

**Jorg Friedrich (Translated by Allison Brown)**  
**The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945)**  
**(New York: Columbia University Press, 536 pp.).**

It is meaningful that the subject of this review is the element of fire. Not the fire of the sun scorching with dangerous intensity due to depleted ozone; not the fire of unprecedented incidents of lightning striking throughout a region. The subject in this context is the fire of fear and hatred, the fire of war and fury, the fire of technology and savagery.

One goes to history for a reason. Perhaps the best of all reasons is a personal connection, so that a seeker may come to better understand what to expect and evaluate how life got to where life is. In a remark on the similarity of shared historical perception by Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, Maria Pia Lara, in her study **NARRATING EVIL** (*Columbia University Press*), writes that, "It is a view that connects the past to the future with a moral thread placed in the hand of the historian," which role is also associated with poet and storyteller. In the same book professor Lara also quotes Arendt on the place of reflective judgment in historical reexamination: "The spectacle before the spectator—enacted, as it were, for his judgment—is history as a whole." It is within the framework of these principles of personal connectivity and moral expressivity, or reflective judgment that I wish to proceed with this present review. The title under consideration is, in my estimation, written in this same spirit of opening public dialogue on arenas of past events and memory.

Allow me a bit of personal reminiscence by way of approach to Jorg Friedrich's work, **THE FIRE**. I grew up in the west country of St. Louis in a community called University City, due to its relationship to Washington University, a private prestige school founded by TS Elliot's grandfather. In the days of my childhood, University City had a demographic that was between 85-90% Jewish. Insiders in the township called our home turf U. City for short. And so pervasive was the Jewishness of the place that outsiders, derogatorily, referred to it as Jew City.

When I was on the verge of my early teens, Adolf Eichmann was put on trial in Jerusalem and U. City was literally inundated with shockingly graphic books and periodicals exposing the Nazi Holocaust. A picture then was certainly worth a thousand words, as the photographs presented were witness to millions of dead. These testimonies and depictions were a traumatic shock, causing a particular sensitivity to this (and consequently other) systems of mass murder and genocide. It goes without saying, therefore, that I was not favorably disposed toward Germans. Indeed, even before the Eichmann trial, I remember that whenever my boyhood friends and I played at war, it was always Germans who were the enemy, Germans who had to be killed and defeated.

From such a background, it is a particularly agonizing challenge in my maturity to see "the enemy," in this instance the German people, as also victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity. But do not be mistaken, Jorg Friedrich is no historical revisionist or apologist trying to garner sympathy. He is far too honest of a storyteller, speaking with bold passion but integrity to be accused of any attempted manipulations. His intention rather might be to share with his readers these truths: **(1)** what you are witnessing are the politics of war, regardless of whose side death is coming from, and **(2)** this is what war looks like, in particular modern air war, from the experience of noncombatants on the ground. There is an important dimension here of time and space—the distance between earth and sky and the fatal relationship between what drops from the sky and burst in flaming death and consuming fire upon the earth.

As well, Friedrich is neither a sentimentalist nor a propagandist; far from it! One reads him with combined pathos and horror. The most valuable lesson to be learned from his important, utterly engaging history, pertains to the implications of the story he so skillfully yet openly narrates—that here **too** is what war is: not glory, not patriotism, not honor, not right or wrong, but horror. In reality a grandiose murderous organization with terrifying intentions and executed with precision tuned, atrocious results, progressively determined to destroy civilian populations and the memory of their lives and suffering. While much of the volume draws on source material from the British Bomber Command and

the cabinet meetings of such august personages as Sr Winston Churchill and Arthur Harris, American military participation in strategic death from the skies, in terms of carpet bombing and pyrotechnics necessary to bring about efficiently destructive firestorms—this US role increases as the war moves into its final two years. Moreover, the author's intention is never to deny that Hitler's Nazi German was an evil social machinery engaged in an unprecedented organization of criminality, but rather to open all eyes to the reality that fire bombing urban centers to kill, terrorize and displace civilian populations is also an aspect of the heritage of Prometheus, now in life-devouring service to the industries of war. We might even speculate that there is a way of thinking presented in these pages which leads from the fire bombing of Germany to the nuclear bombings of Japan, and to times and places beyond and more immediately challenging before us.

Examples from **THE FIRE**, the *Bombing of Germany, 1940-45* (in something of a line of developing argument), are given voice:

**p.54:** “The first totally industrialized war, from 1914 to 1918, was followed by a general reflection on the military future. The slaughter at the Belgian-French western front was not to be repeated. The fighters on the front lines were killed off age group by age group, by the ability of both sides to produce a never ending supply of machine guns, ordnance, and artillery munitions. Military strength was no longer based on the military abilities and skills of officers and rank and file, but on the capacity of industry to supply the front with more and better weapons. The war of the future would not be decided at the theater of war but far behind the lines, in the factories and dwellings of the workers.”

**p.66:** “The directive of July 9, 1941, expanded the main effort of dislocating the transportation system with an additional clause: ‘destroying the morale of the civilian population as a whole and of the industrial worker in particular.’ With that the concept that give the war in and of the air its form had been introduced into practice: ‘morale bombing’.”

**p.376:** “The transformation of the body back to matter is a horror to the eyes; only in war does this happen in the light of day.... The infernal scenes that were revealed when cellars were opened challenged any and all public authority. What were the reasons of state when things were permitted to happen as they did in Darmstadt? Heating pipes burst in the buried cellars and the occupants were boiled in the overflow... Knots of human beings were found stuck together, needing tools to separate them. According to reports on cleaning out the cellar of the Café Hauptpost at the main post office...the bomb blast killed the occupants, including a woman in labor. ‘Either the people boiled to death in water or they were charred. Or else they just sat there like ghosts, their faces covered by blankets and cloth, as they tried to protect themselves from the smoke.’”

**p.380:** “The urban population that had to take leave of the light of day precisely because they belonged to the urban population did not need a soldier's grave, that was an individual one. The soldier was a legal entity even if he could be killed. This was only permitted to continue as long as he himself continued to kill. If he laid down his weapon, he enjoyed a pardon.... The children of Heilbronn could not lay down their weapons because they did not have any in their hands. Consequently, they also received no pardon—and how could they have been taken prisoner? They were neither legal entities nor individuals; they were a group defined by virtue of their residence in the target area.”

Of course a reader can stop here and object, saying, and rightly so: But wait! Wasn't the Nazi Reich doing the same and worse—categorizing by group and annihilating—throughout all of Europe, most especially consuming in a murderous strategy millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, Slavs? And since the answer to the question is yes, then wasn't some measure of payback (these days we might call it blowback) due the entire nation of perpetrators, and even retribution in kind exactly what was deserved? Or contrarily we might stop together and agree on a public discussion by way of reflective judgment on the universal responsibility to not have history of this sort repeated through “Shock and Awe,” Armageddon, or similar campaigns of the politics of mass destruction and indiscriminate death.

Here, a further quotation, from page 461 of the chapter **Stone**—a poignant recognition of the primary target in this our ongoing era of total war: “An air offensive could do little damage to a rural population. Its violence unfurled only in collapsing that which was firm and solid, in burying people and property in rubble, in creating fire bridges and draft conditions in the buildings.... The air war was not the tonnage dropped but the blazing city thereby created. The dwellings of generations did not merely split in two, they became masses of stone that struck people dead, glowing ovens that asphyxiated, dungeons that gassed to death. Its final face was that of fury.”

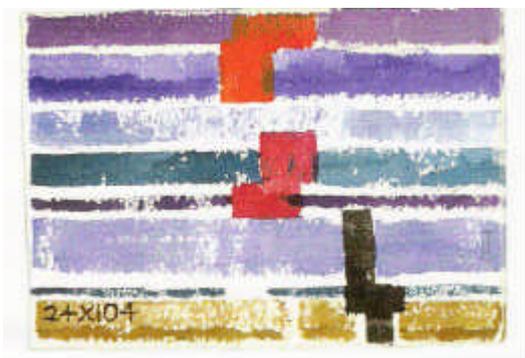
Within his studious while equally impassioned pages, Jorg Frederich remarks at one point that the age of the youngest victim of one technologically orchestrated, Allied fire bombing was but one hour old. Not a year, not a day, but the infant defenselessness of a single hour of breathing life! Had he survived, would that little German baby have grown up to become another Eichmann or a Himmler, a shopkeeper or a Beethoven? We shall never know. Let the question remain open before us then as a sort of malignant fantasy or ever threatening nightmare. But the final word; of recollect as well as universal warning; belongs to the author himself. So that if some think it is glory to accomplish the mission from afar, on the receiving end of duty, there is horror.

**Jorg Frederick:** *In Pforzheim it had been bitter cold; in Hamburg on the other hand, it was hotter and drier than it had been in ten years.... The combination of the climate, the incendiary ratio, the collapsed defenses, and the structure of the city blocks created what Harris's codename “Gomorrah” predicted. Like Abraham in Genesis 9:28, Harris looked toward the sinful city, “and behold, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace.” It melted between forty thousand and fifty thousand people.... Seven thousand children and adolescents lost their lives, and ten thousand were orphaned.*

*The small, close courtyards turned into glowing cells whose inmates could not escape death. At the zenith of the firestorm, the pure heat radiation caused buildings to ignite all at once, from the roof to the ground, like a darting flame. The gale winds drew the oxygen out of the cellars like a gigantic pump. Six hours of firestorm supposedly forced two billion tons of fresh air up more than four miles through the air chimney. This created horizontal wind velocities into the storm of up to 170 miles per hour, causing people to lose their footing.... The rescue crews that later gathered the remains of those who had suffocated from lack of oxygen or had been incinerated by the radiant heat had to let the masses of rubble cool down for ten days.*

*A firestorm usually developed over several hours, but in Hamburg it formed during the raid itself.... Those who were caught in it were ripped into the furnace like poor souls in perdition.*

David Sparenberg



Painting: Lona Towsley