

THE DRESDEN BOMBING
AS PORTRAYED IN GERMAN ACCOUNTS, EAST AND WEST

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On February 13, 1945, in one of the most devastating bombing attacks in history, combined British and American strategic air forces attacked Dresden in three waves, creating a firestorm of extraordinary proportions. On that night the Royal Air Force set the city on fire with two "area" raids aimed at its center, accomplishing the (vast) majority of the destruction. The Americans followed at noon on the 14th. The number of people killed is still hotly debated, with some claiming the total to be equal or greater than the combined initial losses of the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹ As if the great loss of life were not enough, the almost complete destruction, often characterized as needless, of Europe's "Florence on the Elbe," has made the bombing of Dresden notable. Critics charge that the attack was unnecessary because the defeat of Germany was already assured and no attempt was made to hit military targets - with the possible exception of railroads and bridges, for which a fire raid was ineffective.²

Unlike the even more devastating March 9, 1945 bombing of Tokyo, the bombing of Dresden has not disappeared into the annals of history. It is commemorated periodically in the press of many countries, including the United States, and remains an ever evolving point of contention between the two Germanies.

German views of the bombing on both sides of the Iron Curtain have been shaped by ideological

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disputes for which the bombing has become a symbol. The German past is an instrument of propaganda for both sides; not only is the bombing of Dresden controversial, but the division of Germany has led to controversy over interpretation of the event as well.

The perception and interpretation of an historical event is a dynamic process. The study of the forces which shape peoples' perceptions can be as interesting and significant as the event itself. Little has been published about the bombing of Dresden in this country, and, to my knowledge, no one else here has studied German views of it over time, much less compared the two Germanies in this respect. It is important to recognize that the understanding of events is defined and redefined in the changing context of time and that perceptions of this particular event belong to a continuing ideological struggle of forty years' duration, of which the bombing of Dresden is only a small, although revealing, part.

I have attempted to sample German periodical sources at different post-war periods and discuss them in the context of German historical accounts as well as in the broader Allied perspective. It was not a thorough survey of the literature, as my search was delimited by the collections available in the University of California library system and those which could be borrowed from other United States libraries. There were numerous German-language articles not available to me, although most of the books written about the bombing of Dresden were. In addition, when I travelled to Dresden in 1984, I searched out East German sources at the Sachischelandesbibliothek and managed to interview Professor Max Seydewitz and his wife, Ruth, as well as an archivist, who preferred to remain anonymous, at the Dresden Fotothek (an historical collection of photographs of Dresden), and several ordinary Dresden citizens. I also made a brief visit to the American Library in West Berlin.

The Allied policy of "what was ... described as 'terror bombing,'"³ was the result of a British directive issued February 14, 1942, which "laid down the aim of the offensive would be focused on the morale of the enemy civil population and, in particular, of the industrial workers."⁴ This policy, concealed from the public by the British until exposed by C.P. Snow

in March 1961, in a little book entitled Science and Government, was admitted the following September in the official history by Charles Webster and Dr. Noble Frankland: admitting "There is no doubt ... that Sir Charles Portal's instructions of 15th February 1942 to the effect that Bomber Command was to aim at built-up areas and not at factories were in accord with Government policy..."⁵

By February 1945, Germany was on the verge of defeat. The American and British troops had not yet reached her border, but the Red Army was already advancing through eastern Germany and, by the 13th stood only about 50 miles outside of Berlin, 70 miles from Dresden.⁶ Dresden would fall into the zone of Soviet occupation.

The Yalta Conference, from which Churchill ordered the bombing of Dresden, began on February 4th. One major order of business at the conference was the determination of the occupation zones in Germany. Churchill had originally intended that the Dresden raid, code-named "Operation Thunderclap," coincide with this conference, but it had to be postponed because of inclement weather.⁷

At this late date in the war, Dresden was unique among large German cities in having been spared a major bombing attack.⁸ Many Germans believed it would not be attacked and had sent their children to Dresden for safety.⁹ The Germans had managed to inflict only relatively minor damage on England by air, the attack on Coventry having killed about 500 people and the heaviest attack on London about 1400,¹⁰ while German cities had suffered severe damage and high death tolls from allied bombing. In the summer of 1943, in the midst of four days of repeated air raids on Hamburg, a new phenomenon, the urban fire-storm or "Feuersturm" (a term coined that night), erupted; occurring within a period of twenty minutes on the night of July 27 and burning for five hours, it killed roughly 50,000 people,¹¹ almost the number killed in the whole of Great Britain during the entire war, which is "precisely known at 60,595."¹² Devastation of such magnitude and intensity was not achieved again until Dresden.¹³ But at Dresden there was a significant difference: where "Previously the fire-storm had been merely an unforeseen result of the attack; in the double-blow on Dresden the fire-storm was to be an integral part of the strategy."¹⁴

The strategy was immediately controversial. Although the Americans claimed the Soviets were responsible,¹⁵ in 1961 the official British history of the strategic bombing offensive assigned responsibility for the attack to Winston Churchill.¹⁶ The Soviets were informed shortly beforehand, but only of the American intention to bomb the marshalling yards, to which they raised no objection.¹⁷ With reference to the statement by General George C. Marshall, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, that the bombing of Dresden had taken place at Soviet request, the British commented: "General Marshall read too much into the Russian request which, apart from the specific mention of Berlin and Leipzig, was in general terms. At any rate no evidence has come to light showing that the Russians asked specifically for the bombing of Dresden."¹⁸ This controversy over the role of the Soviets pervades German accounts of the bombing.

Death toll estimates range widely, from 25,000 to over a quarter-million. The incalculable number of refugees crowded into the city and the intensity of the firestorm made it difficult to ascertain the number of people killed. Lack of a consensus on the death toll has been used for political purposes by both sides.

1950's

Axel Rodenberger's book, Der Tod von Dresden, the first extensive account of the attack on Dresden, appeared in West Germany in 1951. The author, who had lived off and on in Dresden for thirty-five years, reported his own experience along with information gleaned from notes and discussions with many Dresden survivors. In the foreword is a letter from the Silesian poet, Dr. Hanns Gottschalk, written in February 1945, in which he attempts to understand why the city had to die:

Men, whether friend or foe, give no answer.
But more clearly and more emphatically than
any answer could, the destruction of
Dresden demonstrates what man is capable
of, when he wanders from the path of reason
and sets the forces of hate in motion.¹⁹

Why Dresden was destroyed is the most persistent query in German accounts of the attack on both sides of the Wall; the question of responsibility follows closely. In 1953 Rodenberger asked the U.S. State Department "who

gave the order for the annihilation of Dresden?," and received the official explanation, that the attack had been requested by the Soviets, but he was not convinced.²⁰

Echoing Gottschalk's suggestion that the act was irrational, Rodenberger took a philosophical approach and blamed war itself.²¹ The fate of Dresden could become the fate of other cities, he wrote, as the powers of annihilation have become stronger yet, referring to the atomic bomb. In the introduction, Rodenberger characterized the attacks as "the atomic bombs for Germany," since the effect in his opinion exceeded that of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the number of dead was far higher.²² His account, which appears to have been widely read, at least in the Federal Republic, estimates a probable total of over 1/4 million dead, with perhaps only 50-70% recovered from the ruins.²³

Twelve years later, in the epilogue to the book's eighth edition, Rodenberger answered the question of who gave the order for the Dresden attack quite differently. With the publication in 1961 of the official British history of strategic bombing, he wrote, it became official that area bombing had been unimportant in deciding the war, which the British knew long before the annihilation of Dresden, that Churchill was the impetus for the Dresden attack, and that the justification often mentioned - that it was retaliation for the bombing of Coventry - was only a pretext. He now used the word "Untat," or outrage, in reference to these unrestricted Allied attacks on civilians,²⁴ declaring the death of Dresden "should be an eternal memorial. A warning to mankind."²⁵

An entirely different tone appears in two articles from the West German Hamburg newspaper, Die Zeit, in the early 1950's, which reflect the passionate climate of the Cold War at a time when the reunification of Germany was still being seriously discussed. Christian Wulffen complained that "The Soviets want Dresden to be a 'beacon in the struggle against the Americans.' A 'museum' which depicts and shows evidence of the destruction is supposed to immortalize the hatred."²⁶ The second article, appearing in April 1952, is a scathing attack against the Communists, claiming that the Sachsen Landessekretariat of the Socialist Unity Party (the ruling political party of the German

Democratic Republic) wanted to complete the city's destruction by going over the heads of the city administration to remove the ruins of the Schloß and the Opera House and even demolish the newly-restored Hofkirche for a parade ground for the working masses!²⁷ In 1985 the Schloß ruins were still there, the Opera House had reopened to international acclaim, and the Hofkirche was again holding services.

In February 1953, Die Zeit published a letter to the Editor, which uncritically accepted the American attribution of Soviet responsibility for the attack, but which, nevertheless, directly criticized the British, pointing out - in reference to the annihilation of a French village by a unit of the German SS in June 1944²⁸ - that German soldiers at Oradour had been severely punished or executed for committing atrocities on a smaller scale than Dresden. Worse, the author complained, the German soldiers had only been following orders from their local superior officers, which were later condemned by the German High Command, whereas the highest levels of Allied leadership had given the orders for Dresden: "And moreover Russia was not even England's superior."²⁹

Meanwhile, in East Berlin during 1950 an article appeared in the literary magazine Der Aufbau by Walter Lehweß-Litzmann presenting a reasonable, careful analysis of "Operation Dresden," without resort to the extensive political rhetoric that came to characterize the articles, for example, in Neues Deutschland. The question of the number of dead is left open: 30,000 were buried but "how many people beyond that fell victim to the catastrophe will never be determined ... a systematic investigation is impossible."³⁰

The author pointed out that the British did not invent "terror attacks." Hitler had already used the tactic in Spain, Poland, England, and elsewhere, but it had backfired, tending to strengthen instead of weaken the will to resist. From this it follows that air attacks on civilian targets "were no longer justified, and thus this murder of, in the overwhelming majority, innocent people was senseless and purposeless..." and clearly planned at the highest level.³¹

Lehweß-Litzmann speculated on two possible reasons for the British-American attack on Dresden: 1) to complete the destruction of German

industrial and communication centers, or 2) to make the later work of reconstruction more difficult in the designated Soviet occupation zones. But even these reasons still do not appear to be "decisive" for the attack on Dresden "because Dresden possesses no key industry and the economic splitting of Germany was surely at that time not yet foreseen..."³²

Strong exception is taken to the notion that the raid on Dresden was requested by the Soviets, "who had never during the entire war engaged in massive attacks against the civilian population," despite having had the capability. To have been exceptionally "successful," as claimed, the air attack should have facilitated the Soviet advance up the Elbe, which it did not, or bombed the military barracks and storehouses, which remained almost undamaged.³³ Moreover, if the Soviets had really wanted Dresden bombed, he contends, they would have done it themselves.

The Aufbau article illuminates an opening sparring point of Cold War polemics, asking why the Anglo-Americans were so concerned with the spot at which their troops met the Soviets, since the boundaries of the future zones of occupation had been fixed since Yalta: "It shows that there were powerful forces in the Western camp, which already wished to revise the Yalta Agreement when it was barely concluded." Lehweß-Litzmann cites events in March 1945, using descriptions taken from General Dwight D. Eisenhower's book Crusade in Europe, which show, he claims, that Churchill was anxious to take Berlin before the Russians - although aware that the British and American zones bordered about 300 kilometers west of Berlin - in order to increase British and American influence and prestige in post-war Germany, despite Eisenhower's opposition.³⁴

Lehweß-Litzmann suspected that the American leadership also had plans to expand their zone of occupation to Berlin and the Elbe, noting the difficulties the Soviets had in getting American troops to withdraw from the Soviet Occupation Zone after the war as evidence. He then concludes:

In light of these facts the destruction of Dresden obtains adequate significance for the first time. The crime probably belongs in the framework of parallel British and American attempts to expand their zones of occupation beyond the boundaries set at

Yalta and thereby their post-war influence in Germany.

This is surely, he declares, how they defend their actions against critics in their own camp. Once again, the comparison to Hiroshima is made:

Mass annihilation without military necessity, but with unrealized political goals of an imperialist stamp, considered cold-bloodedly--that characterized Operation Dresden, which had an effect on the unfortunate city and its inhabitants not inferior to an atomic bomb.

Now came the polemic, as he warns that more attention should be focused "on those forces and circles in the world, which continually and loudly threaten a repetition of Dresden and Hiroshima, with super atomic and hydrogen bombs..."³⁵

A good example of East German 1950's hard line rhetoric is the book, The Undefeatable City: Destruction and Rebuilding of Dresden, by Professor Max Seydewitz, an eminent art historian who was also Prime Minister of Saxony in the difficult years immediately after the war and later General Director of the State Art Collections at Dresden. Seydewitz did not mince words, calling the bombing of Dresden a "crime against humanity for all time." He labelled the 1953 U.S. State Department statement shifting the blame for Dresden to the Soviets a lie, a "swindle ... served up anew for February 13, 1953 in the already refuted old form" to render previous assertions in the press "directed by American millionaires and armaments profiteers" more believable. He noted that some bourgeois newspapers in the Federal Republic also rejected the U.S. accusation against the Soviets, including the respected Süddeutsche Zeitung.³⁶

Seydewitz makes a reference to Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well, but to make quite a different point:

The terror attack on Dresden was no military action for the defeat of fascist Germany, but, like the dropping of the atom bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one of the early steps towards preparation of a new war for the seeing through of American imperialist plans for world mastery, which made an appearance after the end of the war.³⁷

In 1956 and 1957 tactical atomic weapons were introduced into Europe through NATO, under

American surveillance, and West Germany began pressuring NATO for atomic weapons.³⁸ This became an additional source of tension between the two Germanies, giving rise to a popular domestic movement against atomic weapons in West Germany, which reached a high point in 1957-1958. Despite its strength, however, in March 1958 the Bonn parliament passed a resolution preparing a legal basis for acquiring nuclear weapons and allocated money for that purpose.³⁹

In 1959, a West German history, The Period of the World Wars, appeared. Its author, Karl Dietrich Erdmann, went so far as to compare the bombing of Dresden with the Nazi extermination of the Jews, implying a moral trade-off:

Next to the names of Belzec, Treblinka and Auschwitz as symbols of horror ... stands the name of Dresden: here crowded great multitudes of homeless refugees. Into these defenseless people air squadrons ... dropped their explosive and incendiary bombs.⁴⁰

This kind of comparison, from one of the most conservative German historians, is highly unusual in references to the Dresden attack. Most authors, both in East and West Germany, draw moralistic comparisons with the atomic bomb and avoid explicit reference to the Holocaust. The popular Hamburg magazine Stern, for example, published a series of articles in 1960 on the Second World War, in which Dresden was called the most horrible attack "prior to the entry of the atomic bomb," taking on a tone of severe reprimand directed at the Allies:

The first attack alone should have sufficed to destroy Dresden and to murder tens of thousands of unprotected refugees, who were camped on the banks of the Elbe. However, in the same night the bombers came a second time ... That still was not enough: at noon the next day the enemy flew on Dresden a third time, completing the work of destruction.⁴¹

The authors take the moral high ground: if Dresden and the atomic bombs were the most horrible attacks in history, then Germans can be portrayed as nice fellows, who would not misuse nuclear weapons since they condemn wiping out whole cities. This subtle piece of turn-about propaganda appeared during the same year that the West German Army High Command was attempting to justify Bonn's demands for atomic weapons.⁴²

In 1960, around the 15th anniversary of the bombing, many articles decrying the arms race and suspecting the militaristic intentions of the West Germans appeared in a major East German newspaper, Neues Deutschland. On February 14, a front-page article reported a French atomic explosion in the Sahara, terming it "the French-West German atomic bomb."⁴³ Another accused the West Germans of wanting to use force of arms to "correct the outcome of the Second World War ... In a 'regional blitzkrieg' conducted with nuclear weapons they want to 'roll-up' the DDR and then shift their positions to the Oder." It strongly protested "the aggressive character" of recent NATO maneuvers.⁴⁴ Similar concerns were voiced in the traditional commemoration speech given by Prime Minister Otto Grotowohl in Dresden as reported on that same page: "The Government of the DDR regards the introduction of a cessation of armaments in the whole of Germany as the most urgent question..."⁴⁵ East Germany was taking the propaganda offensive.

The publication of the official British history of the strategic bomber offensive in 1961 and of another British history in 1963, David Irving's highly detailed The Destruction of Dresden, brought many documents and little-known details to light. After an extensive survey of the wide range of estimates, Irving estimated the total dead at 135,000 - well below the higher estimates of 250,000-300,000, but about four times the official East German figure of 35,000 dead, which had been made in 1946.

In 1964, Wolfgang Paul's eye-witness account, ..For example, Dresden, came out. A former Dresden resident author and theater critic, Paul had been forced to leave the Russian zone in 1948 after openly criticizing the Kultur Bund and censorship of cultural expression. Similar to Erdmann, he implies a moral trade-off, writing that the horrors of "Hiroshima and Auschwitz will outlast the century ... Dresden also has horror to offer our posterity."⁴⁶ He uses the moderate Irving estimate of 135,000 killed. Paul is amazed at an act of war in which the soldiers of both Fronts live, while "between them lie the dead civilians ... Why," he asks, "must they pile up horror after horror so shortly before the victory?"

Paul, like Rodenberger, blames war. He found the 1953 U.S. State Department justification

incredible, noting that not only had the Soviets not ordered the attack, but that it was not designed to support their offensive, since, for example, "The railway lines were passable again three days after the 13th of February, 1945." Perhaps the British and Americans wanted to impress the Germans with their military might and the Soviets as well, he surmises, thus suggesting a political motive new to West German accounts.⁴⁷

In 1962, West German Defense Minister Strauß demanded that Washington install medium-range nuclear missiles on German soil.⁴⁸ In December 1964 the Western press reported atomic mines and nuclear demolition charges along the German interzonal frontier.⁴⁹ Alarmed, the East German press continued attacks on West Germany's nuclear capability and aggressive intentions throughout 1965.

That year, on the 20th anniversary of the Dresden bombing, a Neues Deutschland article reported that the city of Coventry had sent a delegation (as it has every year since the founding of the Coventry-Dresden Friendship Society in 1956). Residents of both cities took vows at the monuments of the victims of the "barbaric" air attacks "to do everything so that no city in the world would ever have to endure again what Coventry and Dresden experienced in November 1940 and February 1945." In the context of time, this meant demonstrating for the cessation of atomic armaments and prevention of the further dissemination of nuclear weapons.⁵⁰

Mentioning that many people question the meaning of the "technically well-organized mass murder" which was Dresden, another article stated significantly:

Even if it was madness, so was its method nevertheless ... Dresden was already a capital of that 'Cold War,' which the Western allies of the Soviet Union prepared with a view to the future.

Then, with a jibe at West Germany - "...The heirs of this policy sit today in Bonn and have endeavored desperately to maintain the Cold War" - it declared that the guilt of the "Dresden massacre" is not to be laid to persons, but to the "inhuman system of imperialism, which gave birth to such a crime. Hiroshima and Nagasaki proved that in the same year which brought annihilation to Dresden; today the mad atomic mine speculations of the Bonn Ultras proves that, and the U.S.A.'s playing with fire over Hanoi."⁵¹

At the same time, the first post-war mayor of Dresden, Walter Weidauer, published a book, Dresden Inferno: Lies and Myths Concerning Operation Thunderclap. Acknowledging the dispute raging over the destruction of his city in West Germany and elsewhere, occasioned by the opening of archives and publication of official documents, he asserted that Paul, Rodenberger, and Irving had, among other falsifications, greatly exaggerated the death totals, calling it a "swindle" for the purpose of glorifying the German militarists in the eyes of the younger generation.⁵² Weidauer had been a member of the commission in Dresden charged with determining the number of dead, which reported at the end of 1946 a death toll of around 35,000, confirmed in 1965, he claimed, by recently discovered documents. Irving's estimate of 135,000 dead had been used in West Germany to show that the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima were not so bad after all, Weidauer asserted, citing a February 1964 article in the Stuttgart Zeitung which alleged that Irving's total took some of the wind out of the sails of the West German anti-nuclear movement, which East Germany saw as an important counter to possible West German and NATO aggression.⁵³

Webster and Frankland name an August 1944 British Air Staff memo by Sir Charles Portal as the charter of the Dresden operation. "Operation Thunderclap," as originally conceived in the memorandum, was intended to be a special air attack on a "relatively undamaged city" to cause "immense devastation" and thus hasten or consolidate an impending victory.⁵⁴ Weidauer questioned what was "special" about this attack, since missions with up to 1000 planes had already been flown as early as 1942, and massive attacks on cities like Hamburg and Kassel had hardly hastened or brought about the collapse of fascist Germany. But Weidauer has a bomb of his own to drop: "However improbable it may sound, it is quite certain nevertheless: The world's first atomic bomb was supposed to fall on a German city. For that the 'special plan' for the mysterious Operation 'Thunderclap' was created."⁵⁵

Weidauer marshals considerable evidence that "Operation Thunderclap" was originally a plan to use the A-bomb in Germany. He quotes the director of the Manhattan Project, General Leslie M.

Groves, to the effect that, as late as August 1944, "The Fat Man (the plutonium bomb) was still under development, but there was some hope that the first of this model could be delivered as early as January 1945,"⁵⁶ and attributes great significance to the coincidence of this timing with the inception of Operation Thunderclap. Groves also disclosed that the training of air crews for the dropping of atomic bombs actually began in September 1944, that the first planes were ready in October and, furthermore, that overseas flight training began in December.⁵⁷ Weidauer's source for the U.S. intention to drop the first atomic bomb on Germany is Groves' quote of President Roosevelt at a meeting shortly before his departure for Yalta in February 1945, "Mr. Roosevelt informed me that if the European war was not over before we had our first bombs he wanted us to be ready to drop them on Germany."⁵⁸

The fact that Operation Thunderclap was designed for a "virgin" city is not proof, although Weidauer claims it is, that Dresden was purposefully left relatively intact to become a target for the atomic bomb in Germany, even if Operation Thunderclap had originally been intended to be an atomic attack. After all, as he himself points out, there were "At the beginning of August 1944 in eastern Germany still several relatively undestroyed cities..."⁵⁹ Weidauer supports his conjecture with reference to a story reported by the German atomic scientist, Werner Heisenberg:

In July, 1944, at the same time as the action 'Thunderclap' originated, Heisenberg, who was president of the German Uranium Association at the time, received a visit. Goering's adjutant communicated to him that an American threat was submitted to the German legation in Lisbon. In the next six weeks an atomic bomb would be dropped over Dresden."⁶⁰

If true, this would move the date of Allied atomic readiness up considerably, but Weidauer provided no further substantiation, and this is the only point he made which directly connects the city of Dresden with the atomic bomb. His best evidence supports the contention that the British and Americans had originally expected to have an operational atomic bomb at least as soon as early 1945. Weidauer postulated that the hidden purpose of the Dresden attack was to

impress Stalin with the might of the Western Allies, so as to create a favorable negotiated outcome at Yalta, for which an atomic bomb would have been most impressive.

With these revelations, 1965 was a very interesting year for East German writings on Dresden. In the East Berlin cultural magazine Sonntag, Bernt von Kugelgen had an intriguing article reviewing the new material which had surfaced in the books by Webster and Franklin, Irving, and Weidauer. The tone is remarkable:

Our publications about the destruction of Dresden have a different tone than in past years ... (which were) nearly free of a polemic targeted against the supreme commanders of this night of bombs. Do we have, so we asked, a right to criticize the causes of the destruction of Dresden? Was not the first and most important cause a war such as that provoked by Germany? Is a people whose soldiers are guilty of Coventry and Amsterdam and Warsaw ever allowed to ask about guilt if a German city encounters the same fate? How many Dresden ruins atone for the barracks of Auschwitz?

This is the only reference to Auschwitz and Dresden together in an East German publication in my sampling. The author's answer is one which only an East German could use:

We are only too conscious of these connections. And nevertheless, we have the right and the duty to criticize the causes of the destruction of Dresden. The right is guaranteed us by the lifeline of our republic, drawn over two decades, which was a hangman's noose for the Nazi spirit of Potsdam. We have driven it out and buried it ... We have earned the right to name the guilty.

The duty of criticism proceeds from the danger inherent in myth-formation and a host of falsehoods behind which the true connections were obscured. Meanwhile, in the course of the years the stamp with the word 'secret' has faded ... the time of exact research results is here. Would we be allowed to ignore it?⁶¹

The attitude reflects an enhanced sense of self-righteousness. Among the excerpts included from the aforementioned books is Weidauer's allegation that Dresden was originally targeted for an atomic attack.

The claim that the secrecy surrounding documents from the war was fading was a bit premature regarding the Dresden raid, however. The American report on the bombing by Joseph W. Angell, although commissioned in 1953 for the United States Air Force Historical Division, was not even partially declassified until 1970; it is still very difficult to obtain.⁶² As for the East Germans, as recently as 1984 the photo library in Dresden did not have and could not get aerial photographs of the city taken by the Germans shortly after the bombing, and library personnel had never been allowed to see them; they are reportedly kept under top secret classification in East Berlin.⁶³ As the West German writer, Goetz Bergander says of the effect of keeping studies and documents about Dresden hidden for decades: if the facts are not available, myths arise. The Dresden controversy is a classic example of this process.⁶⁴

Von Kügelin criticized studies by bourgeois historians for inadequate explanations of the tragedy of Dresden, declaring:

Only an unbiased, Marxist historian was capable of working out its quintessence: The 35,000 inhabitants of the city died, sacrificed by Fascism, as victims of anti-communism. They died because there was the Morgenthau Plan ... They died because the advance of the Red Army was supposed to be impeded - scorched earth, destroyed road and information networks never facilitated marching. They died in a bloody lightning flash of atomic policy and the cold War, which made its debut with 'Operation Thunderclap.'⁶⁵

This amazing claim of lack of bias among Marxist historians, coupled with the charge of an Anglo-American scorched earth policy directed against an Ally, are remarkably blunt. The common charge of anti-Communist motives in the Dresden attack now carried the implication of already contemplated nuclear coercion.

The twenty-year period of the 1950's and 1960's is remarkable for the number of issues on the political agendas of both Germanies in the Dresden accounts as well as the highly emotional content, especially of the East German accounts, which grew more distressed and polemical as the political stance of East Germany vis-a-vis the Federal Republic became more defensive.

1970's and 1980's

In 1975, West German estimates of the dead began to conform more with the official East German total. A Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung article mentioned that "a number, never determined, of people died - a five or six place figure...",⁶⁶ while a Die Zeit story used the 35,000 figure,⁶⁷ as did an article in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, which also surmised that the Allies under Churchill and Stalin intended to destroy the residential part of the city: "The high number of 650,000 incendiaries alone speaks for this assumption..."⁶⁸ It is most interesting that the author does not single the Soviets out for blame, although he does include them as intending to destroy residential areas of the city.

An important book on Dresden appeared in 1977 in West Germany, Dresden im Luftkrieg by Goetz Bergander, a Dresden resident who witnessed the bombing. This book, characterized in Die Zeit as the first scientific investigation of the bombing, aroused vehement controversy when it confirmed the official number of 35,000 dead maintained by the East Germans for many years, utilizing evidence cited by Weidauer.⁶⁹

Bergander was skeptical of the commonly accepted estimates of the refugee population in the city, claiming that their numbers were greatly exaggerated. He allows that more people were killed than given in the official estimate, but by no means hundreds of thousands. This assertion has apparently met with passionate protest from people who felt it was an attempt to mitigate Allied guilt. West German reporter Christian Schütze, for example, decried this as an indication that the myths "corresponded with a need subsequently to win the lost war, at least morally, with the wonder weapon of indignation."⁷⁰

Another West German, Helmut Günther Dahms, writing for the historical magazine Damals in 1985, went even further in the direction of East German interpretations, asserting that the bombing was clearly directed towards the Soviets. He explained that the relatively weak military position of Britain vis-a-vis the Soviet forces at the time of the Yalta Conference, and her junior-partner status relative to the Americans, were inducement to impress Stalin with a show of

power calculated "to obtain ... further respect for the power of the island empire as the helper of the Soviets." Dahms attributes to England's Combined Intelligence Committee the opinion that "it would be 'politically valuable...' to set a visible beacon" through an attack behind the German Eastern Front.⁷¹ His estimate of the death toll was below Bergander's.⁷²

The 40th commemoration was given a different twist in the hands of the younger generation in the ecologically-orientated West Berlin newspaper, Tagesszeitung. The account acknowledged the official East German 35,000 death toll estimate and then remarked:

Each of us has heard about it - nevertheless these war scenarios are less familiar to us, the under-forty generation, than the scenarios of ecological collapse, of atomic catastrophe. Perhaps it is the experience of the night of bombings, as in Dresden, that caused the older generation to become relatively inured to the modern apocalypse. Do they not embody the experience: The Apocalypse is survivable?⁷³

A second article in the same issue, written by an eye-witness to the bombardment who had been only fifteen years old at the time, likewise accepted the East German 35,000 death toll estimate as well as the argument that Churchill wanted to impress Stalin "with an intimidating proof of strength, in order to improve his position at Yalta."⁷⁴

The influential West German news magazine Der Spiegel ran two stories on this occasion. One lengthy article, mainly about the recently rebuilt Semper Opera House, which had been destroyed in the bombing, ignored the dead, declaring that "Over 250,000 people had lost their homes" in the "senseless attack." It very briefly compared the bombing to a natural catastrophe: "Beneath streams of liquid phosphorus fire and a black rain of ashes in the firestorm the baroque Elbe-Florence turned overnight into a German Pompei."⁷⁵ The second reported that East German Prime Minister Erich Honecker's commemorative speech about world peace "uncommonly enough" spared the words "imperialism" and "revaunchism,"⁷⁶ while an article in the Süddeutsche Zeitung noted that Honecker avoided the phrase "Anglo-American

terror bombing," otherwise common in East Germany, in his depiction.⁷⁷

Albrecht Hinze also accepted the East German official death toll of 35,000 in a report in the Süddeutsche Zeitung that both Honecker and the Federal Republic of Germany representative laid wreathes in memoriam.⁷⁸ In a later article, he granted that there might be some justification for Weidauer's assertions of strategic political and military connections between the bombing and the Yalta conference. West German President Weizsacker's message was that the 13th of February was "a day of sorrow for all Germans."⁷⁹

At this point, while West Germans were increasingly accepting the official East German estimates, some East Germans were admitting, as had Lehweß-Litzmann in 1950, that it was only a tentative figure, with a potential for upward revision. A Neues Deutschland article by Hajo Herbell questioned the number of 35,000 dead asking "Does it do justice to the entire dimension of the horror? Who really knows how many people were staying in Dresden at the time ... How many may have disintegrated into ashes in the city?"⁸⁰ There were other indications of a more conciliatory attitude towards the West: the article was a very long one, and although he hinted that the destruction of Dresden was anti-Soviet in nature, Herbell significantly did not argue that the attack was meant as an opening blow in the Cold War. He used the word "imperialism" only twice - once in conjunction with the Nazis and once in reference to the "unbridled high level of imperialistic armaments." The article mentioned that military targets had not been hit in the raid, but just at that point asked "Is it not a matter of bitter necessity to recall everything that had previously been ruined in Europe by imperialistic Nazi barbarism?" thereby returning to a position more than twenty years old, assuming again the burden of Nazi guilt.

CONCLUSION

It is now more than forty years since Dresden was bombed. An extremely traumatic and controversial event, the raid is a perfect vehicle for propaganda. As such, the destruction of Dresden surely belongs in the propaganda hall of fame. It has all the necessary characteristics: a high level of emotion, death

tolls of all sizes for every purpose, opportunity for fingerpointing in all directions - at the Nazis, the Soviets, or the British and/or Americans, or at war in general. It can be used to vilify or to vindicate.

The two Germanies viewed each other with suspicion in the 1950's and 1960's, paralleling the attitudes of the respective power blocs, and their accounts of Dresden reflect this. While East German writers almost invariably utilized the opportunity to air general criticisms of the United States, Great Britain, and West Germany, West German articles reserved their criticism mainly for the Soviet Union and only occasionally Great Britain and the United States, and were less critical on the whole.

East and West German authors are in general agreement that the civilian population was deliberately targeted and that the attack was militarily senseless. They disagree on the motivations behind the attack. West German accounts rarely ascribed anti-Soviet motives for it, while East German ones invariably did, generally stressing anti-Soviet motives. Not until the mid-1960's, after the publication of the official British record, did some West Germans hint at the possibility of anti-Soviet intent.

The West Germans seem reluctant to draw conclusions as to motive, describing war in general, and the destruction in Dresden in particular, as senseless and attributing it to enflamed passions - hatred and revenge gone out of control. In sharp contrast, East German views interpret the attack as purposeful jockeying for post-war position. The West Germans appear to have become more receptive to this argument in the last ten years, as the two German governments have attempted to ease tensions. The idea that the bombing of Dresden was an opening move in the Cold War, so common in East German portrayals, has, however, never been accepted in West German accounts, with the exception of those in the youthful and very recent Tageszeitung.

The position taken on the central question of responsibility for the attack differs among West and East German accounts. Some West Germans point the finger at Churchill, but the Soviets are more often blamed, especially in the 1950's, and even as recently as 1983. None of the East German sources blame the Soviets, preferring to

point the finger at imperialism, a general category which includes the Nazis, the British, and the Americans, and expectedly absolves the Soviets of all responsibility. Some of them have gone so far as to declare that the Soviets, out of principle, would have never considered doing such a horrible thing, while others claim that its purpose was to intimidate the Soviets. In recent years many West Germans have taken the position that the Soviets simply acquiesced to the British and American plans, with or without prior information as to the civilian nature of the target.

The issue of the death toll of the raid on Dresden is an excellent example of a game of numbers being used for political purposes. West German estimates are in general much higher than East German, particularly prior to 1975. One might think that, for purposes of emphasizing the "criminality" of the bombing attack, which many of the latter allege, this would be reversed. It is sometimes suggested in West German accounts that the East Germans minimize the numbers in order to "minimize the possible co-guilt of the Soviets." What is interesting is that it is the West Germans who use larger figures and seem to have a vested interest in retaining them, as the criticism (which included death threats) of Bergander's acceptance more than thirty years after the event of the far lower East German figure would indicate.

There are several possible explanations for this anomaly. Given that the process of de-Nazification in West Germany was less thorough and that therefore a greater number of former Nazis reside there than in the East, the higher figures might be viewed as an attempt to achieve some kind of moral trade-off by playing up Allied as against Nazi atrocities, as Christian Schütze suggested. On the other hand, the higher figures tend to have intimidation value implying Western military strength, corresponding to West German efforts in the 1950's and 1960's to bolster its military situation, by joining NATO for example, in the face of alleged threats of "Russian expansionism." This interpretation is indicated by frequently expressed East German fears of West German acquisition of nuclear weapons in accounts of the raid. West Germans, by playing up the numbers, appear to want the West to seem more intimidating to the East.

The psychological phenomenon of self-pity would have played a supporting role in this game. The atomic bomb analogy is widespread on both sides. Weidauer even goes so far as to assert that the first atom bomb had been originally intended for use on Dresden. Yet the East German government, by playing down the numbers, might have wanted the nuclear-armed West to appear less intimidating. The scaling down of West German estimates in the 1970's and 1980's corresponds to a determined effort by the West German government to reach an accommodation of interests with the East Germans.

The articles from East Germany in the 1980's emphasize the desire to improve East-West relations, despite pressure from the Eastern bloc in the face of increasing hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁸¹ They do not seem to be making accommodations to the West in terms of the various controversies surrounding Dresden; the concessions made are more tone than substance. In February 1985 the East German Prime Minister met with former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in Dresden, and there was another attempt to have the heads of the two German states meet, this time in West Germany. It was unsuccessful due to East-West tensions accompanied by East bloc pressure, but reveals a continuing attempt on the part of both Germanies to ease tensions.

In the 1950's the question of blame was emphasized, amid the hot rhetoric of the Cold War. In the 1980's there is new inflammatory rhetoric between the super powers, but between East and West Germany there is a new tone of reconciliation. Unlike the 1950's and 1960's, the tendency in the German-German relationship today runs counter to the tendency in the great power relations. German portrayals of the bombing of Dresden were more hostage to superpower rhetoric during the first part of the Cold War, whereas at present they seem to reflect more distinctly German attitudes.

NOTES

¹Axel Rodenberger, Der Tod von Dresden (Frankfurt/Main: Franz Müller-Rodenberger, 1965), p. 17, and David Irving, The Destruction of

Dresden (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 14. Irving relied on the figure supplied to him by the Dresden official in charge of the Abteilung Tote of the Bureau of Missing Persons, a "conservative estimate" of 135,000 dead. In the report sent by both Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the United Nations in 1976, the total deaths due to exposure to the atomic bomb by the end of 1945 was estimated at 140,000. See the Committee for the Compilation of Materials on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Physical, Medical, and Social Effects of the Atomic bombings, trans. Eisei Ishikawa and David Swain (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 113.

²These circumstances have led some people to categorize the bombing of Dresden as a war crime. See the article by R.H.S. Crossman in New Statesman, May 3, 1963, p. 684, and the book by F.J.P. Veale, Advance to Barbarism (London, 1968). Winston Churchill himself admitted to the Chief of Air Staff in March 1945, "The destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing." Sir Charles Webster and Dr. Noble Frankland, The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany 1939-45 (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1961), p. 112.

³Ibid., p. 116

⁴Noble Frankland, Bomber Offensive: The Devastation of Europe (Ballentine, 1970), p. 41.

⁵Webster and Franklin, op.cit., p. 114.

⁶Melden E. Smith, Jr., The Bombing of Dresden Reconsidered: A Study in Wartime Decision-making (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1971), p. 45.

⁷Webster and Franklin, op.cit., p. 103 and Irving, op.cit., p. 93.

⁸That is, of cities of more than half a million inhabitants. "Perhaps one of the reasons why Dresden's legitimate targets had not earlier been attacked in force was that the city lay at extreme range from the Allied bomber bases in England." Smith, op.cit., p. 241.

⁹Dieter Georgi, "The Bombings of Dresden," Harvard Magazine 87 (March-April 1985):58. Georgi, fifteen at the time of the bombing, was one of these children.

¹⁰Charles S. Maier, "Why the Allies Did it," Harvard Magazine 87 (March-April 1985):61.

¹¹Hamburg Statistisches Landesamt figure, cited in Irving, op.cit., p. 44. See also Martin

Middlebrook, The Battle of Hamburg (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), pp. 222 and 232.

¹²Alexander McKee, Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinderbox (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), p. 12.

¹³Alan S. Milward, "Die deutsche Kriegswirtschaft 1939-1945," trans. Elisabeth Maria Peteinal, Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte (Stuttgart: 1966).

¹⁴Irving, op.cit., p. 112. See also Georgi, op.cit., p. 10 and Norman Longmate, The Bombers: the RAF Offensive against Germany 1939-1945 (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 334.

¹⁵W.F. Craven and J.L. Cate, eds., The Army Air Forces in World War II, vol. III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 731.

¹⁶Webster and Franklin, op.cit., p. 103.

¹⁷Smith, op.cit., pp. 232-235.

¹⁸Webster and Franklin, op.cit., p. 113. This is nevertheless still controversial in England, where the "blame-it-on-Stalin" theory persists. Witness the article in The Times of London on February 13, 1985 by Alexander Hamilton: "The East Germans, now masters of Dresden, plan a major event, following the Soviet principle of using the crimes of Hitler to argue against German reunification. That Dresden was an Allied crime committed at Stalin's request is unlikely to be raised."

¹⁹Axel, op.cit., p. 7.

²⁰Ibid., p. 193.

²¹Ibid., p. 12.

²²Ibid., p. 17.

²³Ibid., pp. 195 and 187.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 195-198.

²⁵Ibid., p. 192.

²⁶Christian Wulffen, "Tabula Rasa in Dresden," Die Zeit, 13 July 1950, p. 4.

²⁷"Restaurierung war vergebens. Die Dresdner Hofkirche steht den Aufmärschen im Wege," Die Zeit, 3 April 1952, p. 11. It is not at all evident whether there was anything of substance behind this fear, except perhaps with regard to the Opera House. See Wolfgang Paul, ...zum Beispiel Dresden: Schicksal einer Stadt (Frankfurt am Main: Wolfgang Weidlich, 1964), p. 189.

²⁸Herbert Michaelis, et al. Der Zweite Weltkrieg: Bilder, Daten, Dokumente (Bertelsmann, Lexikon Verlag, 1968), p. 668.

²⁹Die Zeit, 19 February 1953, p. 14.

³⁰Walter Lehweß-Litzman, "Operation Dresden," Aufbau 6 (1950):111.

³¹Ibid., p. 115.

³²Ibid., p. 116.

³³Ibid., pp. 117-118.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 118-119

³⁵Ibid., p. 120.

³⁶Max Seydewitz, Die Unbesiegbare Stadt: Zerstörung und Wiederaufbau von Dresden (Leipzig: VEB F.A. Brockhaus Verlag, 1982), pp. 133-134.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 161-162.

³⁸Albert Legault, "Atomic Weapons for Germany?," International Journal 21 (Autumn 1966):451.

³⁹Willi Wilke, "Bonn Demands Atomic Weapons," German Foreign Policy 3 (1964):100.

⁴⁰Karl Dietrich Erdmann, Die Zeit der Weltkriege from Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte, Band 4, ed. Bruno Gebhardt (Stuttgart: Herbert Grundmann, Union Verlag, 1959), p. 311.

⁴¹J.J. Heydecker, Arnim von Manikowsky, and Henning Meincke, "In Europa gingen die Lichter aus: Sturz in den Abgrund," Der Stern, 19 March 1960, p. 80.

⁴²Wilke, op.cit., p. 100, citing information from Wehrkunde 9 (1960):476 and 481.

⁴³"Sahara-bomb," Neues Deutschland, 14 February 1960, p. 1.

⁴⁴"Blitzkrieg - Blitzselbstmord," Neues Deutschland, 14 February 1960, p. 4.

⁴⁵"Nicht totaler Krieg, sondern totaler Friede," Neues Deutschland, 14 February 1960, p. 1.

⁴⁶Wolfgang Paul, op.cit., p. 7

⁴⁷Paul, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁸Albert Legault, op.cit., p. 457.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 457-458. The author is associated with the Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales, Geneva.

⁵⁰Horst Richter, "...damit keine Stadt der Welt je wieder leide!," Neues Deutschland, 13 February 1965, p. 5.

⁵¹W.M., "Ende und Anfang," Neues Deutschland, February 1965, p. 5.

⁵²Walter Weidauer, Inferno Dresden: Über Lügen und Legendum um die Aktion 'Donnerschlag' (E. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1966), pp. 6-7.

⁵³Ibid., p. 118.

⁵⁴Webster and Franklin, op.cit., p. 55.

⁵⁵"So unwarscheinlich es auch klingen mag, so sicher ist es dennoch: Die erste Atombombe der Welt sollte auf eine deutsche Stadt fallen." Weidauer, op.cit., p.63.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 66. See also General Leslie M. Groves, Now it Can be Told (New York: Da Capo, 1983), pp. 255-256.

⁵⁷Groves, op.cit., pp. 259-260.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 184 and Weidauer, op.cit., p. 67. This assertion, nevertheless, was denied by the British, specifically Sir Charles Portal. Shortly after the Neues Deutschland interview with Weidauer appeared in January of 1965, the Hamburg newspaper, Die Welt, reported that Portal "...denied Sunday a report of the S.E.D. paper, Neues Deutschland, according to which Great Britain recommended dropping the first atomic bomb on Dresden in the summer of 1944 ... Portal said there had never been an atomic attack planned for Europe." From "Bericht auf Dresden als Atomziel Dementiert," Die Welt, 25 January 1965.

⁵⁹Weidauer, op.cit., p. 62.

⁶⁰Also in Ibid., p. 63. Heisenberg reported the story to the publisher of the Physikalischen Blätter on October 25, 1963, says Weidauer.

⁶¹Bernt von K lelgen, "Rauchschrift," Sonntag, 7 February 1965, p. 2.

⁶²The American Angell Report is supposed to have been fully declassified since 1978, but it is not available at respected and comprehensive institutional libraries, such as the University of California system, the Stanford library system, and the Hoover Institute, and does not appear on the lists of available declassified Government documents.

⁶³My source is one of the librarians at the Dresden Fototek interviewed in person in August 1984.

⁶⁴It is perhaps worth noting that Bergander was very critical of the Angell Report. It supposedly was written entirely from official sources, but Bergander found much erroneous information, for example, citations to respected sources but with erroneous page references. In addition, there is confusion between an earlier and a later declassified version as to whether the study rests on generally accessible sources, but the documents were in no way "unclassified," declares Bergander, saying that such obfuscation arouses suspicion.

⁶⁵Bernt, op.cit., "Sie starben in einem blutigen Wetteleuchten der Atompolitik und des kalten Krieges, die sich mit der 'Aktion Donnerschlag' ihr Entree besorgten."

⁶⁶"Dreißig Jahre nach dem feuersturm über Dresden," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 13 February 1975, p. 7.

⁶⁷Manfred Sack, "Dresden 30 Jahre danach," Die Zeit, 21 February 1975.

⁶⁸Klaus Schumann, "Die Nacht, in der Dresden unterging," Süddeutsche Zeitung, 13 February 1975, p. 3. The reporter erred in calling the operation "Clarion" instead of "Thunderclap."

⁶⁹See Christian Schütze, "Unsterbliche Legenden über den Untergang von Dresden. Der Nachhall der NS-Propaganda hält noch nach 40 Jahren an," Die Zeit, 12 February 1985.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Helmut Günther Dahms, "Vor 40 Jahren: Bomben auf Dresden," Damals, February 1985, p. 118.

⁷²Ibid., Die Geschichte des Zweiten Weltkrieges (München-Berlin: Herbig, 1983.), p. 576.

⁷³"Bomben auf Dresden," Tageszeitung, 13 February 1985, p. 1.

⁷⁴Axel Besteher-Hegenbart, "Über den Dächern, unten im Keller," Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁵"Der Freischütz mit der Wunderharfe; Die Wiedereröffnung der Semperoper als gesamtdeutsches Fernsehfest," Der Spiegel, 11 February 1985, p. 176.

⁷⁶Uly Foerster, "Es lastet und es blutet," Der Spiegel, 18 February 1985, pp. 28-29.

⁷⁷Albrecht Hinze, "Am 40. Jahrestag der Zerstörung Dresdens Honecker ruft zu Friedensbemühungen auf," Süddeutsche Zeitung, 14 February 1985, p. 1.

⁷⁸Albrecht Hinze, "Dresden - vierzig Jahre nach der Zerstörung: Zwechmäßiger, wohnlicher und schöner?," Süddeutsche Zeitung, 13 February 1985, p. 8.

⁷⁹Hinze, op.cit.

⁸⁰"Dresden - 40 Jahre danach," Neues Deutschland, 9/10 February 1985, p. 9.

⁸¹"Große Doggen und kleine Hunde," Der Stern, 31 January 1980, p. 1968.