A German catastrophe? German historians and the Allied bombings, 1945-2010
von Benda-Beckmann, B.R.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
5 —

Breaking taboos

Jörg Friedrich and the “rediscovery” of the Allied bombings in the United Germany

Introduction

With the ending of the Cold War rivalry between East and West Germany an important context for the interpretation of the Allied air war had disappeared. In the new, united Germany, little place was left for the East German interpretations or the anti-Western propaganda that had accompanied it. After 1990 even the more differentiated views of Olaf Groehler were largely ignored by German historians. Though his West German connections had facilitated an academic position for him, the appearance of Groehler’s monograph Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland in 1990 was either ignored or dismissed and associated with the ideologically restricted climate of GDR historiography. But more generally, important parameters, which had influenced and colored the interpretations of the Allied air war until the late 1980s disappeared after 1990. On the one hand, the ideological competition between the GDR and the Federal Republic no longer had a current relevance. On the other hand, the threat of a possible nuclear conflict no longer had political significance for the memory and interpretation of the Allied air war.

The disappearance of the Cold War as a context that could give a contemporary meaning to the Allied bombings did not reduce interest in this issue. On the

contrary, during the 1990s in reunified Germany the destruction of Dresden was increasingly commemorated on a national level and public interest in the air war grew rapidly, especially at the turn of the Millennium. W.G. Sebald’s essay Luftkrieg und Literatur (1999) received considerable attention among literary critics and also in press. But the publication of Der Brand (2002) by Jörg Friedrich inspired public interest in the Allied bombings on a previously unseen scale, catalyzing a wave of memory-literature, documentaries and films. Also, the debate following Der Brand generated a new academic interest, both in the history of the air war and in the role the bombing experience had played in German memory culture.

This book and the debate which followed raise different questions. In the first part of this chapter, I will look at Der Brand and analyze the way it interpreted and narrated the Allied bombings. What elements made Der Brand into such a controversial work? Did Friedrich bring a new perspective on the air war or did it “recycle” a narrative that had dominated the West German discourse during the 1950s? To answer these questions, I will include a study of his earlier works, Das Gesetz des Krieges (1993) and Die kalte Amnestie (1984), which, though dealing with Nazi perpetrators and the failure of the postwar international community to bring their crimes to justice, both contain chapters on the Allied bombings.500 While these studies have often been neglected in the many articles and reviews, which try to understand Friedrich’s complex position, integrating these works in an analysis of Friedrich’s perspective on the air war can help to better understand some of the most controversial aspects of Der Brand. In particular, the function of his oft-criticized references to the Holocaust can be clarified by looking at these works. I will

therefore look at *Der Brand* not only as a starting point for a public debate but as a narrative which is characterized by strong continuities, both of Friedrich’s earlier work as of the West German historiography on the Allied bombings.

In the second part of this chapter, I will explore the recent conjuncture in the German popular interest in the air war. I will analyze the impact of Friedrich’s book on both the public debate and place it in the renewed interest for German suffering during World War II. To what extent can *Der Brand* and the discussions that were provoked by it, be understood as the result of a memory culture that underwent important changes after German Unification in 1990? The third part of this chapter deals with the significance of *Der Brand* and the “German victimhood debate” for recent academic historiography. While it is commonly acknowledged that *Der Brand* generated broad public discussion on the air war, its impact on academic research is less clear. This raises two questions regarding the relationship between the narrative represented in Friedrich’s *Der Brand* and recent developments in German professional historiography. First: to what extent do the interpretations in Friedrich’s *Der Brand* represent a general trend in German historiography, or does this book, as some have argued, have to be seen as part of a discourse on German memory, which largely took place outside of academia? The second question is, whether recent historiography has offered an alternative narrative of the Allied bombings and to what extent this narrative can be understood as a reaction to the new public interest in the Allied bombings that was initiated by Jörg Friedrich.
Remembering German suffering in a United Germany

During the 1990s, the air war was increasingly discussed in the public discourse, especially in 1995, when the 50th anniversary of the end of the war was commemorated. In his study Der Krieg als Text (1998) Klaus Naumann has pointed out that in this year more than in previous years commemorations focused on German suffering from the Allied air war. Naumann argued that for the first time since German unification public commemoration focused extensively on the bombings. German cities in East and West commemorated their destruction during the war, and local, regional and national press all wrote extensively on the history of the bombings and the memory and commemorations.501

What also became clear in the mid-1990s was that the 50th anniversaries of the destructions, commemorated between 1993 and 1995, took place in a different national framework. Before 1990 Dresden had stood out in both German states as the ultimate symbol for German suffering, a meaning that in a sense stood for the whole of Germany and exceeded the East German state. But even though Dresden was remembered in the West as well as in the East, the division of Germany had been a crucial framework for the way the destruction was commemorated and linked to the present. For the first time the Allied bombings were commemorated in the context of a united Germany. This meant that while certain patterns of interpretation were continued, German Unification and other political devel

501 Klaus Naumann, Der Krieg als Text. Das Jahr 1945 im kulturellen Gedächtnis der Presse (Hamburg: 1998) 33-71. Writing his book only a few years later Naumann’s emphasis on 1995 as a “Schwellenjahr” of air war memory seems slightly overstated in retrospect. On the one hand, Aleida Assmann has pointed out that the attention for air war in 1995 was relatively minor compared to the “dam burst” of the “German victims” narrative, which emerged when eight years later Friedrich’s Der Brand provoked a much further-reaching debate. On the other hand, looking at local memory cultures Malte Thiessen and others have pointed out that the “boom” of air war memory, with increased public interest in the memory and commemoration had been advancing steadily since 1985: Thiessen, Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis 182-184, 255-373.
opments of the 1990s provided a new context in which the bombings were translated to the present.502

That Dresden had potential to serve as a symbol for united German memory had been immediately recognized by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who had shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall laid a wreath at the Dresden Frauenkirche in December 1989.503 Also, already during the 45th anniversary of Dresden’s destruction in 1990, new meaning was attributed to Dresden as a national “united” site of memory. For example, an article in the FAZ, discussing the decision that had been made to reconstruct the Frauenkirche, explained this as a symbolic gesture to give shape to a new perspective on the Second World War and a “chance to leave the horrible experience of the Second World War behind and approach a better future in a United Germany”.504 By 1995, Dresden could manifest itself as a national place of memory. For the commemoration of the 50th anniversary on 13 February 1995 the city organized a series of commemorative activities, with prominent speeches by the Bishop of Coventry and Bundespräsident Roman Herzog.

The increasing prominence with which Dresden manifested itself as a national place of memory can be seen as a prelude to the enormous interest in the air war and more generally in the issue of German suffering since the early 2000s. For the debate on the Allied bombings, an important catalyst was Luftkrieg und Literatur (1999), an essay by Winfried Sebald, a German writer and Professor of German literature, who lived in England. It was based on studies and lectures given by Sebald during the 1980s and 1990s on the way German writers had failed to

502 Naumann, Der Krieg als Text 34-47.
come to terms with the air war.

Sebald’s thesis was that there had been a general silence surrounding the memory of the Allied bombings in Germany after the war. This had become especially apparent in the absence of literary works on this important subject. Sebald stated that the Germans in their primary concern with the reconstruction of their destroyed country did not face the deep trauma of the bombing-experience that had had such a devastating impact in the lives of so many. The air war, Sebald stated, “hardly left a painful trace in German collective consciousness”. With the rebuilding of the ruins, the memory of their destruction disappeared and the bombing-experience seemed to have been erased from the German memory landscape. When in 2002 Jörg Friedrich published Der Brand he in a sense answered Sebald’s plea, and in interviews Friedrich often confirmed that the air war had earlier been ignored and considered unworthy of discussion. Sebald, who died 2001 from a car crash and unfortunately missed the impact of Friedrich’s book, had already praised a chapter on the air war in Friedrich’s earlier work Das Gesetz des Krieges (1993) as a single example in which a German historian had described the effects of strategic bombing in an appropriate way.


506  Annette Langer, “Interview mit dem Berliner Historiker Jörg Friedrich: Von guten Massakern und bösen Massakern ” Spiegel-online, 27-2 2003. http://www.spiegel.de/sptv/special/0,1518,237918,00.html. While in Der Brand Friedrich referred to previous works of Groehler and Boog in this interview Friedrich claimed that Der Brand was “the first book devoted to the bombings against Germany and with it to the largest battlefield of the Second World War”.

507  Sebald, Luftkrieg und Literatur 76, 86-87. In this conclusion Sebald seems to also have been led by a narrow notion of what was to be seen as “appropriate” history writing. His focus on a genuine “form” of memory not distorted by symbolism or political instrumentalization also allowed him to ignore the always present but often politically exploited memory of the Dresden raid, as well as other “political” commemorations on a local as
5.1. Jörg Friedrich’s *Der Brand*

Jörg Friedrich’s Fire

Though Friedrich’s *Der Brand* has been thoroughly discussed, this book, its interpretation of the air war, and the reason for its success still raise some unanswered questions. The question for example, as to how *Der Brand* can be placed in the German historiography of the air war, is still disputed. *Der Brand* has a structure that is rather unorthodox for a historical account and in many ways uses narrative forms that are more common in literature than in history. This becomes apparent in the radical identification with the perspective of the German victims, which results in a radical lack of interest shown in *Der Brand* for the role of Germans as “victims, bystanders and perpetrators of Nazi crimes”.508 Rather than placing the air war

---

within the context of the development of the Second World War, it aims to create a "narrative of loss." Moreover, by structuring the book in chapters with titles such as "weapon", "strategy", "land", "protection", "we", "I" and "stone," Friedrich chose a thematic rather than a chronological approach. Where other accounts more or less tell a chronological story, Der Brand manipulates the temporal structure by using flash-backs and flash-forwards, sometimes even time-leaping back to the Middle Ages. Starting with an attack on Wuppertal in May 1943, the book draws the reader right into the climax of the air attacks on German cities. The central starting point in this book is the juxtaposition of an apparently planned "mass killing" by the Allied "weapons" and "strategy" on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the experience of German suffering in its different dimensions ("I", "we", "land" and "stone"). With a compelling style unparalleled even by David Irving or any other popular account, Friedrich created a "action-atmosphere" which emphasizes every painful and horrible detail of the Allied air attacks. In quick succession eyewitness accounts are followed by historical and moral considerations on the Allied strategy. Allied strategic ideas and practical conduct are followed by lengthy details of the physiognomic effects of fire bombing on human bodies and horrific images drawn from various eye-witness sources. These again are combined with stunning contemplations on the nature of "the firestorm" created by area bombing and described as "another planet incompatible with life" and the “spa-
tial extension of death”, in which “the victim” is even deprived of his own death, because he “finds himself in a sphere in which life has ceased”.511

Apart from these abrupt changes of perspective and stunning descriptions of human suffering Friedrich’s style also is characterized by the use of charged language, which provoked a direct association with the Holocaust. It was especially the suggestion that Germans had been “ausgerottet” (exterminated)512 and “gassed” by carbon monoxide poisoning in air raid shelters which provoked a direct association with the gassing of Jews in extermination camps.513 The use of words such as “crematoria” for burning air shelters added a similar charge to the book.514

Narrative continuities

Apart from his distinctive style however, Friedrich was travelling “a familiar route” and to a high degree drew on a long continuity of narrative elements and interpretations.515 Jörg Arnold and Ralf Blank have pointed out that Friedrich heavily relied on and re-assembled local historiography, copying their decontextualized and highly local approach.516 But there are also strong parallels with the West

511 Friedrich, Der Brand 84, 194.
512 Ibid. 114, 432.
513 Ibid. 342, 361, 378, 505.
514 Other terminology which evoked such an equation were the use of “bookburning” to describe the destroyed German libraries and especially the use of the word like “Hinrichtungsstellen” (places of execution) and “Massenvernichtung” (mass annihilation) to describe both the practical conduct as well as the intentions of the Allied bombings. Ibid. e.g. 110, 361, 386, 515.
German historiography of the 1950s and 1960s. Though in an interview Friedrich referred to Boog and Groehler as his most important predecessors, in his interpretations, however, Der Brand comes closer to the accounts of the 1950s and 1960s.

Like Hans Rumpf, Eberhard Spetzler and David Irving, Friedrich regarded the air war as a completely senseless act of terror against innocent civilians. Friedrich too created a schematic juxtaposition of victims and perpetrators, which was even more emphasized by his stylistic use of universalizing categories such as “the bombardier” on the one side and “the exterminated” on the other.\textsuperscript{517} As a consequence the Germans appear as sole subjects of annihilation and terror and therefore as a collective of victims, unwillingly drawn into the war and subject to Allied terror as well as to that of their regime, since the population had “no choice between bomb terror and regime terror, but to save itself from both”.\textsuperscript{518}

Another continuity can be found in the emphasis on the distinction between British and German bombings. While German bombings were not always excused, the Luftwaffe bombings were distinguished from the Allied bombings as a phenomenon of a different moral dimension. While not denying Hitler’s dreams of massive terror bombing and the initiative of the Luftwaffe in bombing civilians, Friedrich did stress that the Allied strategic bombing was “something completely different”. While the German Luftwaffe remained a “tactical weapon for ground support”, strategic bombing aimed to win the war from the air by consciously “erasing” German cities. Somewhat paradoxically Friedrich, on the other hand, did not exonerate the Luftwaffe attacks and even stated that the bombing of Rotterdam and Warsaw could have easily been prevented by the Germans, but he

\textsuperscript{517} Friedrich, Der Brand 432. Also see: Süß, “Erinnerungen an den Luftkrieg” 21.
\textsuperscript{518} Friedrich, Der Brand 371.
still clung to the earlier narrative of a moral distinction to stress the uniqueness of British strategy.519

Moreover, the broader context of the Second World War, Germany’s total warfare in Eastern Europe as well as the development of Germany as a national-socialist dictatorship is almost wholly absent. Instead Der Brand focused only on the strategic bombings, concentrating on the British strategy and the effects. As historical context only the centuries-long cultural history of the bombed cities is depicted, not the actual historical developments which led to the outbreak of the Second World War.520 Also as had earlier works, Friedrich traced the origins of the terror bombing to the highly personalized role of certain British military leaders. Though he also saw strategic bombing as a consequence of scientific developments and the inner dynamics of war, Friedrich also pointed explicitly at Harris and Churchill as instigators and “pioneers” of this concept.521

519  Ibid. 64, 70-73. 131-133, 299. Also: Jörg Friedrich, “Die Rechtsnatur der anglo-amerikanischen Bombenoffensive im Zweiten Weltkrieg,” in Der Bombenkrieg und seine Opfer, ed. Bernd Heidenreich and Sönke Neitzel, Polis 39 (Wiesbaden: 2004) 71-81, here: 76-77. It should be noted though that Friedrich made a far less clear moral distinction than for example Horst Boog made. Though Friedrich recognized that Warsaw and Rotterdam had been “defended cities” according to The Hague conventions and that Hitler had initially been reluctant to fully unleash terror bombings on British cities, Friedrich did not deny the strong presence of “terror” in German warfare. He stressed that Hitler had been reluctant to openly bomb civilian targets in Britain only out of fear of retaliation. “The real causes of terror fear its reciprocity”, is how Friedrich explained Hitler’s attitude. Also in Das Gesetz des Krieges Friedrich devoted lengthy attention to the bombing of Coventry, stressing that in spite of the military significance of the armament industry, the city had been chosen as a target because of its easily flammable medieval city centre. “Destruction of military targets went hand in hand with the demoralizing of the civilian population”. E.g. Friedrich, Gesetz des Krieges 53. Friedrich also distinguished the British from the Americans who he claims were led by “humane” considerations. Friedrich, Der Brand 30, 106.


521  Friedrich especially emphasized the role of Churchill and stated that strategic bombing had not been a “private war” of Arthur Harris: Friedrich, Der Brand 61-70, 76, 86-91, 169.
It is therefore not surprising that by reproducing terminology and interpretations from earlier accounts, without reflecting on their meaning and history, various patterns of Nazi propaganda were echoed. Friedrich’s image of the Germans who suffered from the air attacks reflected the image of a cohesive *Volksgemeinschaft* and largely excluded the stories of people not in this community. The stories of Jews, forced laborers and other victims of Nazi terror were excluded from Friedrich’s narrative of suffering. Thus a very problematic image of “the Germans” was transmitted, one that to a high degree reflected the ideal of Nazi propaganda.  

Moreover, Friedrich often evoked the image of a coherent community of Germans, battered but not broken by the Allied terror. Friedrich interpreted the bombings as a(n) (eventually successful) “test for national cohesion” and used terms like *Zivilgemeinschaft* (civil community), which echoed the propaganda of *Volksgemeinschaft*. Though Friedrich stressed that the Germans had lost their trust in Nazi propaganda and reacted with apathy and cynicism, a heroic and sometimes ethnically determined image of the Germans was nevertheless transmitted in the subtext. Not only did Friedrich use language that echoed the ideology of ethnic continuity, referring to “German tribes”, but he also praised German air protection and adopted such propagandistic terms as “*Blutzoll*”, which stressed the heroism and sacrifices of the Germans.  

In reporting the undisturbed reaction of the people living in Berlin, Friedrich stressed their “their unique and crafty character”. More generally, Friedrich emphasized the Germans’ ability to forget the horrific image

---

524 Friedrich, *Der Brand* 463. See the similar term “*Blutopfer*” in: Rumpf, *Das war der Bombenkrieg* 113.
of mass killing as something that “can’t be imagined in a Roman country”.\(^{525}\)

This presence of stereotypical classifications also point to the continuity of another trope: that of German culture. Jörg Arnold argued in his review that Friedrich focused on the cultural dimension and the impact of local perspective, giving local cultural history as a point of reference instead of the nation.\(^{526}\) However, one cannot conclude that the national perspective was truly abandoned by Friedrich. His book radically limited itself to the suffering of German citizens, ignoring the effects of area bombing in other parts of the world. Interestingly the chapter “land” focuses not only on the different cultural histories of German cities, tracing them back into the late antiquity and the Middle Ages, but also puts them in a European context. By doing so, and by supposing a deliberate attack on European cultural heritage, the book clearly echoes early German historiography as well as Nazi propaganda which suggested that the British and Americans were not only waging war against the German army but were aiming to wipe out the essence of European culture.

This image was evoked in two different narrative ways. First, especially in the chapters “land” and “stone” the long history and beauty of German cities was illustrated with romantic summaries of cultural history. Interestingly, many of these short histories, by referring to Charlemagne’s or Napoleon’s empires, or the Hanseatic traditions stress the European character of German culture.\(^{527}\) And

---

\(^{525}\) Friedrich, *Der Brand* 486. While in the English translation it is suggested that this view on “Roman countries” belongs to the workers, in the German original Friedrich suggests that this is his own view by not using the conjunctive form. See for example for the exact same argument: Rumpfl, *Das war der Bombenkrieg* 128-129. Other racial stereotypes can be found in his frequent descriptions of charred Germans, who had been “black like negroes” or having “lips like negroes”. See: Friedrich, *Der Brand* 434, 483.

\(^{526}\) Arnold, “A narrative of loss”.

\(^{527}\) According to Friedrich the Hansa gave the world “a north eastern Area of civilization”. Friedrich, *Der Brand* 180.
also in Friedrich’s geographic descriptions “land”, Friedrich described Germany as the centre of “Old Europe”. The effect of these references to the long history of cultural highlights is to create a contrast with the abrupt and harsh descriptions of their destruction. The emphasis on the material and cultural quality of the destruction also suggests that the Allies had tried to commit “cultural genocide” on the Germans.

The other strategy designed to evoke this idea of an attacked “Abendland” was to draw parallels between the air raids and “mongoloid” invasions during the Middle Ages. With phrases similar to those used in Fuller’s account and Goebbels’ propaganda, Friedrich referred to the Huns (“born war criminals”) to suggest that occidental culture was attacked by raging hordes. The bombing of Cologne “marked the way into the world of the battle of the Huns”. Like Rumpf and others, Friedrich claimed that the intention of the British and Americans was out to “historically annul” Prussian militarism. After “the war against Germany’s present” had already been won the last phase of the air raids was, according to Friedrich, an attack on German culture and an attempt to destroy “the roots of the past that had borne the disaster” of the Third Reich.

528 The various digressions to medieval European history form a striking element in this book, which otherwise seemed to focus only on the history of the air war, even ignoring the most elementary context of the history of the Third Reich and the Second World War. Ibid. 179-180, 205. Friedrich for example stated that “The Rhine is Europe’s north-south axis” and “Old Europe was largely the history of the struggles for the Rhine”.

529 Ibid. 137, 257-259. Also see: Moeller, “On the History of Man-made Destruction” 117.

530 Friedrich, Der Brand 524.

531 Ibid. 190. A similar argument was revived by German writer Walter Kempowski. In his mosaic of collected eye-witness accounts Walter Kempowski, Das Echolot. Fuga furiosa. Ein kollektives Tagebuch. Winter 1945 4 vols. (München: 1999). Kempowski provided another attempt to reconstruct a collective memory of the air war. By simply letting various eye-witnesses “speak for themselves” Kempowski tried to provide a direct and pluralistic perspective, which not only showed German victimhood but included many citations of Hitler and Goebbels to emphasize their responsibility for the suffering. However, Kempowski’s mosaic was a clearly constructed narrative, which failed to wholly detach itself from interpretive patterns, which had been shaped during the war. In an interview with Der Spiegel Kempowski contemplated the destruction of the Frauenkirche in Dresden by
Crematoria and Gas-cells: References to the Holocaust

But the most striking characteristic of Der Brand, which also led to the strongest criticism are its various references to the Holocaust. The exact function of these references to the Holocaust was still subject to debate even among those who clearly criticized Friedrich for integrating them in his work. While historians Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Hans Mommsen criticized Friedrich for doing this, they interpreted it as a consequence of his emotional engagement and as “slips” or “linguistic derailing”. They saw aspects of Friedrich’s work as problematic but this nevertheless did not prevent them from regarding his work as a great accomplishment. Friedrich’s previous works on the history of the Holocaust gave him the benefit of the doubt for not wanting to suppress this history. Other critics however have judged him more harshly. Nicholas Stargardt saw Friedrich’s implicit comparisons as a conscious strategy and pointed at the “danger of trivializing and relativizing the Holocaust”. Hannes Heer for example went even further and interpreted Friedrich’s apparent equation of the air war and the Holocaust as a deliberate attempt to relativize the Nazi crimes.


533  Stargardt, “Opfer der Bomben”.

Such commentaries have not satisfactorily answered the question as to the exact function of the linguistic references to the Holocaust in *Der Brand*. Friedrich’s position and the motives behind his comparisons can be better understood by looking at earlier works by Jörg Friedrich, which have often been ignored. What is interesting is that Friedrich differed fundamentally on one crucial aspect from authors like Spetzler and Rumpf. Unlike these authors Friedrich had engaged extensively in a critical confrontation with German perpetratorship and strongly criticized the “amnesty” that had been granted to former perpetrators. Friedrich wrote several historical studies, which were regarded as very critical comments on German memory culture, with arguments normally associated with the left-liberal discourse of the Federal Republic. In *Freispruch für die Nazijustiz* (1983) and *Die kalte Amnestie* (1984) he strongly criticized the failed prosecution of those who were responsible for crimes committed during Nazi rule and the resulting massive “cold” amnesty. And in *Das Gesetz des Krieges* (1993) Friedrich explored the involvement of the *Wehrmacht* leadership in the genocidal politics of the Third Reich. Though not working for an academic institution and not applying the methodological rules and methods of academic history writing, Friedrich’s works were

535 In reviews especially Friedrich’s contribution to the *Enzyklopädie des Holocaust*, has been mentioned by his defenders to show that Friedrich could not be regarded as someone who denied or suppressed the history of the Nazi crimes. For this encyclopedia Friedrich mainly contributed an article on the trials of Nazi persecutors: Israel Gutman et al., eds., *Enzyklopädie des Holocaust. Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden* (Berlin: 1993) vol II, 1019-1049. As will be discussed below Hannes Heer has drawn parallels between *Der Brand* and *Das Gesetz des Krieges*. Otherwise, little has been said on the relationship between his earlier works and *Der Brand*.


538 Friedrich, *Kalte Amnestie*.

539 Friedrich, *Gesetz des Krieges*. 

This does not mean that these earlier works are undisputed. Hannes Heer, one of the initiators of the first and most controversial \textit{Wehrmacht} exhibition, criticized Friedrich’s problematic view of the \textit{Wehrmacht}. Unlike most other critics of Friedrich, Heer included a critique of \textit{Das Gesetz des Krieges} in his analysis of \textit{Der Brand}. In his polemic against Friedrich, Heer argued that, by claiming the \textit{Wehrmacht} had merely instrumentalized anti-Semitism, Friedrich suggested that the military leaders did not really associate themselves with Nazi ideology and had recycled the old myth of the “clean \textit{Wehrmacht}”. The result according to Heer was “flat acquittal” for the \textit{Wehrmacht} leaders. Moreover, Heer argued that there was a strong connection between Friedrich’s apologetic account on the \textit{Wehrmacht} and his strong moral condemnation of the Allied leaders. “While in \textit{Gesetz des Krieges} the participation of the \textit{Wehrmacht} in the genocide of the Jews and in the partial annihilation of other Slavic population is reconstructed as military operations, in \textit{Der Brand} the air attacks which pursued military goals are turned into a Holocaust on the Germans”\footnote{Heer, \textit{Vom Verschwinden der Täter} 276-278, 302.}.

Though Friedrich’s image of the \textit{Wehrmacht} indeed echoes popular images of the apolitical “clean” \textit{Wehrmacht} at times, Heer’s judgment is not only too one-sided, but also fails to recognize another continuity in Friedrich’s work.\footnote{Assmann, ”(In)Compatibility of Guilt and Suffering” 195-196.} First, Heer’s note that Friedrich was “acquitting” the \textit{Wehrmacht} does not do justice to
the very critical comment on the role of the *Wehrmacht*, indeed linking it directly
to the Holocaust and explicitly describing its participation in the genocide of the
Jews and other inhabitants of Europe. Where most historians concerned with the
air war largely avoided describing the Nazi crimes in detail, the opposite was the
case in Friedrich’s work. Far from downplaying the impact of the crimes commit-
ted by Germans under Nazi rule, Friedrich elaborated extensively on the organi-
zation and practice of the ethnic politics, crimes, persecution and genocide of the
Third Reich. Also Friedrich stressed that Hitler’s “race war” had not been a “secret
mission of a crazed swastika-horde” but a “public matter” and an integral part
of the “total war” that was fought by the Third Reich.543 With a strong sense for
explicit details, Friedrich described the workings and legal status of the German
crimes, especially those committed by the *Wehrmacht*.544

What is interesting is that in most of his works that primarily focused on Nazi
crimes and their (failed) trials, Friedrich elaborated extensively on the Allied strat-
geic bombings of German cities. Both his major accounts of Nazi crimes contained
chapters on the Allied bombings, in which Friedrich denounced these as an illegal,
immoral form of warfare that had proved unsuccessful in its aim to break German
morale. Also exploring the lawfulness of bombings according to the international
law and agreements that had been formalized in The Hague peace conventions,
Friedrich drew the conclusion that the British and American bombings could not
be seen as a justified or legal method of warfare.545

Though shorter, the style and language with which Friedrich described the
Allied bombings in these chapters are remarkably similar to those found in the

---

543 Friedrich, *Gesetz des Krieges* 169-175, 187-188.
544 Ibid. e.g. 320-351, 412-451, 603-674.
545 Ibid. 18-19, 91-92.
Der Brand. As in Der Brand the writing was heavily charged with pathos and vividly described horrific scenes, which in many aspects resemble the documentary accounts of the 1950s and 1960s by authors like Hans Rumpf and David Irving. Making use of different sources, such as Erich Nossack’s literary account Der Untergang and David Irving’s Destruction of Dresden, in his treatment of the air war Friedrich integrated highly emotional and gruesome stories and details about the impact of the bombings in a polemic moral denunciation of the Allied attitude towards the Germans as a collective. Friedrich summarized the Allied strategy as an attempt to demoralize and at the same time punish the Germans for their support of Hitler, but especially focused on the perspective of the victims. Friedrich described their fear, agony and suffering in the most direct and explicit words available, elaborating on burning corpses, bodies that had become stuck in liquid asphalt and the exact physical workings of a “firestorm”, even describing the sound effects that were created by this storm.

What is puzzling and striking in Friedrich’s work is that while he also explicitly addressed the German crimes, he went much further in his comparison between the bombings and the genocidal practice of Nazi Germany than any of the previous accounts on the bombings. The integration of chapters on Allied bombings in studies that primarily focused on Nazi crimes made the comparison and the suggested equation of the bombings with the Holocaust much more direct. Together with the mass murder of the “Final Solution” Friedrich presented the Allied strategic bombings and the droppings of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as examples of a new stage of warfare, the total “war of exter-

546 Hans Erich Nossack, Der Untergang (Hamburg: 1948).
547 E.g. Friedrich, Kalte Amnestie 22-24; Friedrich, Gesetz des Krieges 737-741.
mination”. Though Friedrich distinguished the “ideologically motivated” race war against an “imagined” threat from the “punishment” of the Allied terror bombings against the Germans, he regarded both as a means of warfare in the total character of war that made the terror of civilians a central instrument in warfare. The “calculated” and thoroughly planned mass destruction of civilians marked a new level in the totality and criminality of war. Friedrich stressed that the terror bombardments make victims in a wholly impersonal and indiscriminate manner. Where “conventional war crimes” require a certain “encounter between victim and perpetrator (...) extermination (Ausrottung) occurs differently. The air bombardment creates a condition of annihilation of life” Friedrich argued, proving his point by pointing to the high percentage of children among the victims.548

Friedrich’s sense for gruesome and vivid details should therefore not be regarded as a mere fascination with horrific stories, but serves a more specific purpose. It is exactly here where it becomes evident how Friedrich consciously searched for a linguistic proximity to language that is commonly associated with the Holocaust, something that critics have often pointed to when discussing Der Brand. In his short chapter on the bombings in Die kalte Amnestie Friedrich’s linguistic references and comparisons became most explicit. Here, Friedrich not only frequently used terms like Ausrottung and Vernichtung, words that immediately refer to the language used in the Third Reich to describe the extermination of the Jews and other victim groups, but even went so far as to call the area in which the firestorm blazed a “Ghetto” that was “sealed off”.549 Finally, Friedrich even repeatedly stressed that many victims of the bombings perished due to the intoxication

548 Friedrich, Gesetz des Krieges 158-159.
549 Friedrich, Kalte Amnestie 22.
of carbon monoxide, the same cause of death as the prisoners of Nazi extermination camps, thus making a direct equation of the bombings with the gassing of Jews and other victims of Nazi terror: “The fires had created carbon monoxide, that had inexorably and inodorously floated into the bunkers and had turned them into gas chambers. In the extermination camps of Treblinka, Belsec, Sobibor and Hadamar, which worked with carbon monoxide, victims showed the same red discoloring”. Friedrich stressed that the only difference here was that the intoxication of the Germans hiding in air-raid shelters “had not been planned by its causers, but resulted from the spontaneous working (Wirken) of the elements”.\textsuperscript{550}

What was Friedrich aiming at with his references to and comparisons with the Holocaust? Far from making an unconscious “linguistic derailing” it seems that Friedrich deliberately made such comparisons and integrated the Allied bombings in a study on Nazi war crimes to make a double point. On the one hand, Friedrich attempted to emphasize as clearly as possible that “formally” the Allies had “participated in the atrocities of the Second World War”. By killing about 500,000 civilians “about the same as the number of Jews, mentally ill, Gypsies and political dissidents coming from the German Reich that died”, the Allies had collectively and indiscriminately punished the Germans for their support of national-socialism “in Nazi-style”.\textsuperscript{551} With this the air war was seen as a phenomenon in which no longer was a battle fought but a “space of annihilation” was created. In spite of the dif-

\textsuperscript{550} Ibid. 17, 24.
\textsuperscript{551} Ibid. 27; Friedrich, Gesetz des Krieges 162. Also see the interview with Jörg Freidrich available on the website of the Dutch TV documentation on the history of Europe, In Europa, broadcast on VPRO network, 8 December 2008. Here Friedrich reacted to the arguments of one of the program’s researchers, whose family had been persecuted under the Third Reich and who felt that the Germans had gotten “what they deserved”. Friedrich reacted to this by claiming that he knew of only one man, Adolf Hitler, who felt that whole people deserved such a punishment. “In short: this is Nazi thinking, and nothing else”, Friedrich concluded. http://weblogs.vpro.nl/ineuropa/2008/12/08/killed-darlings-jorg-friedrich/ (final clip).
ifferent motives, the air war in its internal dynamics of irrationality and immorality resembled the German war of annihilation against the Jews and other victims.552

Following this argument the victim-status of the Germans who suffered in Allied air attacks is effectively put on the same level as that of the victims of Nazi terror. Thus the culpability of the Allies approximates the criminality of the industrial killings of racial minorities in the Holocaust. Friedrich took this equation much further than even rightwing authors and former Nazis like Hans Rumpf had done. Still there is a certain tension between this seeming exoneration of German civilians as a collective of victims and, on the other hand, Friedrich’s emphasis on the collaboration of “normal Germans” and Wehrmacht soldiers in the Holocaust.

A key to this apparent paradox can be found in looking at Friedrich’s point on the failed trial of perpetrators of this “war of extermination”. An obvious point Friedrich wanted to make is that one reason for the failure of the legal “coming to terms” with the Holocaust is the fact that Allied war crimes were not brought to trial, therefore giving the trials a character of “victor’s justice”.553 Two aspects of the Allied attitude had therefore according to Friedrich contributed to a failure of an appropriate bringing to justice of the Nazi crimes. On the one hand, the Allied bombings in themselves had incorporated the idea that Germans as a collective (including even small children) could be held responsible for the crimes committed in the Third Reich. As such, they had undermined a differentiated notion of indi-


553 Because the Allies did not want to go into their strategic bombings no charges had been made against the responsible German Luftwaffe leaders either. See: Friedrich, “Die Rechtsnatur” 77.
vidual responsibility. Moreover, by ignoring war crimes committed by the Allies, the trials had fuelled the arguments of the defense of Nazi perpetrators that the revolutionary new conditions of the “total war” made a legal judgment according to existing international law impossible. And for the “normal” Germans who were not on trial this attitude contributed to a line of thinking in which Germans could free themselves of responsibility and equate themselves with the Jewish victims of Nazi terror; since according to popular opinion “both Germans and Jews had been made hostage of an act for which they were not responsible. Both, according to this West German legend, had suffered a false collective guilt.”

Aufrechnung? The diverse functionality of Holocaust-comparisons

Based on this argumentation critics of Friedrich have pointed to the continuities between Der Brand and the position of conservative historians like Nolte and Hillgruber. Most of these critics have focused on Nolte’s suggestion that there was a “causal nexus” between Soviet terror and the Holocaust, which he used rhetorically in a plea for a broader perspective on Nazi aggression. It is interesting that while critics have pointed out continuities between Friedrich and the earlier polemics of Ernst Nolte and historic accounts of Rumpf and others, it is particularly Rolf Hochhuth’s position during the late 1960s which resembles that of Jörg Friedrich in the early 2000s. Though Hochhuth recently criticized Friedrich for ignoring the context of the Holocaust too much in Der Brand, their positions have

554 Friedrich, Kalte Amnestie 506; Also see a similar argumentation in Friedrich, Gesetz des Krieges 839, 888-893.


many aspects in common. Both had a leftwing political background and were active in the anti-Vietnam movement. Both had actively taken part in a debate on German guilt and perpetratorship and belonged to the rather small group of German intellectuals who addressed Nazi crimes and the Holocaust directly. A further parallel is that both managed to provoke a discussion of the air war, which exceeded a conservative and revisionist discourse. Interestingly, while many of Friedrich’s as well as Hochhuth’s arguments seem to be primarily based on the conservative rightwing discourse of the 1950s, and both relied strongly on David Irving’s *Destruction of Dresden*, their argumentation also clearly echoed the East German narrative, which primarily drew the conclusion that the Anglo-Americans and Nazi Germany had shared a basic mentality in their way of waging war. As in the GDR their equation of Allied bombings and the Holocaust summoned a radical distinction between innocent civilians and the cynical and brutal power politics they were subject to.

557 Schwartz, “Die Würde des Ortes”.
558 Also see Fritze’s criticism of German historical culture. Fritze stressed that “A Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ that because of considerations of ‘pedagogy’ leans towards untruths, only leads to irrationalities and can only cause alienation abroad”. Here, more than in the case of Hochhuth and Friedrich, Fritze’s argument followed arguments of conservative historians during the Historikerstreit like Nolte and Michael Stürmer. See the similar argument of the possible foreign alienation caused by a overly fixated focus on the Holocaust in Michael Stürmer, “Geschichte in geschichtslosem Land,” in “Historikerstreit” (München: 1987) 36-38.
559 They both suggested that there were fundamental moral and historical similarities between the Allied bombings and the Holocaust; both were outgrowths of the modern war of extermination in which warfare was increasingly directed at civilians instead of combatants. Though the Allies and Nazi Germany had different motives, Friedrich and Hochhuth argued, their methods and concepts of warfare had close similarities, as they both attempted to annihilate peoples. This also offers an explanation to the question of why West German intellectuals like Friedrich and Hochhuth, who belonged to the political left, were willing to accept such a problematic view of the Allied bombings. Though not explicitly using such terms as “imperialism” to characterize both Nazism and the Allied leaders, the idea that the Allies had waged a “war of annihilation” just like the Nazis is an underlying aspect of both the GDR narrative and the rhetoric used by Friedrich. This is especially apparent in Hochhuth’s work and articles, in which a direct line was drawn between the war in Vietnam, NATO and the Allied bombing war. Though Friedrich was more reluctant in this matter, and significantly denied any parallels between the Allied bombings and post-Cold War NATO bombings in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, on another occasion he did
To a certain degree their previous critical contributions to the recognition of German perpetratorship gave both Hochhuth and Friedrich an alibi to approach the sensitive issue of the strategic bombings in a direct manner. It also resulted in a much broader reception of their ideas. Both managed to provoke a public debate on the morality of the Allied bombings and by doing so have repeatedly been accused of Aufrechnung, of deliberately balancing the air war with the Holocaust with the purpose of diminishing the horrors of the Holocaust. In response, however, they claimed that this was not their goal at all.

This ongoing discussion often fails to recognize the nature of the comparisons suggested by Hochhuth and Friedrich and also does not really ask what is exactly meant by Aufrechnung. The word actually implies two things: the first implication is that the hierarchy of suffering as well as the hierarchy in the morality between the Allied bombings and the Holocaust is re-evaluated. By claiming that the proximity between the Holocaust and strategic bombing both in concept and practice is much stronger than commonly accepted, a hierarchy of suffering and of evil is contested. This is what all the various authors who drew parallels between the air war and the Holocaust have in common. They wanted to show, that the air war was (almost) as terrible as the Holocaust. However, this does not explain what the ultimate purpose of this argument is. To understand this we must look at the second implication of the term Aufrechnung, which implies that by demonstrating a moral equality between both “crimes” the “scores can be settled” and Germany can

---

be freed of its “negative identity” for which the singular status of the Holocaust is the most important pillar. It is this kind of *Aufrechnung*, which was central to the argument of Hans Rumpf and Spetzler, who ultimately saw the one-sidedness of moral accusations as the main problem for Germany’s relationship with the world. It is also this argument that Ernst Nolte was making, when claiming that the fixation on the Holocaust kept Germans from putting the air war in perspective.

The question is, to what extent was such an attempt to “settle scores” in order to balance the negative prominence of German guilt also present in the arguments of Hochhuth and Friedrich. Both clearly stated that this was not the case and that they had made important contributions to the recognition of German responsibility for the Holocaust. Friedrich, especially in his earlier works, integrated the narrative of German suffering under Allied bombings in a very critical study of German war crimes and their legal aftermath. Where historians of the air war like Rumpf or Spetzler cautiously blanked out German war crimes, in his earlier works Friedrich focused explicitly on them.

Moreover, there is no reason to assume that Friedrich, for example in his criticism on the one-sidedness of the Nuremberg tribunal, actually argued that the *Wehrmacht*-generals had been wrongly accused or should be exonerated because they had committed crimes similar to the Allied leaders who had not been prosecuted. This demonstrates a certain tension in Friedrich’s narrative. While he often reproduced earlier narrative patterns without any reflection on their meaning, Friedrich was making a different argument. This becomes clear in his use of legal arguments. Like Spetzler and others Friedrich based his moral denunciation of the air war on references to international law, not only arguing that the air war was
immoral but also stressing its illegality.\textsuperscript{561} But in the case of Friedrich the argument clearly works the other way around too. Far from exonerating the \textit{Wehrmacht}-leaders or even the \textit{Luftwaffe} attacks on Rotterdam and Warsaw, Friedrich stressed their similarity to imply that Allied leaders should have been tried too.\textsuperscript{562}

In terms of \textit{Aufrechnung} Friedrich can therefore, it seems, not be accused of “balancing” the Nazi crimes and the Allied bombings, with the ultimate aim of avoiding any explicit discussion of the former. However, at the same time his perspective was strongly characterized by narrative elements which had characterized the earlier East and West German accounts. First, the Allied strategic bombing campaign was simplified as an attempt to punish and annihilate the German people. And secondly and even more explicitly than others before him, Friedrich stressed that the Allied bombings marked a catastrophe for the Germans that was equal or at least similar to the “Jewish catastrophe” and the fate of other victims of Nazi crimes.\textsuperscript{563} Therefore, by recycling a highly problematic narrative of Germans

\begin{footnotes}
\item[561] Also see: Friedrich, “Die Rechtsnatur”.
\item[562] What is also striking is that, like Hochhuth, who, in spite of his repeated moral accusations called Churchill a “tragic but great” statesman, Friedrich too seemed reluctant to make this argument explicit. Hochhuth, \textit{Soldaten} 143-144. Also see: Hochhuth, “Churchill - wohin er führte”. Though his whole work implies the similarity between Holocaust and strategic bombings, and implies that Churchill and Harris should have been tried as war criminals, Friedrich never formulated such an argument explicitly. For example, in an interview with \textit{Die Welt} Friedrich refused to confirm that he considered Churchill a war criminal and only insinuated that he felt this to be the case. In his answer to the question whether \textit{in Der Brand} Friedrich was labeling Churchill as a war criminal, he stated that he did not: “Churchill was responsible for the annihilation of half a million civilians, because he wanted to break their morale. The bombing of Coventry cost 568 dead. When the war was already won, and the Allied armies already stood in the Eiffel, in January 1945, the bombing war reached its climax: not to bring victory, but in order to punish the Germans. During the last half year the war, every day on average 1023 civilians fell victim to bombings. Cities like Pforzheim with barely 63,000 inhabitants were destroyed; every third person died. Is this a war crime? This, everybody has to decide for themselves. I take no position on this matter”:”Ein Kriegsverbrechen? Das muss jeder für sich selbst entscheiden”, \textit{Die Welt} 21-11 2002. http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article264642/Ein_Kriegsverbrechen_Das_muss_jeder_fuer_sich_selbst_entscheiden.html.
\item[563] Also see Chris Lorenz’ argument that the problematic relationship between “German catastrophe” and “Jewish catastrophe” have dominated German memory culture since 1945: Lorenz, “Twee soorten catastrofe”.
\end{footnotes}
as a collective of victims, based on both the East German anti-Western rhetoric as well as on West German rightwing apologetic argumentation, eventually Friedrich too “balanced” the two crimes against one another and placed them on the same moral level. By suggesting the proximity to the Holocaust, the latter becomes “just one example” of modern “wars of extermination”. Implicitly this interpretation also becomes a criticism of a view on the war, which focuses too much on Germans’ guilt and denies their collective status as victims, often using the same rhetoric as those authors who wanted to avoid a discussion on German perpetra-
torship altogether. For this Friedrich could draw on East and West German narratives and integrate them in a moralistic narrative of German victims of a cynical and genocidal Allied massacre.

5.2. Der Brand and the new public interest in the Allied bombings

The new German victim’s discourse

Jörg Friedrich’s Der Brand became probably the most influential book on the Allied air war, at least since David Irving’s Destruction of Dresden. It became a bestseller, provoked an enormous response and was heavily debated in both the German and British press. Reactions to Der Brand as well as to a photographic collage by Friedrich, Brandstätten (2003) varied from great praise to harsh criticism. Since its publication, Der Brand has puzzled and divided the critics. Friedrich’s uncon-
ventional style and his direct descriptions of suffering appealed to those who like Friedrich himself felt that the air war as a collective experience of suffering had been neglected in Germany. Martin Walser for example praised the book as an

“epic” book of war, “stylistically transcending categories of friend and foe and of perpetrators and victims”. Cora Stephan labeled it an “extraordinary” book and an important “hymn” to the dead.565 They felt that Friedrich had for the first time found a language and style that was appropriate for the horrible phenomenon.

On the other hand, the stylistic qualities of Der Brand also drew strong criticism. The central critique of Der Brand focused on Friedrich’s linguistic references to the narrative of the Holocaust. In particular, Friedrich’s use of words such as “crematoria” and the suggestion that bombed Germans had been “gassed” and other references to the Holocaust were denounced as inappropriate. Apart from the immediate responses and reviews the book also triggered a strong increase in public attention for the Allied bombings. The first indication of the impact of Der Brand was the enormously increased interest for the air war in the press, popular and local documentary accounts, literature, television-documentaries and films and exhibitions. Through this variety of popular media the history of the Allied bombings, often in the form of emotional and enthralling eye-witness accounts, was brought to a large audience. After the success of Der Brand various local memoirs were published.566 German magazine Der Spiegel devoted an entire issue to the air war in 2003, which was also published as a volume under the title “Als Feuer vom Himmel viel”.567 German public television stations ZDF and ARD launched doc-


566 See the different accounts reviewed by Jörg Arnold in: Arnold, “Sammelrezension Bombenkrieg”.

567 Burgdorff and Bayer, eds., Als Feuer vom Himmel fiel.
umentaries “Der Bombenkrieg” and “Feuersturm”, in which Jörg Friedrich was given a prominent role as “historical expert”. In 2005 Sebastian Dehnhart in cooperation with Guido Knopp directed an award-winning documentary film Das Drama von Dresden in 2005. These films and documentaries often adopted the popular idea that the air war had been a taboo, giving the word to Friedrich and others to spread their narrative of German suffering.568

*Integrating the victims discourse in the narrative of German guilt*

In the new public interest in German suffering, not everybody was willing to accept such a radical lack of historical context and implicit references to the Holocaust that characterized the work of Friedrich. A considerable part of the following massive series of publications and other forms of representations were concerned with integrating the history of the air war within the parameters of a general view of history, in which at least on a basic level the German responsibility for the Nazi crimes was recognized and addressed. This search for a way to address German suffering, while avoiding “Aufrechnung”, to an important degree characterized leading voices in the new public debate.

What is interesting is that this search had already played an important role in the increasing commemoration of the bombing of Dresden during the 1990s.

568 Like Friedrich’s work documentaries like Das Drama von Dresden and Feuersturm depicted the effects of strategic bombing in highly decontextualized settings. These documentaries show a trend in German history on television to focus on the experience of “normal Germans”, while avoiding a critical reflection on their stories and neglecting basic historical outlines. In a style typical for the big-budget ZDF/Guido Knopp-productions, emotionally charged interviews are followed by short dramatized scenes. These again are followed by computer simulations which show the physical workings of the firestorm, and dramatic voice-over giving basic historical backgrounds. In all, most recent documentary films to a great degree followed the concept of Der Brand, emphasizing the German “loss” without contextualizing it. Das Drama von Dresden (Sebastian Dehnhart 2005); Der Bombenkrieg (ZDF 2002); Feuersturm (ZDF/Spiegel TV 2003). E.g. Sönke Neitzel, “Wer Wind sät, wird Sturm ernten.” Der Luftkrieg in westdeutschen Fernsehdokumentationen,” historicum.net (2003).
Typical of public reactions to the 50th commemoration of 13 February in 1995 was the strong emphasis that Dresden should stand for a collective memory beyond the politicization of GDR politics, moral accusations and “balancing” the air war with the Nazi crimes. Die Zeit for example stated, that “Dresden does not accuse. It does not try to extrapolate itself in regards to Auschwitz. It does not say: we’re even. Dresden calls for reconciliation”. Roman Herzog’s speech with a similar message received much positive attention in the German press. In his speech, Herzog, on the one hand, emphasized that remembering Dresden should not lead to “Aufrechnen”, to the balancing of German suffering with the suffering of victims of Nazi crimes and the importance of reconciliation with former enemy Britain. On the other hand, Naumann points out that the emphasis of the commemoration ritual and Herzog’s speech was “self image of a now united nation in commemoration of its own victims of the (air-) war”. Herzog summoned an image of a group of victims, which in spite of their diversity all became equal victims under the indiscriminatory attack. Hereby the Nazi crimes were only referred to in a symbolic way, and not as something that personally concerned the Germans who were commemorating the past as a community of victims.

Such a position, however, was present not only in official memory politics. While many documentaries, local histories and memory accounts of the Allied bombings approached the Allied bombings from a perspective similar to Friedrich’s, there was also concern to avoid a decontextualized one-sided focus on German suffering. Another attempt to add the context of Nazism to the narrative of German suffering in German history was big-budget TV-drama Dresden (2005)

570 Naumann, Der Krieg als Text 51-54; Fache, “Gegenwartsbewältigungen” 229-231.
made by the ZDF, which scored very high on viewer ratings and was widely discussed in German media. The film demonstrated that the memory of the air war had entered the centre of mainstream discourse on the Second World War, in which the Holocaust could not be totally ignored. The film not only tried to reproduce the firestorm as realistically as possible but it also took some of the criticism of Der Brand seriously and with the help of historians Richard Overy and Rolf Dieter Müller included some basic historical background, showed short scenes in which brutality of the Nazi regime was depicted, and addressed the moral dilemmas and discussions among the British army leaders.571

From similar attempts two conclusions can be drawn. First, the concern with avoiding Aufrechnung and the evocation of a “victim-identity” showed that the fear that the Allied bombings could be appropriated for rightwing politics had not disappeared. And secondly, that, while challenging rightwing revanchist claims, they were ultimately unsuccessful in attempting to offer an alternative narrative of the Allied bombings. The need for a correction of a rightwing revanchist discourse on the Allied bombings was probably fueled by the fear of increasing attempts by extreme rightwing groups to appropriate the bombing war for their political agenda. Since the late 1990s the bombings had increasingly become an important historical theme for the extreme right, who took the equations sug-

gested by Irving, Friedrich and others one step further by labeling the air war as the “real Holocaust” or “Bomben-Holocaust”, and in the early 2000s organized demonstrations in Hamburg, Dresden and other targeted cities.572 These extreme right groups mainly expressed their views during organized memorial demonstrations in Dresden but also on online-discussion-boards, websites and you-tube.573 But more generally this rightwing narrative expressed on the internet dwelled on a series of recent extremely pathos-filled and victim-centered popular accounts of the air war spread by the rightwing Junge Freiheit.574

In light of these extremist attempts to appropriate the memory of the Allied bombings, official memory politics and liberal media and intellectuals searched to represent the narrative of German suffering, while avoiding the trap of decontextualizing the air war or reproducing an overly simplified image of Germans as

---


574 The references to the terror attacks on German civilians have formed a central element in Junge Freiheit’s strategy of historical revisionism. While on the one hand following the argument that the Luftwaffe had refrained from terror attacks the air war is directly equated with the Holocaust, and seen as a symbol that even more than the Nazi crimes represents “more than anything else” the horrors and suffering of the Second World War. Ruoff, Verbiegen, Verdrängen, Beschweigen. Die Nationalgeschichte der Jungen Freiheit: Auschwitz im Diskurs des völkischen Nationalismus 103-109. Interestingly though these articles are often based on works of Irving, Friedrich and other recent popular accounts and sometimes even on more moderate accounts of Horst Boog, who recently has contributed to Junge Freiheit on different occasions. Also see chapter 3. While Boog and Friedrich certainly do not associate themselves politically with Neo-Nazism, their work and arguments are used by extreme-right publications extensively. Websites of Deutsche National Zeitung and Junge Freiheit offer articles, interviews with authors and also advertise and sell popular literature on the air war. See: https://www.national-zeitung.de/shop/page?sessid=RA9wFxa7lsr54Bsr6fMu4XdlBK0xlrDPNwF0TeZUbppNtNjYfY5R3apTxlktj&shop_param=; https://www.deutscher-buchdienst.de/index.htm.
a collectively innocent group. However, what becomes clear from Herzog’s speech as well as from similar attempts in films and documentaries following *Der Brand*, is that while on a certain level the context of the Nazi crimes and German responsibility are acknowledged, the basic narrative of German suffering was confirmed. The references to the Holocaust here mostly served to bridge the two narratives, but failed to overcome problems that accompany the victim-centered perspective on the Allied bombings. Just as in the work of Friedrich, here the Germans were seen as a closed community of victims, who were clearly dissociated from their leaders and a small group of evil Nazis. That such a failed attempt to integrate these narratives also characterized the attempts of German historians like Rolf Dieter Müller will discussed below.\(^{575}\)

**Explaining the new debate on German victims**

Before continuing with the recent historiography after Friedrich, I will briefly address the intensive discussion of the impact of Friedrich’s book within the context of recent developments in German memory culture. It is evident that the public interest in the Allied bombing, generated by *Der Brand* was a signal that a shift was taking place in German public memory. Simultaneous with the interest in the Allied bombings, other issues that related to the German victims of the Second World War were discussed with similar intensity. In 2001 Günter Grass published his novel *Im Krebsgang*, which addressed the fate of the German expellees from East Germany and also generated a massive public interest in the expulsions.\(^{576}\)

\(^{575}\) A similar call for a commemoration is visible in the recent commemorative practices in Dresden and especially in the newly rebuilt Frauenkirche. When in 2005 the Frauenkirche was reopened, the tradition of pacifism and the alternative commemorations in which dissidents from the GDR had voiced their protest in silent candle burnings were emphasized. Fache, “Gegenwartsbewältigungen”.

\(^{576}\) Like the Allied bombings, since the early 2000s, the expulsions were discussed in
Though not as massively as the Allied bombings and the expulsions, the recent interest in German victims also led to new attention to the mass rape of German women by soldiers of the Red Army.  

The question why such an increased interest in German suffering emerged in the late 1990s has been one of the most discussed issues in recent studies on German memory. While it is impossible to find a single distinct explanation for the new debate on German suffering, it is possible to distinguish several factors that have played a role in this process. First, it is clear that popular media have been important. The appeal of emotional eyewitness-stories of “normal Germans”, describing history from their personal point of view, has been a more general trend in the German media landscape. In this form of “histotainment”, for which the TV productions of Guido Knopp are exemplary, subjectivity and emotionality largely suppress the historical background. Especially during the 1990s, this proved to be a successful formula to reach a large audience and became an increasingly dominant form in which history was represented. Since there had been various TV documentaries on the bombings before the end of the 1990s, the media interest itself does not wholly explain why these documentaries, films and books suddenly met with such resonance and all of a sudden triggered such a lively debate. But the new interest in the personal suffering experiences of “nor-

---

577 E.g. the strong public interest in the anonymous diary of a “woman in Berlin”: Anonymia, Eine Frau in Berlin. In 2008 a motion picture based on this book and directed by Max Färberböck came out under the same title.
mal Germans” cannot be understood without this broader development in German historical culture. It is not surprising that topics such as the Allied bombings and the expulsions eventually became part of a historical culture which was primarily concerned with the compelling stories of eye-witnesses.  

German Unification and the Flakhelfer-Generation

Another explanation is that German Unification brought about a change in German historical debates about the Second World War. In the first place the end of the division of Germany and the ideological competition between GDR and the Federal Republic played an important role. After 1990 the old narratives, which had been largely influenced by Cold War politics, had to be replaced with a new meaning. Robert Moeller argues that “once the Wall came down, it was possible for Germans to reflect on what all Germans had suffered, re-examining parts of their past that had been subordinated to Cold War priorities”. The air war and especially Dresden as a “site of memory” provided potential ground for a united memory, which could include East and West German war experience in an inclusive narrative of German suffering. But not only the relationship between East and West Germans had changed after 1990. Reunified Germany had proven its democratic stability and allowed those who had always feared that national unity would allow for revisionism and nationalist sentiments to find a more relaxed and less tense perspective on German history. After the Berlin Republic proved itself as a stable nation strongly embedded in the European Union, the former critical “guardians” of German “Verfassungspatriotismus” opened up for memories, which

578 Assmann, Der lange Schatten 192; Kansteiner, In pursuit of German memory Neitzel, “Wer Wind sät”.
had always been associated with a dangerous German nationalism.\textsuperscript{580}

This “stability” of German national identity was confirmed by the increased discussion on German perpetratorship during the 1990s. In public debate, literature and arts, but also in official memory politics the question of German perpetratorship and the Holocaust became a central reference point. The building of the “memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe” in the centre of the memory landscape of the new German capital Berlin demonstrated the importance of the Holocaust in the official politics of memory. Also, major controversies around Daniel Goldhagen’s \textit{Hitler’s willing executioners} (1996) and the exhibition on the crimes committed by the \textit{Wehrmacht} catalyzed an increasing presence of the Holocaust in the public debate.\textsuperscript{581}

Aleida Assmann argues that before 1990 in West Germany the memory of German suffering was “blocked” from two sides. On the one hand, it was appropriated by rightwing revisionist groups, and, on the other, rejected by a left-liberal group of intellectuals, who associated themes such as Dresden and the Expulsion with the “war-guilt” and apologetic attitude of the generation of their parents.\textsuperscript{582} Yet as they reached their seventies, these leftwing intellectuals, especially members of the \textit{Flakhelfer}-generation like Grass, Wehler and Mommsen, made a shift


from focusing only on German guilt to now also discussing German suffering. These aging intellectuals now reflect a generational shift which is taking place with the disappearance of the last group of people who had experienced the war themselves. The primary memory of those who have actually experienced the air war is about to be erased, which is the moment in which these carriers of this direct experience call for a final attempt to share their memories. These attempts are made not only by the disappearing generation of eye-witnesses themselves but also by members of the second and third generation, who see this as a final chance to collect and account for the memories of their parents and grandparents.583

In particular, the generation of the Flakhelfer who were born roughly between 1926 and 1930 and who were adolescents or young adults during the war, has demonstrated a changed attitude in this process. For historians and intellectuals belonging of the Flakhelfer generation, like Walter Kempowski (1929), Günter Grass (1927), and Hans Mommsen (1930) who had also played a part in a critical discourse on the Nazi past, new publications on German suffering meant that they were confronted with personal childhood memories, for which there had been little space in their focus on the question of German guilt. The recent commentaries by historians like Hans Mommsen and Hans-Ulrich Wehler about Der Brand reflect an interesting conflict of different narratives. Wehler, on the one hand, expressed a certain uneasiness with the theme and repeatedly warned about a “victim’s cult” and an overly emotional and moralizing discourse. On the other hand, however Wehler stated that the air war had been a neglected theme and the present debate was potentially “liberating”. He stressed that his generation had felt an enormous shyness about talking about their experience during the air war, because of a fear

583 Assmann, *Der lange Schatten* 24-27, 176, 194.
that would “balance” the attacks with the Nazi crimes. While Wehler still saw a certain tendency among Germans to draw such a balance and criticized Jörg Friedrich for “lack of discipline” in his language, he also pointed to the changed political culture in Germany, which had “stabilized” to such a degree that he did not expect this tendency to dominate the current debate. \(^{584}\) Less cautious than Wehler, Hans Mommsen celebrated Friedrich’s account as a breakthrough in the public discussion of a historical theme in German popular culture. Finally had this central historical event and its horrors returned to the German consciousness.\(^ {585}\)

**German foreign policy and Iraq**

Another significant factor regarding the increased interest in the Allied bombings can be found in recent German foreign policy. With international conflicts in Yugoslavia, Kosovo and later in Afghanistan and Iraq, the new United Germany was increasingly confronted with the question whether or not it should participate in international peace missions and interventions. Here, there is a striking coincidence with the debate on German participation and the shift in the German debate on the Allied bombings. In reaction to the images of the ethnic cleansing and genocide in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995, German foreign policy had shifted towards a position in which it felt that, on the basis of its responsibility as a nation which had committed genocide in the past, now it was obliged to interfere, when a similar crime reoccurred. It was Joschka Fischer’s reference to “Nie

---

\(^{585}\) Though Mommsen was not wholly uncritical of Friedrich, his review was ultimately very positive. Hans Mommsen, “Wie die Bomber Hitler halfen,” in *Als Feuer vom Himmel fiel. Der Bombenkrieg in Deutschland*, ed. Stephan Burgdorff and Christian Habbe (München: 2003) 115-121; Mommsen, “Moralisch, strategisch, zerstörerisch”. 
wieder Auschwitz” (never again Auschwitz) which led the leftwing government of
Schröder and former pacifist Fischer to the decision to interfere in the military air
attacks on Kosovo in 1999.

However, regarding the new conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, Germany took
a different position, and in particular objected to the US intervention in Iraq, a
decision that to an important degree reflected German public opinion on this mat-
ter. Interestingly, the fierce discussion on the Iraq war coincided with the shift
from the discussions on German perpetratorship to an increased focus on German
suffering. As Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, where in Kosovo the German expe-
rience with its genocidal past provided legitimacy for participation, in the case of
Iraq, Germany’s position was now linked to the German victims’ experience. The
objection against US air attacks on Iraq was often connected to the notion that the
Germans “knew what it was like to be bombed” and based their current political

Though, interestingly enough, Jörg Friedrich dissociated himself from the
argument that the Allied bombings provided an argument to oppose the attack,
in the German public debate and also on the level of local commemorations in
cities such as Hamburg, Iraq was often mentioned as a current point of reference
which showed that the Germans had “learned” from their own suffering-experi-
ence. In creating a link between the current air war in Iraq and the Allied bomb-
ings, the Germans emphasized not so much their own suffering, but claimed that
their experience gave the Germans a better understanding of the horrors of war
and served as the foundation of their commitment to world peace.\footnote{nolan, “Air wars” 25-28 huyssen, “Air War Legacies” 181-193. such a position was, for example, taken by hans mommsen, who stressed that the strong opposition in germany to the Iraq war could be explained by the shared experience of the allied bombings. mommsen, “Moralisch, strategisch, zerstößerisch” 150.}

The debate on the war in Iraq does not in itself explain the new interest in the Allied bombings and it can be argued that this mechanism was not a new phenomenon. Malte Thiessen points out that such an attitude also played a role in the anti-atomic movement of the 1950s and especially in the peace movement in the 1980s, which related the memory of the air war to current calls for peace.\footnote{thiessen, \textit{Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis} 134-142, 296-303.}

Also, many East and West German historical accounts of the air war had referred to the threat of a possible atomic bomb. However, because the simultaneous discussion on German suffering and the general German rejection of the Iraq-war concurred, this translation of the air war into the present now became part of a nation-wide discussion. Unlike Friedrich, public intellectuals such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Günter Grass related the two issues to make a stand against the Iraq war.\footnote{nolan, “Air wars” 26; huyssen, “Air War Legacies”.}

Also, the Iraq war became a direct reference point for critical studies that explicitly addressed the morality and legal status of the Allied strategic bombing war and concentrated on retrospective criticism of the Allied methods.\footnote{fritze, \textit{Moral des Bombenterors}; hans-joachim von leesen, \textit{Bombenterror: der Luftkrieg über Deutschland} (Kiel: 2005) 32; christoph kucklick, \textit{Der Feuersturm - Bombenkrieg über Deutschland} (Hamburg: 2003) 40-41. this was also the case in britain and america. in britain authors like anthony grayling explicitly took the bombing of Iraq as a starting point for an objection to the involvement of their country in the invasion of Iraq. more than offering new historical or moral arguments, grayling’s book, written for a large public, concentrated on retrospective moral criticism of the way Britain and America had sought moral legitimacy for the mass bombing of civilians. A.C. Grayling, \textit{Among the dead cities. Was the allied bombing a necessity or a crime?} (Londen: 2006). for other recent British and American accounts, in which the Iraq conflict is a central point of reference, see: keith lowe, \textit{Inferno. The Devastation of Hamburg 1943} (London: 2007); beau grosscup, \textit{Strategic Terror. The Politics and Ethics of Aerial Bombardement} (Londen, New-York: 2006).}
An old debate in a new context

The increased trust in German national identity after German Unification and after a period of intense debates on German perpetratorship as well as the fading of the war generation are plausible explanations for the increased public interest in the wartime suffering experiences of normal Germans. This explains in particular the changed position of the last generation who experienced the war as adolescents. Whether it was the reaching of retirement age or an increased trust in German political culture after a longer period of intensive confrontation and debates on German perpetratorship that brought this old guard to new positions is unclear. However, while these intellectuals indeed seem to have made a shift recently, the position of 68ers like Sebald and Friedrich is more problematic. While their books Luftkrieg und Literatur and Der Brand have often been regarded as the product such a shift in German memory culture after 1990, this becomes less certain when we look at Friedrich’s earlier works. Since 1986, Friedrich had been writing on the Allied bombings, drawing more or less the same conclusions as in Der Brand. The same can be said for Sebald, who also started writing on the air war memory in literature during the early 1980s.591

The recent generational shift and changed conditions in German national identity after 1990 therefore can offer explanations for the increased attention to issues like the Allied bombings. They help explain under what circumstances it became politically opportune to commemorate Dresden or why earlier sensitivities among certain intellectuals had begun to fade. However, it is clear that Sebald and Friedrich had not “shifted positions” after 1990. That they had become interested in the Allied bombings and had begun recycling elements of the 1950s dis-

591 Sebald, “Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte”.
course during the mid 1980s is significant and shows that especially Friedrich’s argumentation should be regarded within the context of a dispute over the discursive limits within which the Second World War could be discussed in Germany, that culminated in the *Historikerstreit*. This is not to say that Friedrich as a leftwing writer can easily be placed within the group of conservative historians, for his critical writing on the *Wehrmacht* and direct descriptions of Nazi crimes contrasted significantly with the work of historians like Nolte. There are nevertheless strong parallels between their positions, since they shared the tendency to equate the Allied bombings with the Holocaust and reused arguments and narrative elements from the 1950s to counter the idea that Germans had been collectively guilty for the Nazi crimes. The basic elements of the two narratives that had collided during the 1980s were in this way continued during the 1990s.

What had changed, however, is that the degree of sensitivity and polemic atmosphere that had characterized the *Historikerstreit* seemed to have faded. While during the 1980s similar rhetoric had provoked vast polemic counter attacks, now, many more attempts were made to build bridges. Friedrich’s book was, in spite of its limits seen as an opportunity to discuss the Allied bombings as an important topic. The earlier left-liberal polemists like Wehler and Mommsen were to a considerable degree willing to accept basic elements of Friedrich’s narrative and give him the benefit of the doubt in his “linguistic derailing”. Representations of German suffering which, while focusing almost exclusively on German suffering, did not forget to point to or depict the essential symbols of the Nazi crimes and German responsibility, became a common approach. They characterized official commemorations as well as most of the popular representations. While these were often much more cautious than Friedrich, their attempts to integrate the Allied
bombings in a narrative of German responsibility remained problematic. Unable to offer truly different interpretations and narrative forms, they to a high degree adopted Friedrich’s perspective. The narrative of German victimhood now had become a central element in German memory culture.

5.3. Der Brand and recent German historiography

This did not mean that the basic tension between two conflicting narratives had disappeared or that issues like the Allied bombings had now become safely integrated in a pluralistic narrative of German responsibility for Nazism. Academic historians, in particular, formulated serious criticism against Friedrich and the new German victims discourse in German memory culture. Interestingly, the historians involved have often regarded their criticism as a conflict between academic history and popular memory. For example, military historians Horst Boog, Richard Overy and Ralf Blank pointed out fundamental academic deficits and superseded interpretations in Friedrich’s account.592 Some historians trying to understand Friedrich’s role in light of recent developments in German historiography deny his self-acclaimed position as a historian altogether, arguing that Der Brand could better be seen as a “novel” and “may not be history at all”.593 Stefan Berger has taken this issue even further. By emphasizing the non-academic status of Jörg

593 Boog, “Kolossalgemälde”; Nolan, “Air wars” 28. Jörg Arnold has pointed out that Friedrich’s work primarily narrates popular images of the air war rather than drawing on professional historiography and offering new insights. Arnold, “A narrative of loss”; Arnold, “Sammelrezension Bombenkrieg”. Interestingly some contributors to the debate have turned this argument around. Cora Stephan has praised Friedrich’s independent position outside of the “school of academics”, which according to Stephan was directed by “political correctness” and not by “love for the truth” like Friedrich had been. Stephan, “Wie man eine Stadt anzündet” 97.
Friedrich and other protagonists of the recent debate, he argues that since the 1990s the narrative of German suffering has not been the province of professional historiography.\footnote{Berger, “On Taboos” 210-224; Lorenz, “Twee soorten catastrofe” 199. Also see: Chris Lorenz, “‘Hete’ geschiedenis. Over de temperatuur van de contemporaine Duitse geschiedenis,” Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 120, no. 1 (2007) 5-19, here: 14.}

This is a far-reaching conclusion that needs some qualification. Different historians have taken Friedrich’s work very seriously as a work of academic history. Prominent German historians like Hans Mommsen, though also expressing some reservations about Friedrich’s style and perspective, have acknowledged his effort in writing a comprehensive account of the air war by “accurately summarizing” the current academic discussion and supplementing it with a compelling account on the suffering of German civilians.\footnote{Mommsen, “Moralisch, strategisch, zerstöerisch”.} More recently, by analyzing the harsh criticisms of Der Brand, American historian Charles Maier argued that “critical historians have simply labeled the book demagogic and flawed” and he made a plea for historians to take the issues raised in Der Brand seriously.\footnote{Charles S. Maier, “Targeting the city: Debates and silences about the aerial bombing of World War II,” International review of the Red Cross 87, no. 859 (2005) 429-444, here: 440-441.} While this does not mean that these historians agreed uncritically with all the conclusions and stylistic aspects of Der Brand they have taken it seriously as a historical work and not only as a catalyst for a public debate on memory.

The second reason that this distinction needs differentiation, is that it assumes that a victim-centered perspective was present only in popular accounts like Der Brand and no longer characterized professional historiography. However, many German academic historians, though expressing uneasiness with the many deficits and inaccurate information, underlined some of the basic interpretations...
of his work. Both Mommsen and Wehler, for example, restated the idea that the Allied bombings had strengthened the German will to resist and depicted the Allied bombings as a senseless mass killing. It is indeed clear that Friedrich’s narrative particularly resembled the historical accounts of the 1950s and lacked much of the nuance that characterizes the work of military historians, like Boog and Groehler. However, I have pointed out in the previous chapter that there was a strong continuity of the earlier victim-centered discourses in the professional military historiography of Groehler and Boog, both of whom published important works during the 1990s.

Continuities of the victim discourse: Rolf Dieter Müller and Lothar Fritze

A similar interplay can be seen in some other recent accounts by military historians, for example, Rolf Dieter Müller’s account *Der Bombenkrieg* (2004) that accompanied a documentary series for the Television Channel NDR. Military historian and leading historian of the MGFA Rolf Dieter Müller attempted to bring “military historical research to a wider public” and thus contribute to a more differentiated perspective on the air war in the German public debate. Interestingly Müller’s work, on the one hand, emphasized the need for contextualization. Müller not only questioned that the air war was a “crime” and but also stressed that “to remember the air war, irrevocably led to thinking about the catastrophe, which had been caused by the national socialist war policies”. On the other hand, however, in its structure of main actors and events, the book largely followed older narrative patterns.

Relying heavily on the work of his MGFA-colleague Horst Boog, *Der Bombenkrieg* centrally revolved around the argument that the indiscriminate bombing
of civilians had been initiated by the British and that the Luftwaffe had initially refrained from terror bombings. Moreover, it also emphasized that the Allied “terror bombings” were aimed at destroying German morale and suggested that this strategy was focused on the wrong target. Rather than attempting to assassinate Hitler, Müller argued, the British put pressure on the German population by planning a large scale attack on Berlin. “In other words: it was not Hitler who was sentenced to death but the population of Berlin”. While dissociating himself from Friedrich’s radical victim’s perspective, Müller, by suggesting that in Berlin the Allies had “sentenced” the German civilians “to death” instead of Hitler, made a similar argument.

Even closer to Friedrich’s interpretations was that of Lothar Fritze, historian and political scientist at the University of Chemnitz and associate of the Hannah Arendt Institute in Dresden, who wrote Die Moral des Bombenterrors (2007). While his work, on the one hand, echoed earlier East German anti-American rhetoric, in discussing the air war under the international law, Fritze relied on the work of Horst Boog. Fritze completely followed Boog’s argumentation that the bombing of Warsaw, Rotterdam and Coventry had not violated international law. On the other hand, Fritze clearly distinguished morality from legality and claimed that he “had no idea, how these actions could be legitimized from a moral perspective”. However, as in earlier studies, such a distinction based on the different legal status, did lead Fritze to an almost exclusive emphasis on the Allied bombings and their effects on German civilians and to seeing them as inherently different from the German attacks.

597 Müller, Huber, and Eglau, Der Bombenkrieg. Especially 84ff, 185ff, 230ff. Significantly, it is Müller’s book that Berger refers to while making his point that recent historiography has dissociated itself from the victim-centered public discourse. E.g. Berger, “On Taboos” 221 (note 51).
598 Fritze, Moral des Bombenterrors 38-40, 81. E.g. Horst Boog’s very positive review of this book. Boog considered Fritze’s work to be a “quantum leap” in German process of
By doing so, Fritze expressed a view on bombing that resembled Jörg Fried-
rich’s perspective to a high degree. Fritze explicitly stated that the Allies had not
only “declared the entire German population as their enemy, from little children
to elderly women, independent from individual actions or personal guilt”. He even
went further in explicitly claiming that the target of the Allies consisted of a col-
lective of civilians, who were either wholly or partly innocent of the Nazi crimes.
In a deeply “inhuman way of thinking”, the Allies had “identified the enemy gov-
ernment with the population it ruled” and had considered the enemy nation as
a “homogenous unity”, which it sought to destroy.599 A central parallel in these
works is that the German civilians were seen as victims of cynical power politics by
the Allies, in which German civilians were ruthlessly identified with their regime
under the general assumption that Germans had been collectively guilty for the
crimes committed by their regime.

Unlike Friedrich, however, Fritze connected his contempt of the Allied bomb-
ings directly with the present conflict in Iraq. According to Fritze the Americans
and British legitimized the bombing campaign against Iraq by referring to the
strategic bombing of Germany. It was because its importance for present con-
cepts of warfare that the morality of the air war had to be re-evaluated, for in
the present situation a “favorable depiction of the Allied warfare in the Second
World War” was used as a “source of legitimacy, which could be tapped from in
any convenient situation”. Because of this it was necessary to point out that nei-
ther legally nor morally could the bombing of civilians be justified. By choosing
Iraq as a starting point, Fritze was seemingly able to overcome some of the prob-

599  Fritze, Moral des Bombenterrors 65-72, 93-94.
lems that had characterized earlier German works that focused on the moral and legal status of Allied warfare. Fritze dissociated himself from rightwing revisionism or any attempts to “consolidate a national consciousness”, but pleaded for a “collective learning” from the recognition that the Allied air war, far from having been a “just war”, continued to lead to the justification of current illegitimate and immoral acts of warfare. It also gives the impression, that after a period of intensive discussion and academic research, the Nazi crimes were “self evident and had no need to be proven once more”. It was now important and legitimate to criticize the Allied war as a “prototype of the just war” and re-examine the air war beyond a discussion of German identity.600

Alternative perspectives: German society and the Allied bombings

The use of such rhetoric in Müller’s and Fritze’s book shows the strong continuities of the traditional military historical approach, which become especially striking in light of Müller’s simultaneous attempt to challenge the problematic narrative of Friedrich’s Der Brand. It moreover demonstrates that even in very recent cases professional historians have not abandoned the victim-centered discourse to the extent suggested by Stefan Berger. On the other hand, however, several German historians have begun to approach issues like the Allied bombings and the expulsions from a different angle. While military historians like Müller and Boog integrated several basic elements of the German victim narrative in a more thorough historical context, many academic historians have dissociated themselves more strongly from Friedrich’s victim-centered perspective.

Fundamental criticism came from a new generation of historians, interested in social history and memory culture. Ralph Blank and Dietmar Süss and American scholars such as Mary Nolan and Robert Moeller challenged Friedrich’s interpretations and called for a more complicated interpretation of the history of the bombing war. They not only criticized Friedrich’s factual deficiencies, rhetoric and style, but also argued for a more fundamental change of perspective in three central aspects. First, critics drew attention to the way the main “characters” were treated. While many critics acknowledged the need to include the experience of German civilians, serious objections were made against the stereotypical image of a coherent German “Volksgemeinschaft”, which dominated these accounts. Critics therefore called for a more pluralistic approach to the experience of Germans, which included a widening of the focus of Allied perpetrators and German victims, by including a focus on the role of the German state. Secondly, critics of Friedrich suggested the widening of the temporal, special and thematic scope of the narrative of the air war. Rather than approaching the air war as an isolated phenomenon, critics called for extending the contexts in which the Allied bombings took place. The Allied campaign should be seen as an integral part of military actions during the Second World War in which the line between civilians and combatants was increasingly blurred. Thirdly, Friedrich was criticized for his lack of reflection on the history of the narrative he tried to represent. By uncritically recycling interpretations rooted in Nazi propaganda and in postwar identity politics Friedrich used problematic terminology and interpretations, which according to his critics, needed to be reflected upon and placed in the context in which they were constructed.601

Though not all critics of Friedrich had themselves done research on the Allied bombings, their call for an alternative interpretation of the air war was not only a reaction to *Der Brand* but also reflected recent developments in German historiography of the Allied bombings. It is interesting how different developments in social history and *oral history* since the 1980s have delivered interesting new insights. Though in spite of the long tradition of using eye-witness accounts to illustrate the horrors of the air war, a methodically reflected *oral history* has rarely been applied in the analysis of this problem, in a few cases the war experience and memories of Germans have become subject of such an approach. For example, in Lutz Niethammer’s research on Ruhr workers and Margarete Dörr’s project on the war experiences of German women, it became clear that the air war had played an important role in the way Germans living in urban areas experienced the Second World War.\(^{602}\)

Other impulses came from the study of local social history. By focusing on cities like Hamburg, the question as to the nature of the effects of the bombings on the regular life and local urban community could be researched with more detail and precision than the more general surveys and overviews had been able to give before. In Hamburg, Joachim Szodrzynski, Frank Bajohr and Ursula Büttner started to place the experience of the attack on Hamburg in July 1943 in a wider context of local society during the Nazi period and the Second World War by focusing on the local level.\(^{603}\) In addition to these local studies historians in the 1990s began

---

\(^{602}\) Lutz Niethammer, ed. *"Die Jahre weiß man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll": Faschismus-Erfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet*, Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet, 1930 bis 1960; Bd. 1 (Berlin: 1983); Margarete Dörr, *"Wer die Zeit nicht miterlebt hat...“ Frauenerfahrungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg und in den Jahren danach*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: 1998).

\(^{603}\) For example see: Joachim Szodrzynski, *“Das Ende der “Volksgemeinschaft”? Die Hamburger Bevölkerung in der “Trümmergesellschaft” ab 1943,” in Hamburg in der NS-Zeit:
to research the various attempts of the Nazi bureaucracy to handle the effects of bombing. This even found its way into the series of the MGFA, in the 9th volume of Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg (2004), edited by Jörg Echternkamp and Ralf Blank. Where the other volumes had been dominated by traditional military history and analyses of military operations, this new part entitled “Die deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939 bis 1945” integrated the military history of air raids with an analysis of their impact on German society. More recently Dietmar Süß, in his “habilitation” study, took a similar social historical approach in an international comparison between the air war in Germany and Great Britain.

---

604 New articles and works appeared on the German civil defense, evacuation organizations such as the Erweiterte Kinderlandverschickung (the evacuation of children from endangered cities) and social institutions like the Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfart (NSV), which became an important agent in the different attempts of the state to provide social aid to the German population Wilfried Beer, Kriegsalltag zur Abwehr- und Schadensbegrenzung, dargestellt für den Raum Münster (Bremen: 1990); Gerhard Kock, “Der Führer sorgt für unsere Kinder...” Die Kinderlandverschickung im Zweiten Weltkrieg (Paderborn: 1997); Krause, Flucht vor dem Bombenkrieg; Armin Nolzen, “‘Sozialismus der Tat?’ Die Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (NSV) und der alliierten Luftkrieg gegen das Deutsche Reich,” in Deutschland im Luftkrieg. Geschichte und Erinnerung, ed. Dietmar Süß, Zeitgeschichte im Gespräch, Bd. 1 (München: 2007) 57-69; Jörn Brinkhus, “Ziviler Luftschutz im ‘Dritten Reich’ - Wandel seiner Spitzenorganisation,” in Deutschland im Luftkrieg. Geschichte und Erinnerung, ed. Dietmar Süß, Zeitgeschichte im Gespräch, Bd. 1 (München: 2007) 27-40.


607 Dietmar Süß, Tod aus der Luft. Deutschland, Grossbritannien und der Bombenkrieg (München: 2010) *Publication date has not been established.
**Differentiating the Germans**

To an important degree, these studies contested the victim-centered view, by including other “actors” and perspectives. By looking at the social policies and political measures which the Nazi state developed in reaction to the air war, the history of the air war now not only included passive victims of bombings but also as active participants and supporters of the Nazi state. Here we find Germans who participated in air defense or even in the public lynching of Allied crew members. A novelty was that the oral and social histories of Blank showed that German victims of the air raids could very well be active participants in the Nazi dictatorship and perpetrators at the same time.\(^608\)

In concentrating on the experience of women the oral histories presented and analyzed by Dörr in her chapters on the bombing raids and the evacuations offered space for different biographic stories, which narrate the history of the air war in a highly individual but also pluralistic way. They show how gruesome the confrontation with mass death was and how these experiences continued to influence the physical and psychological health of many women. Also these interviews show that the often praised “solidarity” among the Germans, though acts of help and support certainly could be expressed towards neighbors, in extreme circumstances was often limited to one’s own family. The willingness to help each other, mostly excluded strangers, and especially those who were considered outcasts and pariahs by the regime. For example, Dörr showed that women who described Jews or foreign workers, who were excluded from the air shelters, showed very limited

---

\(^{608}\) E.g. Nolan, “Air wars” 33. It is exactly on this point where these more recent accounts can be distinguished from the social historical reflection made by Olaf Groehler who, as I have argued in an earlier chapter, still largely addresses the Germans as victims of both Nazism and Allied bombings.
empathy for their underprivileged situations. These oral histories offered more than a simple collection of individual experiences during the air war, which is also the point where oral history distinguished itself from the growing body of “memory collections”.

The focus on social structures and individual biographies also led to an increased interest in the impact of the air war on gender relations and family life. The air war had specific consequences for the social activities of German women. With their husbands fighting on the fronts, women were often alone in facing the huge challenges and strains caused by the raids, such as homelessness. The situation of being alone in the confrontation with these strains and the resulting increased sense of self-sustainability and independence formed a crucial aspect of the war experience of the female Ruhr workers. Moreover, it was on the “home front” where many women and children were mobilized in military institutions. The reality of the frequent air raids and the absence of male popula-

---


610 Though popular accounts, exhibitions and TV-documentaries showed a renewed interest in the memories of ordinary Germans, using methods similar to those of Jörg Friedrich, eye-witness accounts were used merely to uncritically illustrate the stereotype of terrorized Germans. In some cases, the editors of collected eye-witness accounts, though not using them for an oral history analysis, nevertheless reflected on the nature of their sources. For example see: Horst Matzerath and Brigitte Holzhauser, eds., ... vergessen kann man die Zeit nicht, das ist nicht möglich: Kölner erinnern sich an die Jahre 1929-1945: zum 40. Jahrestag des Kriegsendes (Köln: 1987) 222-223.

611 As recent research by Nicole Kramer points out, the air war had profound consequences for the position of women and also influenced the way women were portrayed by the Nazi propaganda. For many German women, as well as for their children, the experience of bombing raids meant a first real confrontation with the war. About 50 percent of the victims of air attacks were female. Nicole Kramer, “’Kämpfende Mütter” und “gefallene Heldinnen” “ in Deutschland im Luftkrieg. Geschichte und Erinnerung. Zeitgeschichte im Gespräch, Bd. 1, ed. Dietmar Süß (München: 2007) 85-98. Kramer is working on a PhD-thesis on this subject.

612 Niethammer, “Heimat und Front” 223; Dörr, Kriegsalltag 299-300.
tion made the Nazi state increasingly dependent on women and children in the organization of air protection. Even before the war, the *Reichs Luftschutz Bund* specifically mobilized women as air aid wardens. Also in other organizations, like the German Red Cross, women played an important role in the organization of the “civil air defense”.

This massive mobilization of Germans in the civil defense is also emphasized in the work of social historians like Ralph Blank. In his lengthy analysis in *Das Deutsche Reich* Ralf Blank pointed out that the idea that Germans in the Reich formed a “Home Front” actively supporting the soldiers at the front, though initially based on a propagandistic idea, increasingly became reality. With the growing intensity of air raids, German women, children and elderly not only were confronted with the violence of war directly, but also became involved in other ways. More and more, the Nazi state relied on these groups to operate its air defense, so that on this level too the Second World War became a “total war”, in the sense that the line between civilians and combatants was fading.\(^613\)

But there are more aspects in which the reactions to the air war influenced the society of the Third Reich as well as the Nazi crimes. The air war strongly affected power-relations among the leaders of the Third Reich. The increased pressure on the state, which was caused by the Allied bombings, also meant an increased importance of the role of Joseph Goebbels. Not only was the state depending on his ministry of propaganda to manage the public opinion. Goebbels also gained dominance over nearly all organizations charged with the supplying and accommodating Germans who had suffered damage from the air attacks. Also, in these efforts to compensate Germans and provide housing and material

---

\(^{613}\) Blank, “Kriegsalltag und Luftkrieg”.
goods, the persecution of Jews and other victims became intertwined with this policy of compensation. Nazi bureaucracy developed a precisely organized system to redistribute furniture and other possessions among members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Germans could get Jewish furniture for free or for very low prices. The origins of these goods were openly addressed and well known by the Germans who made use of them. Though this redistribution of material goods and the provision of houses that formerly had belonged to Jews did not come close to solving the major problems of homelessness Germany was facing, it does illustrate the extent to which the story of the air war and the story of the Holocaust intertwined.\footnote{Ibid. 425-429.}

Another connection can be drawn in the relation between the air war policies and the racial war of Nazi Germany. Michael Krause for example has pointed out that there was a direct connection between the euthanasia actions and the relocation of German hospitals, asylums and health institutions.\footnote{Though the mass killing of handicapped and psychiatric patients in *Operation T4* started in 1939, it increasingly became connected to the growing shortage of health institutions during the war. The shortage of health institutions to accommodate those injured in the air raids was clearly connected to the clearing of asylums for the handicapped and mentally ill and their “evacuation” to euthanasia-institutes like Hadamar, where they were mass murdered. Their emptied institutions were mostly reused to accommodate the Germans who suffered injuries due to air raids and soldiers. Research on the euthanasia actions pointed out that in 1942 and 1943, long after the *Aktion T4* had officially been brought to halt, the mass killing continued, now in different places and under a different name. Entire institutions still were “evacuated” to Hadamar and elsewhere. The policy of evacuation of cities, which bore a special risk of air raids, or which like Hamburg in 1943 had been heavily hit, could serve as a scapegoat to veil that so-called evacuation of psychiatric patients actually meant that they would be deported and murdered: Krause, *Flucht vor dem Bombenkrieg* 146-156. Also see: Ernst Klee, “Euthanasie” im NS-Staat: die “Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens” (Frankfurt am Main: 1983).}

*From Nazi propaganda to postwar memory*

By questioning the significance of the air war on the relationship between the regime and the German population these historians also reflected on the work-
ings of Nazi propaganda and re-evaluated concepts that had been invented by the regime. What characterized this new approach is that historians were now deconstructing concepts such as “Home front”, “Total war” and “Volksgemeinschaft”. This approach showed that these terms, while heavily charged with the ideology of Nazi propaganda, simultaneously could help to understand the effects of the massive confrontation with war and violence among Germans living in the Reich. Using not only official reports by the SD and other institutes but also private documents, such as diaries and letters, Joachim Szodrzynski pointed out that the ideal of the “German community” propagated by the Nazi state initially was received quite positively by the Germans. Though this concept automatically meant the exclusion of those who, based on their political or racial characteristics, were considered pariahs, the involvement in this imagined community was very appealing. Membership involved specific advantages and privileges, such as the right to access air shelters and to receive material compensation for losses.616 Social-historical studies showed that the heavy bombing raids of 1943 caused an increasing “erosion” of the Volksgemeinschaft-ideal because the total incapability of the regime to uphold the initial appeal and promise of advantages led to general disillusion. In the heat of the air attacks the ideal of a “Volk” willing to sacrifice itself out of mutual solidarity began to crumble quickly.617

617  In this process, the attitude of the regime towards the German population also began to shift. While the “Volksgemeinschaft” could initially function to integrate Germans in the national-socialist society, now the regime reacted with an increased threat of terror and violence to those who openly challenged the German “Volksgemeinschaft”. Though the increased violence and threat certainly influenced the potential of open protest and resignation, the Germans increasingly withdrew to the private domain and the Volksgemeinschaft made place for a Trümmergemeinschaft, a rubble community. It was during this process that the Germans increasingly dissociated themselves from their
Blank and others reflected on the efforts of Nazi state to respond to the bombings with propaganda, air protection, and social measures, and by the end of the war with increased threats of violence and terror. Especially after 1943, the terror-policies of the Nazi state increasingly affected the “home front”. In reaction to the potential dissatisfaction with the course of the war, the Gestapo and other Nazi organizations began to manifest its indiscriminate terror-regime towards potential resistance and disobedience in the Reich itself.618 The policy of fear towards the Germans was accompanied by the promise of retaliation and vengeance by the Nazi propaganda, which was often welcomed by the Germans. For a long time the hope for Wunderwaffen (miracle weapons) with the potential for large-scale retaliation, which could stop the Allied air raids for a long time was a dominant factor in the German reactions to the air war. In this sense, according to Blank, the promise of retaliation served as to “stabilize” German society under the bombs. A similar function was filled by the mobilization of lynch mobs to murder Allied pilots, who had been shot down by German air defense.619

While social historians showed that the deconstruction of Nazi terminology
could help to understand the working of German society during the war and write a history of the Allied bombings in which the German people did not appear as an amorphous collective, but as a differentiated society, a similar approach was applied in the different studies to the memory of the air war. Even more than was the case for Blank’s social-historical works, it was in the field of memory studies that Friedrich’s *Der Brand* triggered various new studies. In the research on local memory cultures of the Allied bombings in cities like Magdeburg, Kassel and Hamburg, young historians like Malte Thiessen and Jörg Arnold not only argued that the bombings had never become a “taboo”. They showed how the bombings were commemorated and connected to current political issues in postwar Germany and pointed to continuities of wartime interpretations and myths in postwar memory. They showed that on a local level the bombings were widely remembered by different groups and could also function as political arguments for current issues. In this process the old ideal of a brave *Volksgemeinschaft*, which collectively bore the strains of a war that took place beyond their power or responsibility, proved a useful theme to construct an inclusive coherent urban identity. And also in the context of international tensions and the 1980s peace movement, the local experience of bombing provided a main historical context. Thiessen and Arnold’s work therefore showed that the history of the Allied bombings locally was a constantly present factor and in the process often was subject to selective interpretations and myth building.620

---

620 Thiessen, *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis*; Arnold, “*In Quiet Remembrance*”?: Gregor, *Haunted City*. 
Conflicting narratives of Allied bombing

Interestingly these new studies not only corrected errors in earlier historiography or deconstructed popular myths. These social histories and memory studies can be seen as efforts to write a wholly different narrative of the Allied bombings, one that often follows a very different narrative structure. For example, in analyzing the effects of the bombings on German wartime society, the main historical actors are treated differently. Instead of focusing on Allied leaders and the military conduct of strategic bombing Blank, Dörr and others have concentrated on the reactions to the Allied bombings. Their narrative focuses not on Allied perpetrators and German victims, but on German society under Nazi rule. Moreover, by reflecting on the Nazi propaganda apparatus and on different organizations created by the German government to control the social effects of bombing, the Nazi government and leaders such as Joseph Goebbels now appear as important historical “actors” in the history of Allied bombings. It therefore offers a contextualization that exceeds a mere formal acknowledgement of the historical context of the history of the Third Reich, but one that sees them as essentially interrelated.

Another interesting difference in recent narratives is the way they have contextualized the bombings and placed them in a temporal framework. They not only refrain from the suggestion that the Allied bombings share basic similarities with the Holocaust and reflect much more strongly on the historical context of the Second World War and Nazism as the main historical background for this history. But especially the reflection on post-war interpretations and the study of cultural memory have altered the temporal framework from which the bombings are regarded. In the memory analyses of Malte Thiessen Jörg Anrold and others the bombings are not primarily analyzed as a historical phenomenon but as a sub-
ject of collective memory and political appropriation. Though their history starts with the first reactions and interpretations during the war and with the attempts of Nazi propaganda to instrumentalize the bombings for their political aims, it stretches the temporal context to postwar Germany. In the narrative of Thiessen and Arnold the bombings are mainly seen as a central example of the problematic process of coming to terms with the Nazi past in Germany.

Though different in their approach and focus, the social history and memory studies discussed above share a similar overarching perspective. While not denying that the Allied bombings had made many victims, who by no means could be held responsible for the Nazi crimes, nor suggesting that the bombings were moral or a legitimate form of warfare, these historians pushed the discussion of the morality of the decision of Allied leaders to bomb German civilians to the background. Instead they critically reflect on the relationship between the Germans and their regime, or on the way Germans have attempted to repress or avoid addressing their responsibility for Nazism by representing themselves as a collective of victims. Their narrative therefore has a different starting point. It integrates the impact of the air war in the history of a German wartime society, which to a far-reaching degree supported and cooperated with a regime that started a war, and persecuted and mass murdered millions of innocent victims. This history acknowledges the strains and suffering experienced by German civilians, but it does not accept an exclusive focus on these experiences or demand that the victims be collectively labeled as innocent civilians.

It was on the basis of these recent developments in historiography that authors like Süß and Blank built their more fundamental criticism of Der Brand and similar representations of the air war. And it is on this point, where the nar-
ratives of authors like Arnold, Blank and Süss most strikingly collide with those of authors like Fritze and Friedrich. In the history written by Friedrich and Fritze the moral condemnation over the illegitimacy and cruelty of the Allied war methods and empathy with their victims dominate the narrative entirely. This juxtaposition of “those who bomb” and “those who are bombed” determines the narrow historical scope through which the history of the air war is seen. Even the representations of the air war, which like Müller's *Der Bombenkrieg*, or the various documentaries and films, approach the bombings less radically from a victim’s perspective, are unable or unwilling to go much further than adding the general context of a war that was started by Germany, under a Nazi dictatorship. They were bound by a narrative of German suffering that had been carried by both academic as well as popular accounts and had determined the limits within which the air war could be discussed in Germany.

In this light it is interesting to look at the arguments with which authors like Friedrich and Fritze have reacted to such criticism. It is striking that the two basic premises of such an alternative perspective on the air war; the contextualization of the German victims and a reflective view on moralistic terminology and selective interpretations, were refuted by authors like Friedrich or Fritze. The refraining from contextualization of German suffering under the Allied bombings and the decision to focus exclusively on the air war was justified by suggesting that the Nazi crimes needed no further explanation, since they had been thoroughly examined and discussed. Moreover, they argued that the bombings posed such a grave moral issue, that all references to the way they had been exploited for propaganda during and after the war, could not significantly change the conviction that a radi-
The clear rejection of the significance of the basic elements of the alternative narratives offered by critics such as Süß or Blank marks the central point of conflict of two opposing narratives. In this light it is significant that the recent conjuncture in German public debate triggered by Der Brand offered an important new context for academic studies on the air war. These to a certain degree can be seen as academic reflexes to the massive memory debate after the publication of Der Brand. For memory studies, the heightened interest in German suffering and especially the impact of Der Brand brought up new questions about the functioning of the public memory of the air war. It is probably no coincidence that many of these recent projects were initiated shortly after Sebald and Friedrich had sparked a broad public discussion. By commenting on the deficiencies in popular beliefs and offering different “complicated” contexts, such new works also can be seen as the reactions of specialists, who point to the shortcomings of “popular” works, and measure them against academic standards. Moreover, these recent developments fundamentally dissociate themselves from Jörg Friedrich’s narrative, both by deconstructing his historical concepts and interpretations, as well as by analyzing his work in the context of German memory culture.

621 In regarding the air war, according to Friedrich or Fritze, a further differentiation of its victims became irrelevant, because this did not change anything in respect to the inhumanity of the bombings. And equally irrelevant for this perspective was the way in which the air war had been abused for political ideology, from Nazi propaganda, GDR memory politics to postwar nationalist revisionism. Authors like Friedrich and Fritze not only recycled Nazi language, but more strikingly, radically denied any relevance to the way terms like “terror bombing” or “community of suffering” had been rhetorically exploited for ideological purposes. While Friedrich in interviews mostly ignored any question relating to the propagandistic origins of many of the terms he used, Fritze even explicitly stated that any such reflections were “irrelevant” in regards of the “truth” that the air war had been a dreadful crime. Fritze, Moral des Bombenterrors 72, 296. Langer, “Von guten Massakern”; “Ein Kriegsverbrechen?”

622 Especially: Süß, “Massaker und Mongolensturm” and Blank, “Der Brand”.
However, one could ask, whether in light of the recent public debate on German suffering these academic reactions should be seen only from the perspective of a conflict between academic historiography and popular memory culture. First of all, this presumes that these academic works did not take a position in the debate over German memory. This however is questionable and ignores the fact that these recent studies too reflect ideas on how the Nazi past and the Second World War should be remembered and publically discussed. The presupposition of many of these alternative approaches toward the air war was a critique of a politicized memory culture in which the memory of German perpetratorship was suppressed in favor of a victim-identity. This is apparent not only in the writings of the leftwing polemist Hannes Heer, whose style resembles the rhetoric of leftwing historians during the Historikerstreit most, and who regarded the entire public interest in the air war simply as a victory of conservative memory politics in the search for a collective evasion of German guilt. But the basic outlines of such a critical narrative were also echoed in the more nuanced studies about the memory of the Allied bombings. Mathias Neutzner, for example, clearly identified with the “alternative” commemorations of the bombing of Dresden, which according to Neutzner, have to be seen as evidence of the growing discontent with the Communist state and which focused on private mourning instead of on the construction of political identity.

More distanced, a certain identification with the “personal dimension” of the Germans’ experiences of loss, in contrast with the politicized abuse of these experiences is also notable in the work of Jörg Arnold. Implicitly present in these

---

623 Assmann, “(In)Compatibility of Guilt and Suffering”.
625 Arnold, “In Quiet Remembrance”? 48, 52.
studies is the idea that a popular memory culture, in which Germans can unproblematically identify themselves as a collective of victims, is problematic, not only because it does not hold up to empirically based history, but also because Germans have a responsibility to recognize their part in the history of Nazism and any temptations to avoid or repress such a recognition is harmful. While this standpoint mostly remains unarticulated, it can be sensed in the critical rejections and deconstruction of such identity construction and the implicit favoring of a perspective on history in which the air war can be discussed without losing sight of and indeed focusing on the interrelationship with the context of German perpetratorship.626

Conclusion

Friedrich’s Der Brand captures some of the central problems of the German historiography of the Allied bombing, albeit in a radical way. His book “recycled” the basic narrative elements and arguments that had characterized East and West German historiography of the Cold War and integrated them into a highly emotional and moralistic narrative. His book contained many errors, lacked historical context and made the highly problematic argument that the Allied bombings had to be seen as a form of genocidal warfare, directed at erasing the German people and their rich culture. Just like the Holocaust, the Allied bombings had been an example of the “total” war of annihilation. While Friedrich’s book took rather extreme points of view, it reached a large audience in Germany and beyond. Der Brand and the discussion that followed it brought the Allied bombings into the center of German public debate on the Second World War and on its place in Ger-

626 For instance in Thiessen, Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis 388. Here Thiessen notes, without doubt, approvingly a “gradual differentiation of urban memory” in Hamburg.
man collective memory. Not all of Friedrich’s arguments, and especially not his suggested equation between the Holocaust and the air war, became commonly accepted. Many of the different films, books and documentaries that followed Der *Brand* were concerned with avoiding the accusation of *Aufrechnung* and attempted to integrate the history of the air war in the official liturgy of symbolic recognition of German guilt. But nevertheless, the central element of Friedrich’s narrative, which took the suffering of “innocent Germans” as a starting point, and his recycling of interpretations and terminology largely rooted in Nazi propaganda, became common ground in a considerable part of the public debate on the air war as well as in historiography.

The impact of Friedrich’s book cannot be understood without looking at the broader discussions that were taking place in the early 2000s. The sudden massive interest in German suffering, to an important degree stimulated by leftwing intellectuals like Grass or Wehler who had for a long time neglected issues like the expulsions and the air war, led to the idea that finally a taboo had been broken. On the one hand, the increased “stability” of German identity and the disappearance of the Cold War rivalry after German Unification, the search for a shared memory of the war for a United Germany and the long period of critical reflections on the Nazi crimes had taken away the earlier fear that these topics could endanger Germany’s political stability. The fading of the last war generation also led leftwing intellectuals to address issues they had themselves neglected for a long time. This led to a historical culture, in which, more than before, an exclusive focus on the German victims of the Second World War was considered to be legitimate and necessary and no longer endangered a critical reflection on German history.

This does, however, not mean that the discourse on German suffering and
specifically the issues raised by Der Brand can be fully explained by the shift in German memory culture after 1990. Starting to write on the air war already during the 1980s, authors like Friedrich or Sebald were not principally reacting to a historical culture changed by German Unification. Friedrich’s position in particular has to be understood from the continuous conflict between the two competing narratives of German history. Jörg Friedrich’s attempts to equate the air war with the Holocaust and to replace the complicated discussion on individual responsibility of Germans for the Holocaust with a simple division between “Holocaust perpetrators” and “the Germans” as a collective of victims, cannot be understood without looking at the longer tradition in which German intellectuals have sought a counter-narrative against the idea of Germany as a nation of perpetrators. It is therefore not surprising that Friedrich’s first attempts came shortly after the Historikerstreit in the 1980s, when conservative historians like Nolte and Stürmer had in different ways contested this “negative identity”.

But it is also striking that the Allied bombings were narrated and interpreted in the work of Friedrich and in many other accounts in a way that recycled arguments that had a much longer history and partly can be traced back to Nazi propaganda. This narrative was to a high degree accepted in the different popular representations of the air war, but, contrary to what was suggested by authors like Berger and Lorenz, it can also be found in academic historiography. This narrative was only truly contested and confronted with an alternative by a group of historians interested in social history and memory culture. American scholars like Møller and Nolan as well as German historians like Blank, Süß or Thiessen contested the dominant narrative of the Allied bombings. By differentiating the Germans as a pluralistic society and by reflecting on the processes of interpretation and mem-
ory they provided a narrative that was fundamentally different.

To regard this as a conflict between popular memory and academic history is therefore problematic. It underestimates the extent to which the narrative of Der Brand has roots in a longer tradition of historiography. It also downplays the extent to which, implicit or not, academic historiography reflects competing positions in the discussion as to how the Allied bombings should be represented and remembered, and what significance this has for the place of the Nazi past in German identity. The alternative approach to the Allied bombings, given by social history and memory studies has a broader significance than this. Though carefully, they also function as a critical position in a debate over “German memory”, and like all other participants in the debate, have an implicit idea of how the air war should be seen by the Germans.