GERMANS AS VICTIMS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Air Wars, Memory Wars

Mary Nolan

THE German preoccupation with the Nazi past, with issues of guilt, responsibility, and victimization ". . . doesn't end. Never will it end," to quote the resigned note on which Günter Grass concluded his latest novel, *Crabwalk*.[1] It manifests itself in ever new forms, as different parts of the past, which may or may not have been repressed, come to the fore and are painfully reconstructed, tentatively probed, and reluctantly and often only partially accepted. Each new perspective on the past reorders, sometimes even shatters, the previous mosaic. Recall the impact of the film *Holocaust* or of the Wehrmacht exhibition. A similar phenomenon is now occurring—or so some hope and others fear. Since 2002 German suffering, rather than German guilt, has become the principal theme in discourses about the past. The firebombing of Hamburg and Dresden, the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, "moral bombing," mass rape, and ethnic cleansing dominate historical and literary production and public debate as the Eastern Front, war crimes, and the pervasive knowledge of the Holocaust did in the mid- and late-1990s, and the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its central place within the Third Reich did a decade before that.

Why has the air war become a subject of such fascination and disputation at this moment? Was it really previously taboo? Who is writing about the air war, and who is paying attention to the current outpouring of histories, memoirs, novels, documentaries, and interviews? What do those producing and consuming these works hope to achieve by a meticulous reconstruction of German death and destruction and a thoroughgoing critique of British and American aims and actions? Has this debate reshaped German understandings of the past, and has it influenced and been influenced by the politics of the present?

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1. Günter Grass, *Crabwalk*, trans. Krisha Winston, (New York: Harcourt, 2002). The German original *Im Krebsgang* was published in 2002.

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The current collective obsession with the air war and its attendant German suffering has multiple causes and diverse participants with contradictory intentions. Both the intensity of the current debate and its parameters reflect the interaction of the politics of memory and the politics of the present moment, of generational experiences and anxieties, of scholarly concerns with questions of international law and morality, and of the ongoing popular historical fascination with World War II. The effects, actual and feared, of this round of the German memory wars are varied and ambiguous. A concern with the air war is neither the cause nor the effect of the pervasive German critique of American foreign policy, which is subsumed under the empty label anti-Americanism, but the air war debates and "anti-Americanism" do partially define one another in the current moment. A new German victim-centered view of the past has not become hegemonic, but the current debate presents Germans as simultaneously guilty and suffering in proportions still very much open to dispute. In substance and outcome, this marks a significant departure from the Historians' Debate and the Wehrmacht exhibit controversy. Current works about the air war challenge historians to write a much more complex, contextualized, and comparative history of the legitimacy, experiences, and effects of aerial bombardment, a history of World War II as total war that nonetheless retains clarity about the centrality of Auschwitz and Nazi responsibility for it.

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Since 2002, the air war, which in the current debate usually means only the Anglo-American saturation bombing of German cities from 1942 to 1945, has become a cause celebre in Germany and beyond its borders. At issue is not what happened. One hundred thirty-one cities and towns were bombed, most repeatedly and many with the destructive firebombing techniques for which the attacks on Hamburg in 1943 and Dresden in 1945 are the iconic symbols. The death toll is generally placed at 500,000 to 600,000, with the majority of casualties being women, for total war had feminized German cities. Approximately one-fifth were children, many of their peers having been evacuated to the countryside. City after city, from Düsseldorf and Cologne in the West to Hamburg and Munich in the center and south to Berlin and Dresden in the east, was reduced to rubble, and the majority of housing stock and the cultural heritage concentrated in old city centers lay in ruins. No one disputes these facts. At issue are British intentions, German memories, and properly contextualized histories. Was the air war a legitimate military strategy, pursued perhaps to excess, but effective, legal, and moral nonetheless? Or did Britain deliberately target civilians to avenge London and Coventry and break civilian morale and continue to bomb even when it was questionable whether the German war effort was negatively affected? Were Germans understandably silent about the air war in the earlier decades of reconstruction and the later preoccupation with

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the Holocaust, or was the *Luftkrieg*, like so many other aspects of German suffering, a central theme of popular memory and a secondary one for novelists, filmmakers, and historians? Why until recently have public memories of World War II paid so much more attention to POWs and expellees than to the greater number who were bombed? Finally, how should historians analyze, contextualize, and judge the legality and morality of the aerial bombardment of cities and the extent and effects of German suffering?

Three quite different texts dominate the current debate, W. S. Sebald's critical essays, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999), published in English as *On the Natural History of Destruction*; Günter Grass's novel *Crabwalk*; and Jörg Friedrich's history *Der Brand*.[2] All are by authors whose earlier works placed the Holocaust at the center of twentieth century German history and postwar memory and emphasized German responsibility. All share a deep conviction that the traumatic experiences of World War II in which Germans were victims had been repressed and that these must be recalled and worked through. Sebald's anguished and angry attack on postwar German literature criticized both the many novelists who were silent about the air war and the few who wrote about it, but in the wrong language, with the wrong focus, without authentically capturing the trauma experienced, according to Sebald. As a result of these failures of omission and commission, Germans, above all those born like Sebald around the war's end, have been deprived of full knowledge of a formative, traumatic experience that nonetheless always hovers uneasily on the margins of memory and history.

Grass's *Crabwalk* explored the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a Strength Through Joy cruise ship turned carrier of German navy personnel and refugees from East Prussia.[3] Nine thousand civilians and sailors died when a Russian torpedo hit the *Gustloff* on January 30, 1945 (that "damned date," as Grass repeatedly reminds us). Grass explored the repressions, eruptions, and distortions of the memory of the *Gustloff* across several decades and through three generations of a family intimately tied to it. Tulla Prokriefke, young and pregnant, survived the sinking, stayed in East Germany, and remained, however contradictory it might seem, deeply loyal to the GDR, positive about much in Nazi Germany, and increasingly preoccupied with memories of the *Gustloff*. Her son Paul, born immediately after the sinking and Tulla's rescue, is a disaffected '68er and marginal journalist who spent his life running away from his familial and national history. Konrad, Paul's alienated adolescent son, is obsessed by both, and with encouragement from his grandmother, sought to rehabilitate the memory of the

2. W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003). All references in the text are to this version. Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg, 1940–1945* (Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2002).

3. Although Heinz Schön's historical research and the Frank Wiesbar 1959 film *Nacht fiel über Gotenhafen* had explored the sinking of the *Gustloff*, neither captured the popular imagination in the way Grass's novel did. J. M. Coetzee, "Victims," *New York Review of Books*, June 12, 2003, 26.

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Gustloff. His forays into history and memory led him into both neo-Nazi circles and murder, and his resulting imprisonment only intensified his obsession with past German suffering. Neither forgetting nor remembering seems to provide a solution. Or, as Paul the narrator lamented, "History, or to be more precise the history we Germans have repeatedly mucked up, is a clogged toilet. We flush and flush, but the shit keeps rising."[4]

Sebald and Grass set the stage for the air war debates, but the main performance was given by Jörg Friedrich, freelance historian, journalist, and author of *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg, 1940–1945*. This nearly 600-page tome, which spent months on the best seller list and was excerpted in the popular *Bild* newspaper, reconstructed the air war in painstaking and often painful-to-read detail. In sections labeled Weapon, Strategy, Land, Protection, We, I, and Stone, Friedrich takes the reader back and forth across wartime Germany, viewing it first from the perspective of RAF bombers, then from the topography of cities being bombed, then from within the bunkers themselves, where collective and individual experiences are reconstructed from diaries, letters, interviews, and innumerable local histories. The conclusion surveys the damage to German culture through the destruction of churches, museums, archives, and libraries. As we will see below, virtually everything about *Der Brand* has been the subject of controversy—its contextualization of the air war, its language and tone, its explicit arguments, and its implicit accusations. Here we need only note that *Der Brand* found extraordinary public resonance.

In the two years following the publication of these books, Germany was swept up in reliving and debating the air war. There were several TV documentaries and innumerable interviews with Friedrich and others. *Der Spiegel*, which in 2002 ran a multipart series on the German expellees, devoted an entire special issue in 2003 to the air war or rather, air wars, for Hitler's air attacks on Britain, Rotterdam, and Stalingrad were prominently featured. The Grass, Sebald, and Friedrich books were widely reviewed, often together, by the major media not only in Germany, but also in the United States. The British followed the debate with particular interest, for Friedrich harshly criticized Churchill and implied that he, along with Arthur "Bomber" Harris, was guilty of war crimes. Lothar Kettenacker, head of the German Historical Institute in London, collected the responses of German and British historians and public intellectuals, including Richard Overy, Hans Mommsen, Horst Boog, Mark Connelly, and Peter Schneider, in *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940–1945*.[5] On the literary side, Volker Hage, literary editor of *Der Spiegel*, published *Zeugen der Zerstörung: Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg*, which offered both a revision of Sebald's survey of German literature in the postwar

4. Grass, *Crabwalk*, 122.

5. Lothar Kettenacker, ed., *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg, 1940–1945* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2003).

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decades and interviews about the air war with such literary figures as Wolf Biermann, Walter Kempowski, Monika Maron, and Marcel Reich-Ranicki.[6] Hage also edited *Hamburg 1943: Literarische Zeugnisse zum Feuersturm*.[7] The novelist Dieter Forte, whose trilogy *Das Haus auf meinen Schultern* did deal with the air war, published a collection of essays on the theme of silence or speech.[8] Earlier novels about the air war, such as Gert Ledig's mid-1950s novel *Vergeltung*, were republished in German and translated into English (*Payback*) to wide acclaim. And just when the debate seemed to be subsiding, Friedrich came out with *Die Brandstätten*, a collection of horrific photos of bombed cities and incinerated bodies that proved yet more controversial than *Der Brand*.[9]

Even such a brief sketch of the parameters of the air war debate suggests how different this moment of coming to terms with the past is from previous ones. German victims, Germany as victim, wartime suffering in multiple forms, but above all from the purportedly unique German experience of sustained aerial bombardment, occupy center stage, often to the exclusion of other stories and other victims. The themes of morality, legality, and war crimes are, to be sure, present, but in relation to the actions of the British and Americans rather than the Germans.

Contrast this to the Historians' Debate of the mid and late 1980s, which focused on the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the place of National Socialism in twentieth-century German history. Conservative historians, such as Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer, Klaus Hildebrandt, and Andreas Hillgruber, sought to historicize and relativize National Socialism, to acknowledge but minimize the Holocaust by comparing it to other twentieth-century genocides. Their critics, such as Jürgen Habermas, Martin Broszat, Hans Mommsen, and Christian Meier, vehemently rejected both the methods and conclusions of the conservatives, defended the western-oriented, post-national Federal Republic, and insisted that "coming to terms with past" was an ongoing process, not a project whose end was in sight.[10]

The Historians' Debate was about state structures, such as polycracy, and state processes, such as cumulative radicalization, that enabled genocide.[11] It was about whether Germany initiated as well as carried out genocide or imitated

6. Volker Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung: Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2003).

7. Volker Hage, *Hamburg 1943: Literarische Zeugnisse zum Feuersturm* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2003).

8. Dieter Forte, *Schweigen oder sprechen* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2002).

9. For a scathing review of *Die Brandstätten*, which concluded by suggesting the book should be thrown into the waste basket, see Ulrich Raulff, "Von Bombenhammer erschlagen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Oct. 18, 2003.

10. For an overview of the Historians' Debate, see *Reworking the Past: Hitler, The Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston: Beacon, 1990).

11. Ibid.

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Stalin and acted out of fear of Asiatic hordes, in Nolte's extreme formulation.[12] It debated the centrality of Auschwitz to Nazi Germany in terms of Nazism and modernity, the character and continuities of Nazi social policy, and the penetration of Nazi ideology into everyday life.[13] In short, the Historians' Debate was fought over whether one could balance the crimes of National Socialism with the crimes of the Soviet Union. Only one historian, Andreas Hillgruber, invoked—with great empathy—the suffering and heroic endurance of German soldiers fighting on the Eastern Front as the Red Army advanced. He was widely criticized for his misguided equation of defeat and genocide, his emotional distance from Jewish suffering, and his insistence that there was only one perspective from which the Eastern Front in 1944 and 1945 could be viewed, that of the German population, the German army, and the German navy. In the late 1980s, German suffering could not be discussed publicly outside right-wing circles.

The exhibition *War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944* and the intense controversy surrounding it raised a different set of issues, ones representative of the politics of memory in the first post-unification decade.[14] *War of Annihilation* was a photographic documentation of the ways in which the German Army conducted warfare in the Ukraine, Byelorussia, and Serbia. Produced by one of the few private research centers in Germany, the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, it depicted the murder of Jews and so-called partisans by shooting, hanging, and the burning of homes and villages. And everywhere in the photos there are Wehrmacht personnel, ordering, passively watching, logistically enabling, often actively participating, and always legitimating the crimes that were occurring. Accompanying the photos were excerpts from army orders and reports as well as from the letters and diaries of officers and draftees. Like Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which was enormously popular in Germany, the Wehrmacht exhibit focused on German perpetrators and their non-German victims, on German crimes and German criminals. For Goldhagen, these were the SS and police battalions and the ordinary Germans whose eliminationist anti-Semitism led them to support the Nazi regime's genocidal policies; for the Wehrmacht exhibit, it was the Wehrmacht, popularly considered innocent of war crimes and genocide, which was guilty.

The Wehrmacht controversy, like the Historians' Debate, was about collective responsibility for the Nazi past, but unlike the Historians' Debate, it was also about institutional and individual guilt. It was about the beliefs, motives,

12. Ernst Nolte, "DieVergangenheit die nicht vergehen will," *Historikerstreit: Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich: Piper, 1987).

13. Mary Nolan, "The *Historikerstreit* and Social History," in Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past*, 224–48.

14. For a discussion of these controversies, see Omer Bartov, Atina Grossmann, and Mary Nolan, eds., *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century*, ed. (New York: New Press, 2002).

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and actions of specific perpetrators and the fate of particular victims. For Goldhagen and the Wehrmacht exhibit, as for the Historians' Debate, genocide remained central, but the focus was not on industrialized mass murder, but rather on the face-to-face killings that occurred so massively on the Eastern Front and which both marked the beginning of the Holocaust and accompanied murder in the camps.

The Wehrmacht exhibit, like the film *Holocaust*, reached a broad public and not just the educated class inside and outside the academy, as was the case in the Historians' Debate. The disturbingly thought-provoking photos in the exhibit were seen by over 800,000 Germans between 1996 and 1999. The emotional intensity and immediacy of the exhibit, which were acclaimed by some and condemned by others, encouraged individuals and families to reflect on their experiences and memories. The formal academic and political coming to terms with the past was thus accompanied by informal, individual memory work, some of which has been captured in interviews with visitors to the exhibit and in the personal photo albums of the war which were given to the exhibit's designers.[15]

The concern in the 1990s with Holocaust memories, German perpetrators, and issues of restitution was further reinforced by the popularity of Victor Klemperer's *I Will Bear Witness, 1933–1945*, the moving diaries of his life and survival as a Jew in a mixed marriage. These chronicle an everyday life permeated with anti-Semitism, discrimination, and brutalization, petty and major, that began immediately after 1933 and escalated steadily thereafter.[16] Issues of reparations came to the fore in the ongoing controversy about how much compensation should be paid to the survivors among the eleven million forced and slave laborers who worked in Nazi Germany during World War II. And questions of whether and how to memorialize victims in the land of the perpetrators dominated debates about the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, or Mahnmal as it is commonly called.[17]

Although German perpetrators and Jewish victims dominated the memory debates of the 1990s, there were also diverse initiatives to remember and commemorate German suffering. In 1993, Helmut Kohl transformed the Neue Wache in Berlin into an all-purposes memorial to "the victims of world wars,

15. *Jenseits des Krieges*, a film by Ruth Beckermann made at the Wehrmacht exhibit during its showing in Vienna. See also *Besucher einer Ausstellung: Die Ausstellung "Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944" Interview und Gespräch*, ed. Bernd Ulrich (Hamburg: Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, 1998).

16. Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years*, vol. I, 1933–39, vol. II, 1942–1945, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: Random House, 1998, 1999).

17. For an overview of these debates, see Mary Nolan, "The Politics of Memory in the Berlin Republic," *Radical History Review* 81 (Fall 2001), 113–32. For a longer analysis, see Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

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tyranny, racial persecution, resistance, expulsion, division, and terrorism."[18] Only outside the Neue Wache did a plaque name the victims of Nazi Germany—Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, those targeted by the euthanasia program, etc.[19] On the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end, commemorations both condemned Nazism and paid attention to the bombings and expulsions, repositioning "Germans as victims of the war and regime."[20] In a foreshadowing of linguistic slippages to come, an advertisement ran in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* admonishing "against forgetting"—against forgetting the expulsions of Germans, not against forgetting the Holocaust.[21] The ad was signed not only by far-right intellectuals and politicians, but also initially by more mainstream Christian Democrats, Free Democrats, and Social Democrats.[22] An Enmid survey found that 36 percent of those interviewed believed that the expulsion of the Germans was as great a crime as the Holocaust, whereas 27 percent did not, and 35 percent said the two could not be compared. Revealingly, no question was asked about the morality and legality of the Allied bombing.[23] Finally, in late 1999, as criticism of the Wehrmacht exhibit escalated, the Hamburg Institute shut it down. An independent commission of historians determined that the accusations of falsification leveled against the exhibition could not be substantiated. Nonetheless, rather than reopening the exhibit, the Hamburg Institute designed a new one that claimed to present a more contextualized and balanced understanding of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front that acknowledged German crimes but also German suffering and even occasional German resistance.[24]

By decade's end, as knowledge of German crimes continued to expand and trouble Germans, German suffering was claiming more space in public debate and personal memory. It was in this context of competing hegemonic and subordinate memories that the air war debate erupted.

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"Why only now?" asked Grass's narrator in the opening sentence of *Crabwalk*. Why only now can the unspeakable be spoken, the repressed be revealed, the

18. Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 218.

19. Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past*, 200.

20. Klaus Naumann, *Der Krieg als Text: Das Jahr 1945 im kulturellen Gedächtnis der Presse* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1998), 318, cited in Eric Langenbacher, "Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany," *German Politics and Society* (Summer 2003), 59.

21. Langenbacher, "Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany," 59.

22. Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past*, 114. Some, such as Hans Apel and the FDP signatories, later withdrew their signatures. 116.

23. "Die Jungen denken anders: Umfrage über Einsichten und Ansichten der Deutschen um Ende des zweiten Weltkriegs," *Der Spiegel*, 19 (1995), 77.

24. For a virtual tour of the new exhibit, go to http://www.his-online.de/english.htm#.

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taboo against acknowledging German suffering be broken? These questions, which Sebald, Friedrich and many others echoed, are powerful but unfortunately misplaced. They ignore both the post-unification politics of public memory and the private memories that underlay or contradicted official memory east and west. They ignore decades of remembrance, discussion, and disputation. The unspeakable had been widely spoken, the repressed had returned several times, and there was not so much a taboo against acknowledging German suffering as an "inhibition," shared most unevenly across generations and positions on the political spectrum.[25] The air war and other incidences of German suffering were both part of the public record and part of collective memory.[26] One might better ask where German suffering, especially in the air war, had been previously discussed, why it had not stood at the forefront of memory debates, and why it has moved there now.

Some observers, such as Thomas Neumann, have argued that the traumas of the air war could not be worked through publicly or privately. Instead, there were ritualized public commemorations at symbolic places, such as the Nikolaikirche in Hamburg, a privatization of war traumas, and, in the 1950s, pervasive anxiety about future war and destruction.[27] Michal Bodemann has insisted that the idea of Germans as victims only became widespread in public consciousness with the publication of *Der Brand*. Many others, however, strongly disagree.[28] In the family and around the *Stammtisch*, memories of wartime bombings, horror stories of rapes, and heroic tales of life among the rubble were traded, elaborated, and passed on to children and grandchildren. The experiences of those Germans expelled from the east, far from being shrouded in silence, were discussed by politicians, studied in detail by sociologists and historians, mobilized by visible and vociferous expellee organizations, and publicly recognized on such occasions as the *Volkstrauertag,* or Day of Mourning, reinstated in 1952, which commemorated the expellees as well as the civilian and military war dead.[29] The expellees were the prime beneficiaries of the 1952 law

25. The term is from Charles Maier, "WWII Bombing," H-German http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWII_bombing/WWII-bombing_index.htm. "Bombenkrieg, Einleitung," Historicum.net, 1. http://www.bombenkrieg.historicum.net/einleitung.html.

26. Coetzee in his review of Grass wrongly repeats the myth that German suffering was only part of the former and not the latter. Coetzee, "Victims," 26.

27. Thomas W. Neumann, "Der Bombenkrieg: Zur ungeschriebenen Geschichte einer kollektiven Verletzung," in *Nachkrieg in Deutschland*, ed. Klaus Naumann (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition HIS Verlag, 2002), 330–1, 336–41.

28. Y. Michal Bodemann, *Forward*, Oct. 8, 2003.

29. Langenbacher, "Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany," 51–52. Sabine Behrenbeck, "Between Pain and Silence: Remembering the Victims of Violence in Germany after 1949," in Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Life After Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 56–59. For the best discussion of the public debate about and collective memories of the expellees, see Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

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to equalize burdens, which gave extensive financial and social aid to Germans who had suffered during the war.[30] West German maps were an ongoing reminder of loss, showing a nation divided into three parts, the Federal Republic, the Soviet Occupation Zone, and the area "temporarily under Polish Administration." City tours pointed out bomb damage, and postcards displayed the cycle from prewar grandeur through bombed-out devastation to proud reconstruction with its eclectic mixture of old and new.[31]

Until well into the 1960s, popular memory was, in Eric Langenbacher's phrase, "German centered." It was only thereafter that a Holocaust-centered memory became dominant, in part because of the 1968 generation's rejection of their parents' narratives of suffering.[32] Even then, the left was not entirely silent about German suffering. As Andrei Markovits noted, "At German get-togethers, questions about the moral equivalence of Nazi crimes and allied attacks were always there. It [the current air war debate] is new only in the left-wing intelligentsia's willingness to talk about these things publicly."[33]

Andreas Huyssen posited that precisely because there was so much talk about the air war, writers and leftists avoided the issue.[34] But even they were not completely silent. Heinrich Böll, Hermann Kasack, Hans Erich Nossack, Peter de Mendelssohn, Eric Maria Remarque, and Gert Ledig all tackled this fraught theme in the 1940s and 1950s. Thereafter, literary interest waned until the 1990s, when Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Dieter Forte, and Walter Kempowski took up the air war again. And these are only the most noted works. As Hage documents, there was a host of now-forgotten West and East German novels, as well as poems, short stories, and essays.[35] One can, of course, argue about the overall accomplishments of this air war literature and the merits of particular works. Sebald, for example, condemned postwar literature for reflecting and reinforcing "individual and collective amnesia," about "destruction, on a scale without historical precedent." Individual authors were criticized for embarrassing writing, ideological inflexibility and racism, a melodramatic sensibility, an eroticization of death, and a lack of the prosaic sobriety and empathy required to capture authentically the experience of such devastation.[36] Hage is both more generous and more nuanced in his assessments. Whereas Sebald deems *Vergeltung* "clumsy and overwrought (*überdreht*)," for example, Hage finds it "a

30. Moeller, *War Stories*, 45.
31. Ralph Bollmann, "Im Dickicht der Aufrechnung," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 147–48.
32. Langenbacher, "Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany," 52.
33. Andrei Markovitz, *Forward*, Oct. 8, 2003.
34. Andreas Huyssen, "Rewritings and New Beginnings: W. G. Sebald and the Literature on the Air War," in Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 147–48.
35. Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, 118–122.
36. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 10, 4.

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rare masterpiece."[37] Hage assesses the postwar Luftkrieg literature not only for how it talks about German suffering, but also for how it avoids or only obliquely alludes to the suffering of others. Further, he explores how a much later generation, writing when the Holocaust was both known and undeniable, approached it differently. There was no taboo on the subject, he argues, but rather an awareness of how difficult it was to find the right approach, an unease talking about one's own suffering when the suffering inflicted on others was so horrendous.[38] West German writers thus did approach the subject, however warily and inadequately; it was readers who were hard to find. Only in the GDR did socialist realism come to silence a discussion of wartime trauma in favor of heroic tales of antifascist resistance and socialist construction.[39]

Among professional historians, the theme was neglected in the postwar decades, and when major works were produced by Olaf Groehler and more recently Horst Boog, they failed to spark debate. Groehler's 1990 *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* was published when public attention was turned backward to the crimes of the GDR and forward to unification.[40] Moreover, it was published from the wrong place, the GDR on the verge of its disappearance. Boog, the academic director of the military history research office in Freiburg, published *Das Deutsche Reich in der Defensive*, part of the multivolume history of Germany in World War II, in 2001 when German suffering was on the public agenda, but the work was too academic and too judicious to gain a popular audience. Local and amateur historians showed no comparable hesitation to tackle the subject, producing innumerable compilations on the air war. Although Sebald insists they "seemed curiously untouched by the subject of their research, and served primarily to sanitize or eliminate a kind of knowledge incompatible with any sense of normality,"[41] they testify to a widespread preoccupation with and knowledge of the air war.

If discussion abounded, the air war and German suffering were nonetheless not at the forefront of public memory debates in West Germany and were problematically positioned there in the East. Let us turn first to the GDR, for its politics of memory are too often ignored in discussions of this as of so many aspects of German public memory.

The air war, which Sebald and Friedrich claim was shrouded in silence in West Germany, was, in fact, discussed loudly and publicly from 1945 on in the

37. Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung*, 123.

38. Ibid., 128–30.

39. Carole Anne Constabile-Heming, Review of *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, H-German, http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWII_bombing/WWII-bombing_index.htm.

40. Olaf Groehler, *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1990); Horst Boog, Gerhard Krebs, and Detlef Vogel, *Das deutsche Reich in der Defensive. Strategischer Luftkrieg in Europa, Krieg im Westen und in Ostasien 1943–1944/45* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001).

41. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 11.

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east, but the parameters of the discourse differed fundamentally from those in the West. Whereas German crimes and Jewish victims were central in the West, anti-fascist resisters took pride of place in the East. The GDR condemned National Socialism and criticized Germans for supporting it, yet shunted responsibility for reparations onto the Federal Republic, which it considered the successor state.[42] The Cold War context that precluded discussion of the air war in the West mandated it in the East, even as it suppressed the experiences of those expelled or raped by the advancing Red Army.[43] The annual commemorations of the February 13, 1945, bombing of Dresden illustrate how the politics of memory in the East made public discussion of the air war central and the mourning of German suffering marginal.

On the first anniversary, the mayor of Dresden, Walter Weidauer, placed the bombing in a narrative of fascism and antifascism. The catastrophic bombing was avoidable, the suffering meaningless, and the Germans responsible for the war because too few had resisted Hitler. Three years later, the same mayor blamed the British and Americans. As the Cold War intensified, the GDR viewed Dresden through the lens of a Cold War anti-capitalism that was inflected with terminology borrowed from Goebbels. The bombing was a "terror attack," which had no military justification and occurred when the war's outcome had been decided. As a fifth anniversary flyer elaborated, "Dresden was turned into a heap of rubble because the imperialists of the USA knew that . . . the city would fall into the Soviet occupation zone. Dresden was a victim of an anti-Soviet campaign." By the tenth anniversary, bombing was labeled a "war crime," its British and American perpetrators equated with Nazi criminals, and West Germany condemned for rearming and allying with them. A DEFA film, *Dresden mahnt Deutschland* showed mounds of corpses and ruins while a commentator warned, "That was Dresden in February 1945, that is Korea today, and that will be, according to the plans of the American warmongers, the Germany of tomorrow." Thereafter, inflated rhetoric and inflammatory comparisons subsided, but the bombing continued to be viewed as a criminal act.[44]

There were no such public commemorations and agreed-upon narratives in the Federal Republic for multiple reasons. Throughout the postwar decades there was pressure from the occupying powers, from surviving victims, and from the world Jewish community to acknowledge German war crimes and make

42. For a full discussion of these divergent memories, see Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

43. Monika Maron, "Der Fisch und die Bomben," in Hage, *Zeugen*, 215.

44. Gilad Margalit, "Der Luftangriff auf Dresden, Seine Bedeutung für die Erinnerungspolitik der DDR und für die Herauskristallisierung einer historischen Kriegserinnerung im Westen," in *Narrative der Shoah. Repräsentationen der Vergangenheit in Historiographie, Kunst und Politik*, ed. Susanne Düwell and Matthais Schmidt (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002), 191, 194–99. See also Gilad Margalit, "Dresden und die Erinnerungspolitik der DDR," http://www.bombenkrieg.historicum.net/themen/ddr.html.

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reparations for the Holocaust. Whether or not individual Germans admitted knowledge of and participation in the crimes of the regime, official discourse acknowledged that "unspeakable crimes have been committed in the name of the German people."[45] In the 1950s and 1960s German perpetrators were not named, Jewish victims were not empathetically invoked, but German suffering was crowded to the margins of public discussion and commemoration.

The Cold War context reinforced this marginalization of German suffering or some forms of it, even as it transformed West Germany from despised former enemy into valued ally. Cold War anticommunism and the paradigm of totalitarianism focused attention on the crimes of the Soviets against their own population, against the countries of Central Europe, and against Germans at the end of WW II. Thus the expulsion of Germans from East Prussia and the Sudetenland could be documented, narrated, and commemorated by officials, political parties and expellee organizations; mass rapes could be deployed as symbols of German humiliation and Russian barbarism.[46] But the Cold War precluded public discussion of the experience of the air war and the intentions of those who waged it.

The secondary place of German suffering in public memory resulted not only from the structuring global context in which the Federal Republic found itself, but also from the conscious actions of some sectors of West German society. The generation of 1968 refused to empathize with their parents' tales of flight, rape, and bomb trauma, even though they were outspoken critics of the war in Vietnam and opposed rearmament. Their primary concern was to interrogate parental complicity with Nazism and genocide.[47] Public intellectuals and scholars from Jürgen Habermas and Hans Mommsen through promoters of the history workshop movement to the designers of the Wehrmacht exhibit insisted on the primacy of Auschwitz, German guilt and responsibility, and the suffering of Jews and others. Only when these were firmly anchored in German memory and identity, could attention be paid to German suffering.

Although the abundant private memories of the air war were discussed in informal venues, there was much less demand for a public accounting of the bombing than of other forms of German suffering. Expellees clamored for and received official documentation and commemoration of their experience, and

45. Moeller, *War Stories*, 25.

46. Moeller, *War Stories*. Atina Grossmann, "A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers," in Robert G. Moeller, ed., *West Germany Under Construction: Politics, Society and Culture in the Adenauer Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 33–52. Nicholas Stargardt, "Opfer der Bomben und der Vergeltung," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 57.

47. Langenbacher, "Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany," 55. When condemning the war in Vietnam, German students accused Americans of acting like Nazi criminals. They did not compare the bombing of North Vietnam to that of Germany during the World War II. Bernd Greiner, "Deutsche Amerikabilder im Umbruch der 60er Jahre," *Mittelweg 36*, 12: 4 (August/September 2003), 26–45.

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to many Germans, whose memories seemed to stretch back no farther than early 1945, the expellees and refugees represented an unequivocal case of innocent Germans unjustly persecuted and undeservedly suffering.[48] Rape victims and German POWs in the Soviet Union were often invoked, but they proved more problematic, for while their suffering was emotionally evocative, their experiences were a troubling reminder of a gender order in disarray.[49] Moreover, the innocence of POWs and women was tarnished by instances of soldiers' complicity with the enemy, and by women's fraternization with American and British, and even sometimes Soviet soldiers.

Some have attributed the public silence about the air war to the extraordinary trauma of sustained area bombing, the pervasive presence of death and destruction, and the continuous fear of both. Numb and unable to mourn, people looked forward and not back, devoting all their energies to the reconstruction of shattered lives, a disrupted economy, and devastated cities.[50] Others suggest that those Germans more willing to acknowledge the magnitude of Germany's wartime actions regarded the bombing as payback—unpleasant, but inevitable and not to be dwelt on. Some, such as Sebald and Friedrich, argued that those who wanted the air war discussed could not find the right language in which to express or ask others to express such a unique and horrific experience. Others, such as the novelist Dieter Forte, insisted that public silence reflected a pervasive desire not to speak, not to know. "Really people don't want to know anything about it. They prefer to stroll on the Königsallee and buy something pretty."[51]

The gender of the air war may also help account for its marginalization in public memory. Although the victims and witnesses of the air war were certainly not exclusively female, women, children, and the elderly were disproportionately represented. Women were less well positioned to publicize their experiences or demand an official acknowledgment of their suffering. Men may have been reluctant to dwell on traumatic events which they had not experienced but had helped to bring about and from whose consequences they were unable to protect those at home. The suffering of German women and children,

48. Moeller, *War Stories*. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who worked on the documentation about the expellees in 1950, insisted, contrary to Moeller, that no one paid attention then or later to the issue. See interview with Wehler, "Die Debatte wirkt befreiend," *Der Spiegel* 13 (March 25, 2002).

49. Grossmann, "A Question of Silence." Frank Biess, "Survivors of Totalitarianism: Returning POWs and the Reconstruction of Masculine Citizenship in West Germany, 1945–1955," in Hanna Schissler, ed., *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949–1968* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 57–82. Frank Biess, "Between Amnesty and Anti-Communism: The West German *Kameradenschinder* Trials, 1948–1960," in Bartov, Grossmann, and Nolan, eds., *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 138–160.

50. Sebald suggested this is one reason for silence; *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 4–5.

51. Forte, *Schweigen oder sprechen*, 53.

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which justified a claim to victim status and indicted the Russians, British, and Americans alike, also served as a reminder of German guilt and an indictment of the failings of German masculinity.

* * *

One could explore further the venues in which the air war was discussed over the post-war decades, but suffice it to say that Sebald, Friedrich, and Grass are simply wrong to lament amnesia, condemn silence, and ask "why only now?" Germans did perceive their suffering, sometimes to the exclusion of that which they inflicted, sometimes merging it with that of others in a way that blurred the crucial distinctions between perpetrator, bystander, and victim.[52] It is equally true, however, that the last few years have seen a shift of venues, participants, and audiences for discussion of the air war and a recasting of its themes and tropes. There has been an enormous escalation of personal and scholarly interest, political engagement, and emotional investment. Why? The intensity and terms of the current debate are a response to the generational experiences and anxieties of those who lived through the air war and those born at or near its end. Current heated discussions are both reacting to previous memory debates, with their emphasis on German perpetrators and non-German victims, and are enabled by the pervasive knowledge about those crimes and the acceptance of those memories. Finally, the current debate is shaped by the complex issues about German identity, German foreign policy, and German-American relations that have emerged with the demise of the Cold War order.

That attention should turn to the air war a decade after unification is hardly surprising. The 1990s had been filled with both fiftieth anniversary commemorations of World War II events and contentious debates about the involvement of ordinary Germans in the crimes of National Socialism. Goldhagen, Browning, the Wehrmacht Exhibit, and the issue of reparations for forced laborers had indicted a multitude of Germans for complicity in the regime's racist and genocidal policies. While some Germans rejected any accusations of complicity and guilt and vigorously claimed not only their innocence but German wartime suffering as well, many others painfully acknowledged their past involvement. The intense public and personal reflection on German war crimes may have made some more willing and able to talk publicly about Germans as victims—victims as well as, not instead of, as perpetrators.

The 1990s also saw a shift in historical research from Nazi structures, leaders, and ideology to everyday practices and attitudes in the Third Reich. This

52. Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 326–27. For an American discussion of air wars and a similar blurring, see Robert McNamara in Errol Morris' film *Fog of War*.

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encouraged attention to the everyday, including the air war viewed from below, not from the perspective of Nazi party leaders and generals. This has led many both to recognize general German complicity and to focus on individual innocence and suffering. For the children and grandchildren of those who were adults during World War II, for example, there is often a disjuncture between public memory and their private memories. A recent interview project revealed that the children and grandchildren of the perpetrator generation know a great deal about the crimes of National Socialism, are horrified by the Holocaust, and seek to deny neither. Yet, privately they have reworked family stories of National Socialism and war so as to preclude any parental or grandparental involvement. Indeed, they frequently transform the older generation into heroic resisters and nearly always turn them into victims of the horrors of war—bombing, prison camps, the Russians, and occupation.[53] The current debate offered a welcome opportunity to reconcile these public and private understandings, to argue that horrible crimes were committed and innocent Germans suffered, without exploring the connections between them.

If the anniversaries and historiographical debates of the 1990s focused attention on World War II, so, too, did the search for a shared, post-unification identity. National identity, as Ernest Renan famously noted, is built on shared forgettings as well as shared rememberings. The former were much easier to come by in post-unification Germany than the latter. While both East and West had rejected National Socialism, they had understood and condemned that regime in very different terms. Post-1989 efforts to equate the Nazi and GDR dictatorships as totalitarian proved intellectually unpersuasive. Building a shared negative identity by exposing the crimes of the GDR found only brief and limited resonance.[54] The traumas of the air war provided more promising material, for suffering during the air war was the last common experience of East and West Germans until 1991. Moreover, the air war had been only tentatively narrated, its victims only partially mourned on both sides of the Wall. On this issue, unlike on so many others, the West did not have a fully developed historical interpretation and set of memory practices which it would seek to impose on the former East.

The task of narrating and mourning seemed especially pressing because the generations who experienced the air war as adults or adolescents were reaching old age. In the last few years, they have been writing memories, giving interviews, and consuming the vast production of books, articles, and films on World War II. The Hitler Youth and Flakhelfer generation has certainly played an

53. Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, Karoline Tschuggnall, *"Opa war kein Nazi": Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust in Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002), 10, 123, 15–16, 82–7.

54. Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past*, 6–7.

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important role in narrating German suffering. Think of Günter Grass and Ludwig Harig, both born in 1927, or Hans Magnus Enzensberger, born in 1929. It has been particularly the critical and leftist members of that generation who are speaking out, "only now," and for political as well as personal reasons. Grass argued, for example, that he wrote about refugee suffering "to take the subject away from the extreme right."[55] For many others who were adolescents or older at war's end, however, there is little desire to delve into a period marked by a mixture of guilt, humiliation at suffering defeat, and relief that life was possible after all that had happened.[56]

Instead, it has been a younger generation that has taken up the air war with passionate interest. On the one hand, there are those who were children during the war, such as Dieter Forte (1935), Wolf Biermann (1936), and Monika Maron (1941), and on the other, those born near or at its end, such as Sebald (1944) and Friedrich (1944). The older among them have distinct memories of air raid shelters, rubble heaps, fire and death; the younger faint inklings of what had happened that were derived from family stories and a destroyed postwar landscape rather than from the immediate experience of bombing. The younger ones claim to have been deprived of full knowledge of the founding trauma of their world. ". . . [T]he sense of unparalleled national humiliation felt by millions in the last years of the war had never really found verbal expression," insisted Sebald.[57] "The well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations of our state . . . bound all Germans together in the postwar years, and indeed still binds them, more closely than any positive goals such as the realization of democracy ever could."[58] These secrets must be revealed, national humiliation acknowledged.

Many among this generation had associated themselves with the 1968 student movement and its determination to expose the guilt of parents and grandparents. According to the American political scientist Eric Langenbacher, the left is trying to reframe memories that have been the public property of the right, so as to harness them for "positive, pro-democratic and pacifistic ends."[59] Some German observers, however, attribute the "second generation's"[60] interest less to such an instrumentalizing public agenda than to personal and political ambivalence. Since 1989, many '68ers had been rethinking their earlier

55. Grass quoted in Julia Klein, "Germans as Victims of World War II," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 18, 2003.

56. Christian Schütze, "On That Terrible Night . . .," *London Review of Book*, August 21, 2003, 28. "Der Luftkrieg über Europa," *Der Spiegel Special 1(2003)*, 10.

57. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, viii. Schütze claims such a sense of national humiliation was only felt by diehard Nazis; "On That Terrible Night . . .," 28.

58. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 13.

59. Langenbacher, "Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany," 63.

60. The phrase is from Klaus Naumann, "Bombenkrieg—Totaler Krieg—Massaker: Jörg Freidrichs Buch *Der Brand* in der Diskussion," *Mittelweg 36* 12: 4 (August/September 2003), 49–60.

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understandings of nationalism and fascism. In the 1960s and 1970s, it would have been too much to expect the younger generation both to force their Nazi parents to break their silence and to uncover their parents' suffering, according to the novelist and self-identified 1968er Peter Schneider. The focus was justifiably on documenting crimes and indicting criminals. Now, however, it was time for his generation to drop the remnants of a rigid fascism theory, uncover the traumatic biographies of their parents and grandparents, and recognize that "the belated recollection of the suffering both endured and culpably inflicted in no sense arouses desires for revenge and revanchism in the children and grandchildren of the generation of perpetrators."[61] Schneider stressed that the now middle-aged 1968 generation was in the process of overcoming its own past and acknowledging its traumatic personal and familial memories. Klaus Naumann rightly views this prospect with anxious criticism. In the 1960s and 1970s, moral sentiments prevented the second generation from empathizing with their parents, he argued, but in Friedrich's book and positive reception of it, the pendulum has swung the other way, as emotional identification and the concept of "massacre" replaced analysis and context. This shows, he concluded, "how difficult it still is to talk about the air war, about perpetrators and victims, gray zones and responsibilities without understanding and emotion colliding with one another so strongly that one of the two falls by the wayside."[62]

These debates about the air war are not only conducted within and between these two generations. They are also staged before an ever-growing audience of those too young to have experienced either the war or its immediate aftermath. For them, the air war is history, but just what sort of historical understanding of it they will embrace remains very much an open question.

The end of the Cold War and the conflicts of the emerging post Cold War order have both enabled and profoundly shaped the air war debate. The Cold War context not only structured the terms of debate between the U.S. camp and its Soviet counterpart, but also constrained rhetoric, limited dissent, and imposed discipline on the relations between America and its European allies. There were disagreements aplenty between the Federal Republic and the U.S. once the most intense phase of the Cold War gave way to détente and *Ostpolitik*, and these only intensified during the second Cold War under Ronald Reagan. Many of these disputes focused on the dangers of war, especially nuclear war, opposition to rearmament, to Euromissiles, and the neutron bomb, and criticism of America's Vietnam War.[63] But divergent assessments of dangers

61. Peter Schneider, "Deutsche als Opfer," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 163–5. Quote 165. Published in English as "The Germans Are Breaking an Old Taboo," *New York Times*, January 18, 2003.

62. Naumann, "Bombenkrieg," 51–2, 59–60. Quote 60.

63. Such antimilitarism was framed in terms of lessons to be learned from the crimes of Nazism. It does not seem to have invoked the experience of bombing in the way post-1989 German anti-war sentiment has.

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and different social and political priorities were contained by the centrality of Germany to the Cold War and the Atlantic Alliance and by German military dependence on the U.S. The events of 1989 removed the disciplining presence of the Soviet Union on German-American relations and eroded the already attenuated appeals of Cold War anti-Communism. The fall of the Berlin Wall and unification opened the way for Germans not only to act more autonomously in the present and build on the legacies of earlier anti-militarism, but also to rethink their past, including their past relationship with the United States. Air wars featured prominently in this rethinking—those waged by Britain and America against Germany in World War II and those waged by the United States in the Balkans in the 1990s and against Iraq in 1991 and 2003.[64]

In the discourses linking these very different air wars, Germans have not so much dwelt on their status as victims as claimed that their World War II experience gives them a deep understanding of the horrors of war and instills an intense commitment to peace. In newly united Germany, much more than in other countries, the Gulf War of 1991 aroused "fear, concern—one might say hysteria—on such a massive scale in virtually every social group." It was argued that "Because of the thorough lesson which their terrible history had taught them, only the Germans could really appreciate and fully cherish peace."[65] Bosnia in the mid 1990s marked the first use of German forces outside the area of NATO and encouraged many Social Democrats and Greens to pay more attention to victims and not just to perpetrators. Balkan refugees in Germany and the plight of the Kosovo Albanians in 1999 evoked memories of the 1945 expulsions and reminded Germans of the horrors of war, even as a Red-Green government sent German warplanes to bomb Belgrade as part of a highly controversial NATO action.[66] "In the conflict of the two German 'never agains,'" noted Andreas Huyssen, "the 'never again Auschwitz' won out over 'never again war.'"[67] That was to change with the Iraq War.

The invocation of bombings past to critique bombings present erupted once again in the run-up to the Iraq war of 2003. German interest in its wartime past grew in tandem with the widespread German opposition to the war. "When bombs began to fall on Baghdad, a number of newspaper articles appeared with recollections from elderly Germans who remembered when American bombs

64. Douglas Peifer, Review of Friedrich, H-German, http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWII_bombing/WWII-bombing_index.htm.

65. Andrei S. Markovits and Philip S. Gorski, *The German Left: Red, Green and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23.

66. Robert Moeller, "Sinking Ships, the Lost *Heimat* and Broken Taboos: Günter Grass and the Politics of Memory in Contemporary Germany," *Contemporary European History*, 12:2 (2003), 171–72. Langenbacher, "Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany," 62. Hans-Jaochim Noack, "Die Deutschen als Opfer," *Der Spiegel*, March 25, 2002, 39–40.

67. Andreas Huyssen, "Air War Legacies: From Dresden to Baghdad," *New German Critique* 90 (Fall 2003), 163–76, 165.

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had fallen on them."[68] (Interestingly, American bombs are most frequently mentioned when Germans are linking the Iraq war to the earlier air war, but when World War II itself is the subject, British bombs are the focus.) Demonstrations were filled with posters recalling Dresden and demanding "no war." "It's not a pacifist thing," argued Günter Grass, "It's remembering the air raids on German cities, the feeling of impotence and terror. Somehow the memory has been passed down to the younger generation."[69] Hans Mommsen agrees, positing that "One can attribute the deep-seated rejection of military force in today's German population to a long-term effect of the bombing war but also to the general brutalization of the conduct of war after 1942."[70] Others insist it is not long-standing memories, but rather images currently created by *Der Brand* that are fueling the opposition to the Iraq war.[71] However causality runs, the bombings past and present are linked (and the intervening protests against bombs and bombings drop out of the discussion).

Reactions to that linkage vary greatly. Andreas Huyssen condemned the exploitation of memories which most Germans individually do not have and cannot legitimately claim to understand experientially. The association, indeed equation, of Dresden and Baghdad distorted the nature of the two wars, minimized the horrors of Saddam's regime, and reflected unresolved tensions among Germans between their determination to prevent genocide and their opposition to war. Important as it is to oppose Bush's Iraq policy, he concluded, it should not be done by invoking the experiences of bombing that did not result from a preemptive war.[72] Atina Grossmann is less concerned with the accuracy of the parallels drawn than with the contemporary dilemmas they reflect. Noting the international role Germany played in Bosnia and Kosovo and is being asked to play in the Middle East, she suggested that anti-war Germans are arguing less from the moral certainty of having been victims than from the fear of becoming perpetrators once again.[73] Invoking the air war is a way to distance oneself not only from America, but also from the temptations that accompany unified Germany's new power and responsibility. Scott Denham sees positive benefits from the linkage. Precisely because of Germany's greater relevance in international affairs, "having Germans see themselves as victims, or at least be reminded of their possible partial status as war victims—as complicated and fraught with problems as this may be—allows them to be better pacifists on the world stage, or to understand why their Green foreign minister should be taken

68. *Forward*, Oct. 8, 2003.
69. Interview with Grass, *New York Times*, April 8, 2003.
70. Hans Mommsen, "Moralisch, Strategisch, Zerstörerisch," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 150.
71. Daniel Johnson, "Breaking the Silence," *TLS*, April 25, 2003, 7–8.
72. Huyssen, "Air War Legacies: From Dresden to Baghdad," 164–5, 171–2.
73. Atina Grossmann, "War Burnout," paper delivered at Goethe Institute New York panel on "German Civilians as Victims? The Evolution of a Perception." October 29, 2003.

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seriously."[74] Others insist the current debate shows that many Germans on the left and right alike are wrongly united ". . . in their visceral hostility to the use of the same strategy by the same Allies today." Despite the relatively low death rates among German civilians and the even lower ones among Iraqis, argued Daniel Johnson, Germans wrongly equate such deaths with genocide. "In the general acceptance of this false moral equivalence," he concludes, "there is grave danger for the future, not only of Germany but of Europe."[75]

The bombing debate neither produced nor was it a product of contemporary German "anti-Americanism," as the current German critique of American foreign policy is labeled by many American and some European politicians, journalists, and academics. As we have seen, the air war was a long-standing presence in Germany, remembered in a variety of venues and narrated in diverse ways in the East and the West. So, too, was a German critique of American foreign policy, one that focused on the actions of the U.S. and did not entail a rejection of capitalism, modernity, or Americanized culture and gender relations. Recall the German opposition to rearmament in the 1950s, the critique of the Vietnam War, and disagreements about détente and Ostpolitik, about Euromissiles and the neutron bomb, and about responses to the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Germany disagreed with America about global threats and developmental possibilities, about the relative weight of military and diplomatic solutions, and about social and economic policies to be promoted at home and abroad. The history of this kind of opposition to U.S. policies, like the history of the air war, keeps getting forgotten, or more accurately marginalized, and then rediscovered as though never previously visible and discussed.[76] In the current moment, the latest iteration of "anti-Americanism" is interacting with the newest re-remembering of the air war in ways that reinforce one another. Or at least they do so for many of those reading and writing on the air wars past and present. Although Friedrich's book has been described as "a bombshell" aimed "at the aging edifice of the Atlantic Alliance, just as the dam was weakening,"[77] Friedrich himself does not share in the opposition to the U.S. that his book may have fueled. He insisted that his research has not made him a pacifist and that he would not demonstrate against the war in Iraq because, if properly used, bombs are now precise, and civilian casualties can be avoided.[78]

74. Scott Denham, Review of Nossak and Rhen, H-German, http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWII_bombing/WWII-bombing_index.htm.

75. Johnson, "Breaking the Silence," 8.

76. Mary Nolan, "What difference does a Cold War Make? Reflections on the German-American Relationship," in Ruud Janssens and Rob Kroes, eds., in *Post-Cold War Europe, Post-Cold War America* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2004), 30–44 and idem in Andrew Ross and Kristen Ross, eds., trans. "Anti-Americanism in Germany," *Anti-Americanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

77. Johnson, "Breaking the Silence," 8.

78. Schütze, "On That Terrible Night . . .," 29.

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While participants and commentators offer varied explanations for the current air war debate and disagree about its links to contemporary foreign policy disputes, they generally concur that a long overdue and important engagement with the air war has been launched. Andreas Huyssen argued that *Der Brand* is "not a revisionist book about Germans *as* victims as much as it is a book about German victims whose experiences need to be acknowledged and absorbed into the national narrative about the war and postwar years."[79] For Charles Meier and Lothar Kettenacker, the debate has raised complex questions about means and ends, about the morality of civilian bombardment that both proponents and opponents of this strategy must confront.[80] Some, however, have insisted that the terms of the air war debate indicate "that public discourse on the Nazi past is bursting the limits imposed by the uneasy politico-academic consensus that was, with hindsight, remarkably long-lived."[81] Others lamented that the Berlin Republic was pursuing a "longed-for entry into the international victim culture."[82] Hans-Ulrich Wehler captured the dominant ambivalence when he simultaneously praised the discussion of German suffering as "liberating" and worried that Friedrich's book "could promote the fashionable victim cult" and thereby erode "a self-critical discussion of recent history,"[83] which had been a valuable accomplishment of the German public. What then is controversial about how Friedrich has narrated the air war?

However horrifyingly compelling *Der Brand* is, it is not serious and persuasive history, according to many critics. Indeed, it may not be history at all. "Highly effective as a literary dirge and lamentation," Douglas Peifer argued, "Friedrich's book comes up short when judged by the standards of the history discipline" in terms of themes and terminology, context, and chronology.[84] Jörg Arnold described it as "a narrative of loss . . . the *Leideform* is its mode of expression."[85] Christian Schütze viewed it less as a lament than an indictment.[86] After detailing factual errors and bibliographic omissions, Horst Boog, author of the major German academic study of the air war, maintained "It is not a reliable

79. Huyssen, "Air War Legacies: From Dresden to Baghdad;" italics in original, 167.

80. Maier, "WWII Bombing;" Kettenacher, in *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg, 1940–1945*, forward, 14.

81. Max Paul Friedman, "The Hohmann Affair Revisited: Unspeakable Traditions in German Political Thought?" H-German, February 25, 2004. http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-german&month=0402&week=d&msg=EhG1L/5ikaZbFA52xL%2bjDA&user=&pw=

82. *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, cited in Noack, 40.

83. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Wer Wind sät, wird Sturm ernten," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 143–4.

84. Peifer, Review of Friedrich.

85. Jörg Arnold, "A Narrative of Loss," H-German, http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWII_bombing/WWII-bombing_index.htm.

86. Schütze, "On That Terrible Night . . .," 28.

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scholarly work, above all because it repeats myths and clichés which have long been disproved by international historical scholarship." If only Friedrich had "added the subtitle 'a novel,' 'a drama,' or 'a tragedy,' then one could say 'fantastic.'"[87] According to Daniel Johnson, "As a monument to the victims, *Der Brand* is impressive . . . As an interpretation of history, however, the book fails to convince." Friedrich captures the impact of the bombing on the bombed, but wrongly insists it was not a decisive element in the Allied victory.[88] *Der Brand* conveys lived experience, relying heavily on the testimony of victims, "but," as Charles Maier reminded us, "doing justice to the witness is not the same as writing history."[89]

There are, to be sure, some who lavish praise on *Der Brand*. Cora Stephan labeled it "a difficult, disturbing, splendid, extraordinary book," and called it "a hymn, a grand narrative, a funeral dirge [*Totengesang*] for a lost past." Friedrich's independence from the academy, which succumbs to political correctness, enabled him to pursue "his impatient love of truth."[90] Martin Walser, who in 1998 provocatively condemned the purported instrumentalization of Holocaust memory, regarded Friedrich as a master historian and storyteller who vividly captured the micro and macro dimensions of the bombing war. Walser singled out, in particular, the rich factual basis of the narrative as well as Friedrich's judiciousness and objective style. It is a war history that transcends the categories of friend and foe, perpetrator and victim.[91] Precisely what Stephan and Walser praise is critically contested by most commentators.

As many have noted, Friedrich's book did not break a taboo against talking about the war. In claiming it did, Friedrich, whatever his marketing motives, consciously or unconsciously adopted the same form in which each new discussion of expellees and POWs had earlier been presented—a repressed trauma, horrific, unacknowledged suffering was going to be revealed for the first time. According to some, Friedrich did not even offer a new perspective on ongoing discussions. Drawing on "the rich tradition of local historiography," Friedrich presented the local memory of loss and suffering, the lived experience of city dwellers/victims under bombardment.[92] This narrow focus, which ignored both the complex actions and identities of individuals and the context in which the bombings occurred, reproduced earlier memories of the war. According to Nicholas Stargardt, "The language of helpless and passive moral suffering," which Friedrich adopted, and his insistence that Germans were led astray by

87. Horst Boog, "Kolossalgemälde des Schreckens," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 136.
88. Johnson, "Breaking the Silence," 7.
89. Maier, "WWII Bombing."
90. Cora Stephan, "Wie man eine Stadt anzündet," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 95–102. Quotes 102, 98, 97.
91. Martin Walser, "Bombenkrieg als Epos," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 127–30.
92. Arnold, "A Narrative of Loss."

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Nazi propaganda and that Nazi extremism and Allied terror combined to destroy innocent civilians, were "the *vox populi* of Friedrich's childhood." He presented the Germans as they had come to represent themselves at war's end, when they could no longer hope to inflict suffering on others.[93] The journalist Willi Winkler asserted Friedrich's one-sided view on the effects of allied bombing "comes from the need to settle accounts of the first postwar years." Friedrich, like those whose outlook he reconstructed, forgot "it was the Germans who started it."[94]

Responsibility for starting it—war, civilian bombardment, genocide—raises the question of contextualization. Friedrich narrated his air war as so many Germans remembered having experienced it. It began with the Allies planning and then bombing militarily unimportant German cities filled with defenseless and innocent German women, children, and old men. It is told from the perspective of those one-dimensional victims, who are always "Germans" or residents of Cologne or Hamburg or Dresden,[95] and never Nazis or Wehrmacht soldiers or supervisors of slave laborers in local factories or denouncers of Jews in hiding. Foreign elites appear aplenty—Churchill and Bomber Harris leading the way in planning and executing the campaign of terror, but the Nazi regime and its policies are strikingly absent. Friedrich, like Sebald and others, asserted a historical uniqueness, an unprecedented magnitude to German destruction and suffering and trauma, yet never tried to prove the case with comparisons between what was done to Germans and what Germans had done to others first. The death and destruction from the firebombing of Hamburg would not be diminished if one recalled Rotterdam or Coventry or Stalingrad. One can understand Friedrich's sorrow at the destruction of the cultural treasures of Dresden, but one cannot fully share his anger if one recalls what he ignored, namely that on February 13, the remaining Jews in Dresden had received their order to report for deportation in three days and that on February 14, the last of Hamburg's Jews were deported to Theresienstadt. Whatever the air war may have disrupted, it did not stop the regime's efforts to persecute its declared racial enemies.[96]

Friedrich has repeatedly insisted he is not trying to relativize the Holocaust by equating the allied bombardment to it. Nor does he ever directly accuse Churchill of being a war criminal. Yet his terminology and tone implicitly do both. Again and again, the air war is described as "a massacre," the intentions of the Allies as "extermination," burning buildings as "crematoria," the air war as

93. Stargardt, "Opfer der Bomben und der Vergeltung," 63.
94. Willi Winkler, "Nun singen sie wieder," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 106, 108.
95. Arnold, "A Narrative of Loss."
96. Ralph Giordano, "Ein Volk von Opfern?" in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 168. Frederick Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday, February 13, 1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 6.

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a "*Zivilisationsbruch*." As Andreas Huyssen has noted, the Holocaust has become "a universal trope of traumatic history,"[97] but deploying it in the land of the perpetrators in reference to their own suffering is particularly inappropriate and inflammatory. Moreover, Friedrich's borrowings can hardly have been innocent, for Friedrich himself worked on the *Enzyklopaedie des Holocaust*. In adopting the language of the Holocaust to describe the air war, Friedrich was not only appropriating current terminology, but he was also reviving the rhetoric of the late 1940s and early 1950s, which had been fed by both post-war resentment and the residues of Goebbels' propaganda about the air war. These loaded linguistic slippages fell into disuse in the 1960s, but were revived by Nolte in the 1980s.[98] Friedrich employed them promiscuously, preferring accusatory rhetoric to careful analysis of the intentions of the British and Americans and the outcome of the bombings or a nuanced differentiation of victims—Jews, Germans, slave laborers, POWs, Sinti, and Roma, and social and political outcasts.

Throughout his work, Friedrich presents bombers and bombed in radically one-dimensional ways. German victims, stripped of complex identities, problematic pasts, ideological politics, and contradictory responses, are simply innocent, suffering, traumatized. The British, denied complex motivations, competing pressures, and incomplete knowledge, are committed to terrorizing civilians, seemingly as an end in itself, for Friedrich insisted the bombing served no military purpose. Ignoring extensive evidence to the contrary, he argued that it neither weakened morale nor limited Nazi war-making capacity, and that the outcome of the war was already settled before the bombings began. However emotionally satisfying to many such a one-sided history might be, it hardly does justice to the complexity of the air war, the scholarship on its history, legality, and morality, or to the public and private memory work that is necessary if Germans are to continue to grapple critically with their troubled past.

* * *

How might one better approach a subject that can no longer be ignored by historians given its prominence in public memory? Based on the limitations of the current air war debate, let me make four suggestions. First, stop searching for the authentic German experience and seek to capture the multiplicity of diverse, often contradictory experiences and reactions of different Germans as well as non-Germans. Second, expansively contextualize the air war in terms of chronology, causality, and comparisons. Third, seek complicated answers to

97. Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," in idem, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16.

98. Stargardt, "Opfer der Bomben und der Vergeltung," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 61.

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seemingly simple questions about the effects of the air war. Fourth, probe the difficult historical and moral questions about the legitimacy of the air war.

Sebald searched incessantly and in vain in postwar writing for a representation of the authentic experience of civilian bombardment. Friedrich claims to have found it in the realm of the local, the ostensibly private and unpolitical, in the innocent city overcome and devastated by the natural disaster of war. But there was no such realm and no one experience, no response that deserves the elusive label "authentic" over others that should be deemed inappropriate, inadequate, in denial. Rather, there were multiple experiences, contradictory responses by the same individuals, shifts in the collective response of "Germans," and very different experiences of Jews, foreign workers, POWs, and others.

Sebald and Friedrich wanted exemplary victims, uncompromised and ennobled through suffering. Reality was not so simple and pretty. To begin with, many urban dwellers, women and men alike, who were victims of bombing, were also loyal party members or more or less enthusiastic supporters of the regime or aware and approving of its racial policies and militaristic expansion. Most endorsed the war until near the end when it went unequivocally against the Germans.[99] They might criticize this or that policy, this or that leading Nazi figure, but they had also sent their children to the Hitler Youth or League of German Girls, enjoyed Strength through Joy vacations, participated in the Labor Front, and contributed to the Nazi welfare drives. Some were more actively engaged in the regime's racist and genocidal policies, as teachers and medical personnel enforcing the regime's eugenics and euthanasia programs, as soldiers on leave from the front, as bureaucrats organizing "Aryanization" and the deportations of the Jews, or as supervisors of millions of forced and slave laborers who kept Germany's war economy going. Whatever an individual's relationship to the party and regime, he or she became more dependent on the state the more the Allies bombed. As soon as the all-clear siren sounded, police, firemen, and the Technical Emergency Services arrived to oversee the cleanup, for which concentration camp inmates and forced laborers were often recruited. The National Socialist Welfare Organization and the League of German Girls appeared with food and medical care, but also with clothes and housewares that had been taken from German and French Jews deported to the East.[100] The horrific, indescribable, and unimaginable coexisted with the bureaucratic, the normal, and the altruistic. The survival and recovery of "Aryan" Germans was inextricably tied to the deportation and death of Jews.[101]

99. Ibid., 62–3.

100. Jean Marc Dreyfus, "WWII Bombing" in H-German, http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWII_bombing/WWII-bombing_index.htm. "Wir haben ja nichts mehr," *Der Spiegel Special: Als Feuer vom Himmel fiel* (1/2003), 94–95. Stargardt, "Opfer der Bomben und der Vergeltung," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 65.

101. *Der Spiegel Special*, 95.

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Innocence and passivity, those hallmarks of noble suffering, proved useless in the face of bombing. "Whoever wanted to survive had to improvise," noted a *Spiegel* article on life in the ruins. And improvisation in the "civilian state of emergency" entailed ignoring traditional morality and propriety in favor of pushing, shoving, and stealing. Youth especially were quick to form gangs and exploit whatever opportunities arose to steal money and goods.[102] Memoir literature vividly describes suffering, terror, resignation, and fatalism, but also gallows humor and the mad pursuit of hedonistic pleasure. The war was horrific, but many feared the peace might well be worse.[103] German victims could also simultaneously be victimizers and not just to the declared racial enemy but to fellow Germans as well. Ledig's fictional tale of the girl raped in the air raid cellar, who herself had refused to carry an old woman down to possible safety, was all too close to the truth. Bombing, as Ledig not surprisingly showed, "does not make anyone better."[104] Throughout much of the war, Stargardt argued, "People did not want to be a victim." As the bombings continued with relentless destructiveness, Germans felt envy, confusion, and vengefulness toward foreign workers and Jews. Only with defeat did the myth of German innocent and passive suffering come to dominate.[105]

If the bombing spelled terror, evoked calls for revenge, and presaged defeat for "Aryan" Germans, it held quite other meanings for those defined out of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. If Germans suffered the claustrophobic anxiety of the bomb shelter, foreign workers usually confronted air assaults with no protection whatsoever. They, like inmates of the many labor and concentration camps, were often called to find bodies and remove rubble. By 1944, an increasing number of foreign workers whose factories and camps were bombed found themselves homeless and without access to food supplies. If they succumbed to the temptation to steal basic necessities, as many did, they risked death.[106] In October 1944 in Duisburg, for example, "the *Volkssturm*, a party-controlled citizens' militia, stood a 'suspicious looking' Russian, who worked in a clean-up brigade, up against the wall and shot him because a rumor was going around that a few Russian prisoners of war had eaten marmalade in the basement of a nearby house."[107] In the war's closing phase, foreign workers were subject to increasingly brutal treatment by both security forces and segments of the population, culminating in the murder of thousands in the Ruhr in the late spring

102. "Witze über den Führer," *Der Spiegel Special*, 86.

103. Grossmann, "War Burnout," 6.

104. Julia Torrie, Review of Gert Ledig, *Payback*. H-German, http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWII_bombing/WWII-bombing_index.htm.

105. Stargardt, "Opfer der Bomben und der Vergeltung," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 62–6.

106. Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany under the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 359–63.

107. Stargardt, "Opfer der Bomben und der Vergeltung," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 66.

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of 1945.[108] The air war widened divisions, intensified German hatreds, and brutalized behavior. Those Germans who suffered so horribly from bombing showed themselves capable of simultaneously inflicting horrific suffering on those they had already victimized.

For those Jews who remained in Germany as forced laborers, in hiding, or in the Jewish houses to which couples in mixed marriages were assigned, bombing was one more trauma among many and far from the worst. They did not view the causes and consequences of the air war in the same terms as did the Germans who had defined them out of the nation. Writing of the Allied bombers, which he experienced as a Jewish forced laborer in Hamburg, Ralph Giordano insisted that "It was and still is self evident for me that 'those up there' were part of my liberators. In the middle of dynamite and phosphorus I never wavered for one second: Primarily responsible for every civilian and military death in the Second World War are those who planned and started it—Hitler and his followers."[109] For Germans, the bombings marked the end of the good times associated with National Socialism; for some of few thousand remaining Jews, they offered a chance to reinvent themselves in ways that might assure survival. In the wake of the firebombing of Dresden, where he had been living an increasingly deprived and persecuted life in a Jewish house, Victor Klemperer took off his yellow star, claimed he had lost all his papers, obtained a new, "German" identity card and ration books from officials, and headed away from Dresden with his non-Jewish wife.[110] Others simply took identity cards from the corpses of those killed in the bombings. These were a fortunate minority of the small minority of surviving Jews, however. Seventeen-year-old Ilana Turner, one of 500 Jewish forced laborers at the Bernsdorf & Co. factory, survived the bombing in the factory shelter on the outskirts of Dresden. She and her coworkers were then marched by their SS guards to a nearby concentration camp and after a week, were returned to work in the damaged but still functioning armaments work.[111] If Jews lacked papers, as many did, they were often betrayed by their German neighbors or, more rarely, captured by Jewish "catchers." Even those with identity cards often avoided seeking protection in shelters, for fear they might be recognized and captured.[112]

There was, then, no one authentic experience of the air war, not among "Germans," and even less when one includes the tens of thousands of Jews and millions of foreign laborers in Germany. If all were victimized by the air war, they were nonetheless quite different kinds of victims. Jews were the innocent

108. Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers*, 363–64, 372.

109. Giordano, "Ein Volk von Opfern?" in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 166.

110. Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years*, vol. II, 415–16.

111. Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, 306–8.

112. Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 209–11.

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victims of the regime's racial and genocidal policies; forced laborers the victims of conquest, occupation, and the needs of the war economy. Both were victims of the Nazis' willingness to destroy through labor those not pushed out or killed by other means. They were a very different kind of victim from the Germans who had supported and planned and executed the war to which the British and American air war responded. Both wars killed children, women, and the elderly en masse and decimated cultural heritages. But the contexts and the magnitude of destruction were qualitatively and quantitatively different and must be foundational for any analysis of the air war.

The air war against Germany must also be analyzed within a chronologically and geographically expansive context. Civilian bombardment did not begin in World War II. Rather, bombing was used against soldiers and then cities in World War I, first by the Germans, then in response by the British. Bombing was next turned against civilians by the British, French, and Spanish in their Middle Eastern and North African colonies and mandates in the 1920s to break resistance and exert control with little manpower. Bombing strategies were debated throughout the 1930s and perversely refined in the Spanish Civil War. By 1939, bombing was an integral part of military strategy for Allied and Axis powers alike, even if its possible targets, tactical forms, and anticipated effects were subjects of intense debate. The air wars in Europe and Asia did not pioneer civilian bombardment, but with the aid of new technologies, they vastly enhanced its scale, duration, and destructiveness.[113]

The air war also emerged from and was an integral part of total war, involving in the European theater alone not only or primarily British and American bombers and German civilians, but also millions of Jews, Russians, and Poles, as well as millions of occupied French, Belgians, Dutch, and the British subjected to bombardment and fearing possible invasion. As many have critically noted, Friedrich prefers to begin his story with British bombers carrying their destructive load toward Germany and to focus only on the pre-1939 territory of the Reich. A more appropriate starting point would be the destruction of Guernica or Hitler's Blitzkrieg against Poland, which began on September 1 with German bombers leveling Wieluń, a small town of no military importance, and finished with the firebombing of Warsaw at the end of the month.[114] A periodization that gives prominence to those who started the war and who first engaged in aerial bombardment of civilians, a chronology that includes the economically and racially devastating occupation of Poland, the only relatively less brutal control of Western Europe, and the merciless invasion of Russia in which

113. For the most comprehensive and provocative survey of twentieth-century bombing, see Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing* (New York: The New Press, 2001).

114. Joachim Trenkner, "Wieluń 1. September 1939: 'Keine besondere Feindbeobachtung,'" *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 15–23. "Wir werden sie ausradieren," *Der Spiegel Special*," 26–27.

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the Wehrmacht was ordered to fight outside the rules of war, still does not answer the troubling questions about the effectiveness, legality, and morality of the air war. It does remind us who initiated this war of aggression and pioneered its brutalization on the ground and in the air. It helps explain why the Allies adopted such a ruthless counterstrategy. When the air war was launched and through much of its destructive course, Germany controlled Europe, Allied troops were absent or on the margins, and popular support for the Nazi regime remained strong at home. For the British, the air war was not just a revenge for the Blitz and Coventry, but a substitute for the postponed second front that left the Russians fighting alone and at terrible cost to soldiers, civilians, their economic infrastructure, and their cultural heritage.[115] We need, in short, not a "natural history of destruction" that begins with the technology and organization of bombs and bombers, but rather a political history of destruction.

Comparison is every bit as essential to a contextualization of the air war as are chronology and geography. Yet some of those most eager to explore the air war have resisted the very idea. Sebald insisted the destruction was "without historical precedent," the sense of national humiliation "unparalleled." Boog maintained comparisons between Coventry, Warsaw, Rotterdam on the one hand and air war on the other are misplaced, for the former were either targeted attacks on munitions works or followed repeated appeals to surrender.[116] Friedrich kept his gaze resolutely fixed on the local, comparing the experiences of different German cities, but ignoring the victims of German bombs and dismissing any comparison of the death rates of bomber crews and civilians as "absurd" (*unsinnig*).[117] His liberal use of terms like "massacre" and "crematorium" implied a comparison to the Holocaust that is never made explicit.

Yet, without comparisons, there is no way to know what, if anything, was quantitatively and qualitatively distinctive about the German experience of air war as opposed to what had been foreshadowed in the bombardments of first colonial North Africa and the Middle East in the 1920s and then numerous European and Asian cities during World War II or what would be repeated in the numerous subsequent sustained air campaigns—Korea, Vietnam, Kosovo, to name some of the most famous and controversial. Of particular relevance to the German air war experience—the character of the attack, the duration and intensity of destruction, and the individual and collective response to it—are the other major incidences of bombing that were part of the same war, done with similar technology, and intended, like the Allied attack on Germany, to destroy military capacity, economic and social infrastructure, and civilian morale. While body counts alone capture only a part of the experience of air war, they pro-

115. Kettenacher, *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 52.
116. Boog, "Kolossalgemälde des Schreckens," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 134.
117. Friedrich, *Der Brand*, 63.

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vide essential parameters for any discussion. Overall, as many civilians died of bombing in the Soviet Union as did in Germany.[118] Allied bombs killed fewer people than the Germans did in their assaults on Warsaw and Leningrad alone.[119] The attacks on Coventry and Rotterdam killed 500 and 900, respectively. The sustained assaults on London killed 40,000, as did the bombing of Stalingrad that preceded the ground assault. In the firebombing of Tokyo, 100,000 died, and a million were wounded. The iconic bombings in Germany, Hamburg, and Dresden killed 40,000 and 35,000, respectively. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a total of 110,000 were killed immediately, and the death toll rose to 210,000 by January 1946, surely the bombing destruction without precedent in a war of unprecedented destructiveness.[120]

We need to compare how each of these city bombings was planned and executed by the governments and militaries involved and assess the attendant expectations and disappointments. We need to explore how each was seen in relation to what had gone before and what it was feared would come after, for the different campaigns and theaters were not imagined in isolation from one another. If the air war failed to break German morale and turn the population against the regime, did civilian bombardment have similar effects in other countries? Was it the intensity of an air war, the nature of the regime dealing with it, or the culture and society under attack that was most important in shaping popular responses? Were the emotional numbness and literary silence for which Sebald indicts the Germans peculiar to them or a shared attribute of societies that had experienced bombing as one among the many forms of dislocation, destruction, and death that swept over Europe and Asia in World War II?[121] Total war requires a comparative, transnational, and global analysis of suffering and destruction.

Two seemingly straightforward and related questions have played a large role in the air war debates. Did the air war have military effects? Did it unite Germans behind the regime or alienate them from it? Rather than seeking simple answers, historians should develop complex ones. It is simply wrong to argue, as Friedrich does, that the bombing in no way impeded German war-making capacity, that the Allies knew this, and that they continued bombing long after the outcome of the war had been decided. But we need to know

118. Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, 411.

119. Pieter Lagrou, "The Nationalization of Victimhood: Selective Violence and National Grief in Western Europe, 1940–1960," in *Life After Death*, 246.

120. "'Wir werden sie ausradieren,'" *Der Spiegel Special*, 27. Asian statistics from American Airpower Heritage Museum. http://www.airpowermuseum.org/trafter.html. The GDR never equated Dresden with Hiroshima, but in the wake of David Irving's 1960 book on Dresden, which mistakenly gave the death toll as 130,000 instead of 35,000, many West Germans did. Margalit, "Der Luftangriff auf Dresden, Seine Bedeutung für die Erinnerungspolitik der DDR und für die Herauskristallisierung einer historischen Kriegserinnerung im Westen," 204.

121. *Life after Death* begins to explore these issues for Western Europe.

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much more about what kinds of effects were intended, what the British and Americans thought they were achieving, what was, in fact, realized, and exactly when. The American Strategic Bombing Survey, for example, minimized the extent to which bombing detrimentally affected production and morale.[122] More recent scholarship disagrees. Frederick Taylor's new book on Dresden insisted that Dresden was a legitimate military target and that the bombing severely disrupted railroad communications and impeded a transfer of men and materiel to the German Army on the Eastern Front.[123] Richard Overy maintained that while the air war alone was not decisive for the Allied victory against Germany, it contributed significantly to it. Militarily, the bombing served as a substitute for the delayed second front in the West and, by forcing the Germans to produce fighters rather than bombers and use them against Allied bombers in Germany, it eased German pressure against the Soviet Union. From late 1943 on, bombing was crucial to defeating German air power in Western Europe and to preparing for D-day. Economically, the air war did not prevent the expansion of German production, but it did set limits to such growth. Bombing did disrupt key war-related industries, such as oil, chemicals, and railroads, and diminished the 1944 production of tanks by 35 percent, aircraft by 31 percent, and trucks by 42 percent. Of equal importance, it forced Germany to divert planes and resources from the Eastern Front to the home front. In short, concluded Overy, the direct and indirect effects of bombing "denied German forces approximately half their battle-front weapons and equipment in 1944. It is difficult not to regard this margin as decisive."[124]

The impact on morale and popular relations to the regime are equally complicated. The controversy is twofold. First, did the Americans and British really believe saturation bombing would break the civilian will to fight? Certainly government wartime rhetoric proclaimed this goal repeatedly, and its achievement was popularly expected. Overy asserted, however, that British and American leaders harbored no such illusions, and Harris, in particular, regarded bombing as primarily effective against Germany's material ability to wage war, not against civilian morale.[125] Second, did the air war, in fact, divide people or unite them, and if the latter, around which goals and emotions? Some argue that bombing, which distributed the burdens of war widely and unequally and promoted a privatized and individualistic orientation, further atomized an already fragmented population.[126] Others insist it "welded the Germans together into a

122. Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: Norton, 1995), 127–28, 343, footnote 65.
123. Taylor, *Dresden, Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, 355–56, 416–17.
124. Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 20, 124–5, 129–31. Quote 131.
125. Ibid., 20, 113.
126. Frank Bajohr, Talk on the air war, delivered at Goethe Institute New York panel on "German Civilians as Victims? The Evolution of a Perception," October 29, 2003.

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Schicksalsgemeinschaft."[127] But what was the nature of the community of suffering? Did the Germans in it become more or less anti-Semitic, more or less hostile to foreign workers and social and political outcasts as they themselves suffered? Did workers retreat into the factory community and away from politics or lash out at those labeled enemies of the racial community or both at once? Stargardt has sketched the sort of convoluted and contradictory trajectory for which historians should look. Many Germans, he suggested, became more brutalized and Nazified in the face of the air war at home and the ground war in the east, even as the regime on which they remained increasingly dependent became ever less popular.[128]

Even the most complex, nuanced, and contextualized history of the air war will still present the historian with the difficult challenge of evaluating the morality and legality of such a strategy. Some have justified it. Overy, for example, insisted the air war was "barbaric but efficient (*sinnvoll*)."[129] Citing Overy's view that "the air offensive was one of the decisive elements in Allied victory," Daniel Johnson asserted "even from a German standpoint that is surely the clinching moral argument in its favor."[130] Others flatly condemn such civilian bombardment. Günter Grass acknowledged "What we started came back to us," for the Germans started the bombing of civilian targets with no military value at Guernica. "But," he adamantly insisted, "both were war crimes."[131] *Der Spiegel* concluded its discussion of the morality debate with a quote from Gandhi: "In Dresden and in Hiroshima Hitler was defeated with Hitler."[132]

Still others strive to arrive at a differential judgment of short- and long-term effects. In a complex assessment of the legal and moral aspects of the bombing, Eric Langenbacher explored wartime controversies about whether the air war was permissible under international law and justifiable morally and militarily. He paid particular attention to the growing wartime British doubts about this strategy. He concluded the air war was "a violation of international law, military ethics, and the war convention." Its only redeeming feature was that it encouraged the postwar affirmation of human rights and international law and led to clearer definitions of war crimes.[133] Lothar Kettenacher, who saw the air war as an expression of weakness more than strength and as a surrogate second front, nonetheless argued that "to understand is not to forgive and certainly not to approve." Few historians justify the bombing strategically or

127. "Wir haben ja nichts mehr," *Der Spiegel Special*, 95.
128. Stargardt, "Opfer der Bomben und der Vergeltung," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 69.
129. Richard Overy, "Barbarisch, aber sinnvoll," in *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 183.
130. Johnson, "Breaking the Silence," 7.
131. Interview of Grass, *New York Times*, April 8, 2003.
132. "Luftkrieg über Europa," *Der Spiegel Special*, 20.
133. Eric Langenbacher, "The Allies in World War Two: The Anglo-American Bombardment of German Cities," 19 http://www.georgetown.edu/departments/government/faculty/langenbe/BombardmentofGermany.pdf.

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morally.[134] Nonetheless, he posited ". . . the air war, more than unconditional surrender and the occupation of the entire Reich, contributed to the "intellectual (*geistige*) demilitarization of the Germans."[135] In a similar vein, Hans Mommsen condemned the air war on moral and strategic grounds but emphasized it had made the vast majority of Germans suspicious of responding to threats with military means. The experience of World War II should teach everyone that "escalating air war is equally wrong on military and humanitarian grounds."[136] For Charles Maier, the success of the air war came at a high moral cost. "Ultimately those of us who would accept the air war say that under certain conditions it may be necessary to burn babies. Even if we are not explicitly targeting babies we all live with statistics enough to know that our historically mediated choice will kill those whom no theory of a society at war can plausibly claim have opted for war."[137]

All raise challenging issues of morality and legality about civilian bombardment in the context of a war where Germany was clearly the aggressor and initially the more powerful force. (Condemning civilian bombardment in contexts of wars of national liberation or preventive war is easier.) None engages in the complicated moral calculus of alternative strategies and counterfactual history. Yet the questions remain: Was the air war immoral and illegal from the beginning, or did it only become so at a certain point? What would the costs of not bombing have been? Are there any ends that justify the saturation bombardment of civilians? The Allies not only tolerated but, at times, aimed to maximize "collateral damage," (a very elastic and problematic term) argued Jörg Arnold, but their goal was not mass murder. Rather, it was, in the words of the 1943 Casablanca directive, "the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial, and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened."[138] The intent was surely moral and legal, and the death and destruction wrought by the air war was far less than that wrought by the genocidal and destructive policies of the Nazi state and the Wehrmacht in Eastern Europe. Yet, the execution of the air war did contravene morality and legality.

The debate will and should continue, for it concerns not only the history and memory of air wars past, but also the practice of air wars present and future for which the Allied bombardments in Europe and Asia serve as the benchmark.

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134. Kettenacher, *Ein Volk von Opfern?*, 55.
135. Ibid., forward, 13.
136. Mommsen, "Moralisch, Strategisch, Zerstörerisch," 150–51. Quote 151.
137. Maier, "WWII Bombing."
138. Arnold, "A Narrative of Loss."

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