Personal Reflections on Surviving Allied Bombings

Abstract

Strategic aerial bombing had formed a key element of military strategy from the start of the Second World War. The Axis powers had destroyed entire towns and cities from the outset, and while the Allies had largely kept to military targets in the early years, there was often considerable collateral damage resulting from their strikes. In 1942, however, Great Britain authorized the area bombing of cities, including civilian areas, with the express purpose of breaking the morale of the population that occupied these spaces. These indiscriminate bombing raids were devastating, destroying 40%-80% of the cities hit, and causing hundreds of thousands of casualties: the fire-bombing of Hamburg in Jul 1943 alone killed over 42,000 civilians and injured 67,000 others. In the following excerpts, three German women who survived the attacks on Stuttgart, Berlin and elsewhere describe their experiences in detail. The first is a retrospective account while the last two were written during the war. Each describes similar feelings of terror, dread, and foreboding at the uncertainty of when, where or how raids would come, as well as the deep concern for the potential loss of loved ones. They depict the chaos and general panic gripping the population as a result of pending or ongoing raids.

While many Germans had access to public bomb shelters or basement air raid shelters, these places were not always safe, as they could not all withstand the impact of bombs, nor could they always protect their occupants from the dangers of incendiary bombs. Nonetheless, while these shelters could provide no guarantee of safety for Germans, they were closed off to non-Aryans such as foreign workers, who were routinely shut out from shelters and left to fend for themselves. Jews who were still hiding in Germany could hardly risk seeking out bomb shelters either, for fear of being discovered and arrested after the raid.

Source

Hannelore S. (born 1927) describes how some helpers, including her father and herself, tried to get to people buried under rubble after an air raid on Stuttgart in the late summer of 1944:

“With some others, I too fought my way down to the cellar through smoke and fumes in one of the two neighboring houses. In the other neighboring house, another group tried the same thing. I actually managed to get down to the cellar adjacent to the burning neighboring house. The partition to the other cellar had already been smashed in, and one could see a person sitting in the opening. Since I was the smallest and slimmest, I was made to crawl and scramble ahead, because of course the devastation caused by the air mine was so severe in this cellar, too, that it was difficult to make any headway. Mr. L. was close behind me and held me by the clothes. Presumably he, too, was held tightly so that the connection to the outside would not be lost. Debris dropped down from everywhere, and through the dense dust we fought our way over collapsed air-raid beds, chairs, shelves and suitcases closer to the passage. I could already hear a small child whimpering from the neighboring cellar. Finally I reached the man sitting in the opening in the wall and was about to ask him to clear the way when my touch caused him to topple over and fall at my feet. Then I saw that he was dead. A brick had probably hit him in the neck and killed him. With difficulty, Mr. L. and I were able to move the dead man backwards in the tangle of wood and bricks to clear the way again. Others then took the man down, and we tried to move forward again. Then something collapsed in the neighboring cellar. Under the swelling cloud of dust I could briefly make out the face and the moving little hands of the child of about two years, then everything was enveloped by the dust, swallowed up! And we almost couldn't breathe! From behind they called for us to

immediately start the way back.... In the meantime, the fire had spread to the house from which we were trying to rescue people. The heat was getting to us more and more, but even more the thought of the people who might still be alive down there! Mr. L. pulled me with him, and we made our way upstairs in the hope that perhaps the rescuers from the other neighboring house had come through better and could help. Dirty and black in the face and on our hands, however, we faced the other rescue group outside. No rescue possible! We could only hope that the people down there had fallen asleep and died before the flames reached them, due to lack of oxygen and because of the carbon monoxide gas. I could not hold back the tears and must have presented a gruesome picture, because my mother was paralyzed from the shock of my appearance ... she believed I was injured. The fact that my father supported me when I went home and constantly reassured me must have reinforced this impression. I don't remember anything about it myself, I was told about it later. When I passed the scene of the fire the next morning, all three houses (they had been rowhouses) were nothing but a pile of smoking rubble. I can hardly describe the sensations that befell me when, on one of the next days, I happened to witness the shrunken and charred corpses of the inhabitants of the middle house being carried out. Everything seemed so senseless to me – once again – the whole war, all the calls to persevere, this last-ditch effort to achieve victory when small, innocent children lost their lives in such a terrible way. Why did God allow this to happen? Was there even a God?"

From the diary of student Lilo G.:

"This night there was another horrible attack, they come every day now. You can really feel how your nerves are slowly breaking... When the bombs crash around you with an unimaginable noise, death reaches for your heart with an icy hand. You have only one thought: 'If only it would stop!' But it doesn't stop, you think that in the next moment your nerves will burst, you will have to cry out, but you mustn't, you must keep your composure.... But outside of the struggle for the most necessary attitude, it is no longer enough for me either to be happy and joyful, because threateningly, whenever you want to be happy, the specter of death, of fear looms before you and makes you shudder.... You will ask why I am afraid since I am religious. Yes, I answer you, I am religious... but my heart is too weak, the human fear of the end is so unimaginably great that at the moment of immediate death nothing remains of strength and surrender to God's will but a trembling human heart..."

Liselotte Orgel-Purper (b. 1918, photojournalist) in a letter to her husband at the front, two months after their wedding on Nov. 25, 1943:

"And Berlin now looks like the front. You wouldn't recognize it! We are beaten, once again! badly beaten! Mummy goes through the contents of the apartment incessantly in her thoughts! And what all went up in flames! Even all your letters that I loved do much. And your very precious war diary sheets!!! Oh Kuddel! This and other things lay ready to be taken along on the next trip here. My violin! My 6,000 archive pictures, all my contact prints of seven years! My work from this year. Our wedding negatives, our negatives from our honeymoon, and they were to be your Christmas present. Beautifully ready! All gone! All books, pictures, souvenirs, letters and thousands of things. My radio, gramophone and records, the beautiful lamp, oh everything, everything my heart was attached to."

Source of German original text: Margarete Dörr, ed. *„Wer die Zeit nicht mitgelebt hat…" Frauenerfahrungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg und in den Jahren danach, Band 2: Kriegsalltag*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1998, pp. 270-80.

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