

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #139

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Coda to Book Note #138: *Kurt Vonnegut's 'Slaughterhouse-Five'*



This is going to be a short **Book Note** – probably the shortest of all!

Apparently, Kurt Vonnegut still strikes a chord.

Last week's **Book Note #138** about Vonnegut's novel ***Slaughterhouse-Five*** elicited multiple responses from readers. Several mentioned how they had read it a number of times; others how much they enjoyed George Roy Hill's 1972 film based on the novel. About the film, Vonnegut himself said, "I love George Roy

Hill and Universal Pictures, who made a flawless translation of my novel ***Slaughterhouse-Five*** to the silver screen. I drool and cackle every time I watch that film, because it is so harmonious with what I felt when I wrote the book." [1] Hill could get a joke; he also directed ***Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*** (1969) and ***The Sting*** (1973).

While saying they enjoyed the **Note** and appreciated Vonnegut's work, a few pointed out that his assertion that over 130,000 people died during the Dresden firebombing was inaccurate. The actual death count was **only** (emphasis added) approximately 25,000 or so.

I am tempted, *pace* Vonnegut, to add *so it goes*, but I won't.

First things first – thank you to all **Book Notes** readers for their comments and feedback. It is very much appreciated, even when you don't agree with me. Maybe when you don't agree with me most of all, for how else can one learn anything? Comments can be sent to me at roth@jeserie.org.

Reader response about the accuracy of Vonnegut's numbers got me thinking yet again about the morality of war. Which, cutting through the relativistic clutter, is really thinking about two questions:

When is it permissible to kill someone?

When is it permissible to accept the slaughter of slews of others?

Those two questions fog the mind.

Maybe they shouldn't.

That "maybe" is the fog rolling in. As a result, as promised, this is going to be a very short **Book Note** because thinking about the morality of war raises questions to which the answer is either the **Decalogue's** Sixth Commandment that "Thou shalt not kill" or entire libraries and millennia of philosophical and theological quibbling about when that straightforward dictum does not apply.

In fact, here come the quibbles, the Sixth Commandment itself is not straightforward. Biblical scholars point out that the **King James Bible** mistranslated "the Hebrew word *ratsach*, which nearly always refers to intentional killing without cause." [2] **The New Revised Standard Version** says that "You shall not murder." [3] My copy of **The Oxford Study Bible** reads: "Do not commit murder." [4]

What is the difference between "to kill" and "to commit murder"? One is a verb – to kill, or to extinguish life; the other is a noun, murder, which is the act of killing someone or something with premeditation and planning. Parsing those

distinctions leads down a rabbit hole from which there is no return, for nuances are many and clarity nonexistent.

Let's abort these philosophical musings, not go down that rabbit hole, and save the topic for another day. Maybe I'll ask ChatGPT for its opinion about the matter. In fact, I will. That'll be another **Book Note**.

To keep this note short, let's examine the question posed by a number of readers challenging Vonnegut's claim that about 130,000, give or take the odd thousand, died in Dresden on February 14, 1945 – Valentine's Day – the lover's day. Vonnegut does not mention that ironic coincidence, but he would have found the irony of a historic slaughter on the eve of an ancient Roman fertility ritual only *too* human.

That does merit, I think, a *so it goes*.

Nonetheless, as it turns out, those readers are correct.

The actual death count from the Dresden firebombing air raids was somewhere between 25,000 on the low end and 250,000 on the high end. Which is a wordy way of saying, no one knows the actual number.

What accounts for the discrepancy?

Well, Vonnegut himself had two different numbers. In ***Slaughterhouse-Five***, he placed the casualty total at "over 130,000." The exact quotation reads "... the next night about one hundred and thirty thousand people in Dresden would die. So it goes." [5] In a famous letter, at least among Vonnegut scholars, that Vonnegut wrote to his family from a repatriation camp in France after the war, "On or about February 14th the Americans came over, followed by the R.A.F. their combined labors killed 250,000 people in twenty-four hours and destroyed all of Dresden. ..." [6]

The discrepancy results from the fact exactly how many people were killed/murdered/died during the Allied bombing of Dresden is unknown. Official American and British sources place the number at between 22,700 and 25,000. The German government in 1945 before the surrender placed the dead at 200,000. Others had other numbers. David Irving, the Holocaust denier, put the number at 200,000 in his book ***The Destruction of Dresden***, but later recanted and said his analysis was based on incorrect and forged data. [7]

So, on the one hand, we have sources who for reasons of their own want the number low; on the other hand, we have sources who for reasons of their own want the number high. Why the wild variances? Because how many people were in Dresden that night, the city's population swollen by tens of thousands of refugees from the east fleeing the advancing Russian Red Army, remains

undetermined. The actual number almost certainly is greater than the “official” 25,000 reported and probably far less than the 250,000 often quoted.

More importantly, for the purposes of Vonnegut’s art, whether it was 25,000, 130,000, or 250,000 matters not. As I said in last week’s **Book Note**, “Stalin, one of *“the bad guys,”* allegedly said, “A single death is a tragedy; A million deaths is a statistic.” [8]

Debating the number of dead in Dresden is a debate about statistics.

The tragedy is that it happened at all. For as John Donne said, “... any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” [9]

And that is Vonnegut’s point: since we’re all humans, the death of any human diminishes us – whether schoolchildren in a mass shooting that could have been prevented, or the probability of its occurrence significantly reduced by sensible gun laws; the rape and murder of women and children in the Ukraine; refugees fleeing for safety in February 1945 only to be in the wrong place at the wrong time as death fell from the sky – because we share their humanity. Their death diminishes us.

Vonnegut tells a moral tale. His moral is simple and apparently almost impossible for humans, their common humanity notwithstanding, to honor. If we are to escape the judgment Vonnegut placed upon one of his characters – he said, “She had been given the opportunity to participate in civilization, and she had muffed it,” [10] – we need to remember to:

Do no harm.

Thou shalt not kill.

Peace, or as Pope John XXIII wrote, ***Pacem Im Terris*** (if only!)

Keep those emails coming!



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End Notes

1. Parshall, Peter. “Meditations on the Philosophy of Tralfamadore: Kurt Vonnegut and George Roy Hill” in **Literature/Film Quarterly**, 1987 V.15, No. 1 (1987), p. 49 at JSTOR available at [Meditations on the Philosophy of Tralfamadore: Kurt Vonnegut and George Roy Hill \(jstor.org\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/428588) accessed April 1, 2023.
2. “What is the difference between killing and murder?” at **BibleAsk** available at [What is the difference between killing and murder? - BibleAsk](https://www.bibleask.com/what-is-the-difference-between-killing-and-murder/) accessed April 1, 2023.
3. “Ten Commandments” in **The Encyclopedia Britannica** available at [Ten Commandments | Description, History, Text, & Facts | Britannica](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ten-commandments) accessed April 1, 2023.
4. “Exodus 20:15” in **The Oxford Study Bible**, Eds. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller. (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 82.
5. “Vonnegut, Kurt. **Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade**. (New York: The Modern Library, 1969 Kindle Edition), p.168.
6. Higgins, Chris. “Kurt Vonnegut’s Letter to His Family About His Imprisonment in Slaughterhouse Five,” at **Mental Floss** available at [Kurt Vonnegut’s Letter to His Family About His Imprisonment in Slaughterhouse Five \(mentalfloss.com\)](https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/100000/kurt-vonnegut-s-letter-to-his-family-about-his-imprisonment-in-slaughterhouse-five) access April 1, 2023.
7. There are multiple (an understatement) sources for data on the bombing of Dresden; a few good places to start are “Bombing of Dresden” at **History.com** available at [Bombing of Dresden - World War II, Germany & Facts - HISTORY](https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/bombing-of-dresden); “Bombing of Dresden” at **Encyclopedia Britannica** available at [Bombing of Dresden | History, Deaths, & Facts | Britannica](https://www.britannica.com/event/bombing-of-dresden); Jack Wear, “How Many Germans Died under RAF Bombs at Dresden in 1945?” at **Aletho News** available at [How Many Germans Died under RAF Bombs at Dresden in 1945? « Aletho News](https://www.aletho.com/news/how-many-germans-died-under-raf-bombs-at-dresden-in-1945/); Erin Kelly, “Inside the Dresden Bombing and The Apocalyptic Firestorm That Turned a City Into a Wasteland” at **All That’s Interesting.com** available at [The Dresden Bombing, The WW2 Firestorm That Devastated Germany \(allthatsinteresting.com\)](https://www.allthatsinteresting.com/dresden-bombing); “Bombing of Dresden in World War II” at **Wikipedia**, the free encyclopedia available at [Bombing of Dresden in World War II - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bombing_of_Dresden_in_World_War_II); a good book length place to start is Frederick Taylor, **Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945** (New York:Harper Collins, 2004).
8. *A Single Death Is a Tragedy; A Million Deaths Is a Statistic*,” in the **Quote Investigator** available at [A Single Death Is a Tragedy; A Million Deaths Is a Statistic – Quote Investigator®](https://www.quoteinvestigator.com/2023/03/27/a-single-death-is-a-tragedy-a-million-deaths-is-a-statistic/) accessed March 27, 2023.
9. Donne, John, “*Devotions on Emergent Occasions*,” quoted in Rundell, Katherine, **Super-Infinite: The Transformation of John Donne**. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2022 Kindle Edition), p. 296.
10. Crichton, Michael. “*Analysis: Slaughterhouse-Five (1969)*” in **The Critic as Artist: Essays on Books 1920-1970**, ed. Gilbert Harrison. (New York: Liveright, 1972), pp. 100-107 available at [ANALYSIS \(amerlit.com\)](https://www.amerlit.com/analysis-slaughterhouse-five-1969/) accessed April 1, 2023.

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