
Fire from the Sky

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IN WAR, as in famine and pestilence, one finds the earthly basis for visions of hell. Wartime agony is immemorial, but the 20th century brought the military arts of inflicting suffering and death to diabolical perfection. For many in World War II, terror and death rained from the skies: one did not have to be a soldier in order to suffer like one. The bombers carried the war to civilian populations, and the names of cities ravaged by air attack—London, Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki—figure as largely in the history of the war as the sites of monumental battles. Indeed, apart from the Holocaust, it is principally the great bombing episodes that give World War II its horrific blazing signature.

Four new books consider this air war, and particularly the one waged by the British and Americans against Germany, which killed some 600,000 civilians: Michael Bess's *Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II*¹; Jörg Friedrich's *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945*²; A.C. Grayling's *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the World War II Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan*³; and Marshall De Bruhl's *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*.⁴ All four recount the history of air warfare in theory and practice; describe the nature of the attacks and the damage done to human life,

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property, and cultural inheritance; and examine whether the bombings were militarily necessary or morally justifiable.

But the books are also distinct. Bess, a history professor at Vanderbilt University, has written the most wide-ranging volume of the four, with chapters on topics as diverse as the Allied pact with Stalin, kamikaze attacks, and the Nuremberg and Tokyo war-crimes trials. In a chapter subtitled "A Case of Moral Slippage," he concludes that the large-scale bombing of cities was an unpardonable atrocity, "the single greatest moral failure of the Anglo-American war effort." Grayling, a philosophy professor at the University of London, essentially concurs with this judgment, at much greater length; he goes so far as to insist that Allied airmen ought to have refused to carry out area-bombing raids, designed to kill civilians.

Friedrich, a Berlin broadcast journalist turned historian, avoids Grayling's kind of pontification, but nevertheless indicates that the time has come for Germans to "appropriate" their past as the suffering victims of a brutal air war. De Bruhl, a distinguished editor and publishing executive, is the only one of the four to defend the firebombing of German cities, with full awareness of how terrible

¹ Knopf, 395 pp., \$27.50.

² Columbia University Press, 532 pp., \$34.95.

³ Walker, 361 pp., \$25.95.

⁴ Random House, 346 pp., \$27.95.

the destruction was and how difficult it is to make his case. Useful as Bess's and Grayling's books are for the reader who wishes to be walked through the moral arguments (and to come out at the predictable condemnatory end), Friedrich's is especially noteworthy for its insight into one side of the contemporary German debate over World War II, while De Bruhl's is indispensable for the general reader who wants to know what the air war really was.

AS WAR WAS just breaking out in 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued a plea that all combatant nations do the decent thing and refrain from bombing civilians. But the advantage, indeed the necessity, of doing the indecent thing had long been revolving in the minds of strategic thinkers. As Britain's minister of munitions in the last year of World War I, Winston Churchill envisioned a thousand-bomber air raid on Berlin for 1919; fortunately, the end of the war in November 1918 intervened.

In 1921 Giulio Douhet, poet, playwright, and visionary chief of the Italian army aviation corps, whom all four writers correctly regard as *the* theoretical innovator of air power, published *The Command of the Air*. There he declared:

The battlefield will be limited only by the boundaries of the nations at war, and all of their citizens will become combatants, since all of them will be exposed to the aerial offensives of the enemy. There will be no distinction any longer between soldiers and civilians.

Two years later, Hugh Trenchard, the principal architect of Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF), insisted that the best defense was a good offense, and that the surest offensive weapon was the bomber: "It is on the destruction of enemy industries and, above all, on the lowering of morale . . . caused by bombing that ultimate victory rests."

In 1931, British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, known for his vehement pusillanimity—Churchill immortalized him as "the Boneless Wonder"—explained why he was certain that complete disarmament was the only solution. The "man in the street," Baldwin said, must "realize that there is no power on earth that can prevent him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through."

As for Adolf Hitler, he was, in Jörg Friedrich's words, "a Douhetist through and through." In 1934, indeed, Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi-party theoretician, spoke of air war as a salutary means of

re-forging the connection between the "man in the street" and the soldier at the front. It was Rosenberg's conviction, Friedrich writes, that "the war of the future would be carried out under the banner of the air fleets . . . and would involve the whole nation in the struggle for survival."

SO PRESIDENT Roosevelt's high-mindedness did not count for much once the action was under way. The Nazis bombed Warsaw mercilessly in the opening month of the war, and infamously demolished Rotterdam in May 1940. As for the British, only hours after declaring war on Germany, they sent a reconnaissance bomber to scout the German coast, though the move was a feint rather than a thrust. The really serious business between Britain and Germany started in August 1940, when Luftwaffe pilots assigned to bomb British aircraft factories and oil-storage tanks got lost and accidentally hit residential districts of London instead. Churchill immediately ordered a 50-bomber raid on Berlin; poor visibility ensured that most of the bombs missed by miles, sending up fountains of dirt on farmland outside the city.

The British repeated their attacks in early September, and the Nazis responded with Operation Loge, named after the fire god in Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: it was the first salvo in the Blitz. For nearly two months, nightly attacks of as many as 200 planes ripped into London. During the Battle of Britain in the skies overhead, the British lost 790 planes, the Germans 1,389. Although Operation Sea Lion, Hitler's plan for the invasion of Britain, was relegated to the scrapheap of strategic fantasies, the airborne hostilities continued. The Nazis struck Coventry, with its great cathedral, and the British retaliated against Mannheim, in what Marshall De Bruhl calls "perhaps the first instance of pure morale bombing," having no object other than terrorizing the populace.

In the wake of a disastrous daylight raid on Stavanger, Norway, in April 1940, in which they suffered heavy losses, the British decided to conduct their bombing missions strictly by night. Since this decreased the already dubious chances of finding and striking the target, a new technique, called area bombing, was adopted: the bombers would unload without fine discrimination on a wider area in the general vicinity of the desired target.

In effect, the general area *became* the desired target. De Bruhl writes:

Any talk about the relative merits or morality of area bombing versus precision bombing was just that in the early years of [British] Bomber

Command—talk. At most there were only nine nights a month—the time of the full moon—when there was any chance of what might be called accurate bombing. And even then the weather had to cooperate.

Sending a bomber force to hit a large industrial site or a port in a particular city, the British would deploy another contingent to rough up the city's civilian precincts. Thus they preserved in name the intention of specifically attacking industry while in fact they engaged in area bombing to kill civilians and sap morale. The British had great hopes for this bombing project; Churchill proclaimed in 1940 that it would break Germany. But an August 1941 report by the war cabinet secretariat showed that, of pilots reporting success, only one-third had come within five miles of the target; in the Ruhr, a heavily targeted area where industrial pollution impeded visibility, the figure was one-tenth.

Although the volatile Churchill despaired at this report, Sir Charles Portal, chief of the air staff, convinced him to persevere—if only because there was no alternative, no possibility of a ground offensive on the continent, until 1943 at the earliest. The bombers kept on, to the crews' grave peril: of Bomber Command's 125,000 crew members over the course of the war, 55,000 were killed, wounded, or captured, a casualty rate of 44 percent.

THE U.S. Army Air Force, which began to fight alongside the RAF in the spring of 1942, believed it had a better way. The B-17 bomber, the Flying Fortress, formidably armed and equipped with state-of-the-art Norden bombsights, would blast its way through Luftwaffe fighter squadrons and deliver its bombs exactly where they belonged, and by the light of day.

Moral considerations as well as military ones figured in the American scheme: the indiscriminate wreckage of nighttime area bombing was repugnant to the Americans, who vowed to concentrate on exclusively military targets and to leave the dirty work of bombing civilians to the British. But American precision was also to remain largely imprecise. The B-17's proved far less hardy than hoped for against enemy fighters, which shot them down in flocks, and the daylight precision raids were prohibitively costly in men and machines. Furthermore, the perennially heavy cloud cover frequently made the Norden bombsight pointless.

As Michael Bess puts it, "the whole idea of 'precision bombing,' given the technology available in 1942, was turning out to be something of a pipe dream." Although the Americans continued to try

to bomb as precisely as possible, or at any rate continued to say they were trying, they effectively settled more often than not for area bombing even on their daylight runs.

Wartime necessity, however, tends to speed technological advancement, and the killing machinery grew more efficient in 1943 and 1944. Vast improvements in navigational apparatus and techniques played a huge role. In Bess's description:

The sheer number of both British and American aircraft continued to rise; their quality kept improving, as new models were introduced; the number of fighter escorts slowly but steadily grew; important modifications to the Norden bombsight rendered it considerably more effective; Allied scientists developed several ingenious techniques for defeating German radar; new types of bombs, both incendiary and high-explosive, were brought on line; and in 1944 the P-51 Mustang entered service—a fast and highly maneuverable plane that could not only outmatch the best German fighters, but whose fuel drop tanks allowed it to escort bombers all the way to Berlin and back.

The Allies did not hesitate to put their new acquisitions to use. In late July and early August 1943, they loosed upon Hamburg the fury of Operation Gomorrah, named after the city in Genesis that the Lord extinguished with a fiery rain as His vengeance for its wickedness. High-explosive bombs leveled buildings and shattered water mains. But it was incendiaries, less than two feet long and weighing two to four pounds, that did the most devastating work. The phosphorus, magnesium, and thermite bombs fell in cascades of destruction, and on the second night of bombing they came in so hard and fast that they triggered a firestorm. Streams of fire flowed together into a raging torrent. Flames rose 7,000 feet into the air, so that even the British airmen could feel the scorching heat. The inferno fed ravenously on the surrounding air, its monstrous inhalation causing hurricane-force winds and intensifying the conflagration.

OVER 30,000 buildings were razed; some 45,000 people died. Oxygen starvation and carbon monoxide poisoning killed many; bomb shelters turned into ovens and roasted the persons inside, so that rescue workers days later found the bodies seared together in an indistinguishable mass; the molten asphalt of the streets engulfed those who fled the burning buildings. A million and a quarter refugees fled the city in the aftermath of the bombing.

Albert Speer, the Nazi minister of munitions, told Hitler that six more cities done in like Hamburg would mean the end of the war. Field Marshal Erhard Milch, inspector general of the Luftwaffe, believed that the war was as good as lost already, and that people on the home front could not hold out much longer. The Allies, on their side, considered Hamburg an enormous military success, and “Hamburgization” became a favored term of art in Bomber Command. The effacing of that city would be a model for assaults to come, with the ultimate target being Berlin, whose ruin would secure the Allied victory.

Try as they might, however, the Allies could not get Berlin to burn like Hamburg. Failing to make a fatal strike at the Reich’s vitals, they hacked away piecemeal at its appendages. In *The Fire*, Friedrich calculates that if Berliners had died in some optimum attack at the same rate as Hamburgers, 109,000 lives would have been lost, and the Nazis would presumably have capitulated. But since, after Hamburg, more than 340,000 Germans would die by air attack, an immediate death blow to Berlin would have spared half of all bombing casualties. As it happened, again by Friedrich’s reckoning, 158 small and medium-sized cities bore the brunt of the air war: “Churchill’s weapon was not able to pull off six Hamburgs; instead it produced a thousand Gelsenkirchens.”

Still, it is by the truly spectacular strikes that the bombing war is known. Dresden, which the 18th-century writer Johann Gottfried von Herder had christened “Florence on the Elbe,” and which in the view of many had been the most beautiful city in Europe, is the most famous, or the most notorious, of German cities bombed to fiery rubble. The American novelist Kurt Vonnegut was a prisoner of war in Dresden in February 1945, at the time of the firestorm there, and his novel *Slaughter-House Five* (1969) has contributed mightily to the city’s legend of innocent loveliness ravished. To lay waste so delicate a flower seems to many an act of the most heinous barbarity. In the many books, articles, and documentary films about Dresden, a nearly universal chorus of opprobrium has maligned the Allies for their destruction of the fairest of the fair.

IN *Firestorm*, Marshall De Bruhl undertakes the heroic task of coming to the Allies’ defense. He has his work cut out for him. Churchill himself felt severe pangs about the devastation, to the point of calling for re-evaluation of the entire area-bombing strategy: “The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bomb-

ing. . . . I feel the need for more precise concentration upon military objectives . . . rather than on mere acts of terror and wanton destruction, however impressive.”

Behind Churchill’s remark (later officially withdrawn in the wake of protest from others) lay the presumption that the area bombing *could* cease now that the Germans were nearly beaten. To this, Arthur “Bomber” Harris, the commander-in-chief of Bomber Command, pungently replied:

Attacks on cities like any other act of war are intolerable unless they are strategically justified. But they are strategically justified insofar as they tend to shorten the war and so preserve the lives of Allied soldiers. To my mind we have absolutely no right to give them up unless it is certain they will not have this effect. I do not personally regard the whole of the remaining cities of Germany as worth the bones of one British grenadier.

Harris was known for a turn of mind and phrase that sometimes sent him right off the rails of decency. In the remaining cities of Germany, after all, there were many innocent children whose bones would be reduced to glowing ash—some 75,000 children under fourteen were among those killed by the bombs. Surely their deaths counted for something, even when measured against the loss of British heroes.

But Harris also insisted, and De Bruhl agrees, that the point of the Dresden bombing was not in fact “wanton destruction.” The sentiments people had for Dresden, Harris observed in the aftermath, were

connected with German bands and Dresden shepherdesses. Actually, Dresden was a mass of munitions works, an intact government center, and a key transportation point to the East. It is now none of these things.

De Bruhl illustrates the point by listing some of the military-industrial installations in Dresden—110 of them, employing 50,000 people, and manufacturing everything from small arms to aircraft to anti-aircraft and field guns to poison gas. He observes that the city was essential to the national postal and telegraph system, and that three great railway trunk routes met there. And he notes that the bombing helped ease the Soviet westward advance and impeded the Nazi retreat.⁵

⁵ In his book *Why the Allies Won* (1996), the British historian Richard Overy expands on this, arguing that the entire bombing campaign helped end the war sooner by forcing the diversion of German resources from offensive to defensive purposes.

THE CONTENTION that, with the war pretty well sewn up by 1945, there really was no call for further civilian bombing continues to enjoy strong support among commentators. Thus, A.C. Grayling, for whom even the Hamburg raid at the height of hostilities was unpardonable according to the rules of war set forth in the 1899 International Peace Conference at the Hague, believes that, with the denouement imminent, the Dresden raid was unspeakably wrong.

To such detractors De Bruhl replies that on April 13, 1945, two months after Dresden and on the first day of his presidency, Harry Truman was told by his leading military advisers that Germany would not fall before October 1945 and Japan not before October 1946. No one knew how soon the end might come, and until the end the enemy remained as lethal as a live grenade. In the week of the Dresden bombing, for instance, the Nazis launched more V-1 and V-2 rockets—*Vergeltungswaffen*, literally “vengeance weapons”—against England than ever before. And, as De Bruhl angrily adds, the Nazis as they retreated in 1945 only speeded up the extermination of the Jews. Grayling’s argument that any moral imperative for bombing—or, as he prefers, any pretext of a moral imperative—was gone by 1944 lacks a leg to stand on.

More troubling is Friedrich’s emphasis on the destruction of smaller cities that had no strategic significance. The bombing that was designed to win the war from the air, he writes, was in large part just a paring-away of inconsequential towns: scattershot and ineffectual killing that hardly affected the Reich. Moreover, some of the targets could not by any stretch be construed as of military importance. Of the Baroque jewel box of Würzburg, destroyed by firestorm on March 16, 1945, when 5,000 of its 105,000 residents perished, Friedrich rightly laments: “There were no warmongering industries here, just spinets and altars.” Even the wine country was not exempt from the occasional massacre: “Heilbronn was a vineyard, and was incinerated because people lived there.”

Friedrich, however, forfeits a large portion of one’s sympathy by insinuating that the bombing of Germany is comparable to the Holocaust. The German title of his book, *Der Brand*, patently suggests a word for holocaust, *Brandkatastrophe*. Even as he rejects any effort to justify the bombing as righteous revenge for the mass murder of Jews, he subtly tries to establish it as equivalent to the Holocaust in evil:

The firestorm simulated the atmosphere of another planet, one incompatible with life. Gas, uranium radiation, bacteria, or heat do

not injure the body through violence; they simply place the body in another place, a place that does not support life. A fatal injury might come from being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but it does not fundamentally change the world. Annihilation, by contrast, occurs when nothing can continue to exist in a certain place. . . . As if thrown through a revolving door, 4.5 square miles of Hamburg found itself in a room for three hours not where life dies—that always happens—but rather where life is not possible, where it cannot exist. Hamburg and Hiroshima are symbols denoting a war that isolates certain regions from the world of life.

There, contrived through some very fancy verbal stepping, and without even a mention of dead Jews—with just a hint of gas and a room where no life can breathe, a circumscribed zone of annihilation—is the supposed equation of the extermination chambers at Auschwitz with the burning streets of Hamburg. And yet, as terrible and indeed hellish as the bombings were, this implied comparison is a feat of moral incomprehension. The Holocaust was the attempted extermination of a people officially spoken of as vermin, for the crime of having been born; the bombing of Germany was an essential part of the effort to preserve the world from the tyranny of perhaps the vilest regime it has ever known.

Friedrich’s metaphysics of annihilation treats the Allied means of war as though they were the ends, as though mass extermination were the ultimate purpose of the bombing campaign just as it was the purpose of the Nazi polity. A.C. Grayling, putting the full weight of judgment upon the means the Allies employed, displays a perverse incapacity to distinguish among ends altogether. Although sufficiently astute to recognize that the evils of Hitler far outweighed those of the Allied bombing, even here he makes the moral distinction one of degree, not of kind; that one side was fighting for the good and the other to do pure evil seems beyond him.

Furthermore, Grayling states in *Among the Dead Cities* that “the principle underlying 9/11, Hamburg, and Hiroshima is the same . . . [and] the same moral judgment applies to all three”; all are “terrorist attacks . . . consisting in deliberate mass murder of civilians to hurt and coerce the society they belong to.” This is as much as to say that the war aims of the Allies then were morally congruent with those of al Qaeda now, as if the nature of the moral agent, and the ends that he is pursuing, do not make all the difference between a foul deed and a tragic but decent action.

THE WAR locked decent men into a tragic dilemma. In so consuming a conflict, in which the stakes are nothing less than the survival of civilization, a decent people's viciousness increases in direct proportion to that of its most unclean enemy—or else its chances of survival diminish drastically. To fail to do all you can to defeat an enemy truly malignant would be the greatest evil.

War on this scale creates its own atmosphere, a poison that everyone must breathe as though it were oxygen. In total war against an evil enemy, even the best men become barbaric to some degree, and realize with horror what monstrosities they are compelled to take part in. "Are we beasts? Have we gone too far?" Churchill asked in consternation after one especially successful bombing raid.

The Allies went as far as they had to with the means at their disposal. Admittedly, righteous fury, the ache for vengeance against those who had started the war, was an inextricable part of their motivation. This makes their actions questionable in the eyes of those who believe that all killing in war should be done with a spotless heart and in accor-

dance with the precepts of the finest liberal conventions. But in judging a man caught in a tragic vise, the question is not so much how he behaves once he is trapped as why he allowed himself to become trapped in the first place.

We too are in danger of being trapped, though our situation is significantly different from that of the democracies facing Hitler. We have far more precise and powerful weaponry, and we are more scrupulous about how and where we use it. Jörg Friedrich writes that "had Dresden been bombed with the same result as Baghdad, there would have been no story for me to tell of the intentional mass killing of urban residents." But we are faced with an enemy that threatens to develop atomic weapons and that is avowedly far less scrupulous than we are about using them.

The fire from the sky that consumed Germany in 1945 became a necessary instrument of war only because the Allies failed to stop Hitler when he was just getting started. It is a lesson to take to heart as we face the prospect of another conflagration with a ruthless and evil enemy that is just getting started.