A Blemish on the History of the 20th Century? The Contentious Remembrance of the Dresden Bombings in Post-War Germany

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In 2003, the German historian Jörg Friedrich published the picture book *Brandstätten: Der Anblick des Bombenkriegs* (Scenes of Fire: The View of the Bombing War), a visual counterpart to his bestselling 2002 monograph *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (The Fire: Germany in the Bombing War 1940-1945). The gruesomely pre-Islamizing photographs of charred and disfigured corpses in the chapter "Bergung" (rescue) sparked a controversy in Germany, as they had been presented without proper historical contexts. Reviewers jumped to the conclusion that Friedrich’s selection of shocking images constituted an attempt to balance "German crimes with German suffering," thereby perpetuating "the myth of the Germans as Opfer." For instance, Heinz-Peter Pretzel argues that in Germany, "these photographs cannot be regarded without denoting the emblem of industrial mass killing, the destruction of European Jewry." Viewed in isolation, without the critical reexamination of the historical circumstances that led to the destruction of Germany’s urban centers, the images of dead German civilians are vulnerable to misappropriation by revisionists and their accusatory claim that the Allies had perpetrated a "Bombing Holocaust." This demonstrates the fundamentally problematic nature of showing violence in what John Berger calls "public photographs." Because public photographs are "like images in the memory of a total stranger," they "carry no certain meaning in themselves" and thus "lend themselves to any use." With the easy access to and rapid proliferation of images on the internet, the question as to how photographed atrocities are being used in the service of an ideological standpoint becomes all the more pressing: David F. Crew concludes his analysis of online treatments of the bombing war in Germany since the 1990s with the remark that "numerous websites depend on inflammatory rhetoric, shock images, emotional appeals, and narrow perspectives to focus users’ attention exclusively on German suffering." The “new emphasis on anger and outrage” informs the way these internet sites employ “pictures of desolate ruins and gruesome...
Bernardo Bellotto: Dresden from the Right Bank of the Elbe below the Augustus Bridge (1748)

- Frauenkirche (1743)
- Dresden Cathedral (1753)
Dresden – The Florence on the Elbe
• The City Center of Dresden: the Altmarkt (Old Market Square) on the left; the Neumarkt (New Market Square) with the Frauenkirche on the right
The Allied Bombing Campaign Against Nazi Germany (1940-1945)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Air Raids</th>
<th>People Killed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cologne</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>20,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essen</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>7,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Munich</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>6,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leipzig</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dresden</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Operation Gomorrah – The Bombing of Hamburg (July 24- August 3, 1943)

The incendiary bombs dropped on Hamburg created a firestorm.

The multiple air raids killed between 35,000 to 40,000 people.

Prisoners from the concentration camp Neuengamme clearing out the dead from the bombed-out city.
The Bombing of Dresden (February 13-15, 1945)

- In four raids between 13 and 15 February 1945, 772 heavy bombers of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and 527 of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) dropped more than 3,900 tons of high-explosive bombs and incendiary devices on the city.

- The bombing and the resulting firestorm destroyed more than 1,600 acres of the city center.

- Based on the 2010 report published by the Dresden Historical Committee, 25,000 people were killed during the raids.
Dresden – The “Virgin Target”

- lack of antiaircraft guns
- lack of concrete-reinforced shelters
- no strategic importance
- Nazi Germany was at the brink of defeat
- the aged, women, and children were “deliberately” targeted on the open spaces of the Dresden city park and the Elbe river
The Dresden Firebombing: “the greatest massacre of European history”

Kurt Vonnegut
American Writer and Eyewitness of the Dresden Bombing
(1922-2007)
Terror Attacks against Innocent Civilians: The Propaganda Response to the Dresden Bombings in the National Socialist Press
The Photographic Documentation of the Altmark Mass Cremations

- The Dresden Photographer Walter Hahn received permission from the Reich Propaganda Ministry of Saxony to document the Altmark Mass Cremations on February 25, 1945
Richard Peter: Dresden – eine Kamera klagt an Dresden – A Camera Accuses (1949)
The Commemoration of the Dresden Bombings in the East German Newspaper Neues Deutschland (New Germany, February 13, 1949)

“The criminal warmongers of the Anglo-Saxon nations” are perpetuating the barbarism unleashed by fascist Germany

“The Gestapo let the stacks of bodies burn on Dresden’s Altmarkt”
Who were the uniformed people that collected and burned the dead?
The Men from the SS Training Camp at Trawniki in the Lublin District of Occupied Poland

• Starting in Autumn 1942, the SS Captain Karl Streibel oversaw the conscription of Ukrainian men to be trained as auxiliary police guards at the Trawniki training camp.

• The Trawniki men provided the guard units for the Operation Reinhard killing centers at Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka II.

• In all three killing centers, the corpses of the murdered Jews were cremated on “roasters” constructed from railroad tracks.

• Fleeing from the advancing Soviet army, remnants of the Streibel Squad (up to 500-600 Trawniki men) arrived in Dresden on February 14, 1945.
The Trawniki-trained personnel participated not only in Operation Reinhard (the genocide of European Jews) but also in the “restoration service” following the Dresden firebombing: The same cremation procedure used in the killing centers in occupied Poland was used for the corpse disposal on Dresden’s Old Market Square.
Later, our vague feelings of shared guilt prevented anyone, including the writers whose task it was to keep the nation’s collective memory, alive, from being permitted to remind us of such humiliating images as the incident in the Altmarkt in Dresden, where 6,865 corpses were burned on pyres in February 25 by an SS detachment which had gained its experience at Treblinka” (W.G. Sebald, On the Natural History of Destruction (1999), p. 97-98).
Memorial to the Cremation of the Bodies after the Dresden Bombing on February 13-14, 1945 (dedicated on February 13, 2009)
“On the morning of 13 February 1945 the order came to evacuate the last remaining bearers of the star in Dresden. Spared deportation up until this point because they were living in mixed marriages, they now faced certain death; they would have done away with en route because Auschwitz had long since fallen into enemy hands and Theresienstadt was in grave danger.

On the evening of 13 February the catastrophe overtook Dresden: the bombs fell, the houses crumbled, the phosphorous poured down, the burning timbers fell on Aryan and non-Aryan heads alike, and one and the same firestorm drove Jews and Christians to their death; for any of the seventy or so remaining bearers of the star who survived this night, however, it meant salvation, because they were able to evade the Gestapo in the general chaos” (Victor Klemperer, The Language of the Third Reich, 267).
The Rebuilt City Center of Dresden Today

Thank you!