

An extract from Fire Weather, John Vaillant's latest book. 2023

The Hamburg Firestorm 25 July 1943

This was the infamous event in which allied forces studiously and systematically bombed Germany's second largest city. Over 8 days and nights in the summer of 1943 bombers dropped thousands of tons of high explosives and incendiary bombs across the city. Their objective was two-fold. The first was physical to destroy the strategic port shipyards, factories and refineries. The second was psychological. By targetting workers' housing the architects hoped to kill, terrorise and demoralise the citizenry, the real engine of the Nazi war machine. A pointedly, vengeful military code name was given to the Hamburg bombing campaign ' Operation Gomorrah'. It was diabolical but this was total war. The 8 day assault on Hamburg would be payback for the equally merciless London Blitz.

On the fourth night of Operation Gomorrah 2 million kilogrammes of bombs and incendiaries were released over Hamburg in under an hour. First were the high explosives designed to flatten whatever they landed on. Their shock waves blew out windows and doors for hundreds of yards around while the rubble and craters they made hampered rescues and firefighting efforts. With the buildings broken and ventilated, escape routes blocked, the incendiaries came next. These were smaller, designed to puncture roof tiles and explode in the upper floors and stair wells of houses.

" The bombs" wrote one survivor "often came to rest in beds or on the floor, beside wardrobes and ignited these fuels from which the fires then developed". Hamburg on July 27 1943 was exceptionally hot and dry.

The streets became canyons of fire. Stone apartment buildings roaring like blast furnaces. Roads took on the characteristic of giant bellows, drawing in surrounding air with such force and velocity that residents, particularly lighter women and children were sucked back into the buildings they tried to escape from. Others fled their roasting in bunkers, only to become mired in molten road tar where they too were buried alive. Above, the city smoke and fire spun in a terrible gyre that drew the surrounding air in faster causing the fire to burn so hot it caused bricks to melt.

20,000 were killed that night. After 8 days of relentless bombing the death toll rose to 40,000. The bombing of Hamburg would come to be known as the Hiroshima of Germany.

