

Selected book reviews of *The Fire*, Jörg Friedrich, trans. Allison Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005):

From the review in: *The Independent* (London), “The inferno that still blazes,” by David Cesarani, published January 18, 2007:

“One reader of Jörg Friedrich’s epic account of the Allied air offensive against Germany during the Second World War told him it was ‘an encyclopedia of pain.’ The seemingly endless recapitulation of death and destruction certainly makes it hard going. But Friedrich’s method and style are mesmerising. This is a book that demands to be read, no matter how uncomfortable the experience.

But it also calls for caution. The book aroused controversy in Germany because it seemed to draw an equivalence between Nazi genocidal policies and Allied goals in the air war. When Friedrich characterised the bombing campaign as a ‘comprehensive extermination strategy,’ he seemed to be evoking the victimhood of the Jews in order to curry sympathy for the Germans.

Allison Brown’s fine translation reveals that, while Friedrich may not be entirely acquitted, his thesis is more complex and ambiguous than some of his critics allowed.”

From the review in: *The Houston Chronicle* (Houston, TX), “View from under the bombs: German historian questions need for Allied air attacks,” by Adam R. Seipp, published February 1, 2007:

“Between 1940 and 1945 more than half a million German civilians perished as the Allies mounted an increasingly coordinated and deadly air offensive designed to break not only Germany’s ability to fight but also the will of her people to do so.

In 2002 the historian Jörg Friedrich published an enormously popular but highly controversial history of the bombing campaign in his native Germany. Thankfully, it has now been translated into English. Readers interested in the history of World War II, or those who want to understand the very different ways in which Germans understand what Americans tend to think of as the defining moment of their ‘greatest generation,’ owe it to themselves to read this book.

It has been difficult for Germans to publicly commemorate, or even discuss, the suffering of Germans during the war without seeming to trivialize or relativize the crimes of their countrymen. Issues like the postwar expulsion of millions of Eastern European Germans, the violence of the Soviet invasion or the air war against German cities were hopelessly politicized and bitterly contested. The public memory of the air war seemed to belong to those at the ideological extremes. The radical right accused the Allies of ‘crimes’ equal to anything the Nazis might have done, while those on the left memorialized the 1945 destruction of Dresden as proof of Western belligerence.

The past decade has seen a cautious reappraisal as German writers like W.G. Sebald, Günter Grass and Guido Knopp have begun to consider the wartime role of Germans as both victims and perpetrators of wartime violence. Friedrich’s contribution to this debate asks readers to consider the air war not in terms of the other human horrors of World War II but as a tragedy of its own. Many readers will take exception to this distinction, but it deserves to be considered.

The path of a bomb

The Fire is not just a well-documented piece of historical writing. It is also a poignant, lyrical and terrible account of human suffering. Friedrich ingeniously structures the book to follow the path of a bomb, beginning in the cabin of a Lancaster bomber

manned by a crew in mortal terror of fighters and anti-aircraft fire. The narrative follows the munitions as they fall through the roofs of densely packed half-timbered houses and into the cellars and bomb shelters where Germans crouched, prayed and died.

Many of Friedrich's conclusions challenge widely held assumptions about the air war over Germany. Bombing, he argues, was largely ineffective, failed to significantly weaken civilian morale and succeeded primarily in killing civilians and flattening Germany's urban landscape.

...
In his account of the bombing of medieval Hildesheim, Friedrich grimly suggests that, while locals saw their community as a cultural treasure, the Americans thought of it as 'a train station that happened to have a city surrounding it.' The result was a devastated city and more than 1,700 dead.

Because the war ended with the destruction of Nazism, generations of Germans have been asked to view the bomber campaign as a necessary component of their liberation. Provocatively, Friedrich asks, 'If Allied history does not depict this as a tragedy, then does German history also have to view it as a total success?'

It is here that Friedrich's book is most controversial and most likely to anger readers. There is some unfortunate language, carefully parsed in Allison Brown's generally excellent translation, in which Friedrich uses terms like 'extermination' that resonate with the very real genocide Germans carried out in Eastern Europe.

Friedrich's account does not, as some of his harshest critics have suggested, ask us to draw moral equivalencies between the air war and the crimes of the Nazis. *The Fire* reminds us of the terrible inadequacy of the official language of war. Those who planned and carried out the bombing campaign targeted 'military production' and 'civilian morale.' Those who lived and died in the path of falling bombs were human beings, a lesson that should not be forgotten in any year or any war."