

Targeting the city: Debates and silences about the aerial bombing of World War II

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Abstract

The article goes back to the early discussions of the morality of city bombing which took place before and during World War II and attempts to analyze both the moral argumentation and its historical context from the 1940s until today. The development of the doctrine of “collateral damage” which recognized that attacking enemy factories was permissible even if it cost the lives and homes of civilians was soon widened beyond its original notion. After the war, the dropping of the atomic bombs became an issue in its own right, to be considered separately from the earlier recourse to conventional bombing — even when conventional bombing achieved equally destructive results. Twin inhibitions have reigned in the issue of what force against civilians was justified: the reluctance of German commentators to seem apologetic for the Third Reich, and the difficulty in the U.S. of seeming to cast any aspersions on those who fought “the good war.”

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The moral issues in context

For many years the debates on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki obscured debate on the “conventional” bombings during and even before the Second World War. A certain tacit consensus prevailed, namely that the German bombings of Madrid in the autumn of 1936, of Guernica, of Warsaw and of Rotterdam, the London Blitz, and the bombing of Coventry, which gutted St. Michael’s Cathedral and destroyed the centre of the city, were acts of

wanton terror designed primarily to terrorize populations, whereas the subsequent more destructive Allied attacks on Italian, German, and then Japanese urban centres (including the massive 1945 assault on Tokyo that may have taken 100,000-125,000 lives), waged with hundreds of planes that could carry far heavier bomb loads, were legitimate military actions (with Dresden perhaps an exception). The heavy attacks on northern French cities and towns in 1944, far more destructive than the German air raids in 1940, have also been largely accepted as a legitimate part of the war effort.

To be sure, the German attacks were condemned, because even if the German war effort might be deemed legitimate (though usually considered such only by Germans!), the Luftwaffe's bombings often seemed gratuitous and excessive, designed just to terrorize and demoralize civilian populations. The attack on the Basque city served little military purpose, and victory was already at hand when Warsaw and Rotterdam were bombed. But what about the Allied air raids? Even if they were possibly as violent as the German attacks, they were often defended as a necessary means to a worthy end. In short, for a long time most post-war debate about the means used was subordinated to consideration of the ends to be attained: Allied victory was a worthy end that justified the very means condemned when used in the service of an Axis victory — an unworthy end.

What has happened, of course, is that the said debate, which has seemed to be quiescent for so long, has now resurfaced. This article is concerned with both the context of the debate and the issues involved. By the very nature of the subject, it must include an analysis of moral questions as well as an historical account.

Actually the discussion about means is a two-fold debate though often a rather muddled one. War is an evil and is recognized as such, but there are lesser and greater evils, and there has been general agreement in the West that the evil of war should be kept to a minimum. This imposes limitations on recourse to war (*jus ad bellum*) and on the waging of a war once it is deemed necessary (*jus in bello*). The concept of “necessity” is usually the licence for resorting to war and employing means in warfare that are harmful — but necessity remains a subjective standard. And even necessity has in some cases been ruled out by international agreement as an excuse for bringing harm to civilians, although such agreements are often not honoured.

War involves a means-end calculation in several ways. Just war doctrine suggests both that recourse to war, and the conduct of a war already decided upon, must meet certain criteria. Waging war cleanly will nevertheless cause death and destruction and so recourse to war — codified as *jus ad bellum* — must be a last resort, undertaken only if the good achieved can outweigh the harm that will ensue. In the second sphere, war is limited by imposing constraints on the conduct of hostilities, that is, by observing *jus in bello*. At the heart of these constraints are two major moral priorities: first, preservation of the distinction between civilians and military combatants; second — and again, as in the case of recourse to war — the invocation of proportionality as a standard to be met: the harm done should not be disproportionate to the good supposedly achieved. An

aggrieved State should not go to war lightly and, once engaged in war, it should not employ a level of violence disproportionate to the provocation. Conversely many military men, such as General Sherman, have cogently argued that harsh measures used in waging war make war more unlikely.

However, many measures in war also ran foul of the other underlying moral priority laid down for the conduct of war: the distinction to be made between combatants and civilians and by extension the distinction between combatants not yet disarmed, and those rendered harmless by capture or injury. In brief: do not kill civilians and do not murder prisoners of war or the wounded. The question of killing soldiers clearly bent on mass retreat is more of a grey zone. (The American air attacks on the disabled and fleeing columns of the Iraqi army in the 1991 Gulf War caused some qualms here, but not such as to become a major theme of discussion in the United States. Americans do not really believe themselves capable of war crimes. When they do occur, they remain the exception that proves the rule.) Intentional destruction of civilian property has also been condemned, but far less intensely.

Although the distinction between civilian and combatant has often been erased, it has been recognized since Antiquity. Thucydides narrates how the morality of the Greek armies degenerated in the Peloponnesian War. The Melian Dialogue and the repression of Mitylene suggest that male civilians were deemed to be at least potential soldiers; but remember, too, how shocking the Thracian attack on Mycalessus appeared, where soldiers “sacked the houses and temples and butchered the inhabitants, sparing neither youth nor age, but killing all they fell in with, one after the other, children and women, and even beasts of burden. (...) in particular they attacked a boys’ school, the largest that there was in the place, into which the children had just gone, and massacred them all.”¹ Tacitus’ *Annals* are filled with such accounts, and slaughter after overcoming a besieged city remained commonplace way into the Thirty Years War of the seventeenth century. Still, it was generally recognized as wrong in some fundamental way, and that recognition lay at the basis of what was claimed to be “natural law” or developed as “international law.” Eighteenth-century theory and practice in Europe attempted to re-impose the firewall between civilians and combatants, though not without some military men complaining that this just increased the likelihood of war.

The issue has become more difficult in modern times, however, in that modern weapons technology has once again tended to erase the distinction between civilians and soldiers. But the blurring has occurred, so to speak, on both sides. On the one hand, the new weaponry has made it harder to limit casualties and destruction. The use of submarines and torpedoes in World War I presented this argument in particularly cogent form. For a submarine to give notice of attack would render it highly vulnerable and far less effective. In this situation the Allies did not contest the fact that it would be impractical for a submarine to surface, ask the passengers or crew of a vessel to take to the lifeboats, and only then destroy or capture it; they simply said that attacks without

1 Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian Wars*, Vol. XXI, p. 29.

warning on ships carrying civilians were unlawful. On the other, there is the German retort that the Allied blockade — formally contrary to the rules of war, which allowed a close blockade at a harbour entrance but not the interdiction of distant shipping routes — also killed civilians never had quite the same force, since the effects were indirect and hard to visualize as an immediate consequence.² (The same disjunction of cause and effect has also attended the debate on economic sanctions against Iraq or other offending governments: are sanctions that affect a population as a whole justified against dictatorial regimes that supposedly keep their populations in thrall?) By 1918, moreover, it was evident from the emerging implications of aerial warfare, especially with the Zeppelin raids over London, that the question of harm to civilians had to be considered.

In view of the issues raised by aerial bombing in general, debate has often centred not on the degree to which military necessity might justify harm done to civilians, but on the question whether military necessity really came into play. In other words, even if the issue of taking civilian casualties in one's stride were suspended, might not victory be possible without such cruelties. Debate on use of the Hiroshima bomb, and even more so the Nagasaki bomb, has usually focused on the question of their necessity to end the war. Was either needed to compel the Japanese to surrender? At least, did those advocating the use of the bomb believe it was needed to bring about their surrender without a great loss of American lives?³ Was the second bomb equally necessary? Might a greater interval between them have been allowed?

But a major reason that civilians have become (or became) a target is of course that modern technology makes civilians instrumental in warfare. The growing dependence of warfare on society as a whole — especially the role of labour in arming a nation — rendered the civilian-combatant distinction questionable. Modern warfare was so dependent upon war production at sites far away from the fighting that the concept of a front line tended to seem irrelevant. Surely a belligerent nation was entitled to destroy the industrial capacity of its adversary, since that seemed such an integral part of the military effort. But was it entitled to attack the civilians who worked in such production facilities? As is well-known, the doctrine of “collateral damage” was first put forward among British air strategists to cope with this issue. Civilian casualties had to be accepted as a by-product of attacks on a physical plant used for war production or even related civilian production.

2 Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare: The Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflicts*, Methuen, London, 1983.

3 Barton J. Bernstein has sorted out much of the argumentation in many essays. Of course, quantitative issues then intrude. How many lives would have had to be saved? The Stimson-Bundy claim was that the atomic bomb was believed to forestall an invasion of Honshu, planned for 1946, and which might have cost “a million lives.” The argument was refined, for the first invasion planned for the autumn of 1945 would probably have taken place in Kyushu, a smaller island, with a smaller estimated number of casualties. On the other hand, when those objecting to the bomb have suggested that no invasion was really necessary, defenders of the bomb's use suggest that a blockade of Japan would probably have cost more Japanese lives than did the bomb itself. See McGeorge Bundy's reflective weighing of the issues in *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*, Random House, New York, 1988.

No earlier dilemma had required the same splitting of hairs. In the Peninsular War of the early nineteenth century and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, the issue of non-uniformed guerrillas had arisen. The Prussian military insisted that such guerrillas or “franc-tireurs” lost any protection to which captured combatants were entitled as prisoners of war, and could be executed out of hand. Subsequent conferences in Geneva and The Hague attempted not to shield the irregular soldier as such, but to establish guidelines for differentiating legitimate militia forces from the “franc-tireur,” essentially by insisting on some visible insignia and the open, not concealed, carrying of weapons.⁴ The “franc-tireurs” were not civilians; they were more akin to spies, who also did not announce their presence and thus could rightfully be executed on discovery. Not surprisingly, hard-bitten commanders in such wars often took action without undue precision. And in 1914 the fear of “franc-tireurs” led to massive German atrocities in Belgium. In World War II, however, a guerrilla fighter became a partisan, deserving of recognition as a combatant in the eyes of his British or American allies, but meriting execution in the eyes of the occupying force. Since some German commanders resorted to civilian reprisals as well as executions of captured partisans (Field Marshall Kesselring in Italy was a notable example of such action on a western front), this issue soon eclipsed even the fate of partisans. After World War II, new guidelines drafted in 1949 extended similar protection to resistance fighters, and in recent decades even paramilitary fighters have asked for similar recognition.

Nonetheless, reprisal policy remains at the heart of guerrilla war because it seems to emerge from that “necessity” which, despite all the conventions, continues to be the underlying justification of violence. Guerrilla warfare, as practised by World War II partisans and perfected in post-war colonial struggles, deliberately involved the civilian base and drew on its resources. It was a war either to recruit (by conviction or coercion) civilian support for the partisan cause or to make such support too costly. The theory of guerrilla warfare, which French authorities zealously studied from Chinese and Viet Minh writings, basically urged that the distinction between the people and the army be erased.⁵

It is the co-involvement of civilians that unites the issue of guerrilla or partisan warfare with that of aerial bombardment. Still, there were differences. After all, partisans acted with putative intent to kill or wound. They took to the field or to the forest. But what were the rights and wrongs of bombing civilians — and their families — who merely took to the factories? Bombing did not introduce this issue: bombardment had originated with shelling, and the British had made famous the idea in 1806 of “Copenhagening,” i.e. the naval bombardment of a neutral city. By the end of World War I, however, the possibilities of bombing were recognized and doctrines for its use had to be developed. Another Hague

4 Best, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 190-200.

5 Besides Best, see Herfried Münkler (ed.), *Der Partisan: Theorie, Strategie, Gestalt*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen, 1990, for a series of essays on theories of revolutionary and partisan war.

Conference in 1923 contributed Draft Rules for aerial bombardment that would have prohibited the bombardment of civilian populations “not in the immediate neighbourhood (...) of land forces.” They incurred objections and were never ratified, although clearly on the table as guidelines whose rejection had to be argued for. Neville Chamberlain in 1938 and American air force generals through much of the war seemed to express sympathy with a sense of restraint (although by 1944 American practice seemed as ruthless as that of the British). British advocates of the new weapon, however, did not want to be trammelled. Air Marshall Hugh Trenchard’s championing of the new war aim, and finally Arthur (“Bomber”) Harris’s conviction that precisely the bombing of civilian centres could win the war for Britain prevailed over earlier hesitations. In 1928, Trenchard argued that one might seek to “terrorise munitions workers (men and women) into absenting themselves from work” but that the indiscriminate bombing of a city for the sole purpose of terrorizing the civilian population was “illegitimate.”⁶ This distinction proved far too tenuous to retain as a maxim of strategy. Early in the war, the British moved on to define, along Trenchard’s lines, the idea of collateral damage. But collateral damage was the up-to-date version of what the medieval just-war doctrine of Scholasticism had sanctioned as “double effect.” If despite care to minimize civilian casualties — and such care was necessary to render the procedure acceptable — civilians were still injured or killed in order to secure a legitimate military end (there was no dissent that wiping out enemy industrial capacity was a legitimate objective), this was acceptable within the more general injunction to observe proportionality.⁷

Proportionality, it should be stressed, remained a criterion that had to be met to justify both the recourse to war and the conduct of war. It linked *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. But what guidance did it actually provide, especially when the results were not so clearly decisive as proponents such as Harris or Lord Cherwell promised. There is no scope here for a survey of the statements and the strategies of the air wars. It is general knowledge that by 1945 Churchill himself had some doubts, and that until a few years ago Arthur Harris was deprived of the honours bestowed on the air warriors themselves. Long before, however, two judgments became commonly accepted: first, that the Americans somehow had clung to precision bombing as a strategy and were less morally obtuse than the British, at least in Europe; second, that the bombing was not really effective in achieving its goals.

Both these statements can be contested, however. It is true that with the important exception of General Hap Arnold and his junior officer Curtis (“Bomb them back to the Stone Age”) LeMay, transferred to oversee the

6 Best, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 274; Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany, 1939-1945*, 4 vols., Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1961, Vol. IV, pp. 71-76.

7 Stephen A. Garrett, *Ethics and Airpower in World War II: The British Bombing of German Cities*, St. Martin’s, New York, 1993, pp. 142-144; Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002; also Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, Basic Books, New York, 1977.

bombing of Japan in 1944–45, American military doctrine did not argue that civilian bombing as such might produce a rapid end to the conflict. The US clung to shrouding large-scale bombing with particular industrial or strategic objectives. Nonetheless, American bombers did participate in the Dresden raids and continued bombing targets until almost the last weeks of the war, when it was clear that they could play little strategic role. In theory, disruption of rail communication could justify almost any attack, but in fact the prevailing emotion seems to have been that no target should remain spared. The argument was an implicit one of potential resistance. It no longer claimed that civilian morale would collapse. It simply postulated that the more destruction there was, the sooner the collapse would come. Americans, too, studied how to achieve the felicitous result of firestorms of the kind that ravaged Hamburg. And Americans, of course, pursued an air war on Japan that was directed against cities as targetable units. The US chose weapons — incendiary bombs — designed to start widespread devastation of urban areas, aware that both civilians and artistic monuments must fall victim to this destruction.

The issue of efficacy was raised by the famous results of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, whose members — especially John Kenneth Galbraith — argued that bombing had achieved far less of an impact than had been claimed. The report pointed out Germany's industrial production continued to increase until the autumn of 1944, that railroads and even factory buildings were quickly repaired, and that morale was not seriously impaired. The Survey's minimizing judgments were long accepted and cited by domestic opponents of President Johnson's and Nixon's resort to heavy bombing of North Vietnam. More recent assessments such as Richard Overy's view, however, have challenged the Survey's early dismissal of air-war efficacy. According to Overy, the Allied attacks produced a downward spiral of industrial collapse for the Third Reich, above all when bombing concentrated on strategic industrial targets. Germany relied on synthetic oil from hydrogenation for three-quarters of her consumption, and the "oil offensive" cost Germany 90 per cent of her synthetic production between May and September 1944.⁸ Destroying railway lines precluded adequate fuel transportation and thus limited use of German fighter defences, which rendered Allied bombing all the more effective, thus destroying more fuel supplies, etc. We cannot test the counter-hypothesis, namely what would German production have achieved without the bombing? German production declined only from the second half of 1944, and part of the downturn admittedly followed after Romanian oil sources were finally overrun by Soviet troops and the Reich was fighting huge battles on two fronts.

Still, one can agree that to think of bombing as counter-productive (which some of its critics tended to claim) seems as simplistic a conclusion as to believe that it alone could have defeated the Third Reich, as Bomber Harris

8 The various reports of the US Strategic Bombing Survey became available as from October 1945; see John K. Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times: Memoirs*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1981; Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, Norton, New York, 1995, pp. 230-232.

insisted. Intuitively, it does seem incredible to think that the massive and continuous attacks on a densely populated country did not cut into transport and production as well as wearing down industrial workers whose nights were spent taking whatever shelter was provided. It was a costly strategy: airmen were not easily replaced and 140,000 British and Americans died in the attacks, while 21,000 planes were lost. It had costs in the Pacific theatre, too, though less in terms of bombers succumbing to defending fighters, for Japan was largely denuded of defence, than in terms of the lives and efforts needed to capture the outlying island bases from which the planes could reach the home islands. Even so, with less tonnage bombing took its terrible toll, even before the Americans used their two nuclear weapons.

Perhaps it is useful to separate the arguments for bombing used before D-Day from those afterward. Between 1940 and 1942, Britain was unable to bring any counterforce to bear outside North Africa except by air. Military “necessity” usually remains a highly subjective factor. But Churchill believed, in my opinion correctly, that it was important for the UK to inflict damage on the foe at a time when his country had been forced out of the continent, its troops in Africa remained hard pressed and it stood, until June 1941, without a major ally. Once Russia entered the war, bombing enabled the British to claim that they, too, were making a positive contribution to the defeat of Hitler. As Overy points out, however, Churchill’s turn to bombing in 1942 was provoked by Stalin’s taunts about Allied inaction with respect to a second front, and it came at a point when it seemed a wasteful diversion of airpower from a better use.⁹ Dresden, too, was probably attacked largely because the Soviets complained that Britain and the US were not contributing their fair share in the winter of 1945 to the forthcoming land battles within Germany.

In the early days, however, the arguments for bombing were not officially developed in terms of morale and retaliation. They followed the more tortuous course of reasoning about the scale of civilian casualties permissible to set back Germany’s war industry. Although Harris and others thought terror as such was permissible because it must surely weaken the enemy’s will, the Allies did not officially accept such a justification. Nonetheless, the earlier notions of collateral damage themselves proved sufficiently elastic — any industrial or transport capacity contributed to the German and Japanese war effort. How much devastation was permissible? In targeting Sodom and Gomorrah for incendiary attacks, even God was willing to allow innocent victims. Once the tide had turned, violence was ingrained and the capacity to inflict damage — but largely indiscriminate damage — had been vastly enhanced. Only Hitler and Goebbels were frank enough to declare that the V-1 and V-2 attacks in the latter stages of the war were indeed designed to wreak terror, hence their V designation for “*Vergeltung*,” meaning reprisal or retaliation. But they could not win that battle.

9 Overy, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 103-04.

The German debate and the issue of taboos

In retrospect, what has been striking about the post-war German discussion of these issues is the relative absence of political reproach except in extreme right-wing circles, at least until a few years ago. Dresden, for all the implicit reproach in the discussion about it, never became a Hiroshima. Of course, the fatalities, despite propagandistic inflation, were lower: 35,000, not 70,000-100,000.¹⁰ The reasons for this reticence are not hard to find: West Germany remained dependent on the British and Americans for its post-war security against the Warsaw Pact alliance. Also, to raise the subject of German suffering seemed, for many “good” post-war Germans, to be tainted by neo-Nazi politics; it might be acceptable for the Japanese to play the role of unique victims because of the atom bomb, but that had indeed been a new and terrible weapon. And even the Japanese did not harp on the equally destructive conventional air raid on Tokyo in April 1945.

Still, debate was renewed a few years ago and along two separate tracks. First of all, the issue of German victims re-emerged, most sensationally in a book by Jörg Friedrich, “*Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*” (The Fire: Germany in the Bombing Campaign). The Friedrich book, appeared at a moment many writers were opening issues of German suffering in the war and asking whether post-war German culture had “repressed” any sustained discussions of Germans’ status as victims. as was claimed most notably by the late literary scholar and novelist W. G. Sebald in his Zurich lectures, published under the title “Air War and Literature.” In the same connection Günter Grass published his novel “*Im Krebsgang*” (Crabwalk), which gradually circled around and then told the story of the sinking of a German liner in the Baltic that was evacuating 9,000 refugees fleeing the Soviet invasion.¹¹ None of these authors could be suspected of neo-Nazi tendencies: Friedrich had written about German war crimes; Grass was a maverick leftist whose subject was the maiming or survival of ordinary people caught up in a German history they perhaps should have earlier resisted but didn’t; Sebald had written melancholy tales of

10 The death toll in Dresden quickly became a politicized estimate. For a while it was rounded off to 100,000, then totals of 135,000, gradually rising to a quarter million, were given credence by David Irving in *The Destruction of Dresden* (1963), who finally seemed to settle for a hundred thousand. It suited the Communist regime to accept such an approximate tally, but more careful estimates revised the number downward. At the entrance to the restored Zwinger, one of Dresden’s architectural treasures, the East German plaque still stands with its take on the history of the Second World War: “destruction of the inner city of Dresden,” by Anglo-American air forces in February 1945, “liberation” of Dresden from the fascists by the armies of the Soviet Union in May 1945, and reconstruction of the Baroque masterpiece by the German workers’ and peasant State. For the first scholarly re-evaluation of the death toll see Götz Bergander, *Der Luftkrieg in Dresden* (1977), who estimated it at 40,000, and for the most recent evaluation (between 25 and 40,000) see Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945* (Harper Collins, New York, 2004) with its discussion of how casualty figures became inflated, pp. 443-48. On Hamburg, see Martin Caidin’s graphic account, *The Night Hamburg Died*, Ballantine, New York, 1960.

11 Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945*, Propyläen Verlag, Munich, 2002, forthcoming shortly in English from Columbia University Press; W. G. Sebald, “Air War and Literature” (“Luftkrieg und Literatur”, 2001), now included in his *On the Natural History of Destruction*, transl. Anthea Bell, Random House, New York, 2003; Günter Grass, *Im Krebsgang*, Steidl, Göttingen, 2002.

German-Jewish refugees and their inability to work through the impact of persecution in their later lives. Obviously all were moved by the numbers (half a million killed in the air war; 9,000 on the ill-fated ship) and needed to let the dead finally speak out.

Friedrich's book is an attempt to describe the aerial war from the viewpoint of those bombed, which it does in unsparing detail. It has broken through what was a virtual taboo about open discussion of the approximately half a million German civilian deaths in the Anglo-American air raids of 1940-45 and the destruction of cities and cultural treasures. Let us separate the book from the problem or problems it raises. At the emotional core of his account Friedrich stresses the horrors of incendiary bombing: death by burning in melting asphalt, by incineration in cellars, by asphyxiation through carbon monoxide and deprivation of oxygen. There is no shortage of accounts of large explosive bombs and of bomb-blast effects on the human body; he also gives due credit to guidance systems and the marking of targets by flares. But the incendiary bomb, dropped in thousands, remains the real technological protagonist, burning its way through the roofs of Gothic and Renaissance landmarks as well as private housing. He describes the shrivelled or carbonized remnants of victims being brought in baskets for burial, the destruction of families, the efforts at civil defence and the dispersal of children (a measure which the population hated). He points out that as much destruction followed during the final year of the war as in all the previous years before: devastating raids not only on railroads or in return visits to towns smashed repeatedly before, but also on cities ranging from Dresden to Würzburg and Potsdam whose destruction seemed called for mainly because they had until then been spared.

Although the book focuses primarily on British bombing, American readers will recall the devastating accounts of the Tokyo raid of 9/10 March 1945 and the toll as our B-29s roamed virtually unopposed over Japanese cities as from November 1944, dropping incendiary weapons on wooden housing with sometimes even greater human costs. Billy Mitchell, the American pioneer of naval bombing, had recognized this as early as the 1920s, when he described the Japanese cities as "the greatest aerial targets the world has ever seen..."¹²

The Friedrich book offended many Germans (and *a fortiori* Anglo-American readers) by its inflammatory language which borrowed the rhetoric used for the "final solution," including the terminology of the Holocaust.¹³ But I

12 Cited in: Richard Rhodes, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*, Random House, New York, 1999, p. 48.

13 See the excellent reviews submitted to the H-German network by Joerg Arnold, 3 November 2003, and Douglas Pfeifer, 4 November 2003, which appropriately address, I believe, the strengths and weaknesses of this work — Pfeiffer's with more emphasis on the military and political issues, Arnold's with greater emphasis on the moral and conceptual problems. Others have also indicated the deficiencies of the book as a scholarly source. See for instance Horst Boogs' summary list of errors in his contribution to *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940-45*, Rowohlt, Berlin, 2003. Obviously many issues are contentious in this debate. The most parochial issues are those that concern historians as such. To what extent can the historian merely report or dissect the differing positions without engaging his own sense of moral judgment. Second, what sort of rhetoric is legitimate in an historical account?

wonder whether we Anglo-American readers, for whom the Second World War remains above all the most righteous military cause, do not seek to evade the questioning the book provokes by pointing to the admittedly charged language. (And so, too, may those German readers who fear the apologetics implicit in the work.) Yes Friedrich resorts to the images we usually associate with Holocaust literature... but children and adults did end up incinerated. Discursive fastidiousness should not serve as a defence mechanism to draw too much comfort from the flaws that are documented.

Sebald's thesis of literary repression is also flawed. In the early post-war period, as Volker Hage's collection shows, German accounts of bombing and urban destruction did appear.¹⁴ But they were not backed up in major essays or novels. No German dialogue on those issues came into being, such as that generated by Germans themselves on their own war crimes and genocide. As Pfeiffer rightly notes, there was in fact extensive though often specialized literature on the latter subjects. Rather than an outright taboo, there has been an inhibition against producing or citing material about German suffering as such. Yes, we have had surveys of the air war — the ones written by the victors and the important scholarly work carried out at the Freiburg centre for military history.¹⁵ But such works rarely dwell on the experience of being bombed. Commentators have also raised the question why non-neo-Nazi Germans could not write this history so graphically before or let themselves discuss it more openly. The answer put forward by Hans Ulrich Wehler and others is that they

If a particular vocabulary becomes associated with what is agreed to be the most abominable atrocity (such as the antiseptic language used by the Nazis in carrying out the "final solution") is it illegitimate to use that language for other situations? Is "tasteless" a category that makes sense for historical writing? Saul Friedlaender sought to take up this issue from the other side when he questioned Nazi kitsch — the deliberate effort to evoke the aesthetic dimensions of fascism and Nazism. See *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, Harper & Row, New York, 1984. We know the phenomenon from films (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler: Ein Film aus Deutschland*, 1977, and Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*, 1974), novels (Michel Tournier, *Le Roi des aulnes*, 1970; US title, *The Ogre*), Friedrich's book suggests that the historian cannot rest content with a history of lived experience, no matter how important it may be to convey that experience. Television, cinema and the preoccupation of society with the testimony of victims have suggested to us that history is sterile without the evocation of experience, but history cannot be merely the excavation of experience — old pictures, sad songs, diary extracts, and the like. To rely on these is our version of a pathetic fallacy. It is appropriate and indeed, I think, often a duty to convey testimony. But doing justice to the witness is not the same as writing history. It may be the beginning or the end of historical reflection, but it is a different sort of exercise. There can be no history perhaps without memory, but neither can there be history that does not discipline memory.

- 14 Volker Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung: Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg*, S. Fischer, Frankfurt, 2003. Such accounts include: Gerd Ledig, *Vergeltung* (1956), in English as *Payback*, translation by Shaun Whiteside, Granta, London, 2003 — review at H-German (see note 13 above), 5 November 2003, by Julia Torrie; and Hans Erich Nossak, *Der Untergang* (originally published in 1948, reissued by Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M, 1976); also an extensive essay on Nossak by Scott Denham, likewise at H-German, 7 November 2003.
- 15 Klaus Maier and Horst Boog in Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (ed.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Vol. 7, H. Boog et al., *Das Deutsche Reich in der Defensive*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 2001; Olaf Groehler's *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1990, from the German viewpoint. From the Allied viewpoint, Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany, 1939-1945*, 4 vols., Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1961; Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, 7 vols., Chicago, 1951; also among others Denis Richards, *RAF Bomber Command in the Second World War*, Penguin, London, 1994; and Max Hastings, *Bomber Command*, Pan Books, London and Sydney, 1981.

were acutely aware that their regime bore the responsibility for the war and had killed on an even larger scale, committing outright murder in which each and every death inflicted was intentional. Some Germans, I believe, were silent not merely because they could not reconcile themselves to the deaths, but because they really did understand where the chain of murderous warfare began. “[As young survivors, we took] no oaths of revenge against the Allied bombers. In a certain sense we felt a solidarity with them; they would destroy that system that we ourselves [...] had erected but which we did not have the strength to overthrow,” Peter Wapnewski writes.¹⁶ Even Friedrich, who is outraged by the suffering inflicted, states: “The destruction of the cities helped the cause of eliminating Himmler and his adherents, who had taken hostage these places, this history and this humanity, all Germany and all Europe.” But it was Germany, too, which had taken these hostages, “...whether through violence, approval, or anger, out of equanimity or impotence. A different Germany was nothing but hypothetical — a would- or might-have-been.” He goes on to say, however, that it is also hypothetical to ask whether the conflagration might have been unnecessary: “Did Hildesheim have to be destroyed for its railroad station? Was this the reason, was there really any reason? Did those who set the fires intentionally and in anger want to win at any price, or was this the price that had to be paid for their victory? Certainly this was their effort. If this represents no tragedy as part of the Allies’ history, was their total success the same for the history of the Germans?”¹⁷

Critical historians, have simply labelled the book demagogic and flawed. In effect, this is a strategy of compartmentalization, which I do not share. Friedrich raises serious issues that we cannot seriously deal with if we merely object to inflammatory language or lack of balance. Friedrich does understand that after the 1940 defeat in the West, there seemed no choice for the British but to strike at the enemy with whatever weapons were available if they were not to come to terms. Did not morale, as Churchill sensed, require inflicting some damage on an enemy that threatened to invade and was laying waste to London? Could any democratic statesman set on resistance not have followed this strategy? Yet was there not a point at which it changed — as Arthur Harris said it should — from a purposeful pursuit of targets, whether railroads or industry, to moral bombing? Nor is this change surprising. As Friedrich understands, the air war became one of *Vergeltung* or retribution in which the British went far beyond the level of destruction they themselves had suffered (just as the American *Vergeltung* against Japan vastly exceeded the toll taken at Pearl Harbour that was so often cited as justification). Retribution fuelled the air war as much as did strategy. Peter Wapnewski’s recollection notwithstanding, many Germans impatiently awaited the retaliatory “V” weapons that Goebbels promised.

16 In Lothar Kettenacker (ed.), *Ein Volk von Opfern: Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940-45*, Rowolt, Berlin, 2003, p. 122 (author’s translation).

17 Friedrich, *op. cit.* (note 11), pp. 217-18 (authors translation).

The contentious issue is not military success alone. As mentioned above, the American Strategic Bombing Survey's critique of the efficacy of bombing, no longer seems tenable. By the summer and autumn of 1944, the war machine was largely incapacitated. Air defences were faltering, production began to fall sharply. Surely, argue their historian defenders, the tons of explosives that rained down from the air brought about that collapse. To which critics can respond, first, that other factors including military setback on the ground played a large role and, second, while so-called precision bombing was not precise, the Allies did not have to embrace city bombing so indiscriminately. I personally think that the bombing can be credited with another success: the demonstrated hopelessness of the Nazi defence had something to do with the fact that after World War II there was no real revanchist movement, no defiant nationalism. But then again, defeat without immolation might also have achieved an equal post-war success. No, the issue remains the price of success; that is always debated, and must be debated by historians as well as by those who were directly involved.

The non-existent Anglo-American debate and the issue of reprisal

What is striking about these debates is, I believe, first of all the fact that they did not resonate more strongly in Germany. For all the cries about the German proclivity to victimization, the bombing issue has hardly become a major or hotly discussed political subject. It has not stirred up public sympathy or awareness like the Hiroshima attack has done in Japan. German civic culture abandoned the *tu quoque* attitude it still largely maintained throughout the 1950s. Yes, for a long while there were many stories of victimization — especially among refugees from East Prussia, the territories taken over by post-1945 Poland, and the Sudetenland. Friedrich's book can be seen as a continuation of this strand of self-pitying and often right-wing apologetics, but non-Germans are in fact willing to listen to this narrative with a sympathy that was excluded in Germany until very recently, except on the far right. Vaclav Havel's expression of regret at the expulsions of Germans from the Sudetenland was a conspicuous case in point. Nonetheless, Friedrich's book and the related series of memoirs and commentaries in the press did not unleash any widespread attempts to claim a moral equivalence of German war crimes and Allied bombing. I believe this reticence is due to a deep-seated recognition that one cannot indulge in a sort of moral bookkeeping that offsets one series of atrocities against what might be considered another. The recent VE Day celebration on 8 May 2005 demonstrates even more clearly that the Germans are willing to forswear any political exploitation of the air-war issue. A few years ago, they often tended to say that their country could not celebrate 8 May as a day of liberation since it simultaneously marked a catastrophic national defeat. At this most recent commemoration, in Moscow and elsewhere, this reserved stance had completely changed: Germans participated as Germans who could welcome unreservedly the results of 8 May 1945.

The political culture that allows conventional national feeling to be overcome in this way is not one that will sustain the undercurrents generated by Jörg Friedrich. Jürgen Habermas could be proud: constitutional patriotism has prevailed even in the united Germany.

But equally striking, to my mind, is the absence of discussion in the United States, if not in Great Britain. American political culture allows, I think, far less tolerant examination of earlier failings in World War II — or at least not yet. True, Americans have engaged in national expiation with regard to Indians, the slavery, lynching and segregation of African-Americans, and the internment of West-Coast Japanese-Americans during World War II. But the “good war” is still too fresh in their memory or too necessary a perception to be subjected to the same emotional scrutiny. The fierce controversy over the Enola Gay exhibition in 1995, however flawed the explanatory material might have been, revealed the great resistance to this sort of scrutiny.¹⁸ In fact, Hiroshima and Nagasaki can be questioned and discussed, but the conventional air war remains beyond widespread popular re-evaluation. The recent histories of America’s bombers, especially Stephen Ambrose’s history of B-24 Liberator raids, are cast in the heroic mould. Thomas Childers’ moving study, which evidently inspired Ambrose (though he never acknowledged it), of his uncle’s B-24 war, *Wings of Morning*, likewise did not seek to question the rationale for bombing raids up to and including April 1945.¹⁹ Childers, however, was explicitly writing a book about subjective experience — the very dangerous one that ordinary Americans undertook on orders — and he has promised a counterpart volume on experience of the war from the ground. But no one has suggested that if American soldiers are supposed to resist immoral orders or commanders are punishable for giving them, any aspect of the air war should come within that moral category.

What the air-war discussions — German, British and American alike — reveal is that much of the discussion about the legitimacy or “just war” justification of massive aerial bombardment was beside the point. In large-scale national wars, even in cases where societies were under totalitarian control and citizens were not thought to have any influence over their rulers, reprisal became an accepted course of action. As a British Liberal MP wrote in 1942, “I am all for the bombing of working class areas of German cities. I am Cromwellian — I believe in ‘slaying in the name of the Lord’, because I do not believe you will ever bring home to the civil population of Germany the horrors of war until they have been tested in this way.”²⁰ Of course, bombing for pedagogical purposes is not meant to imply that five-year-olds deserve that lesson. Rather it presumes that

18 See Philip Nobile (ed.), *Judgment at the Smithsonian: Smithsonian Script by the Curators at the National Air and Space Museum*, Marlowe & Company, New York, 1995. The afterword by Barton J. Bernstein is a valuable summary of the debates since 1945.

19 Thomas Childers, *Wings of Morning: The Story of the Last American Bomber Shot down over Germany in World War II*, Addison Wesley, Reading, MA, 1995; Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Wild Blue: The Men and Boys who Flew the B-24s over Germany*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2001.

20 Geoffrey Shakespeare to Archibald Sinclair, cited in Hastings, *op. cit.* (note 15), p. 147

German parents need to learn it by watching their innocent infants die. But even without this degree of righteous anger, we tend to accept reprisal. Potential reprisal certainly became an acceptable recourse during the Cold War, when massive retaliation rested on “mutual assured deterrence,” and the second-strike or counter-city strategy was largely accepted until the 1980s, when the consensus about nuclear deterrence started unravelling.

Still, for most of us, such reprisal must be stochastic or actuarial. What remains unacceptable is the targeting of individual civilians. What is acceptable is reprisal with the statistical certainty that a given percentage of civilians must be killed thereby. In the final analysis, those of us who would accept the air war say that under certain conditions it may be necessary to burn babies. Even if we are not explicitly targeting babies, we are all familiar enough with statistics to know that our historically mediated choice will kill those whom no theory of a society at war can plausibly claim to have opted for war. Vengeance is mine, supposedly sayeth the Lord. Vengeance, though, is also ours — including civilian deaths as long as the victims are not personally selected. This remains curious. Why is it more acceptable that, say, five per cent of a city of half a million will be killed (25,000) so long as we do not specify which five per cent, whereas shooting 50 hostages out of hand is unacceptable? Nonetheless, it is. The issue is not quite that of randomness, for the terrorist does not know which teenagers will for instance be discoing in the Jerusalem café, or who will already be at work in the World Trade Centre. He or she inflicts death as in a lottery. Is distance the issue? Is whoever kills close up deemed more responsible than he who slays from far away? No matter what the source of these scruples, and whether due to bombing, blockade, radiation or the like, the unspecified death is more acceptable than the specified death. But is it more ethically acceptable to treat life and death as a lottery than to inflict death on specified groups of people. And why is it more acceptable to condone, as a means of warfare, the heavy bombing of cities and towns with the statistical certainty of innocent victims, but to condemn the terrorism that purposely kills innocent civilians as a pawn in a political response.

There are two possible answers, and neither is very satisfactory. Terrorism is specifically intended to kill innocents; in city bombing their death is merely accepted. The historian, of course, is not an ethicist. But how robust a distinction does this really amount to? The second is that evil regimes hold their own citizens hostage and are as responsible for the death of “innocents” as are those who seek to defeat them. The Germans started the war, or their Führer did. Well, this sounds good, but it doesn’t diminish the complicity of the bombers. At what age did one become a Nazi or even a supporter? Surely not younger than 4 or 5 or 6 or...or...or. Readers expect historians (legitimately, I think) to take a surrogate responsibility for approval or disapproval of their protagonists’ hard choices. To say that Friedrich’s “Fire” is flawed by lack of balance or inflammatory language cannot get us off the hook. As good liberals, we might plausibly argue that our statesmen and pilots could have killed fewer babies or non-combatants, and probably that is where most of us are

left after reading his book. Yet at the end I am nevertheless forced to confront inconsistencies and beliefs that I would rather avoid. *Jus in bello* remains at best an asymptotic guideline, never fully to be achieved, often to be hypocritically violated. But what other choice do we have?