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Book Review **by Richard M. Ebeling**

To Destroy a City: Strategic Bombing and Its Human Consequences in World War II
by Hermann Knell (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2003); 373 pages; \$32.50.

On the night of July 27, 1943, 728 Allied bombers arrived over the German city of Hamburg at one o'clock in the morning. Ten thousand tons of high explosives and incendiary bombs were dropped on several districts of the city. The late W.G. Sebald explained what followed in his recently published book, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2003):

Within a few minutes, huge fires were burning all over the target area, which covered some twenty square kilometers, and they merged so rapidly that only a quarter of an hour after the first bombs had dropped the whole airspace was a sea of flames as far as the eye could see. Another five minutes later, at one twenty a.m., a firestorm of an intensity that no one had ever before thought possible arose. The fire, now rising two thousand meters into the sky, snatched oxygen to itself so violently that the air currents reached hurricane force.... The fire burned like this for three hours. At its height, the storm lifted gables and roofs from buildings, flung rafters and entire advertising billboards through the air, tore trees from the ground, and drove human beings before it like living torches. Behind collapsing facades, the flames shot up as high as houses, rolled like a tidal wave through the streets at a speed of over a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour, spun across open squares in strange rhythms like rolling cylinders of fire. The water in some canals was ablaze. The glass in the tramcar windows melted; stocks of sugar boiled in the bakery cellars. Those who fled from their air-raid shelters sank, with grotesque contortions, in the thick bubbles thrown up by the melting asphalt.... Horribly disfigured corpses lay everywhere. Bluish little phosphorous flames still flickered around them; others had been roasted brown or purple and reduced to a third of their normal size.... Other victims had been so badly charred and reduced to ashes by the heat, which had risen to a thousand degrees or more, that the remains of families consisting of several people could be carried away in a single laundry basket.

That night in this one raid alone, more than 45,000 men, women, and children were killed in Hamburg. Half the houses in the city were destroyed, and more than a million Germans had to flee into the surrounding countryside.

The death toll from military bombing of civilian populations in the Second World War was massive. German bombs and V-rockets killed more than 60,500 British civilians in Great Britain. German civilian deaths from British and American bombing of German cities have been estimated to have been between 570,000 and 800,000, and more than 120 cities were turned to virtual rubble. The civilian death toll in Japan from Allied bombing was between 330,000 and 900,000 with an additional 112,000 killed from the atomic bombs. To undertake Allied raids on German and Japanese cities, more than 46,250 Royal Air Force bomber crewmen were lost, and more than 161,000 U.S. Army Air Force crewmen were killed.

Hermann Knell was 19 years old when the Allies bombed his home city of Würzburg, Germany, in March 1945. The deaths of 6,000 people and the destruction of 92 percent of a city of great historical beauty and no military significance led him to decide, after the war, to try to find out and understand why decisions were made to target civilian cities for terror bombing. The result is his book *To Destroy a City: Strategic Bombing and Its Human Consequences in World War II*.

The first significant aerial bombardments of targets were conducted during the First World War when the Germans used zeppelins to attack British military facilities in England and succeeded only in killing civilians. Planes were then used by both sides to hit targets behind enemy lines.

But it was in the years after World War I ended that a theory of the strategic use of civilian bombing was developed. It was first formulated by an Italian, Giulio Douhet, who argued that in war “the bomber force must ruthlessly attack the enemy hinterland.” It must be directed “against enemy population morale” and “the bombing effort must be massive.” Its purpose, Douhet argued, was to break civilian support for the war and minimize the cost of war because “aerial bombs are cheap.”

But the major voice in the period between the two world wars for the use of civilian bombing to destroy the will of the enemy was Hugh Montague Trenchard, chief of staff of the RAF. And it was the British who utilized and began to perfect civilian bombing techniques in the years after the First World War. In 1919–1920, they bombed Kabul, Afghanistan, and rebellious tribal groups along the border areas of India. And in the 1920s, the British intentionally bombed rebel villages in Somalia and Yemen and undertook an extended bombardment campaign against civilian populations in rebel areas in British-controlled Iraq for several years.

In the years leading up to the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, the British undertook the construction of a long-range bomber fleet, precisely with the intention of having the capacity to attack cities far inside German territory. Knell details the development of the

British bombing capacity, as well as the use of bombing methods in the Spanish Civil War by the Russians and the Germans on their respective sides of that three-year conflict.

“Bomber” Harris

While the Germans following the fall of France used civilian bombing as a method of their campaign against Great Britain, it was the British who developed and initiated massive urban area bombing. The master theorist and practitioner of civilian bombing was Sir Arthur T. Harris, marshall of the RAF and commander of the British bomber command from 1942 until the end of the war.

One of the rationales Harris used was that, since precision bombing was not perfected, “to destroy something you have to destroy everything.” The aiming points were “usually right in the center of the town.” And Harris proudly declared at one point during the war, “I kill thousands of people every night.”

A staff report in 1942 stated that it was necessary to destroy 42 German cities with populations exceeding 100,000; that one ton of bombs was needed to kill 800 people; and that 75,000 tons of explosives would be dropped per month for a six-month period. And in a later report in 1942, it was said that the goal would be to cause 900,000 civilian deaths and 1 million to be seriously wounded, while 25 million would be left homeless. Besides Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Bulgaria were targeted for civilian casualties in the war, but it was German cities that bore the brunt throughout the war in Europe.

Franklin Roosevelt and the U.S. military command had no serious disagreements with civilian bombing campaigns, with only a greater concern about the losses to Allied bomber crews. When some members of the American bomber command in Europe objected to Washington that urban bombing was “baby-killing,” they were either ignored or told to shut up.

It was almost a completely American show in the bombing raids on Japan. The most severe and continuous campaign against Japanese cities began in January 1945. By the end of the war in August 1945, 153,000 tons of bombs had been dropped on civilian targets, 75 percent of the bombs being incendiaries. The result was that 60 major Japanese cities were burned down, with Tokyo being the major target in a series of raids in February and March of 1945.

The leading rationale for civilian area bombing had been that it would break the morale of the home population and the people of Germany would pressure their government to sue for peace. It did nothing of the sort, Knell explains; if anything it stiffened the resistance and anger of the population. Nor did the bombing succeed in its second major purpose, the destruction of German industrial capability; many German industrial facilities had been moved to the countryside or were relatively easily repaired.

Knell concludes his history of civilian bombing in the world wars with these words:

One can say that the losses and destruction were unnecessary and do not represent a leaf of honor in the annals of mankind. They cannot be excused. The best one can do so many years after the wars is to analyze and assess them, dispatch them to history, and hope and pray that they will never happen again.

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