



Bodies and Ruins: Imagining the Bombing of Germany, 1945 to the Present by David F. Crew.

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A number of historians have described to audiences in Germany the guilty silence surrounding the bombing of their civilian countrymen in the Second World War, only to have some older listener rise and declare that almost everyone in his or her postwar hometown had loudly and publicly labeled Allied aircrews as murderers. It is true that academics as well as national, provincial, and other public officials and commentators have said very little about German victimhood. In *Bodies and Ruins*, historian David Crew¹ (Univ. of Texas) now elegantly proves that, at the “everyday,” municipal level of rebuilding and burying, Germans were never silent. Their truly exceptional national acceptance of guilt for past wrongdoings (contrast the Allies or the Japanese) has not erased the painful memory of the war at the level of the neighborhoods and families that were obliterated. Similarly, to this day, in the United States, most Americans remember the Confederacy as being in the wrong and deserving to lose, but in the South, attitudes about the Civil War are complicated by memories of starving ancestors and scorched-earth tactics.

Crew has painstakingly canvassed locally produced memories of Allied bombing, usually taking the form of coffee-table-style illustrated histories. He clarifies how local, municipal postwar populations dealt with loss and the infliction of violence while acknowledging that they, after all, had started the war.

The author opens by walking us through the post-Cold War moment—during the conflict in Bosnia—when, at a national level, Germans first spoke of German civilians as victims. If commentators described the use of rape in Bosnia as an unprecedented weapon of war in the modern world, they then had to concede that Soviet soldiers methodically raped over a million German women (among others) in the closing months of World War II and thereafter.² This opened the door in Germany to a broad discussion of victimhood and, inevitably, Allied strategic bombing. In 1999, W.G. Sebald³ sparked a national discussion of attitudes toward the bombing in German postwar literature. Three years later, Jörg Friedrich’s *The Fire*⁴ initiated a major, national discussion of the subject by evoking the Holocaust with images of German children being cremated in the oven-like cellars of Hamburg. While this twenty-first-century phase of the discussion is by now familiar to historians of Germany, Crew demonstrates that the agony wrought by Allied bombing was present in local history books throughout the postwar twentieth century, notwithstanding received wisdom to the contrary.

1. His other work includes *Germans on Welfare: From Weimar to Hitler* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1998) and *Hitler and the Nazis: A History in Documents* (id., 2006).

2. See Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (NY: St. Martin’s Pr, 2012).

3. *On the Natural History of Destruction* [German orig. 1999], trans. Anthea Bell (NY: Random House, 2003).

4. Subtitle: *The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945* [German orig. 2002], trans. Allison Brown (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2006).

These pictorial histories skirt the thorny subject of the Third Reich in the usual “history of everyday life” manner, with plentiful images of burned homes and ruined buildings, but none of concentration camps a few miles outside of town. Such books evolved to include more text; they sometimes even showed men in Nazi uniforms, with oblique discussions of what led to the bombing. Intriguingly, the author references photos that would have intimated a dark subtext: “before” images of intact cityscapes featuring some citizens who would have no “after”—Jews. He also provides a chapter on the communist party-line East German memory of the bombing war: German fascists brought it on and the fascist Americans carried it out. The Communists running the country had not a trace of guilt and hence could both mourn the loss of old Dresden and revel in a clean slate on which to build a socialist future.

At the heart of Crew’s book is a tension always at play in discussing the bombing of the “Nazis.” The International Law of Warfare (both then and today) categorizes the deliberate targeting of civilians as a war crime; the British “de-housing” of German workers by raining incendiary bombs on the residential quarters of German cities was precisely that. Locally produced German picture books that display only the visual evidence of this crime are, legally and perhaps morally, correct to strip out the context. After all, even if the adults were criminals, what about the children? But when it comes to Nazis, disregarding context would be profoundly unhistorical. Yet here Crew seems daunted by context. The consensus of English-language scholarship is that strategic bombing of civilian targets was illegal and immoral and that, moreover, it wasted resources and failed to hasten the end of the war. The final months of bombing were motivated by revenge rather than any discernible military objective.

Historian Richard Overy’s long, lonely dissent⁵ against this consensus is the exception that proves the rule, and even he now cannot forgive the final phase and finds less to praise in the campaign.⁶ Friedrich, in his 2006 documentary on the bombing, enlisted Overy to refute German claims that it was wrong. But that distorts the Allied historical interpretation of the bombing.

Nowhere in *Bodies and Ruins* does David Crew recognize the scholarly consensus that the Germans are correct to portray their wartime civilians as victims of a monumental war crime.⁷ In his view and that of many others, this would be a bridge too far. But not for elderly Germans who stand up at historians’ lectures to point out that they were but children in 1940–45 and that the bombing was simply wrong.

5. *Why the Allies Won* (NY: Norton, 1996), esp. chap. 4, “The Means to Victory: Bombers and Bombing.” Overy’s argument has recently been endorsed by Victor Hanson in *The Second World Wars: How the First Global Conflict Was Fought and Won* (NY: Basic Books, 2017).

6. This shift is on display in his most recent book on the bombing, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), but at the International Conference on World War II, held at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, in November 2017, Overy declared that he now considers Strategic Bombing to have been wrong, full stop.

7. Of course, with regard to the targeted bombing of civilians in the Pacific War, Robert McNamara stated in the documentary *The Fog of War* (dir. Errol Morris, 2003) that Curtis LeMay openly admitted to him, during the war, that if the United States lost, both of them would be tried as war criminals.