



The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945

Jörg Friedrich , Allison Brown (Translator)

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For five years during the Second World War, the Allies launched a trial and error bombing campaign against Germany's historical city landscape. Peaking in the war's final three months, it was the first air attack of its kind. Civilian dwellings were struck by-in today's terms-"weapons of mass destruction," with a total of 600,000 casualties, including 70,000 children.

In *The Fire*, historian Jörg Friedrich explores this crucial chapter in military and world history. Combining meticulous research with striking illustrations, Friedrich presents a vivid account of the saturation bombing, rendering in acute detail the annihilation of cities such as Dresden, the jewel of Germany's rich art and architectural heritage. He incorporates the personal stories and firsthand testimony of German civilians into his narrative, creating a macabre portrait of unimaginable suffering, horror, and grief, and he draws on official military documents to unravel the reasoning behind the strikes.

Evolving military technologies made the extermination of whole cities possible, but owing, perhaps, to the Allied victory and what W. G. Sebald noted as "a pre-conscious self-censorship, a way of obscuring a world that could no longer be presented in comprehensible terms," the wisdom of this strategy has never been questioned. *The Fire* is a rare account of the air raids as they were experienced by the civilians who were their targets.

The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945 Details

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Matt says

“Fire... We’re going to put him in it. That’s saying, friends, that we’re going to put fire around him, all around him. We’re going to put it over him and underneath him. We’re going to bring it down on him and on to him. We’re going to put it in his eyes and up his asshole... and in his baby’s diaper. We’re going to put it in his pockets, where he can’t get rid of it...”

- the opening lines of James Dickey’s *To the White Sea*

Before the rubble had even stopped bouncing at the end of World War II, the victorious Allies were looking at ways to punish the Axis Powers, specifically Germany and Japan. Different ideas were bandied about, such as the Morgenthau Plan, and Stalin’s very Stalin-esque idea of mass executions. (Sometimes you have to scratch your head at how Stalin-y Stalin was).

Eventually, the Allies settled on an International Military Tribunal in both Europe and the Far East, which came to be known, informally, as the Nuremberg Tribunal and the Tokyo Trials. These two courts tried (and mostly convicted) the surviving bigwigs of the German and Japanese regimes most responsible for the outbreak and conduct of the bloodiest war in history. Hundreds and thousands of smaller, less visible trials followed in the wake of Nuremberg and Tokyo.

Almost as soon as they were in the dock, the defendants began asserting a *tu quoque* defense. This is a fancy, lawyerly way of saying “you did it too.” In logic, *tu quoque* is a fallacy; in law, it is not going to save your butt. But if you’re Hermann Goering, and you’ve already got the cyanide capsule between your teeth, you might as well attempt to show your opponent’s putative hypocrisy.

The postwar trials have been heavily criticized as creating crimes that never before existed, and as administering a particular brand of justice known as “victor’s justice.” The assertion is that the trials are somehow unfair because the Allies did things that were as bad as the Germans or the Japanese.

As an argument against the existence of the Military Tribunals, the notion of “victor’s justice” is illogical and obnoxious. (And begs the question, what’s the opposite of “victor’s justice”, and should that have been implemented instead?). Nothing about it changes the fact that men such as Kaltenbrunner, Frank, and Matsui had participated in crimes beyond imagination, that they – in the words of Arendt speaking of Eichmann – “should not inhabit the world” because “no member of the human race can be expected to want to share the earth” with them. They were guilty and deserved what they got a thousand times over.

The criticism of the International Military Tribunals says less about norms of international law (again, the notion that Axis leadership didn’t deserve punishment is ludicrous), and more about our own (meaning the Allies) discomfort with the way we won the war. And nothing crystallizes that discomfort more than the bombing war. Hundreds of thousands of German and Japanese (and French and Italian) civilians died beneath the wings of British and American bomber fleets. Sometimes this was the result of collateral damage. More often, it was the product of a systematic campaign of destruction.

The bombing war over Germany – especially the nighttime incendiary attacks by British Bomber Command – is the subject of Jorg Friedrich’s *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945*. For an English speaker, its most unique aspect is that it is an unrepentant criticism of the bombing war written by a German who refuses to hedge his position by acknowledging larger contextual issues (you know, like the Holocaust). It is a polemic, of a sort. However, it is one of the most dispassionate polemics I’ve ever read.

(A note on the translation by Allison Brown: It's good. I took four years of German in high school, which means that if I had read this book in its native tongue, it would have taken me approximately 6,000 years to translate. Partially because that was 16 years ago in high school, partially because I was mostly drunk – I was an American teenager after all – when I actually visited Germany. Thus, I can't say for sure how close Brown's translation is to the original. I can say it is very readable. I can also strongly assume – based on the way Friedrich molds his story – that she captured Friedrich's detached tone).

Sometimes, the easiest way to explain a book is to describe what it is not. So, this is *not* a history of the bombing war. There is no chronology here. If you're looking for Dresden, for instance, you find it in half a dozen different places. There are no lengthy discussions about strategy, or time spent on personalities. If you want a historical overview of the Allied bombing campaigns, you should head on over to Richard Overy. *The Fire* is something very different.

The Fire is an impressionistic work. A mélange of understated facts and vivid first-person accounts, arranged around different themes. The first chapter, for example, is called "Weapon." Within that chapter are several subheadings: Fire Protection Engineers (about the flammability of German cities, especially the so-called "Old Town" found in many European metropolises); The Heavy Bomber (about the Flying Fortress and the Mosquito); Radar (about Radar); and The Crew (about the different members of the bomb crew). The layout contained in the Contents is important, because Friedrich's writing style is almost stream-of-consciousness, the topics melding into each other without delineation. There is no true structure within the book itself. This is either artful or incoherent, depending on whether the book is gripping you or not.

At its heart, *The Fire* is an argument against the area bombing of civilians. The only place this is explicitly stated, however, is in an Afterword written expressly for American and British readers. Here, Friedrich (rather oddly) condemns the Anglo-American bombing war by reference to the American bombing war in Iraq, which Friedrich supported.

Friedrich never overtly lays out his thesis within the narrative. Instead, in an act of constrained fury, he piles on the brutal, unrelenting facts. *The Fire* strongly reminded me of Len Deighton's classic novel *Bomber* in the scientific, bloodless particularity of his details:

The bomber raced across the heavens; the town below was stationary. When the bomb fell, it needed thirty to forty seconds to reach the ground. Because it continued to travel in the direction of the plane's motion, the bomb had to be released a few seconds before the target was reached. But the ballistics of the bombing war were not totally understood, and the wind also had great effect. Since they were lighter, the incendiary bombs had a more complex trajectory, so they were bundled into clusters to add weight. But the cluster's curve as it fell to earth was not the same curve as that of a 4,000 pound blockbuster mine. And the pilot had a reflex that had to be taken into account, a reflex that caused him to drop the bomb a bit prematurely, just to get it over with, since his life had never been in such jeopardy as it was just then... These split seconds added up from wave to wave to create a "creep-back" effect. The bombers crept back along the approach for miles. It could not be avoided. This creep-back effect was accounted for in the plans, so the indicator marking was placed ahead of the actual target.

There is a lot about this book that I loved. I thought the chapter on the bombers was excellent, as was the chapter entitled Protection, which explained in grueling detail the tactics civilians used to guard themselves from the bombs. (There are, I learned, many awful ways to die in a bunker).

Right smack dab in the middle, however, I almost quit. There is a lengthy, 173-page chapter devoted to a city-by-city account of the bombing war. I am not exaggerating. City-by-city. This is actually the only part of the book that had true organization. Friedrich's rhythm is to introduce a city, describe its ancient history, its architectural wonders, its illustrious citizens. And then he describes its annihilation. For instance, going to a random page, take Stettin, where Friedrich starts in the distant past:

Stetting was one of the strongest fortresses of Europe. The Swedes, Brandenburgers, French, Russians, and Poles had all either laid siege or been besieged there. Its history was marked not by its buildings but by the shells that cannons outside the city walls had fired into the interior. In 1677, a third of the buildings had not survived the prolonged stranglehold of the Great Elector; none were left unscathed. Following in his footsteps, Russians and Poles only succeeded in destroying 150 buildings, in 1713, but these generals did manage to purge Stettin of its Gothic and Renaissance architecture... Thus the Basilica of St. James, which had been started in the early Gothic style and completed in the fourteenth century, had a completely baroque interior, since the incendiary projectiles of the Elector had destroyed it down to the crypts...

Once the history/architecture lesson is complete, we jump to the bombs:

The final besiegers came through the air. The first Wellingtons appeared as early as 1940 and 1941, in search of sites that could do with a load of bombs... In 1943, the distinction between industrial and city targets had become irrelevant, so London was very pleased to hear on April 21 that 339 Lancasters and Halifaxes had succeeded in reaching, perfectly marking, and hitting a site over six hundred miles away. The bitter 6 percent loss of aircraft had been worth the sacrifice, since one hundred acres of the city center were reported as devastated. While that assumption was greatly exaggerated, 586 people had definitely been killed

Initially, I thought this a tremendously effective way to make a point. Then he made the point again, and again, and again. I started getting restless, but fleetingly, I still thought this was a kind of genius, to demonstrate the relentlessness of the bombing campaign. But then I lost interest as repetitiveness turned terror into dullness. I actually put the book down for a long time, before I finally, slowly, slogged through this chapter. There are a lot of great rhetorical devices, but causing numbness in your reader isn't one of them.

As I mentioned above, *The Fire* does not place the bombing war into a larger historical context. It is a story told in a vacuum. Friedrich's implicit argument is that the environment that bred the bombing war (namely, the German Reich) does not mitigate the crime of the Allied air war.

I do not endorse this view. Then again, I do not necessarily disagree with it. This isn't avoiding an argument as much as it is acknowledging that the complexity of the moral issues is far too involved for the tail-end of an amateur book review.

The Fire is provocative, and in that way, I recommend it – despite its shortcomings – for people interested in the tangled question of waging moral war. It should be read alongside bombing proponents for a fuller picture. It is one-sided, to be sure, but when you place it alongside other one-sided books holding the opposite view, well, now you're onto something.

Whether or not the bombing war against Germany (and Japan) was necessary for ultimate victory, thereby justifying its tremendous cost in lives and infrastructure, it was a tragedy. When statistics are presented showing the futility of the Allies' bombing campaign, bombing proponents often fall back on the last argument for their cause: righteousness. The argument goes that the citizens of your enemy deserve to be punished by dint of their citizenship. This is a rather indefensible position. The children who burned in Hamburg were no more guilty than the peasants executed in Belorussia or the Chinese slaughtered in Nanking or the families atomized in Hiroshima. War is indiscriminate murder that invariably causes suffering to people in an inverse proportion to their responsibility for causing war in the first place. If *The Fire* does nothing else, it grimly demonstrates that.

Chris Witt says

I don't remember the last time it took me this long to get through a book, but this was one that I could only digest in 15-minute doses on the way to/from work. It doesn't make for the best nighttime reading material.

Thoroughly researched and thoroughly exhausting to read, "Der Brand" ("The Fire") is about as detailed an account as you can probably find on the bombing of Germany during World War II.

Friedrich gives what I found to be a very neutral, matter-of-fact 600 pages on the subject matter. This is a book about the bombing of a country - how it was done, why it was done that way, and what effect it had on a country. Keep in mind that is squarely focused on the bombing of Germany and does not discuss the politics of the war.

The book is broken down into 7 major chapters, each covering a different aspect of the bombing of Germany. The more prominent chapters focus on:

- * The use of cellars as hiding places (which were essentially turned into ovens where civilians were baked alive - most German deaths during WW2 were the result of smoke inhalation or exposure to extreme heat).
- * The evolution of bomb-making by the Allied powers.
- * The targeting of hospitals and railway lines.
- * How the superior air war of the Allied powers crushed Germany.

"The Fire" also serves as a sad reminder that Germany is a country which, throughout its history, is periodically razed. It was a bit disheartening to read about all the history that was lost - artifacts, church relics, art work, the homes of Goethe and Heinrich von Kleist, Franz Liszt's tomb, etc.

Even if it's a depressing read, it's still very well done. The only negative I can point out is that I found it to occasionally suffer from some translation problems. (I believe it was originally written in Dutch.)

If you are uncomfortable with descriptions of children being burned alive or women carrying bags full of body parts of their dead husbands and babies so that they can receive a proper burial, this book might not be for you.

Lysergius says

This is a necessary book. I was surprised on reading Sebald's book about the air war that German post-war writers had singularly failed to address it.

This is an unemotional and objective account of the systematic destruction by fire and high explosive of a thousand years of German culture, which took 600,000 lives in the process. 70,000 of whom were children, and destroyed every German city of any size and some that were mere towns of no consequence, other than that they housed German civilians.

That this destruction constituted a war crime, or was simply the result of the inability of the RAF and the USAAF to accurately hit military targets, is for the reader to decide.

It reads like "an encyclopedia of pain".

Diego González says

La historia la escriben los vencedores, es un tópico pero no por eso deja de ser una verdad. En El Incendio, se cuenta la guerra de bombardeos que los aliados (fundamentalmente EE.UU. y el Reino Unido) libraron contra la Alemania de Hitler entre 1940 y 1945, pero desde el punto de vista de los civiles alemanes que la sufrieron. Es una historia triste, épica y desgarradora, que merece figurar en los anales más negros de la historia. En cada página del libro flota la misma pregunta, una y otra vez: ¿era necesario? ¿Realmente hacía falta matar a seiscientos mil personas no combatientes? Del relato se desprende una respuesta: en cualquier otra circunstancia lo sucedido con los civiles alemanes entraría dentro de la categoría de crímenes contra la humanidad.

La sucesión de cifras de muertos en cada bombardeo, la explicación con todo lujo de detalles de las tormentas de fuego de Hamburgo o Pforzheim, el minucioso censo del inmenso patrimonio histórico alemán reducido a cascotes o la vida cotidiana en los refugios y los búnkers donde la población civil se refugiaba son algunos de los hilos conductores de este libro que fue polémico desde su misma publicación por el tono de reproche con el que se trata a los aliados.

Lo peor del libro, la traducción. Atroz, descuidada, plagada de errores de bulto, simplemente intolerable en una editorial de primera línea.

Aleksandr Voinov says

I read "Der Brand" as research for a short story I'm planning to write. I tried to read this years ago, but was getting too emotionally involved (my family on my father's side is from around Dresden, other parts of my family are from around Essen - both cities that were put on the pyre of "moral bombing"). When I tried this again, it was still rough and I struggled. Could do about 20-30 pages per day and needed a break. Having empathy and imagination can be a problem. That said, it's a tour de force, compelling, at times literary and philosophical. Next one: Sues: Death From The Skies.

Addendum: Read it in the original German and due to Friedrich's very pointed use of German grammar and tonality, I can't imagine how that was translated. I found his account deeply human, sometimes angry, exasperated, at times sarcastic. I can't imagine what amount of emotional labour it would take to write something like this and immerse yourself in this carnage and suffering for long enough to write a "doorstopper" like this - because just reading it is intense enough.

Cody says

This intriguing work takes the reader into the science and engineering of fire's destructive force with the German bombing campaign during WWII. Long and widely known are the human cost and cultural damage of the fires of Germany, but this book details the how and process of that destruction. Very interesting work fairly recently translated from German.

Pamela says

The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945 is a highly unusual history of the air war written from the perspective of the German civilian population who experienced it. Beginning with a description of British Bomber Command and especially Group 5, it traces the development not only of conventional city bombing but the ability to demolish a city by creating a firestorm with incendiaries and blockbusters so that by war's end it was possible to create this almost at will given the right target and the right conditions. In the medieval cities of Germany, this was not difficult. By war's end, some 600,000 civilians had been killed in this way, and 20,000 of them were children.

Besides the technical aspects of the air war, Jorg Friedrich lets the German people speak for themselves of the horrors they endured and witnessed. It's a very effective technique and hard to read. We have all seen pictures of the completely devastated cities of Germany but to hear first-hand stories of the ghoulish events of the bombing is almost too private to be exposed. His literary powers are compelling and brilliant. There is a palpable undercurrent of rage in this book.

When published, this book caused and still is causing, a good bit of controversy not only in Germany but in Britain and America over much of the language used to describe the bombing. Friedrich as good as calls it murder. There are selective omissions i.e., the Nazi bombing of Warsaw and strafing of civilians at the start of the war. When describing the bombing of certain German cities that he describes as totally disconnected to the war, in the next paragraph he will mention the presence of the Daimler-Benz auto works, or some coal mining company, or a train station known as a transfer point from west to east. Not exactly neutral spots in wartime.

On the whole though, this is an important work, if only to remind us again and again of the dangers of war and the truth of what General Sherman noted so long ago "...war is hell."

Dimitri says

My friend from Frankfurt cried during "Der Untergang". She had seen movies of her home town undergoing similar destruction. This book taught me to understand, even if it could use more Frankfurt.

A gripping look at the effects of the Allied bombing campaign on the cities of Germany. There is no strategic map spread afar over Bomber Command's table. The beat is neither the drone of the B-29 or the hungry rattle of the Flak towers. The sound are the cries of carnage and a litaney of architectural legacy under assault.

The incineration of the Prussian *Generalstab* archives deserve separate mention. I feel their absence so often when dealing with the Other Side in the Great War.

Adam says

A minutely-detailed survey of the Allied bombing of Germany. Some passages are gripping, others are impossibly boring and repetitive (see the 'Land' chapter). The overall intention is the reconstruct the catastrophe of civilian bombing, from strategic draft boards in England in 1940 to the psyche of the ordinary citizen in small German towns in 1945. Not surprisingly, Friedrich is deliberately inflammatory, blending vocabulary culled from Holocaust scholarship with first-person recollection of the firestorms that swept through German communities during the bombings. The upshot is that this book makes a number of powerful observations, most all of which are undercut by cliché or difficult-to-prove claim. Friedrich's work, then, is anything but a sober contemplation of the topic at hand. It's a best-seller in Germany (and England, I believe), but it is more of a call-to-arms than any definitive, balanced study of the issues. No surprise, then, that this book is basically unrateable.

Christina says

I read this book upon my German father's recommendation. It was not an easy read as a first-born American daughter of German immigrants who lived through World War II as children. It changed my entire opinion of the Americans and British being the "good guys" of WWII. The complete devastation of most of Germany's city/town centers and the targeting of civilian populations horrified me. (A lot of effort was invested in figuring out how to create the perfect fire storm which would destroy the closely built wooden city centers which mostly dated back to the Middle Ages.) I now realize that there really are not "good guys" in war - there is no black and white, only varying shades of grey.

Isi says

I am of two minds about this book. On the one hand, it is Friedrich's great achievement to present to the general public a detailed account of the US/UK bombing campaign against German (and some other west European) cities. Friedrich, who is completely unsuspected of being a revisionist historian, tells of a crime that nobody - not in Germany, not in England or in America - ever really wanted to talk about in the face of the much greater crimes committed by Nazi Germany. So thumbs up to the author for telling an important sub-story of World War II, and for doing it in a levelheaded way. I was also impressed by how neutral, even technical the author manages to keep his tone, no matter if he talks about the advent of a certain bomb technology, or about the effects that technology had, say, on a hundred pregnant women burned to death in a hospital.

But from a literary perspective, that tone gets problematic after a while. First, the neutral, analytical voice quickly sounds sardonic and acidic when it describes the details of mass murder, to the point where I am not sure what effect Friedrich really wanted to achieve. And second, I quickly started to get "war book fatigue" as the author trudges through the city-by-city, neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood, sometimes even building-by-building destruction of urban Germany. But then, maybe that slow, systematic, horrifying but in its mechanical way banal story-telling is very apt for the subject matter. Not sure if there would have been a better way to tell it.

Personal note: the block-by-block accounts suddenly became very interesting when they described the destruction of cities that I know and have lived in. Since those include Dresden, Berlin, and Munich, I could personally relate to some of the detail.

So, not an enjoyable book (surprise), but probably a very necessary one.

Vheissu says

I cannot recommend this book for the general reader, except perhaps as a reference on anything and everything about the air war over Germany in World War II. The work is, as one critic of the book claimed, “An encyclopedia of pain” (p. 486). For the specialist, on the other hand, the book is essential reading. Written by a German historian and translated into English by Allison Brown, the book provides compelling and exhaustive evidence about the Allied air war against Germany. Friedrich’s research includes a great many primary documents, personal recollections, government archives, and the conclusions of historians drawn from the past 80 years. He provides the stories of government leaders, airmen, air-defense officials, and most important of all, those most directly affected by the air war, the German people. The ground level view, so to speak, is the book’s greatest strength.

As virtually every expert who has examined the air war in Europe and Japan during World War II has concluded, the Allies deliberately targeted non-combatants, amounting to what today would be judged as war crimes and crimes against humanity, with a possible charge of genocide thrown into the mix.

Unlike the bombing of industrial targets, which frequently inflicted militarily significant damage, the intentional bombing of German civilians in World War II was by any measure a failure. The Allied goal of “millions of dead civilians” was never achieved (p. 325); people, Friedrich writes, “were too mobile to burn” (p. 471). Only something like 600,000 to 900,000 German civilians died in the air war, of which 70,000 were children (p. 483). Those numbers are bad enough. That the bombing served no useful military purpose makes things even worse and underscores its questionable legality. And contrary to the promises of strategic bombing advocates, the air war did not turn Germans against the Nazi regime. The more common popular reactions were dismay at the incompetence of Luftwaffe air defenses, despair, and an overarching desire for revenge against the enemy (pp. 427, 430). German civilians, including children, routinely lynched downed Anglo-American airmen, especially in the final year of the war (p. 433).

High explosive bombs killed structures; collapsed structures killed people and made rescue and relief almost impossible. Indeed, Bomber Command sought to hinder rescue and relief operations by using high explosives set on a timer to detonate hours after the original raid (p. 374). Incendiaries, however—not high explosives—became the annihilation weapon of choice. By 1942, the Allies realized that a bombing war could not be fought with explosives (p. 10). Seven thousand tons of explosives could damage a radius of about twenty miles, but the same amount of incendiaries could extend for more than ninety miles (p. 15). A bombing raid might last twenty to thirty minutes over a target, but the resulting fires burned for twelve hours or more. Urban targets were not bombed just once but hundreds of times. Bremen, for instance, was hit 173 times (p. 153) by Allied bombers. “Fire,” Friedrich claims, “became the goal” of the Allied air war (p. 365).

For their part, the Nazi regime went to great lengths to provide shelter and compensation to the victims of the air war (p. 386). That shelter and compensation were never adequate was not because of a lack of effort by the Nazi government (p. 372-3). Shelter construction and rescue and recovery efforts were widespread and included the use of POWs and concentration camp labor (p. 375). Not that the relief efforts of the Nazis were compassionate; in order to free up bed space, the Nazis murdered mentally ill patients and repurposed sanitarium facilities to victims of the air war (p. 389). Jewish property, of course, had long since been

confiscated and distributed to loyal citizens of the Reich (p. 389).

People weren't the only targets of the air war. Allied bombers targeted cathedrals, libraries, museums, and architectural treasures in an effort to eradicate German culture. Friedrich notes that the air war was "the largest book burning in history" (p. 459). The intentional attacks on items of German cultural heritage violated Article 27 and Article 56 of the 1907 Hague Convention, in effect at the time. By 1945 there really weren't any human, cultural, or structural targets left, but the Allies still had plenty of bombs so they shifted to bombing rubble.

The firebombing of Germany (and Japan; more about that, below) was more than an act of war, more than an effort to incinerate non-combatants. It was also an experiment in the art of "killing cities." The Allies experimented with different ratios of high explosives and incendiaries, and different types and ratios of incendiaries: white phosphorus, thermite, and napalm, just to mention a few. The Allies consulted insurance records, firefighters, chemists, communication and guidance experts, demolition companies, construction companies, and others with the expertise necessary to burn cities. The Allies built ersatz German and Japanese housing to test the effectiveness of various forms of destruction. Many experimental bombings were conducted against cities without important military significance because those were seldom defended and provided good "before and after" photographs for closer examination. In short, the Allies were perfecting methods of annihilation not just for World War II but also any wars that might follow. Until German air defenses collapsed completely in late 1944, Allied bombers preferred undefended targets, undefended because those cities served no important military purpose (pp. 95, 209, 414). Once the Germans could no longer defend the Reich, Allied bombing of Germany increased (p. 144).

Which brings me to the Pacific War. There was no shortage of rationales for the atomic bombing of Japan. Some Allied officials sincerely believed the atomic attacks would end the war and preclude the necessity of an invasion of the Japanese homeland. Some were doubtlessly driven by a rage for revenge, understandable in view of the atrocities committed by Japanese forces against Chinese and American prisoners. Some may have thought the weapon would preclude a greater role for the Soviets in ruling Japan after the war, and some believed that, in view of the vast resources expended in building the weapons in the first place, only use of the bomb could justify the effort put into creating it.

There was, I believe, another unsettling reason for using the bomb and, a reason for rejecting repeated Japanese offers to surrender: only by using the weapon against a live target could the scientists and military understand completely the effects of the bomb. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, much like the firebombing of Germany, was a weapon test against a live target, and a spectacular test it was. It took 4,000 heavy bombers to deliver 10 kilotons of explosives on German positions in Huerten Forest in 1944 (p. 122-3), and only one heavy bomber to deliver 16 kilotons of explosive power on Hiroshima.

Friedrich's book prompted a harsh reaction when it was published in 2002. Predictably enough, air war veterans resented the implication that they might be guilty of war crimes. Others defended the annihilation tactics on the fanatical resistance of German (and Japanese) militarists. And of course there were those, perhaps a minority, who simply argued that the Germans and Japanese got what they deserved.

Nevertheless facts are stubborn things and Friedrich's exhaustive study of the air war against Germany is indisputable evidence of war crimes on a massive scale. Allied leaders knew at the time that the air war was legally suspect. Even Churchill, chief architect of the war of annihilation, tried to avoid responsibility for the bombing in 1945 (p. 145). The war subsequently helped shaped international law with respect to the treatment of non-combatants. "No air force chief of staff today," Friedrich writes, "would command the annihilation of 900,000 enemy non-combatants, as Sir Charles Portal did in 1942" (p. 483). I think he is right about that.

On the other hand, Russia seems deliberately to be targeting non-combatants in Syria today, and although the

casualties there are of a magnitude of order much smaller than that of Germany or Japan, the international community still has not come to grips with a protracted problem.

Eric says

This book by Joerg Friedrich is now available in English. You will have to read it in small doses, as it shows the horrible toll on civilian life that the air raids over Germany during World War II caused. The author does not apologize for the crimes of the Third Reich; rather, he shows the often forgotten suffering of the civilian population, and how men such as "Bomber" Harris planned revenge raids on cities like Dresden. A controversial and interesting look at World War II from the other side.

Michael Samerdyke says

A punishing book to read, but it was well worth it.

This gives a look at the air war against Germany from a perspective most English-speaking readers haven't encountered: that of the German civilian. It is a very angry book (but in a controlled way) and while the organization seems a bit unusual, I found it an interesting choice, as if we were getting the experience of an air raid survivor, with things being repressed and then breaking out at a later time.

I think the translation from the German could have been better handled at some points, but overall this book is essential reading for those interested in WWII.

Dale says

This was worth reading, but it was not an easy read. Not because the subject matter is gruesome (there's relatively little in the way of gory details), but because of the quirky, see-saw way in which the narrative is structured. Another serious look from the editors could yield a book about 150 pages shorter and much more readable.

That aside, this gives an extraordinary look into what exactly happened in the WWII bombing regime against Germany. An informative historical read.
