

Inferno – The Devastation of Hamburg 1943 by Keith Lowe.  
Viking 2007.

At over sixty years' distance from the events of the Second World War, and over seventy from the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany, it is possible to view some of the actions of the Allied armies, principally those of the USA, Soviet Russia and Great Britain, through a slightly more enlightened prism than the old 'they started it so why should we feel any sympathy for what happened to them?'

Inferno is one of a number of books in recent years – Dresden by Frederick Taylor was another notable example – that looks at specific events during the War with the benefit of time and historical hindsight. This is a fascinating analysis, not only of the horrific bombings of Hamburg, prior to that one of the most Anglophile cities in Germany, but also of the development of the bombing campaigns on both sides and the effect these had on their respective governments and populaces.

Inferno is also a rich human story: of the pilots who flew the bombers and fighter escorts, and the conditions they endured, and of those on whom they unleashed their bombs, representative of the fury of the Allies against the Nazis. But perhaps what is most memorable about this superbly researched and written book is the final chapter, Redemption, in which Keith Lowe reflects on the aftermath of the war, and particularly the way attitudes towards those who bombed have changed, notably in Britain and America.

He concludes, quite fairly and correctly, by noting that Germany is now one of the most pacifist nations in the world, and unlike the victorious allies whose armies have gone on to fight many wars since, German arms have stayed silent, proving, perhaps, if nothing else, that as Lowe remarks, 'her people have learnt their lesson.'

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