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The Inhuman Bombing Of Germany, 1940-1945

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'Are we beasts?' asked Winston Churchill one night in 1943 after watching a film of the bomb damage done to Germany. The question was probably rhetorical: Churchill had authorised the bombing campaign from its puny beginnings in 1940 to the massive Combined Offensive launched with the American air forces in the last two years of war. His language was always intemperate and flowery - 'extermination', 'annihilation' and so on. Did he mean it? Did the British military machine set out deliberately in the Second World War on a path to the genocide of the German people?

This issue lies at the heart of Jörg Friedrich's searing account of the bombing of around 150 German cities between 1940 and 1945. In Germany his book sold half-a-million copies. He is the first German historian to expose in remorseless, almost unreadable detail just what the millions of tons of high explosive and incendiary bombs did to Germany's people and its cultural heritage. Most British readers will be familiar with Dresden, which has come to symbolise the awful horror of a ruthless total war. What they will not know is the fate of a host of other small cities - Kassel, Paderborn, Aachen, Swinemünde, and many more - which were all but obliterated by the bombing, or of the many large cities such as Cologne or Essen which experienced more than 250 raids each, so many that at the end the bombers were simply turning ruins into ruins.

Friedrich never quite says that this campaign was genocidal, but his language, too, is immoderate and reproachful. These are massacres, the cellars in which ordinary Germans were roasted to death become 'crematoria', and the bomber crews are exterminating the enemy, not simply destroying his will to resist. He places blame for this squarely on Winston Churchill, whose 'bloody will', as he calls it, drove on the campaign, and

whose occasional second thoughts were always suppressed in favour of doing more of the same until the famous point just after Dresden when he finally, and far too late, told Bomber Command not to bomb just for the sake of pure terror. He finds reasons for Churchill's attitude: Britain's ineffectual war effort could do little else for three years after expulsion from France in 1940; the radicalisation of bombing policy reflected the limitations of the air weapon; the necessity of showing Stalin that Britain meant business compelled a raising of the stakes of horror for the political effect it might have. But killing as many German civilians as possible in ways that became progressively more grotesque was Britain's strategy from 1940 to the last attacks in April 1945.

This is a point of view that will probably not go down well with the British public and this is all to the good. For too long the obsession with the Second World War has sustained cosy myths about the Blitz spirit. Schoolchildren are invited to share the Blitz experience or imagine themselves as wistful evacuees. Friedrich's book should explode this domesticated bombing culture once and for all. Bombing was horrific above everything that civilians had to endure from warfare; Friedrich's book is a raw account of how it was under the bombs for five years. The more remarkable thing is just how the German population endured it without the 'collapse of morale' that the Allied planners sought. Friedrich has little explanation of how or why; his intention is to restore a lost narrative of the war and to remind the British public that it was their grandparents' generation who did this.

Friedrich does not, however, tell it just as it was, and this is a pity. The central claims in the book scarcely stand up to historical scrutiny. It was not just Bomber Command that was responsible for the estimated 450,000 dead; the US air forces soon abandoned any pretence that they could bomb with precision, and two-thirds of their bombs were dropped blind through cloud and smog. A staggering 87 per cent of all bombs missed their target. American planes also killed tens of thousands of civilians. Nor was Bomber Command ever ordered exclusively to murder the German population. The directive for 'area attacks' of 14 February 1942 contained a long appendix, not mentioned by Friedrich, which listed more precise military and economic target systems, while limiting attacks on cities to those with large industrial areas and extensive workers' housing. For much of the last year of war, Bomber Command was ordered to attack transport, oil and other military targets linked with the war on land as it rolled across the German homeland in 1945. Of course all these attacks, British and American, resulted in massive civilian casualty and the destruction of city centres, but it is important to get the history right before trying to argue that Bomber Command alone undertook deliberate and sustained campaigns to annihilate

the civil population. In any assessment of crime, motive must be properly established.

The bomber was a terribly blunt instrument in the Second World War. Even with smart bombs in today's wars, civilians suffer all the time. Recognising that, the British and Americans ought to have abandoned the attack on the home front since it clearly violated the agreed rules of engagement in war, even if it did not formally violate international law. Neville Chamberlain in September 1939 ordered Bomber Command to avoid any attacks that ran the risk of killing a single civilian; Churchill, his successor early in May 1940, ordered bombing to begin at once. Friedrich is right to see Churchill as the driving force behind the campaign, and to recognise that his ruthless bellicosity might even have embraced gas or germ warfare if there had been sufficient threat from the enemy. The important thing to learn from this is just why the two major democracies engaged in the end in forms of total war that abandoned altogether the moral high ground they had tried to occupy in the 1930s. Even Truman, no flamboyant warrior like Churchill, authorised the dropping of the atomic bombs. This is a question Friedrich makes little attempt to answer beyond asserting that killing civilians was Britain's soft option.

There was something almost biblical about the bombing campaign, with its vocabulary of retribution and destruction. It is therefore not so surprising that the plan to destroy Hamburg in 1943 was code-named Operation Gomorrah, Harris's version of 'Shock and Awe'. Keith Lowe's *Inferno* tells a story that is well-known in outline, if less familiar in the detail. He has searched German sources well and, like Friedrich, focuses on the story on the ground. His tone is matter-of-fact rather than literary, but the history is scrupulous. Hamburg endured the first firestorm, losing perhaps 45,000 people. This had not been planned, but a combination of bomb density and meteorological conditions made it possible. Hamburg had been an Anglophile city, with strong liberal and, more recently, social-democrat and communist politics. Yet the working-class, anti-Nazi districts were the ones to be destroyed. Lowe's account is sensitive to all the paradoxes of the bombing war and in a no-nonsense conclusion he reminds readers that at least the bombing finally knocked militarism out of the German people. A point of view, perhaps, but not one that Friedrich would much care for.

There is no doubt that *The Fire* will create a stir. Reading it more than sixty years after the event, it seems hard to believe that the countries of the Western world battered each other's cities and killed in excess of 650,000 people to save their particular versions of civilisation. The real merit of both these books may be the realisation once and for all among those Western democratic publics that bombing should be confined to history.

Winston Churchill was knighted after World War 2 and buried from Westminster Abbey, perhaps the highest tribute that could be paid to him, while Adolf Hitler has been accorded the status of perhaps the most evil politician in human history.

WINSTON CHURCHILL in July 1940

"When I look around to see how we can win the war I see that there is only one sure path. We have no Continental army which can defeat the German military power.. Should [Hitler].. not try invasion [of Britain].. there is one thing that will bring him back and bring him down, and that is an absolutely devastating, exterminating attack by very heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland. We must be able to overwhelm them by this means, without which I do not see a way through. We cannot accept any aim lower than air mastery. When can it be obtained?" [Extract from Winston S Churchill The Second World War (Volume 2 Their Finest Hour Appendix A), Memo from Prime Minister to Minister of Aircraft Production, 8 July 1940].

ADOLF HITLER in May 1940

Britain and France declared war on Germany, not the other way around. Hitler actually wanted peace with Britain, as the German generals admitted (Basil Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill* 1948, Pan Books 1983) with regard to the so-called Halt Order of 24 May 1940 at Dunkirk, where Hitler had the opportunity to capture the entire British Army, but chose not to. Liddell Hart, one of Britain's most respected military historians, quotes the German General von Blumentritt with regard to this Halt Order:

"He (Hitler) then astonished us by speaking with admiration of the British Empire, of the necessity for its existence, and of the civilization that Britain had brought into the world. He remarked, with a shrug of the shoulders, that the creation of its Empire had been achieved by means that were often harsh, but 'where there is planing, there are shavings flying'. He compared the British Empire with the Catholic Church saying they were both essential elements of stability in the world. He said that all he wanted from Britain was that she should acknowledge Germany's position on the Continent. The return of Germany's colonies would be desirable but not essential, and he would even offer to support Britain with troops if she should be involved in difficulties anywhere.." (p 200).

According to Liddell Hart, "At the time we believed that the repulse of the Luftwaffe in the 'Battle over Britain' had saved her. That is only part of the explanation, the last part of it. The original cause, which goes much deeper,

is that Hitler did not want to conquer England. He took little interest in the invasion preparations, and for weeks did nothing to spur them on; then, after a brief impulse to invade, he veered around again and suspended the preparations. He was preparing, instead, to invade Russia" (p140).

David Irving in the foreword to his book *The Warpath* (1978) refers to "the discovery.. that at no time did this man (Hitler) pose or intend a real threat to Britain or the Empire."

A major awkwardness concerning Churchill's conduct of the war lies in the secret British policy of so-called 'area bombing', adopted early in 1942 and outlined by (Lord) CP Snow in the 1960 Godkin Lectures at Harvard University (published in his book *Science and Government*, Oxford University Press 1961). Snow had an insider's view of the development of this policy. He outlines how the sinister Professor FA Lindemann (later to become Lord Cherwell, Churchill's chief scientific adviser), persuaded the British Cabinet to adopt the policy of directing bombing campaigns primarily against German working-class housing. 'Middle-class houses have too much space around them, and so are bound to waste bombs; factories and "military objectives" had long since been forgotten, except in official bulletins, since they were much too difficult to find and hit' (p 48). Snow asks, 'What will people of the future think of us? Will they say.. we were wolves with the minds of men? Will they think that we had resigned our humanity? They will have the right.' (p 49). Fortunately, Snow needn't have worried. There have been and remain such powerful vested interests committed to preserving the myths of World War II that even the history departments of universities have in most cases assisted with the cover-up.

The respected British military historian Martin Middlebrook says, 'In some ways, Area Bombing was a three-year period of deceit practiced upon the British public and on world opinion. It was felt to be necessary that the exact nature of R.A.F. bombing should not be revealed. It could not be concealed that German cities were being hit hard, and that residential areas in those cities were receiving many of the bombs, but the impression was usually given that industry was the main target and that any bombing of workers' housing areas was an unavoidable necessity. Charges of 'indiscriminate bombing' were consistently denied.. The deceit lay in the concealment of the fact that the areas being most heavily bombed were nearly always either city centres or densely populated residential areas, which rarely contained any industry.. The vital links in the dissemination of this view were the press and the radio upon which the public depended for all wartime news.. Neutral reports [of the campaign against the residential areas of the German city of Hamburg, for example] that 20,000 or 30,000 people had been killed were

dismissed as 'Nazi-inspired stories'.. The military historian Sir Basil Liddell Hart [after the Thousand Bomber Raid on Cologne with its claim of so many acres of city destroyed] wrote: "It will be ironical if the defenders of civilization depend for victory upon the most barbaric and unskilled way of winning a war that the modern world has seen." ' (Middlebrook, *The Battle of Hamburg* (1980) pp 343-4). In his foreword, Middlebrook notes 'I am likely to be criticized.. for choosing a series of raids which produced such extremes of horror on the ground. But I must point out that a large proportion of the raids carried out by R.A.F. Bomber Command in the Second World War were devoted to this type of bombing. What happened at Hamburg was when Bomber Command 'got everything right' (p 12). In reality many of these raids consisted of initial attacks using high explosive bombs to break up the buildings, followed with attacks using thousands of incendiary bombs to set alight all the fabrics, furnishing and upholstery exposed by the explosives. In this way firestorms were created under the right conditions which burned tens of thousands of people alive, especially the women and children at home while the men were at the front.

Churchill himself ordered the firebomb raid on the city of Dresden (David Irving *The Destruction of Dresden* (1966) pp. 96-100), Alexander McKee *Dresden 1945* (1982) p 300, 306, 310) in the last months of the war, producing the most spectacular deliberate firestorm in the history of Europe. This action was probably the major war crime committed in Europe - Dresden was not in any way a military target, and was packed with refugees fleeing the advancing Russians, mainly women and children and the elderly who were unfit to fight. It is therefore understandable that it has been necessary to distract attention away from this viciously and appallingly barbaric act by fabricating war crimes afterwards and attributing them to the other side, a procedure that is finally starting to come unstuck. The Bush-Blair attack on Iraq at the behest of Zionists in the US administration such as Paul Wolfowitz has demonstrated before a world audience the lies that can be used to start wars, and in fact usually do. The transparency and scale of Bush Administration lies, together with the support given to the lies by a diverse array of other governments, is producing a revulsion for professional politicians and their handlers and spin doctors and sponsors.

While Churchill has been given titles such as "the greatest Englishman who ever lived", this does not stand up to any scrutiny. While he had unquestioned gifts of oratory - he may have been one of the most bombastic Englishmen who ever lived. His ego was awesome. At a time when he and his wife were short of finance:

"Clemmie (Mrs Churchill).. told me that Winston was most extravagant about his underclothes. They were made of very finely woven silk (pale pink) and came from the Army & Navy Stores and cost the eyes out of the

head. This year according to her calculations he spent something like eighty pounds on them. When I taxed him with this curious form of self-indulgence he replied: 'It is essential to my well-being. I have a very delicate and sensitive cuticle which demands the finest covering. Look at the texture of my cuticle - feel it (uncovering his forearm by rolling up his sleeve). I have a cuticle without blemish - except on one small portion of my anatomy where I sacrificed a piece of skin to accommodate a wounded brother-officer on my way back from the Sudan campaign'." - [quoted from Paul Johnson, The Oxford Book of Political Anecdotes (1989) p215.]

Churchill was also quoted as having the belief that 'in wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.' Just what truth was he referring to - the British guarantee to Poland, which turned out not to apply to FD Roosevelt's Yalta-agreed Communist control of Poland, for instance?

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