



2010.03.04

Randall Hansen, *Fire and Fury: The Allied Bombing of Germany, 1942–1945*. New York: NAL Caliber, 2009. Pp. x, 352. ISBN 978–0–451–22759–1.

Review by Jonathan D. Beard, New York City (jbeard@panix.com).

Few topics in the historiography of World War II have remained as controversial as the Anglo-American bombing campaign against Germany. Arguments about its efficacy and morality raged during the war and continue to exercise historians, the reading public, and politicians. Bombing Germany cost the Royal Air Force and the U.S. Army Air Force about 81,000 airmen, while over 600,000 German civilians died as dozens of their country's cities were reduced to gray shells of their former glory. For decades, the topic of German suffering and losses was almost taboo in Germany itself, but this changed in 2002 with the publication of Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand*,<sup>1</sup> which depicts Allied bombing as deliberate cultural destruction and mass murder—making clear allusions to the Nazi killing of Europe's Jews.<sup>2</sup>

In *Fire and Fury*, Randall Hansen, a historian and professor of political science at the University of Toronto, approaches the topic from a different perspective. He contends that the British, under the leadership of the stubborn and charismatic Arthur “Bomber” (or “Butcher”) Harris, deliberately pursued the destruction of Germany's historical cities and their inhabitants right to the end of the war, while the American bombing effort was almost entirely devoted to precision attacks on militarily significant targets. Despite opposition from his superiors, Harris continued to make terror attacks on cities even after the notorious destruction of Dresden (13 February 1945) and maintained that these attacks helped to shorten, even win, the war. The Americans, led by General Carl Spaatz, were never comfortable with the morality of bombing civilians and sought to destroy the German transportation network and synthetic fuel plants in daylight raids that minimized civilian casualties. Hansen damns Harris and the RAF for deliberately choosing to destroy medieval city centers and to kill women and children—actions that failed to speed the collapse of Nazi Germany to any significant extent. He praises the American generals Henry (“Hap”) Arnold and Ira Eaker as well as Spaatz, for heeding their intelligence staffs' advice to first destroy the Luftwaffe and then take out individual industries, thereby shortening the war.

*Fire and Fury* describes leaders and their decisions based on the rich archive of memos and reports written during the war and studies and memoirs composed after it. Hansen excels at quoting just the right passages, like this 1943 memo by Harris, emphasizing his intent not to destroy war-related industries, but to burn out cities and kill their populations:

The aim of our bomber force which went to Cassel on October 22/23 was to wreck the city.... In the course of the proceedings, the Henschel Works and a number of other factories probably got damaged, and this makes the loss to the enemy all the greater. But the fundamental purpose was to knock another great German city out of the war and add it to the growing list of those which are now liabilities and not assets to the enemy from the point of view of morale and production. By obscuring this purpose, we simply rob the whole operation of its point (160).

By contrast, the American general James Doolittle wrote as follows in a letter to his superior, Carl Spaatz, who had ordered him to carpet-bomb Berlin in 1945: “We will, in what may be one of our last and best remembered operations regardless of its effectiveness, violate the basic American principle of precision

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1. Munich: Propyläen. It has since appeared in English as *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945*, tr. Allison Brown (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2006).

2. Readers wanting an action history of the American effort should read Donald L. Miller, *Masters of the Air: America's Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War against Nazi Germany* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006), Hansen's main source for the American side. Max Hastings, *Bomber Command: The Myths and Reality of the Strategic Bombing Offensive 1939–45* (NY: Dial Pr/J. Wade, 1979) has detailed coverage of the RAF campaign.

bombing of targets of strictly military significance for which our tactics were designed and our crews trained and indoctrinated” (252).

Hansen also quotes German leaders on their reaction to Allied raids. Most of these quotes come from the memoirs of Albert Speer,<sup>3</sup> Hitler’s Minister of Armaments and Munitions during the second half of the war. Speer said that, while British raids on cities horrified the Nazi leadership, he himself feared American attacks on such targets as ball bearing plants and synthetic fuel facilities, because without these products, the German war machine would grind to a halt.

Hansen forgoes that staple of books on the air war: combat reports by aircrew. Though he gives some detail on a few raids—Hamburg, the famous “dam-busters,” and the destruction of Dresden—he does not provide much testimony from either Allied bombing crews or the Luftwaffe fighter pilots who shot them down.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that “little people” figure in the book, they are mostly German civilians who survived, or not, the destruction of their cities. Hansen interviewed dozens of these people, besides mining the vast literature of local history in Germany.

Unfortunately, Hansen is weak on the terminology of military technology. The errors do not detract from his argument, but will annoy readers familiar with World War II military history. For instance, in an otherwise accurate description, he calls Gee, the British bombing aid, a “new development in *radar*” (my emphasis), which is an unrelated technology. Similarly, in describing the Kammhuber Line, the German air defense system, he translates “Himmelbett” too literally as “sky bed.” A Himmelbett is a four-poster or canopy bed, and the name was chosen because the defense system created a “canopy” over the radar and searchlight stations. Writing about an American raid on Berlin, he says “Flashlights [read “searchlights”] coned them and flak blasted them,” and later mentions Hitler ordering “the transfer of fighters from hydrogen [read “hydrogenation”] plants to the Western Front.” Hansen discusses the August 1943 British air raid on Peenemünde, where the V-2 was built and tested, and cites the tragic killing of hundreds of slave laborers in the bombing. But these workers lived and died at Camp Trassenheide, not the Dora camp Hansen mentions, which was the much worse camp set up near Nordhausen after the raid, when V-2 production was moved into caves.

But these minor mistakes do not undermine Hansen’s book, which ends with a judicious chapter on all the difficult questions raised by the bombing war: is area bombing ever justified? Did it work in Germany? Could bombing alone have defeated Germany? Was killing civilians justified, given the death and destruction the Nazis wreaked throughout Europe? Hansen ably answers them all, concluding that the area bombing of German cities was a “massacre” that did little or nothing to shorten the war.

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3. *Inside the Third Reich* [1969] and *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* [1975], both trans. Richard and Clara Winston (NY: Macmillan, 1970/1975).

4. For a fascinating look at German attitudes before Friedrich, see W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* [1999], tr. Anthea Bell (NY: Random House, 2004). Sebald, one of Germany’s finest postwar novelists, bemoaned the virtual absence of the bombing war in German literature.