

Der Brand

Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945

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In war everything is allowed as long as it serves the ultimate end - Victory. *Alles was den Sieg dient ist entschuldigt*. In other words, *Macht macht rechts*. The ultimate crime, as far as war is concerned, is defeat. The barbarity and cruelty that every act of war entails becomes a crime, once it has been revealed to have served no ultimate purpose.

Germany lost the war. This must have been a foregone conclusion. What could a single country do against a superior force that could draw on almost limitless resources. In modern war, valor and skill counts for little in the end, what counts is material superiority. The initial successes were indeed spectacular, and there were valor and skill throughout, probably unmatched by the opponents. But in the end this counted for less and less. As Goebbels put it with refreshing honesty.

- 1.Kriegsjahr. Wir haben gesiegt
- 2.Kriegsjahr. Wir werden siegen
- 3.Kriegsjahr. Wir müssen siegen
- 4.Kriegsjahr. Wir knnen nicht besiegt werden

The war was total. Total war means total, doing everything in order to hurt the enemy and interfere with his capacity to wage war. Everything that is done to shorten the war, to hasten a favorable outcome, is not only morally excusable, but morally imperative. This is a simple moral formula that is hard to argue against and which has a wide latitude of application. It is the moral equivalent of a blank check.

The allied forces did not directly engage German forces until D-day in 1944¹ the front they chose to attack instead was the weak home-front of unarmed civilians living in cities.

There was a rationale for this, namely to take out industrial centers, especially those producing military equipment, and to hit at the infrastructure such as railways. But of course where to draw the line? Cities as such, were part of the infrastructure of a country, they contributed to its wealth, and were in fact part of it. To hurt a city, especially an important city, was to hurt the enemy and thus to score an important point. Thus in the beginning of the war there was a kind of 'friendly' competition between the British and the Germans, hitting each others cities. Goebbels even suggested that they should keep a tally between the fatalities just to see who was doing best. The party thought this to be a frivolous idea. The Germans boasted of having flattened London, but if so, why did they have to come back to it over and over again? The populace remained dubious.

Bombing each others cities was not a very efficient way of waging war, and the Germans

¹ True, there was the North African theatre with Rommel and Montgomery, but this was obviously peripheral to the war as such. Also the invasion against Sicily, ostensibly against the forces of Mussolini, did mostly involve German, but once again only a marginal part of them

soon gave it up, while the British persevered, maybe because they had nothing else to do. To bomb a city is not so easy, first you have to evade the anti-aircraft of your enemy, the artillery fired from below, the fast attack planes, that rendered the heavy bombers sitting ducks. Thus to make bombing feasible you have to attack at night rendering yourself as invisible as possible. But then it is hard to identify your targets. Early on the lesson to keep the cities dark had been absorbed by the populations on either side. But if the city was situated by the coast, or along a river, the reflection of the moon light, made those features obvious, and could serve as a reliable guide. That made some cities far more vulnerable than others to attack. A lot of innovations had to be made in order to make bombing feasible. Navigation through radar was one, but of course radar worked both ways, and you needed means of foiling your enemy. (One such very effective method, revealed only later in the war, was to drop millions of short strips of tin to fool the anti-aircraft radars.) To assign some speedy planes to mark the target with color coded flares for the benefit of the bombers, another one. And above all, to move from the simple stratagem of dropping bombs to that of causing wide-spread fires, ideally those that merged together forming one single entity covering many square miles, creating its own mini-weather ending up as so called fire storms burning everything combustible in its way. The devastation of such raging firestorms did not significantly differ from those nuclear devices later to be dropped on Japan. The bombs had to carry all their explosive energies and tended to become heavy, putting a limit on what feasibly could be done. And that was not very much when directed against a city, especially as accuracy was very low, and the effect of a bomb of limited damage. This was no way of causing havoc. What you needed to do was to exploit the combustible energy stored on site at the target, and that of course singled out targets, not because of their military importance, but because of their combustibility.

The effect was that instead of causing any dent in the production of weapons the damage was entirely human and cultural. To destroy a steel mill was not very easy, it did not catch fire, the machinery and ovens worked even if the surrounding buildings were reduced to rubble, and what was damaged was easily repaired. And above all, the production could be farmed out into the country, leaving the cities irrelevant. The ideal target was a middle-sized city, with a dense historical center, with narrow streets and lots of wood and other combustibles. In Hamburg, they managed to cause firestorms which killed tens and thousands of people, but that turned out to be impossible in Berlin, with wide streets, fire walls, and quite another type of buildings than the typical historical German city.

As an effect a very large and significant part of the cultural heritage of Germany was reduced to ashes. This caused no reduction in the capability of the Germans to wage war, and to a Hitler the destruction of old cities was no big deal, it would just make it easier for him to rebuild him entirely to his taste after the eventual victory, But to posterity it was a catastrophe. Nowhere in the world is the density of culture more pronounced than in Germany. A culture going back at least a thousand year, living an unbroken tradition of different levels. There were the charming medieval cities with their ornate half-timbered houses. There were the palaces of the Renaissance, the Barock and the Rococo. There were old monasteries, domes, castles. There were countless works of arts, historical relics and artifacts, libraries with priceless books, historical archives. In short a very large part

of the German cultural heritage was eradicated for ever with no means of being replaced. The bombings of the Second World War caused a complete break in the traditions of many cities, the one before the war having nothing in common with the one after the war, save for the name and geographical position. Ultimately the loss was not only to the Germans, who as caretakers had the primary responsibility for its preservation, but to all of us. German culture lies at the heart of European culture, and all European cultures are intimately connected to the German. Of course much of the destruction was foreseen, and everything that could be moved was to be moved to security beforehand. On the other hand what was mobile was just one part of it, maybe not the most important, and everything that was mobile did not have time to be moved, nor did everything that was moved rest optimally but were destroyed by salt, moisture, heat².

One may to some extent forgive what was done in desperation, but the longer the war continued, and the more assured eventual victory became, the more effective and pointless the destruction. As the German could no longer defend the airspace above them, bombing missions could be carried through with total impunity. While before the risk to the bombers were higher than to those targeted by their lethal cargo, making the probability of a crew to survive all its assignments over a month, rather slim; they now could be assured of survival, missions seldom losing a plane, unless planes collided among themselves for being too greedily packed. No longer the need to steal during the night and concentrate on the more easily accessible parts of the Reich. Now it lay open in its entirety day and night. Cities like Würzburg and Dresden were completely destroyed in the last few weeks of the campaign. Completely needlessly, only as a demonstration that it could be done. Flotillas involving thousands of planes were regularly discharged, and cities were literally bombed hundred of times to ensure complete destruction.

To posterity the loss of the cultural world is the greatest, because the most obviously tangible. Germany, and hence Europe, has become a far poorer country as a result, and the hollowness of modern German cities bespeaks a loss of tradition and history, making them almost as pointless as the typical American one - conglomerations of consumers. To contemporaries it was the loss of life and limb that was the most urgent. The death of a human being is private, only known and knowable to those who knew him, to outsiders a matter of indifference, after all people die all the time, and we are all bound to die anyway. The loss they cause is only perceivable to a few, to pretend otherwise is hypocrisy. But this of course only refers to one thing, not to the other, and although we may shrug our shoulders at the death of strangers, we would be extremely upset would we in any way be culpable to their demise. But that seems to be a social thing, a social convention suspended during time of war.

Considering the complete destruction of the cities, it is remarkable that the toll in human life was not higher. At worst it reached a few percent, often it was counted in parts per thousands. The first few tentative arial attacks only left casualties on the order of traffic accidents. Where firestorms worked beautifully, the number of casualties could reach five digit numbers. In total about half a million German city dwellers lost their

² Unprotected books in salt-mines are salted, this is catastrophic once moisture sets in on their retrieval. The stained glass panes of a church window, are meant to be in the open air, when stacked together in damp surroundings, the brilliant colors fade and turn milky

lives. This is a significant number per se, equivalent to that of a couple of catastrophic earthquakes, the likes of which seldom has occurred in modern times. When compared to the total death-toll or the second world war, that of soldiers and Jews we are speaking about a sideshow. How come the toll of life was not higher?

Humans are mobile, there were natural shelters as well as man-made bunkers. Ordinary bombings, such as those during the London Blitz, only kills the stray individual. It was the over-raging fires that did the job, trapping people, even those in shelters. The basement of a house offers complete protection, except for the unlikely direct hit of a bomb. It is strong enough to withstand the collapse of the house above, and it provides shelter from splinter. It is also cool, but only for some time. Eventually it absorbs the heat and becomes a death-trap, hot as an oven, filled with poisonous gas (most people who died, died from carbon-mono-oxide) and smoke. After some time its inhabitants have to desert its spurious sense of security and go against their instincts and brave the flaming city above, hoping to find tolerable passages through the sea of fire in order escape the heat and find places where to breath. The real firestorm does not really kill people, as the author puts it, it just creates a space, in which life just cannot continue. For a brief but lethal moment, in a limited area, conditions are created that are not of this earth, but of some other planets deadly atmosphere.

The intention of the allied bombing command was exactly this, to kill as many people as possible, as often as possible, in order to create a sense of un-relented terror in the hope of suffocating hostilities. By dent of constant attrition, like a man pummeling another, the life of the enemy would eventually dissipate. There is a word for this. The word is terrorism. The amount of terrorism exercised by the Allies against innocent civilians, a large percentage of which were women and children (and foreign slave-workers and prisoners of wars, not surprisingly denied shelter by the German authorities), certainly dwarfs the total of other cases of terrorism that have been perpetrated in the post-war world and which has exercised such excited indignation in recent times. The bombings were not rational, rationalized of course, but irrational, motivated by sheer sadism, planned to perfection by technocrats insulated from the terrors they were bringing about. Those very men could as well have been engaged in the extermination of the Jews, it is the same kind of psychology at work, the same kind of institutionalized barbarity. Not that the annihilation of the Jews and the annihilation of the German cities had anything to do with each other³, much less should be compared and weighed against each others, as if put on opposite scales. Atrocities do not subtract, they do not cancel each other out, that is the specious logic of retaliation, they simply add up.

However, much as the history of the Allied Bombings has been neglected, its revival has been something of a controversy, and the indignation it so rightfully should ignite, stifled. No firestorm of outrage followed its disclosure. There simply was not the required combustible material present. The world is chastened, it can only take in so much when

³ The German extermination camps started to become known around '43. There were suggestions to bomb the tracks leading to them, maybe even the installations themselves, and thus to interfere with their operations. Such suggestions which could have saved the lives of Jews, were turned down. The war against Germany was not waged on behalf of its extermination of its (and later others) Jewish populations, it was not a morale crusade, although of course in retrospect it has been made out as such.

it comes to compassion. Everyone vies for the status of the victim, it ennobles. So the attitude was more one of distaste. So now the Germans are trying to enlist sympathy too, claiming that they suffered as well, they they deserve their share of compassion. This was thought of as bad taste, not the least by the Germans themselves, constantly shamed by the deeds of the past. But this is not the point, it was not the point of the author, nor has it been the point of writers like Grass and Sebald either. There is no competition going on. Atrocities are not there as badges of honors, to be compared with each other, in the hope of having them eventually even out. The Germans, or at least some of them, certainly deserved what was coming to them, and Germany as a nation has of course done very well after the war (which maybe another reason for the reluctance to come to grips with the past), much better than it deserved. It has been treated respectfully, been given aid and sympathy and encouragement, and risen out of the ashes, as the proverbial Phoenix. Germany as a nation has done well according to the criteria we ordinarily employ in the judgement of such matters, it would certainly be unseemly of it to indulge in self-pity.

But nations as such are abstractions, and as such impervious to the sufferings that can only befall individuals. They cannot be put on trial and sentenced, nor can they be punished as nations, it certainly does not make sense⁴. The real moral lessons we can and should draw from the atrocities of the allied bombings are completely unrelated to Germany, its war efforts and its own atrocities, the lessons are far more abstract and hence more widely applicable. First and foremost it relates to the moral question whether the ends justifies the means, or whether the ends are fashioned out of the means. Because this only makes sense if there is an ultimate means, if not every atrocity could be excused given a suitable context. It is a question of not using double standards. Would the Germans have practiced the same kind of terrorist fire bombings on the cities of their opponents, those certainly would have been condemned from the start and seen as yet another example of their inhumanity. If we can excuse our own excesses, than by symmetry so could the Germans, would history have taken another turn. Our willingness to excuse our own atrocities, is nothing but a willingness to excuse any atrocity whatsoever would the motivation so be present.

It is not a question about one side being as bad as the other side, for the great majority of people in the world, the actual outcome was one to be very thankful for. (One may also argue that this was indeed the only feasible outcome, maybe also attainable by purely pacifist means, but that is an issue that goes way beyond this essay, although the question certainly is raised by it.) Once the German were stopped from continuing the war, hostilities stopped immediately, and rather than being a foe it was treated as a friend in need. It is this asymmetry to which we can base our moral superiority, whenever it is absent, the basis for such a superiority is undermined. This is a simple fact that has to be kept in mind, and failure to do so, may to some extent explain the moral confusion characterizing much of the controversy,

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⁴ Sense of it was tried at the Versailles treaty, but the folly of that was immediately pointed out by intellectuals, and eventually proved to be a chimera.