky argued, no matter how guilty they are and always will be for unleashing war and for persecuting and murdering millions – the air war against German civilians remains for him “terror” against the “defenseless.”⁷ But apart from these impassioned dissident views, the discussion was primarily characterized by the resurfacing of familiar tropes and reminders, such as Willi Winkler’s complaint that *The Fire* is nothing but an a-historical “balancing of accounts” (“Aufrechnungsbedürfnis”), comparable perhaps to the self-pitying reactions of the immediate postwar period. He concludes in time-honored fashion: “No matter what: it was the Germans who started it.”⁸ As might be expected, contributions from across the Channel were even less sympathetic.⁹

Perhaps Friedrich’s purported challenge to the former Allies’ claim to sole possession of the fabled moral high ground generated such a stir because of the real or feigned fear of German unification and its ultimate consequences. More likely, however, the reason lies elsewhere. With the United States now the sole occupier of the world’s military high ground, America’s claim to moral righteousness is more urgent than ever. As the cultural and political reaction of the 1980s and ‘90s demonstrated, the type of self-doubt and critical examination that the Vietnam War provoked earlier is now strictly forbidden. Instead, veneration of the 1940s in film, television, and the printed hagiographies of a dying generation are to be preferred. And after September 11, 2001, the United States could openly and eagerly embrace the coveted badge of “victimhood” and only allow one set of legitimate martyrs to airborne assaults. It will therefore be interesting to watch American reactions to the English translation of Friedrich’s work.

More likely than not, Friedrich’s linguistic virtuosity will find its critics. The book’s tone is at times colloquial, even leaning to slang. It can oscillate between disbelieving hilarity and downright disgust, can convey dismay as much as scorn. One typical passage might

⁷ Wolfgang Sofsky: “Die halbierte Erinnerung.” In: Kettenacker: *Ein Volk von Opfern?*: Pp. 124-26.

⁸ Willi Winkler: “Nun singen sie wieder.” In: Kettenacker: *Ein Volk von Opfern?*: Pp. 103-09 (here 106, 109).

⁹ See Corelli Barnett: Die Bombardierung Deutschlands war kein Kriegsverbrechen. In Kettenacker: *Ein Volk von Opfern*. Pp. 171-76. Barnett refers to Friedrich’s book as a “historische Travestie” [historical travesty]. The piece was first published as “Bombing of Germany Not a War Crime” in the *Daily Mail*, November 20, 2002. That said, many of the harshest critics of Bomber Command and Sir Arthur Harris have come from British and American historians. It should also be noted that during the war a small but visible minority of British citizens – for instance the Archbishop of Canterbury and the pacifist Vera Brittain – publicly and courageously criticized the government for its bombing policies.

suffice here to illustrate this, one that describes an event late in the war – the winter and spring of 1945 – a crucial time for Friedrich’s ultimate evaluation of events:

An inexplicable destructive drunkenness must have been what finally reduced old Danzig to ruins on March 26, 1945. Only six weeks later it would become a Polish city, Gdansk. Not one single church remained untouched: St. Barbara’s, St. Bartholomew’s, St. John’s, St. Joseph’s, St. Catherine’s, and St. Bridget’s suffered most. Saints Peter and Paul’s, St. Elizabeth’s, St. Ignatius’s, St. James’s, and the Church of the Holy Trinity were severely damaged. The war against Germany’s present existence had finally been won. The war against the roots of the past that had borne the disaster still had to be brought to completion, but it was only a matter of days, and the aim was to destroy as much as possible. “Not wanting to die for Danzig” was an inglorious motto at the start of the war; and at the end, Danzig had to die as proof that there was no lack of militancy against Arthur’s Court, the Great Mill, the Main Town Hall, the Holy Ghost Gate, and the Great Crane, built in 1444 as both the city’s port crane and a city gate, the symbol of the city. The granaries on Granary Island were conquered, as were the wealthy rows of patrician homes, demolished street by street. (163)¹⁰

Some will embrace his linguistic fireworks as brilliant and simply enjoy the book’s virtuosity – even though the English translation often fails to reach the associative opulence of the German original; others will dismiss it as over the top and lacking in scholastic moderation or tact. Allow me to highlight some of these rockets – in both languages. We read of Allied “Zündungsabsicht” (“the intention was still fireraising” 128), the attacks themselves were sometimes “Strafaktionen” (“reprisal actions” 144), and on occasion the air forces returned for an “Ehrenrunde” (“a victory lap” 186) over already destroyed habitat. Similarly, the Allies “mähten die Flüchtlinge nieder” (“senseless hunting down of people” 149), often produced a “blankes Massaker” (an “absolute massacre” 161). “Massacre” appears often, at times in compound form (“Zivilmassaker” – “civilian massacres” 109, 294) or “Kolossalmassaker” (“colossal massacre” 310), and at other times with adjectives like “blank” (“absolute” 161) or “pur” (“purely” 294). We read of “Krematorien” (“crematoria” 93, 167, 340) and “Gaskeller” (“gas cellar” 290), “fortgesetzte Massenausrottung” (“continued mass extermination” 97) of German civilians, or of “Massenabschlachtung” (“mass slaughter” 253). British Bomber Command Group No. 5 are characterized as “Massenvernichtungstruppe” (“Mass Destruction Group” 306) with “vandalischer Tobsucht” (“a vandalistic fit of raving madness” 277), and Churchill “schlachtete” (“slaughtered” 109) civilians, they themselves are “die Gemarterten” (“the tormented bodies” 377) on the ground. They were “vergast” (“gassed” 331), “gedämpft und geröstet” (“steamed and roasted” 339), “zerkocht”, “verkohlt” (“boiled”, “charred” 376). The cities and thus Germany’s reified history were “niedergefeilt” and “fortgekehrt” (“filed down” and “swept away” 467), “beseitigt” (“eliminated” 224), “verschlissen” (“worn down” 319), “zerklopft” (“pounded” 278) or just “stupide abgefeilt” (“mindless grinding down” 218). Indiscriminate and thus morally dubious from the start, the bomb as “Erzieher”

¹⁰ In passages like this one, the English translation falls short of the German original. While “destructive drunkenness” captures Friedrich’s “Vernichtungstrunkenheit”, neither “ins Nichts reissen” (“reduced to ruins” in the English translation) nor “kappen” (“destroy”) adequately expresses Friedrich’s cynicism.

(“educator” 466) certainly loses all truly military purpose and legitimacy for Friedrich near the end of the war when the “Tötungsprozedur” (“killing procedure” 379) continues simply because it *can* be done. But careful! What appears unduly grandiloquent in such artificial isolation loses, for the most part, its inappropriateness in the context in which it stands. To sack the text because of its style or because it dares to speak of gas and cremation outside the context of Auschwitz is, in my view, to avoid the issue by means of a much more inappropriate withdrawal into a moral outrage that only hides an agenda. And more importantly, it misses Friedrich’s effort to place the bombing in the vicinity of the Holocaust *not* in order to claim any moral equivalency – as there is none –, but rather to bemoan a general disregard for human life that, in both instances, seems to go hand in hand with the scientific nature of the planned slaughter of humans. If, provoked by these associations, readers walk away from the text assuming that Friedrich is either negligent or revisionist, they will have missed the mark. Friedrich’s choices are, of course, deliberate. His is a calculated comparison and provocation that wishes to expose commonalities, not equivalencies. The commonality for us to recognize and come to terms with is the scientific nature of extermination in total war that befell all warring parties alike.

Friedrich concludes that an orgy of revenge becomes unleashed between January and May of 1945 – a time during which 130.000 civilians get killed, and cities like Pforzheim, Würzburg, and Dresden cease to exist. Should you have trouble getting your mind around this figure: that makes about 1000 killed a day, or two Coventrys daily when the war is already lost. Friedrich attributes this final crescendo to one central factor: the potential to destroy is simply at hand, meaning that after hundreds of practice runs over large and small cities the expertise is finally available: the planes, the bombs, the knowledge. And then there seems to be a desire to teach these Germans a lesson. Friedrich doubts the usefulness of the air war, especially when weighed against its gains, even though it certainly helped to win the war. *The Fire* remains unambiguous in its portrayal of this weapon as in and of itself barbarous. Perhaps worse, the air war also broke with customs that had at least tried to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. But beyond good and evil, at least for me, is something like Friedrich’s “mongolischer Luftvernichtungssorkan” (“Mongol hurricane of devastation” 118). A linguistic monster like that has downright racist undertones and doesn’t belong in the book. Here, even I give up and roll my eyes. But maybe Mr. Friedrich can explain.

A public discussion of strategic bombing that recognizes doers and deeds in clear terms is long overdue on both sides of the Atlantic. But maybe the majority of us prefer to hear about ‘collateral damage’ over a cup of Café Latte or Caramel Macchiato. Somehow a sanitized version of warfare against civilians goes together better with designer coffee and light jazz than mangled corpses, crushed limbs, or charred bodies of all ages – not to mention a handful of gruesome photographs that are included in the translated edition. That that conveys more about us than about Friedrich’s book goes without saying. Perhaps we have become morally numb – or maybe just smug. The fact that we care so much about what happened between 1937 and 1945 and not enough about what happened

before and since may be a sign of the faulty lessons that we – Allies and Germans – drew in 1945 and that we – Americans and Europeans – continue to draw today. Perhaps new lessons need to be learned, which may be the most desirable reason for reopening the wounds of the past. To talk of the mass slaughter of human beings as a “just retribution” for the mass slaughter of human beings, especially now, in an age of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, would seem to disqualify anyone from occupying anything that resembles moral ground, whether high or low. I, for one, prefer to be disturbed, to have my own smugness stripped away from me if only for a few hours of attention-grabbing reading. That Friedrich’s text will indeed take hold of you, I deem quite probable.

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