

Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg's Letter Describing the Aftermath of the Hamburg Firestorm (August 24, 1943)

Abstract

In addition to thousands of dead, the Allied air attacks on German cities caused catastrophic supply shortages and created panic among survivors. The following account of the Hamburg firestorm was written by an eyewitness. As it attests, air attacks wore down the morale of the population without having the hoped-for effect of triggering uprisings against the Nazi regime and thus hastening the end of the war.

Mathilde Wolff-Mönckenberg (1879–1958) was the daughter of Johann Georg Mönckeberg, Lord Mayor of Hamburg. Although both she and her husband, Emil Wolff, opposed the National Socialists, they remained in Hamburg throughout the war, experiencing its fierce destructiveness firsthand. The following account was included in an August 24, 1943, letter that Wolff-Mönckenberg wrote to her five adult children, four of whom were living abroad at the time. It was one of a series of collective letters to her children that Wolff-Mönckenberg authored over the course of the war. She never sent any of them—nor had she likely ever intended to. They were found in 1974, years after her death, by her daughter Ruth Evans, who translated them into English and first published them in 1979.

Source

August 24, 1943

[...]

During the night of Tuesday-Wednesday there was yet another terror attack, such a heavy one that it seemed to me even more horrifying than the one we had had on Saturday. After the siren had gone, there was only a little shooting at first, then all was quiet and we thought it was over. But then it started as if the whole world would explode. The light went out immediately and we were in darkness, then a tiny flickering light. We sat with wet towels over nose and mouth and the noise from one direct hit after another was such that the entire house shook and rattled, plaster spilling from the walls and glass splintering from the windows. Frau Leiser fainted and lay on the floor, her sweet baby was frozen with fear, nobody uttered a sound, and families grabbed each other by the hands and made for the exit. Never have I felt the nearness of death so intensely, never was I so petrified with fear. With every expansion we thought the house would come down on top of us, that the end was there; we choked with the smell of burning, we were blinded by sudden flashes of fire. And the stillness.

The following morning Maria reported that all women and children had to be evacuated from the city within six hours. There was no gas, no electricity, not a drop of water, neither the lift nor the telephone was working. It is hard to imagine the panic and chaos. Each one for himself, only one idea: flight. We too – W. raced to the police station for our exit permits. There were endless queues, but our permits were issued because we had a place to go to. But how could we travel? No trains could leave from Hamburg because all the stations had been gutted, and so Harburg was the nearest. There were no trams, no Underground, no rail-traffic to the suburbs. Most people loaded some belongings on carts, bicycles, prams, or carried things on their backs, and started on foot, just to get away, to escape. A long stream of human beings flooded along the Sierichstrasse, thousands were prepared to camp out, anything rather than stay in this catastrophic inferno in the city. During the night the suburbs of Hamm, Hammerbrock,

Rothenburgsort and Barmbeck had been almost razed to the ground. People who had fled from collapsing bunkers and had got stuck in huge crowds in the streets had burning phosphorus poured over them, rushed into the next air raid shelter and were shot in order not to spread the flames. In the midst of the fire and the attempts to quench it, women had their babies in the streets. Parents and children were separated and torn apart in this frightful upheaval of surging humanity and never found each other again. It must have been indescribably gruesome. Everyone had just one thought: to get away. W. tried vainly for some kind of vehicle. Most people in our house made hasty impromptu arrangements, carrying bits and pieces into the cellar, and we also towed away a few things. Since nobody could cook, communal kitchens were organized. But wherever people gathered together, more unrest ensued. People wearing party badges had them torn off their coats and there were screams of "Let's get that murderer." The police did nothing. We had another alarm during the night, but only a short one. Maria stayed the night with us because she had had such an awful time in the bunker with the heat and the stink, collapsing people, drunkenness and over aggression, howling children everywhere.

[...]

Source of English translation: Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg, *On the Other Side: To My Children from Germany, 1940–1945*. Translated and edited by Ruth Evans. London and Sydney: Pan Books, 1979, pp. 78–79; portions of this translation reprinted in Jeremy Noakes, ed., *Nazism, 1919–1945*, Vol. 4: *The German Home Front in World War II*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998, pp. 557–58. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

Source of original German text: Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg, *Briefe, die sie nicht erreichten*, edited by Ruth Evans. Hamburg: Hoffmann and Campe 1980, pp. 91–92.

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