

2-1-2004

Review of "The Conflagration-Germany during the Allied Bombing Campaign 1940-45" by Jörg Friedrich

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld
Fairfield University, grosenfeld@fairfield.edu

Copyright 2004 Gavriel Rosenfeld.

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Rosenfeld, Gavriel D., "Review of "The Conflagration-Germany during the Allied Bombing Campaign 1940-45" by Jörg Friedrich" (2004). *History Faculty Publications*. 48.
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs/48>

Published Citation

Rosenfeld, G. (2004) Review of "The Conflagration-Germany during the Allied Bombing Campaign 1940-45" by Jörg Friedrich in: *German Studies Review*, February, 2004, pp. 184-85. (Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg, 1940-45)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

Jörg Friedrich. *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg, 1940–1945*. Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2002. Pp. 592. Cloth EUR 25.00.

Jörg Friedrich's new book is perhaps the most important of a recent spate of publications, including, most notably, Günter Grass' novel *Im Krebsgang*, and W. G. Sebald's essay "On the Natural History of Destruction," to refocus public attention on the suffering of German civilians during the Second World War. Having remained high on the German bestseller list for months since its appearance, *Der Brand* has sparked a fair amount of speculation about whether the Germans have entered into a new stage of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, one in which the suffering of the Nazis' millions of non-German victims is taking a backseat to that of the Germans themselves.

Friedrich's study is a work of popular history that deemphasizes analysis in favor of an extensive description of the origins, technical aspects, and destructive impact of the Allied aerial bombing campaign against German cities and civilians. *Der Brand* begins abruptly and, to this reviewer, rather awkwardly with a long opening chapter (minus any introduction) entitled "Waffe" which rather tediously describes the highly technical dimensions of the bombs, planes, and radar systems used by the British and Americans to attack German cities. A second chapter, "Strategie," focuses more tightly on the rationale behind the area bombing policy adopted by the Allies (the demoralization of the German citizenry) and explains the reasons for its shortcomings and ultimate failure. Subsequent chapters, too richly textured to describe adequately in this short review, focus extensively on the experiential dimensions of the bombings for the victims themselves.

Perhaps the most striking chapter of *Der Brand*, however, is the mammoth third one, "Land," nearly 200 pages long, which essentially comprises the book's core. In it, Friedrich methodically surveys with herculean effort the Allied destruction of all of Germany's major cities and towns from north to south and west to east from 1940 to 1945. At first glance, Friedrich's discussion of the innumerable cases of devastation seems unduly formulaic. In nearly every instance, he provides opening capsule discussions of a given town's history and architectural landmarks before going on to describe its ensuing destruction, complete with statistics about the number of bombing raids and civilian casualties. Before long, however, the reader recognizes that this repetitiveness is more akin to religious incantation. Chapter three of *Der Brand* can be seen as following in the tradition of medieval Jewish "Memorbücher," books commemorating Jews killed in anti-Semitic pogroms, in seeking to document and remind readers of the rich historical legacy that was lost in the Allied bombings of German cities. As he writes of the bombing of Cologne: "sixty-seven minutes liquidated the substance of nine hundred years." Such assertions are no less powerful for their laconic form, and many readers will justifiably shudder at the incalculable losses wreaked by Allied bombings.

Given the elegiac and sometimes angry language used by Friedrich, it is no wonder that *Der Brand* has sparked controversy since its appearance. The most hot-button issue, of course, has been whether or not Friedrich has stolen a play from the playbook of the German right and jumped on the victimization bandwagon in order to minimize the crimes of the Nazis. In fact, as certain German reviewers have noted, Friedrich uses some of the same language typically reserved for the Holocaust to describe the results of Allied bombings, for example, likening German cellars during air raids to “crematoria,” systematically using terms like “Vernichtung” to describe the fate of German cities, and invoking loaded phrases like “die größte Bücherverbrennung aller Zeiten,” to depict the burning of German libraries. Such comparisons potentially suggest a kind of moral equivalence between Nazi crimes and the Allied air campaign against Nazi Germany. Moreover, while Friedrich’s descriptions of architectural devastation and human death are disturbing at the level of basic fact (especially when he recounts the deadly firestorms that killed tens of thousands of German men, women, and children in cities like Hamburg, Dresden, and Pforzheim), he also liberally peppers his narrative with histrionic metaphors that accentuate German suffering, for example, describing the twenty-two minute bombing of Pforzheim as “cooking it . . . into lava, as if the fists of cyclops had struck from a different geological age.”

In truth, Friedrich’s left-wing background and his prior pioneering scholarship on Nazi crimes would seem to exonerate him of any suspicions of being a rightwing apologist. But in raising the important counterfactual question of whether or not “the fire was avoidable” in the Allies’ defeat of Nazi Germany, he potentially allows Germans to look away from their nation’s own heavy legacy of moral culpability and towards the perhaps more comfortable question of the responsibility of others who brought destruction to their nation. Friedrich does not attempt to answer whether Germany could have been defeated without the air war, but in suggesting that Germans now need to overcome the “unwillingness of two generations” to confront it, he may be opening up a new chapter in the German confrontation with the Nazi past—one whose ultimate destination is anything but clear.

GAVRIEL D. ROSENFELD, *Fairfield University*

David K. Yelton. *Hitler’s Volkssturm: The Nazi Militia and the Fall of Germany, 1944–1945*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002. Pp. xix, 305. \$39.95.

David Yelton’s engaging book describes the Volkssturm not as a spontaneous rag-tag army of desperate Nazi resistance, but as a civilian army, a People’s Levy of citizen-soldiers that represented, in many ways, the culmination and failure of