

**Jörg Friedrich.** *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945.* Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2002. 592 pp. EUR 25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-549-07165-6.



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## A Narrative of Loss

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Military histories tend to discuss the allied air war against the German Reich within the context of the origins and development of World War II as a whole, stressing its character as a contest between allied bombers and German air defenses, delineating different phases and targets, and debating the contribution that the strategic air campaign may or may not have made to overall allied victory.[1] *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* by the Berlin scholar and journalist Joerg Friedrich approaches the subject from a different angle: this is a narrative of loss, not of struggle and achievement. The enormous cost of the strategic air war is the true subject matter of the book, the *Leideform* (p. 543) is its mode of expression. Between May 1940 and May 1945, British and American bombers dropped 2,674 million tons of bombs over Axis and Axis-occupied territory, wrecking the urban landscape of the German Reich and other parts of occupied Europe, killing roughly half a million civilians, and subjecting millions more to the terror of bombing.[2]

In order to bring those figures to life, the author carefully arranges his material and adopts a position of identi-

fication and empathy—with the civilian in war (the chapters “we” and “I”), and just as much, with the urban landscape and its cultural monuments (“brick”). The central chapter, “land,” traces the destruction of more than one hundred cities and towns, embedding the relentless leit-motifs of physical destruction and mass death in a thick cultural narrative, reaching back into the past and telling us of foundation myths and turning points in the history of individual towns. Significantly, the text rarely speaks of “Germans”, let alone Nazis or perpetrators, but of the citizens of Cologne, Berlin, Dresden—the locality, not the nation, is the focal point of reference. Towns are not places where people happen to live; they are living organisms with distinct identities whose loss is irreplaceable. From this angle, the allied air war appears as a *Zivilisationsbruch* (p. 169), as a radical rupture in the 2000-year long tradition of European urban culture.

Unmistakably, the narrative carries strong echoes of its primary source. Contrary to the claims of the publisher and the author, *Der Brand* is not based on archival research, but relies for its most impressive passages on the rich tradition of local historiography: city chronicles,

local history projects and “documentary accounts”.[3] The book feeds off a discourse that emerged during the final years of the war and is grounded in local memory. “Ordinary” inhabitants of Kassel, Berlin or Magdeburg experienced and remembered the area attacks as personal and collective catastrophes—and no claim to put their suffering into perspective, be it as a sacrifice for the greater cause of German victory, as advanced by NS propaganda, or as a just punishment for German war crimes, as embodied in the popular contemporary reading of the air war as “revenge tragedy” (Klaus Naumann), has had much of an impact on this local point of view.[4] *Der Brand* gives eloquent expression to this tradition, depicting the horrors of the air raids in all their graphic detail, providing a sympathetic platform for the individual and collective experience of suffering under area bombardments, irrespective of personal and/or societal complicity in the crimes of the German nation.

In so doing, the book also reproduces some of the post-war myths as they became part of the emerging local memorial cultures in the 1950s. In this discourse, the air war is depicted as a natural disaster that suddenly entraps a peaceable and peace-loving local community between the two evils of allied bombing and persecution by the NS-regime. Echoing this apologetic reading of local history, *Der Brand* likewise draws a strict line between (NS-) rulers and (German) subjects, and does tend to portray the local community as a dual victim: “The bomber fleets repaid the cities their connection with the Reich from above, while the Gestapo repaid the city dwellers their war-weariness from the side” (p. 293).[5] In some respects, however, the text goes beyond the narrative traditions of the local memorial culture. Notably, any sense of pride in the post-war reconstruction—so prominent in the local historiography of the 1950s—is missing from the book. Instead, the author indulges in a sentimentalised celebration of the “beauty” of the pre-war urban landscape, ignoring the cramped and unhealthy living conditions so characteristic of many old towns. Some consideration is also given to the brutalising effects of the bombing raids, which found expression in the denunciation of fellow citizens, the lynching of allied pilots, and increased violence against forced labourers and Jews (pp. 480-488).[6]

The book is interested in city dwellers as victims of air raids, not in their simultaneous roles as perpetrators, bystanders or victims of National Socialist and German crimes. Much of the public debate surrounding *Der Brand* has turned on the question whether such an approach is legitimate.[7] In other words: Can we explore the (Ger-

man) experience of allied area bombardments in isolation from its context and the war? If so, in which context, and in which war? In *Der Brand*, the central themes of loss and suffering are embedded in three concentric circles: the outer most ring is the development of modern warfare, which is interpreted as a shift towards total war that erodes the distinction between combatants and non-combatants; the second is the development of air power since the first bombing raids by German Zeppelins in 1915, witnessing the emergence of a doctrine of strategic bombing; and the innermost circle the escalation in the use of air power during World War II as initiated by the German *Luftwaffe* in 1939 and 1940. What the text does not do, however, is to locate the strategic air war within the context of World War II as a German war of aggression, conquest and extermination: “The link between genocide and revenge bombardment is construed by the morality of the observer; yet no link ever existed” (p. 342).[8] This is certainly problematic;[9] yet it is also heuristically productive, for it undermines a popular reading which regards German culpability not just as sufficient moral justification, but also as adequate explanation for the conduct of the allied air war, thus applying a crude behaviourist model to allied strategy. Unfortunately, however, *Der Brand* carries a sub-text that reintroduces—in a subverted form—the very connection between genocide and air war that the narrative so vigorously denies on the surface, pointing to a tension between overt argument and suggestive rhetoric that goes to the core of the book as a whole.

The recreation of the air war in its “suffering mode” conflicts with an analytical approach that seeks to explain and understand. *Der Brand* claims to break a taboo by depicting the horrific consequences of the allied air bombardments; in reality, it erects another by rejecting any attempt to approach the subject matter analytically: “What constitutes the strategic air war is beyond discussion. Any reasoning is silenced by the view of the events in all their magnitude” (p. 169). Thus the analytical tools and differentiations established during the discussion of the allied strategy in chapters one and two are dismissed as irrelevant. No matter what the objective of a specific air raid, be it moral bombing, a ‘precision’ raid or a tactical attack in support of the advancing ground troops, they all become part of a “Mongolian hurricane of destruction” (p. 138), the expression of a “Vandalic maniacal rage” (p. 321), and in essence, unexplainable.[10]

What is more, the analytical void is filled with a highly suggestive rhetoric, creating the impression that the strategic air war had just one true objective, the in-

discriminate slaughter of civilians. This is carried to its rhetorical extreme by borrowing terms from the discourse on the genocide of European Jewry: Allied policy is labeled “politics of extermination” (p. 93), the epithet “group of mass extermination Nr. 5” is given to the elite Bomber Group Nr. 5 (p. 354), and cellars underneath burning buildings are called “crematoria” (p. 388), to name just a few.[11] The allied air forces did not conduct the strategic bombing campaign in order to defeat an aggressive German Reich that was waging a war of conquest and extermination, but in order to carry out their own, or so the reader is left to assume. This suggestion undoubtedly carries uncomfortable echoes of an extremist underground discourse that wants to read the allied area bombardments as the “true Holocaust”. [12] Perhaps, it can also be understood as a narrative frame employed in order to underline the book’s central contention that the dead of the air raids were victims too.

The thesis of the “air war as civilian massacre” encapsulates the strengths and weaknesses of the text as a whole. It is helpful in so far as it denotes the catastrophic consequences of area bombardments for the civilians on the ground, and also points towards the unsettling truth that allied area attacks did not just accept civilian casualties as “collateral damage”, but were designed to kill as many people within a certain area as possible. Yet, stated in such a way, it is untenable. The objective of the allied air war was not mass murder but “the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened” (Casablanca directive, Jan. 1943). As a narrative of loss, *Der Brand* succeeds like few other texts, but as a historical treatment of the allied air war, it is seriously deficient.

#### Notes:

[1]. See for example the official histories of the air campaign, Charles Webster & Noble Frankland. *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945*. 4 vols. London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1961; Wesley Frank Craven & James Lea Cate eds. *The Army Air Forces in World War II*. 7 Vols. Chicago 1951; the contributions by Klaus Maier & Horst Boog in: Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt ed. *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*. 7 vols. Stuttgart / Munich: DVA, 1979-2001; see also the two most recent histories of Bomber Command, Mark Connelly. *Reaching for the Stars. A New History of Bomber Command in World War II*. London / New York: Tauris, 2001; Robin Neillands. *The*

*Bomber War*. Arthur Harris and the Allied Bomber Offensive 1939-1945\_. London: John Murray, 2001.

[2]. Olaf Groehler. *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1990, p. 446.

[3]. 88 of the 215 titles listed in the bibliography fall in this category.

[4]. See for example Goebbels’ speech of November 5, 1943, given on the occasion of the devastating attack on Kassel of October 22, 1943 In: Helmut Heiber ed. *Goebbels-Reden*. Vol. 2. Duesseldorf: Droste, 1972, pp. 259-285. Klaus Naumann, “Der Bombenkrieg: Deutsche als Opfer-ihrer selbst?”, in: Klaus Naumann. *Der Krieg als Text. Das Jahr 1945 im kulturellen Gedächtnis der Presse*. Hamburg: Hamburger Ed., 1998, pp. 33-71; Klaus Naumann, “Leerstelle Luftkrieg. Einwurf zu einer verqueren Debatte”. *Mittelweg* 36. 2/98, pp. 12-15.

[5]. “Die Bomberflotten vergalteten den Staedten die Reichszugehoerigkeit von oben, und die Gestapo vergalt den Staedtern die Kriegsmuedigkeit von der Seite” (All translations are by the reviewer).

[6]. Cf. Bernd Greiner, “Overbombed”. Review of Joerg Friedrich. *Der Brand*, in: *Literaturen*. 03/2003, pp. 42-44.

[7]. For a collection of some of the important contributions to the debate see Lothar Kettenacker ed. *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*. Berlin: Rowolth, 2003; *Nachrichtendienst fuer Historiker*. <<http://www.nfhdata.de/premium/datenbasis-information/pages/Pressechau-Deutsch/Thema/DerBrandDeutschlandimBombenkrieg1940-1945/index.s.html>>; for a thoughtful evaluation see Klaus Naumann, “Bombenkrieg–Totaler Krieg–Massaker. Joerg Friedrichs Buch *Der Brand in der Diskussion*”. *Mittelweg* 36 4/03, pp. 49-60. With the recent publication of the follow-up to *Der Brand*, Brandstaetten. *Der Anblick des Bombenkrieges*. Munich: Propylaeen, 2003, the debate has entered a new phase. For initial responses see Ulrich Raulf, “Vom Bombenhammer erschlagen”. *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (2003-10-18); “Moralisch nicht einzuordnen”. *Die Welt* (2003-10-16); “Holocaust und Bombenkrieg sind nicht vergleichbar”. *Die Welt* (2003-10-16); Kurt Paetzold, “Deutsches Leid”. *junge Welt* (2003-10-22); for a review see Ralf Blank. *Rez. ZG: J. Friedrich: Brandstaetten*. <[http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/id=3483\\$>](http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/id=3483$>)>.

[8]. “Den Zusammenhang von Genozid und Suehnebombardement stellt die Moral des Betrachters

her, doch ist er keiner, der je existierte.”

[9]. The most obvious link is the large-scale use by German air raid victims of household goods stolen from Jewish victims of the Holocaust. See Wolfgang Dressen. *Betrifft "Aktion 3". Deutsche verwerten juedische Nachbarn*. Berlin 1998; Ralf Blank. "Ersatzbeschaffung durch Beutemachen", in: Alfons Kenkmann & Bernd-A. Rusinek eds. *Verfolgung und Verwaltung. Die wirtschaftliche Auspluenderung der Juden und die westfaelischen Finanzbehoerden*. Muenster, 1999, pp. 87-101.

[10]. "Was ihn [den strategischen Luftkrieg, J.A.] ausmacht, steht jenseits von Eroerterungen. Vor dem Anblick des Geschehens in seiner Breite und Tiefe verstummt alles Raesonieren." "Mongolische[r] Luftvernich-

tungsorkan"; "vandalische Tobsucht".

[11]. "Vernichtungspolitik"; "Massenvernichtungsgruppe Nr. 5".

[12]. See as an example the introduction to Helene Grenzendoerfer. *Wie ich die Zerstoeerung der Stadt Magdeburg am 16. Januar 1945 erlebt habe*. Woerrishofen: 1975.

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