

A COLLECTION OF DAMAGES: CRITIQUING THE VIOLENCE OF THE AIR WAR

IN A POEM ABOUT THE HORRORS of aerial warfare, the American-born poet Richard Eberhart writes:

You would think the fury of aerial bombardment
Would rouse God to relent; the infinite spaces
Are still silent. He looks on shock-pried faces.
History, even, does not know what is meant.¹

This last line may be taken to mean that from the perspective of the historian, to say nothing of the poet, determining responsibility or assessing damages for something as horrendous and seemingly apocalyptic as an air war may be a difficult task. Later, in a subsequent verse, Eberhart makes an accusation: “Was man made stupid to see his own stupidity?” Rather than pointing fingers at the Allies, the Germans, or the Japanese, he places the blame for the bombardment’s massive destruction on the shoulders of the world itself.

Assessments of blame and responsibility are matters of rationalisation, or the search for a cause and an explanation. Eberhart’s poem emphasises that war is a violence we do to one another, and it contradicts the assertion that atrocities originate with a higher authority. Yet the acknowledgment of the thoroughly human origins of violence, of its mortal causes and consequences, does not imply that all wars must be followed up by endless adjudication and the attempt to collect on damages. Rejecting the violence of war does not always require its subjection to rational, legal argument. Such inquiries can interfere with what Walter Benjamin referred to as a “critique of violence”. Although recent efforts to hold Henry Kissinger accountable for crimes against the people of Cambodia, Chile and East Timor, for example, have attracted attention, they may often be screens for the far more unwieldy debate as to whether or not the violence of war is itself criminal. Instead, war is always taken to be an unavoidable necessity. Some works, such as those of W. G. Sebald and Gert Ledig, critique this notion through taking a more psychological than politicised approach, compelling us to witness war’s irrationality, or placing us in the eye of the firestorm. The following essay assesses the recent literary and historical debates about the effects of the air war on Germany, particularly those initiated by Jörg Friedrich, with the ultimate intention of considering them in light of Benjamin’s critique.

In his first attempt at examining literature about the bombing of Germany during the Second World War, the German author W. G. Sebald, who had long since taken up residence in England, disparaged attempts to subordinate

the psychological impact of the bombing to reasoned assessments. In this early essay – the initial reflections that formed the basis for his longer study, *Air War and Literature* – Sebald praised Alexander Kluge’s prose for its unique “reconstruction of misfortune”, adding that it stands in contrast to rationalisations of an air war that was “experienced by millions of people as an irrational stroke of fate” (“was von Millionen von Menschen als ein irrationaler Schlag des Schicksals erfahren wurde”).² Even if Sebald can be said to have agreed with the implicit claim of Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the origins of the violence associated with the Second World War are themselves ultimately rational and are in some measure the product of the logic of European Enlightenment (not an altogether unlikely assertion, given Sebald’s avowed interest in the Frankfurt School and his citation of Adorno’s work in that same essay), Sebald suggests that there is an additional, needless, violence in trying to rationalise the suffering of ordinary Germans in terms of cause and effect.

To those on the ground, the bombing likely did not appear as a just retribution for crimes, despite any awareness that ordinary Germans may have had about the enormity of genocidal violence being committed in their name. As is well documented by Sebald, the bombing was so effective as to have left many of its victims consciously or unconsciously with the impression that they had been subject to the wrath of an Old Testament god, rather than to a verdict rendered by humans upon humans. That the very air around them was set aflame and that their cities were levelled seemed to be the consequence of divine more than mortal judgments. As the US authors of the recent campaign of “Shock and Awe” were apparently aware, wars waged from the air can be more effective if they take on the appearance of having been devised by a wrathful god, even when they are waged against a population that knows better. The attempt to find a cause and an explanation, to answer questions regarding guilt and responsibility, stands sometimes at odds with the overwhelming psychological impression formed by those trapped in targeted areas, who are made to believe they have been sentenced to death by fire.

Regardless of how one assesses the guilt of ordinary Germans, asserting either that many actively participated in the genocidal violence of the Holocaust (the position taken by Daniel Goldhagen), or that they failed to resist Hitler’s usurpation of democracy more aggressively (as was tepidly asserted by Karl Jaspers in the period immediately following the war), the bombing was experienced by the population as having come upon them without proper justification. This is by no means to suggest that it was unjustified, but that it was viewed as an excessively violent assault against a civilian population, who expected that the true theatre of war would be the battlefield, as it had been by and large in the First World War. Although the Second World War was not the initial example of aerial warfare – some choose to cite Italian bombings in 1912 and others speak of Guernica³ – it was a uniquely twentieth-century innovation. The Second World War was the first use of such bombing on a massive scale.

In an attempt to highlight the limitations on rationalising the experience of the bombed population, Hans Erich Nossack concludes his ruminations in *Der Untergang* in the following way: “Der Verstand sagt, wie klingt das traurig. Aber es ist nicht traurig, es ist nur einfach so. Traurig ist nur der Verstand, weil er Flügel zu haben glaubt, und stürzt doch immer wieder ab.”⁴ More an extended diary entry than a novel, and written in 1943 while the war was in full swing, Nossack reflects on the bombing by not reflecting on it. He observes the raids on Hamburg from just outside the city, and sticks to describing only his immediate reactions upon seeing his hometown reduced to rubble. As a result, his book reads more as an existential reflection than as any kind of historical assessment. Similarly, Gert Ledig’s violent and vivid 1956 work *Vergeltung* (*Payback*) attempts to depict a world turned morally and physically inside out, narrating seventy continuous minutes during a raid on a German city. Ledig had fought for Germany against the Russians and was wounded badly, losing two fingers and a substantial part of his jaw. He mostly gave up writing after 1957, but the three novels he wrote until that point each contain graphic passages that resonate with the horrific depictions of war found in the art of Expressionists such as Georg Grosz and Otto Dix. Ledig’s book depicts relentless violence and havoc. His project of representing seventy minutes of aerial bombardment is an attempt to show the experience of war “as it actually is”, or to testify for those who themselves did not live through the trauma.

While it is impossible for words or pictures to present the experience of war as it actually is and an account free from political-historical biases, Ledig does his best to depict the bombing as a terror on the scale of the Apocalypse. He takes care, however, to underscore that the air war is something that humans have brought upon themselves. Ledig makes clear that despite appearances, not a moment of it should be mistaken for God’s vengeance; it is merely the vengeance of man against man. Ordinary Germans and British bombers take out their anger upon one another, giving in to their basest urges, or seeking “payback”. One of Ledig’s protagonists is a young American bomber-crew member named Strehen, who survives a plunge to the German earth. The fall and the firestorm leave him wandering naked through the streets. Eventually a crowd of Germans looking to avenge their suffering murders him. The author’s descriptions are brutal, and the Germans are hardly uniformly depicted as helpless victims of Allied violence. Here, a difficult situation brings out the worst, not the best, in people, and Ledig emphasises how human frustration rather than the will of God is responsible for piling one atrocity upon the next. The novel’s final lines can be understood as an attempt to refute the possibility of viewing the bombing as having divine origins. Ledig writes: “Nach der siebzigsten Minute wurde weiter gebombt. Die Vergeltung verrichtete ihre Arbeit. Sie war unaufhaltsam. Nur das jüngste Gericht. Das war sie nicht.”⁵

The fact that bombs fell all over Europe – not only on Germany, but on Rotterdam, Warsaw, London, Coventry and elsewhere – and that the

Germans themselves initiated the air war, by no means implies that one should censor the discussion of the impact the bombings had on the German population. Allied raids such as “Operation Gomorrah” killed half a million Germans, and “de-housed” more than five million. In his book *A History of Bombing*, Sven Lindqvist describes the horror of air wars, focusing his attention on Hamburg:

British air attacks on Hamburg killed more people than all German air attacks against English cities put together. About 50,000 died in a single night, the night of July 27, 1943. The majority of them were women, children, and old people [. . .]. Twelve hundred tons of incendiaries fell in tight clusters on the marked residential areas. Several days of high temperatures and low humidity had left the houses unusually flammable. [. . .] Thousands of small fires were joined in one enormous inferno that sucked great masses of air into its center, where all the oxygen was consumed. The firestorm reached hurricane levels.⁶

Death by incendiary bombs is, it seems, particularly gruesome. Once a bombed area is ablaze, the air above it heats up, and cold air rushes in at ground level with the force of a hurricane, drawing everyone on the ground into a firestorm with temperatures reaching more than 1,400 degrees Fahrenheit. Concerning “Operation Gomorrah”, the war historian Gordon Musgrove writes:

By chance the weather conditions over the city were primed to exaggerate the effects of the bombing beyond all belief. A small rise in temperature (5° or 6° F) on the ground would be sufficient to break the uneasy peace established between a small pocket of warm air trapped over the city and the far colder air above and around it. When that happened the pocket would act like a chimney and the rising air would be sucked upwards, the cold air offering little resistance. If the initial heating was caused by an incendiary fire then, providing the updraught was maintained, the replacement air would be sucked in as if by a flue, and the fire would thrive and become a firestorm.⁷

In contrast with other works, Ledig’s *Vergeltung* makes an attempt to describe how it felt to be in the eye of that hurricane. In this way, his book differs from the other ones about which Sebald writes, such as Heinrich Böll’s more rueful *Der Engel schwieg*, which is not a war story but an elegy written in the rubble-strewn city of Cologne.

Sebald’s book about the air war focused on fiction by Böll, Nossack and Kluge, among others. The public discussion of it returned Germans to the controversy surrounding the bombings, and gave voice to their own feelings of victimisation. But the publication of the book *Der Brand (The Fire)*, by the German historian Jörg Friedrich, launched a far more tempestuous debate. Like Sebald, Friedrich’s interest was in calling attention to the experience of ordinary Germans during the bombings. Both in *Der Brand* and in the book of photographs that followed it, *Brandstätten (Places of Fire)*, his perspective, that of an historian, seems different from that of authors such as Nossack and Ledig. While the collection of photographs contains images of downed Allied

pilots (and it is clear that he means to suggest that they, too, suffered), the Allies are depicted as having been merciless and vengeful. In both works, Friedrich underscores the scope of the destruction, and tries to put the reader in the shoes of those who attempted to flee. Although Friedrich knows that there were more than just German victims of the air war, his works encourage readers to identify only with ordinary Germans.

Friedrich's credentials may lead one to conclude that he is not a simple right-wing revisionist, given that he has brought to light crimes of the National Socialists and of the *Wehrmacht* in other publications. Yet it may indeed be the case, as many critics have suggested, that *Der Brand* and its discourse of German victimisation encourages Germans to retreat from moral self-examination. In raising the question of whether or not Nazi Germany could still have been defeated without the all-out destruction of German cities, Friedrich gives readers license to ignore the question of German culpability. Problematically, even Friedrich's title, *Der Brand*, recalls the Greek origins of the term "holocaust", in so far as it implies a wholesale or complete burning. His title does little to protect against the exchange of the Germans for the Jews as the primary victims of the violence of the Second World War. *Der Brand* is filled with other similarly problematic uses of language, including the provocative contention that the bomb shelters in which Germans were forced to take refuge grew to be as hot as crematoria. It is unlikely that this resonance could be called accidental. The critic Corelli Barnett has emphatically asserted that Friedrich blurs the line between German attempts to eradicate European Jewry and the Allied decision to fight the Second World War from the air. Barnett writes:

It was certainly not a mere vengeful desire to kill German men, women, and children in the same kind of way that the German armed forces were at that time shooting men, women, and children in cold blood en masse in occupied Eastern Europe. It was a cool and deliberate decision – but in no way equivalent to the decision at the infamous Wannsee conference of SS leaders in Berlin in 1942 to gas and cremate the entire Jewish population of the continent.⁸

Against such troubling misidentifications, and against the contention that he intended to replace Jews with Germans as the true victims of the tragedies associated with the Second World War, Sebald was careful to append a lengthy disclaimer to his own published reflections. As it stands, much of the third section of *Air War and Literature* is devoted to outlining the distinction between his highly nuanced position and that of an admirer who had written to him expressing gratitude that he had finally exposed the true consequences of the "Zionist conspiracy" against the Germans. In that work and elsewhere, Sebald takes care to underscore that he agrees that the pioneering developments in bombing were really initiated by Germany⁹ and that Germany's massive devastation must be understood as blowback from Hitler's own "pyromaniac fantasies".¹⁰ In part because he had come to be known as a Holocaust

author, having explored Jewish suffering in his quasi-fictional work *The Emigrants* and his fictional work *Austerlitz*, Sebald attempted to be as circumspect as possible. While one could indeed reproach him with conflating the Holocaust and the bombing under the general rubric of “trauma”, the argument of *Air War and Literature* is well taken. The moment of the bombing itself is somewhat under-represented. Although some refute this,¹¹ there is a difference between the discussion of the moment of the bombing and the depiction of the rubble left behind in the immediate postwar period. We are rarely forced to look the bombing directly in its eyes except in works such as Ledig’s. What is missing in the literature, and that to which Sebald and Friedrich are trying to draw our attention, is not so much stories of the bombing’s aftermath as the representation of how the millions on the ground perceived the bombing while it was underway.

Der Brand is not only a discussion of the impact of the bombings. It also asserts, sometimes explicitly, that when Churchill made the decision to launch his air campaign, he was not acting in defence of Britain, but much more in accordance with a preconceived strategy, contrary to the Hague Conventions, that a modern war could be best fought by demoralising the enemy population from the air. *Der Brand* depicts Churchill as acting maliciously and contends that he ought now, retrospectively, to be understood as a war criminal. In its reference to the Hague Conventions and to war crimes, Friedrich refers us to issues of juridical rights and wrongs, ones that are suspended in the works of Ledig, Nossack and Sebald, which can be said to be more psychological than political. Friedrich’s constant attempt to invert the terms of the discussion, making the Germans the victims and the British the perpetrators, is such that a sympathetic reader would likely set down *Der Brand* and wonder whether or not the long-dead Churchill should now be made to appear before an international court along with his co-conspirator Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris.

Throughout *Der Brand*, Friedrich casts Churchill as fixated on a diabolical scheme:

An der Schwelle des Konzepts [strategischer Bombardements] steht Winston Churchill. Als seinerzeitiger Rüstungsminister hatte er für 1919 einen Tausendbomberangriff auf Berlin vorgesehen. Wenn 1918 die deutsche Westfront gehalten hätte, wäre dort eine neue, die kriegsentscheidende Front eröffnet worden. Dies schrieb er 1925, offenbar erleichtert, daß sie nicht notwendig geworden war. “Die Schlacht von 1919 wurde nicht geschlagen, aber ihre Ideen lebten weiter.” Die Idee habe schlechterdings in der Bereitschaft bestanden, die Zivilisation zu Staub zu zerstampfen. “Zum ersten Mann bietet sich einer Gruppe gesitteter Menschen die Möglichkeit, die andere Gruppe zu vollständiger Hilflosigkeit zu verdammen.” Hilflosigkeit meint das schutzlos der Bombe Preisgegebensein. “Vielleicht wird es sich das nächste Mal darum handeln, Frauen und Kinder und die Zivilbevölkerung überhaupt zu töten.”¹²

Unlike Sebald, who avoids pointing an accusatory finger, Friedrich means to say that Churchill would have started the air war first, had the door been opened to him. He later describes Churchill as seizing the opportunity to respond to German bombing starting from August 1940, because it was a

chance to realise his “langgehegten Plan”.¹³ He quotes Churchill: “Wir werden Deutschland zu einer Wüste machen, ja zu einer Wüste.”¹⁴ Friedrich elaborates on Churchill’s strategy this way:

Die Bombe unternimmt nichts gegen den Menschen, sondern gegen seine verkehrten Ansichten. Sie ist ein Gesellschaftschirurg, der krankhaftes Denken operiert. Sowie der Patient gesunde Anschauungen kundgibt, ist er von dem Operateur erlöst. Churchill hat diesen Beruf im April 1941 pointiert beschrieben: “Es gibt knapp 70 Millionen böartige Hunnen, die einen sind heilbar und die anderen zum Schlachten (some of whom are curable and others killable).”¹⁵

“Bomber” Harris is another villain of *Der Brand* as well as of Hermann Knell’s bitter *To Destroy a City*. Knell’s book accuses the Allies of engaging in a wholly unnecessary destruction of the author’s hometown of Würzburg.¹⁶ The dust jacket of Knell’s book features a photo of the author standing above Harris’s grave, having either the last word or the last laugh.

In decrying Churchill as a war criminal, Friedrich appeals to the concept of the law. The question that guides his inquiry is whether or not the bombing can be justified – whether it can be spoken of as having a just end, regardless of the amount of unjust harm it caused. To rephrase Friedrich’s question: The bombing was *unjust* in that much of it was directed at unarmed and defenceless civilians, many of whom were children, but was it also *unjustified* as a means to bring the war to a close? Both Ledig’s novel and Sebald’s reflections avoid this type of argumentation. While they share with Friedrich the intention of bringing the realities of German suffering into the light, Friedrich’s approach is distinct in that he is concerned with the question of justification, and he therefore introduces the law as a key theme.

Yet as Walter Benjamin knew, violence and the law are hardly easy to disentangle from one another. Because the law is implicitly predicated on the use of violence for its enforcement, violence is always already in the law: the two are inextricable. In his essay “Towards a Critique of Violence”, Benjamin places the law and violence in a constellation and concludes that inquiries that separate the two produce primarily vicious circles. The law is part of the rationalisation of violence; unjustified means may be rationalised through the appearance of a just end, and unjust ends may be rationalised if the means to achieve them are made to appear just. In either case, one is little able to critique violence itself, and it is generally accepted as a fact, or a logical necessity, as though it were a “product of nature” or a “raw material”.¹⁷ By contrast, Friedrich’s position is less transcendent than Benjamin’s. He seeks to assert that, regardless of the ends, the bombing itself was both unjust and unjustified. It was unjust in that it was aimed at neither military nor industrial targets, and was unjustified in so far as it failed to achieve Churchill’s stated goal of breaking the morale of the German people.¹⁸

Although Benjamin wrote “Towards a Critique of Violence” twenty years before the bombing of Germany – a bombing that took place after his

death – one can certainly use Benjamin’s terms to reflect on Friedrich’s position. Benjamin’s essay unveils what he sees as a fundamental deceit of liberal democracies; although they appear to take a stand against violence as a political means, they are really themselves a manifestation of violence. Their laws are always already predicated on the threat of force. In order to critique the legitimated use of violence, particularly by liberal-democratic states, one has to find a transcendent position where violence and the law are not mistaken for independent entities. In his search for such a position, Benjamin speaks from the redemptive standpoint of revolutionary Marxism, and Derrida describes the utopianism of his essay as “Messianico-Marxist”.¹⁹ By 1921, Benjamin had already adopted the position that absolute moral or political actions were unattainable, and we were left in the fallen realm of liberal democratic laws that serve only themselves. Inasmuch as the law is equivalent to the State it protects, it is not an adequate tool for questioning its own ends; it is merely a ground on which the means (violence) may be judged to have been too much or too little. In avoiding the assessment of blame, the works of Ledig and Sebald take on tones that are either apocalyptic or redemptive, similar to those of Benjamin. They aim to critique the violence of the air war less from the standpoints of law and justice than through an attempt to render violence itself profane.

To explore violence, the law and the limits of his own argument, Benjamin provides two examples. The first example is the story of Niobe, which he uses as an allegory for legal violence. He refers to the violence of that story as “mythic”. As the story is told in *The Iliad*, Niobe makes the mistake of comparing herself favourably to the goddess Leto. She boasts that she herself has given birth to twelve children while Leto has given birth to only two (the god Apollo and the goddess Artemis). Leto is offended by Niobe’s hubris, and she sends Apollo and Artemis to punish her. They shoot down her twelve children with arrows, leaving Niobe alive. She weeps for days on end, until she is transformed into a totem, or as Benjamin writes, she becomes “a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods”.²⁰ According to Benjamin, the story is one in which Leto’s violence writes the law; Niobe does not transgress pre-existing law, but offers a challenge, one that is subsequently policed through punishment. As a point of contrast, Benjamin then turns to the story of Korah from the book of Numbers. In that story, Korah, along with Dathan and Abiram, rises up against Moses and Aaron to unseat them as chieftains of the community of Israelites. Moses and Aaron take the position that their will is an extension of the will of God, and assert that in organising the Levites against them, Korah has organised against God. As anticipated, God becomes enraged, and even after Moses and Aaron generously attempt to negotiate on behalf of the striking Israelites, the earth opens up and swallows the rebels along with their households. God consumes them “in a moment” (Numbers 16.21). Their rebellion is put down through divine violence, which Benjamin differentiates from mythic (Greek) violence by way of its bloodlessness. In the end, nothing remains to attest to their

presence but the melted bronze censers in which the Levites once burned their incense.

Benjamin's contention is that the example of Greek violence, as in the story of Niobe and Leto, concerns founding or establishing the law; it is a violence that makes rules, and in its arbitrariness it calls attention to its limited, historical function. Benjamin writes:

Far from inaugurating a purer sphere, the mythical manifestation of immediate violence shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence, and turns suspicion concerning the latter into certainty of the perniciousness of its historical function.²¹

By contrast, the second example is a matter of enforcing the already written law of God. One might look for differences between the two scenes of violence, not in whether it is meant to uphold the law or to create new law (the intent of the perpetrator), but in how it is perceived by the victim. In the Old Testament story, God simply swallows up the transgressors along with their households, rather than drawing their blood, which Benjamin refers to as a symbol of "mere life". Because of its disentanglement from mere life – its emergence from a wholly separate sphere – the bloodless opening of the earth presents itself to its victims as having greater authority. Along these lines, giving the name "Operation Gomorrah" to an air raid serves as an avowal that the violent assertion of the law is most effective when disguised as having transcended the sphere of mere life, or when it presents itself as divine rather than mythic violence. As confirmed by the detailed descriptions of the Hamburg bombings found in Lindqvist, Knell, Musgrove and elsewhere, "Operation Gomorrah" likely appeared as just such an apocalyptic spectacle to those on the ground.

It is not only the presence or absence of blood that separates the two types of violence from one another, but the fact that the Greek, or mythic, violence compels Niobe to be its witness. Because divine violence stands for something larger than "mere life", it needs no witnesses. An obvious parallel narrative in this context is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis. Before smiting the cities – before the original Operation Gomorrah, one might say – the Lord sent angels who spent the night in Lot's home. Lot gave them a room, but the wicked men of Sodom tried to harm the angels, and they were then blinded in turn (Genesis 19.11). Their blinding was the initiation of the city's destruction, and it is followed by the story of Lot's wife, who transgressed in that she turned her head to view the destruction of the cities. She defied the instruction not to look back and see fire raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah. For witnessing it, she was turned into a pillar of salt (Genesis 19.26). Divine violence requires no witnesses. As Benjamin certainly understood, the ban on representation is meant to grant a sublime object (in this case divine violence) still more authority. Benjamin's comparison is therefore instructive in so far as Niobe, as the victim of arbitrary, law-making violence, is left behind. Although she eventually turns to stone, she is not murdered

along with her children, and she bears witness to the newly established law, eventually becoming its totem. Mythic violence, then, does require a witness.

However anti-violent the intentions of "Critique of Violence" were, Benjamin would have likely critiqued Friedrich's *Der Brand* for its appeal to the law, and for its attempts to turn Churchill into a war criminal and drag him before the court. Yet Friedrich's work may indeed contribute to the critique of violence in its effort to voice the experience of violence from the perspective of its victims. Through his use of photos in *Brandstätten* and detailed descriptions in *Der Brand*, Friedrich asks us to bear witness to the air war. He means to shift the terms from divine violence to mythic or Greek violence. In turning us into witnesses, he undermines the continued impression of total destruction implied by the name Operation Gomorrah. He implicitly claims that divine, "bloodless", justice was hardly the providence of the Allies or anyone else. Friedrich's assertion seems to be that we must look at the show of violence because, in his words: "Abermillionen von Deutschen steht das Bild des Bombenkriegs unauslöschlich vor Augen, doch existieren wenige Bilder."²² While in some measure his reproach is directed at trying to make Britain and the US reassess and perhaps mourn the destruction they caused, his texts are more interested in changing the discourse within the German population. If one goes along with Sebald's hypothesis, there was a silence around the bombing that may well have been attributable to its divination. According to Sebald's explanation, the German postwar super-ego spoke like God to Lot and his family, enjoining them to look only forward following the war, in pursuit of the economic miracle.²³

In this respect, Friedrich's agenda is similar to that of Ledig, who did not treat the bombing as a taboo. Ignoring any kind of ban on representation, Ledig aimed to put readers squarely in the eye of the hurricane. He wanted to place them beneath the beams of a collapsed building where a young girl was being raped, despite the ongoing firestorm. His work suggests that raids such as Operation Gomorrah were atrocious, but they were not sublime. We can look at them without turning into a pillar of salt. Although their effect was horrible, it was not literally unspeakable, and here one might underscore a difference between this discourse and that around Auschwitz and its representation. The violence of the air war, unlike that of the camps, was merely politics by other means. Its mythical, historical nature calls for witnesses, in both text and image.²⁴

Yet there are obstacles. As Susan Sontag might point out, death exceeds any favours that witnesses can confer upon the dead, particularly the witnesses who come to know the dead through their photographs. Sontag expresses a concern about the limitations on photographed atrocities when she writes:

Much of the current skepticism about the work of certain photographers of conscience seems to amount to little more than displeasure at the fact that photographs are circulated so diversely; that there is no way to guarantee reverential conditions in which to look at these pictures and be fully responsive to them.²⁵

For this reason, one might understand *Brandstätten* as a supplement to *Der Brand*. Its readers are meant to approach the photos with a position determined by an acquaintanceship with Friedrich's earlier text. He hoped to fix the conditions of its reception so as to leave no ambiguity as to who are the victims of the air war.

Whatever objections there are to Friedrich's revision of the past – and there are good reasons to object to it – depictions of the air war ought not to be reserved for the imagination. Sebald, who avoided including photographs of Holocaust atrocities in his otherwise abundantly illustrated writings, included a photograph of charred German bodies in his *Air War and Literature*. This is not because he cares more for German victims, but because he knows that images of military violence cannot be eschewed. We cannot afford to have the discussion of war, the bloody product of mortal and not divine rage, sanitised.

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NOTES

¹ R. Eberhart, *Collected Poems 1930–1976* (New York, 1976), p. 90.

² W. G. Sebald, "Zwischen Geschichte und Naturgeschichte – Versuch über die literarische Beschreibung totaler Zerstörung mit Anmerkungen zu Kasack, Nossack und Kluge", *Orbis Litterarum* 37 (1982), 345–66 (p. 362).

³ Hermann Knell implicates even the Wright brothers in the long history of aerial bombing. See H. Knell, *To Destroy a City: Strategic Bombing and its Human Consequences in World War II* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), p. 52. In her brief history, Susanne Veas-Gulani makes note of the Italian General Giulio Douhet as well as of Guernica. See S. Veas-Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt: Literature of Wartime Bombing in Germany* (Berlin, 2003), pp. 2–3.

⁴ H. E. Nossack, *Der Untergang* (Frankfurt, 1976 [1948]), p. 72.

⁵ G. Ledig, *Vergeltung* (Frankfurt, 1999 [1956]), p. 199.

⁶ S. Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, trans. L. Haverty Rugg (New York, 2003), p. 95.

⁷ G. Musgrove, *Operation Gomorrah: The Hamburg Firestorm Raids* (London, 1981), p. 82.

⁸ C. Barnett, "Bombing of Germany Not a War Crime", *Daily Mail*, 20 November 2002, n.p.

⁹ See W. G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Frankfurt, 2002 [also Munich, 1999]). Translated into English as *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. A. Bell (New York, 2003). See p. 110. English p. 104. See also "Hitlers pyromanische Phantasien", in: *Zeugen der Zerstörung: Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg*, ed. V. Hage (Frankfurt, 2003), p. 274.

¹⁰ Hage, p. 276.

¹¹ See Veas-Gulani, pp. 124–5 and also Andreas Huyssen, who refutes the claim that the bombings were not talked about, making the point that they were in fact a topic of widespread discussion. See A. Huyssen, "On Rewritings and New Beginnings: W. G. Sebald and the Literature about the *Luftkrieg*", *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 31:124 (2001), 72–90 (p. 81).

¹² J. Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945* (Berlin, 2002), pp. 64–5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 81–2.

¹⁶ See all of Part One in Knell, especially p. 19.

¹⁷ W. Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York, 1978 [1921]), p. 278. This is a translation of “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols (Frankfurt, 1977), Vol. II.1 (1977), p. 180. Benjamin’s title would be better translated as “Towards a Critique of Violence”.

¹⁸ Historians disagree on this point. Max Seydewitz argues that it was effective (see M. Seydewitz, *Civil Life in Wartime Germany: The Story of the Home Front* [New York, 1945], pp. 308, 310, 313, 316). Historians such as Friedrich and Knell assert that it did little or nothing in furtherance of that goal. See esp. Friedrich, *Der Brand*, p. 90.

¹⁹ J. Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’”, in: *Acts of Religion*, ed. G. Anidjar (New York, 2002), p. 298.

²⁰ Benjamin, p. 295, German, p. 197.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 296–7, German, p. 199.

²² J. Friedrich, *Brandstätten: Der Anblick des Bombenkriegs* (Berlin, 2003), p. 239.

²³ See Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, esp. p. 16, English p. 7.

²⁴ On this, see Derrida’s reflection on the relation of “Critique of Violence” to the Holocaust, p. 298.

²⁵ S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, 2003), pp. 120–1.