Introduction: German historians and the Allied bombings

The Allied strategic bombing campaign against Germany has often been described as a “German catastrophe”. Considering the devastating effects of the Allied bombings on the lives of the German population, the popularity of this categorization seems hardly surprising. For many Germans who endured such air attacks the impact was indeed catastrophic. With approximately 380,000 civilian victims, the “Luftkrieg” or “Bomkenkrieg” as it became known in Germany was one of the most direct horrors of war with which Germans were confronted in their own country.\(^1\) The attacks brought loss, suffering and trauma for those who experienced the long nights in the air shelters, who lost friends, families and homes and who witnessed the horrific images of mass death and burning cities. In addition to the mass expulsions from parts of Eastern Europe, especially Silesia, Sudetenland and Eastern Prussia, and the large-scale rape of German women by Soviet soldiers, the area bombing of German cities brought the atrocities of total warfare to the German “home front”, leaving a lasting impression.

Especially since the late 1990s not only the air war itself but also the question of whether the German victims of the air war had been commemorated in

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an appropriate way has become subject of an extensive discussion. Locating the place of the air war in German collective memory has been the topic of academic publications, commemoration ceremonies, press articles, and TV documentaries. The increased interest in the air war followed the publication of two controversial books. In 1999 German writer and literary critic W.G. Sebald stated in his essay *Luftkrieg und Literatur* that there was a complete “lack of memory” about the air war in Germany. According to Sebald, the memory of the horrors of the air war had become a “taboo” because Germans had been primarily concerned with the restoration of their destroyed land and reputation. Therefore they did not confront the deep trauma of the bombing-experience that had had such a devastating impact. The air war, in Sebald’s words, “hardly left a painful trace in German collective consciousness” and was ignored by literary writers as well as by historians.² Three years later Jörg Friedrich’s *Der Brand* (2002) attempted to fill this gap in German collective memory, with a vivid description of Germans suffering under the Allied bombings. The strong public response to his book and the discussion it provoked seemed to confirm Sebald’s conviction that until this moment the air war had been subject to a generally accepted public taboo.³ In the following years, in all sections of the German press and media, from popular historical books to television series, two related questions were passionately discussed. While the moral implications and effectiveness of the Allied air war were debated, the question “whether or not the Germans should regard themselves as victims” became a central issue.⁴ This debate coincided with an increased interest in other forms

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⁴ Especially see: Lothar Kettenacker, ed. *Ein Volk von Opfern. Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (Berlin: 2003) and the special issue of German magazine *Der Spiegel* later printed as a volume: Stephan Burgdorff and Wolfgang Bayer, eds., *Als Feuer vom Him-
of “German suffering” like the mass rape of German women by Russian soldiers and the mass expulsions.⁵

Reflecting on this increased public interest in German suffering, academic studies have sought an explanation for this apparent shift in German historical culture.⁶ To put this shift into perspective scholars started to search for longer continuities in the way the expulsion and the air war had been remembered, commemorated and interpreted. In his groundbreaking study, Robert Moeller pointed out the strong emphasis on German suffering in the Federal Republic during the 1950s.⁷ In reaction to Sebald, literary scholars have analyzed the different ways in which German writers had dealt with this traumatic experience.⁸ Also, different studies have stressed the political exploitation of the bombing of Dresden in East German propaganda.⁹ More recently, the locally focused research by Jörg Arnold,

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Malte Thiessen and Neil Gregor has shown that also in West Germany, the Allied bombing experience became a central reference point for local memory cultures. These researchers look into urban “memory cultures” of the air war as a complex interplay between different actors, who publicly represent different versions of the past in a variety of forms. In the light of the great number of contributions to the study of German memory of the air war it is striking, how little attention has been given to the study of historiography. The study of local memory cultures by Thiessen and Arnold has shown that local historiography played an important role in a broader discourse on how the local past was to be remembered and interpreted. Local historians did not only provide factual knowledge about the history of the bombings of cities like Kassel or Hamburg, but often confirmed urban myths and actively connected the history of the bombings to local identity issues. While these local studies indicate that historians of the Allied bombings were heavily involved in a broader discourse on the past, the interplay between historical research and a broader public memory of the bombings has only become subject of serious study in local contexts. Consequently, general historical accounts on the Allied bombings have largely been neglected as a subject of research. But more importantly, since most local histories have been written by amateur historians, the role of


professional academic historiography has largely been left out of this discussion.

This is a remarkable lacuna compared to the historiography of the German expulsions. Robert Moeller and Matthias Beer have shown for the 1950s, how historical research on the expulsions was influenced by identity politics and a broader public debate on history.\(^{13}\) By contrast, studies on the reception of the Allied bombings have mainly focused on the recent public debate, on literary works and local memory cultures. The German historiography of the air war has been part of this discussion only indirectly and has led to different assumptions.

Regarding the German historiography of the Allied bombings two contradictory conclusions have been drawn. In the first place, the historiography of the air war, or the apparent lack of German historical accounts on the air war was discussed in the context of Sebald’s taboo theory. Sebald stated that the German “guild of historians” had, with the exception of some earlier work by Jörg Friedrich “failed to produce a comprehensive or even a basic study” of the Allied bombings. This lacuna in German historiography, according to Sebald, was a central element of the “scandalous deficit” in German memory regarding the air war.\(^{14}\)


\(^{14}\) Sebald, Luftkrieg und Literatur 76.
On the other hand, various critics have refuted Sebald’s taboo-thesis and indicated the existence of a longer tradition of German historical accounts. Moreover, many contributions to the recent debate conclude that since the 1990s academic historians have approached the Allied bombings in a radically different manner than popular accounts. For example, Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz both have argued that the recent discourse of German suffering was primarily located in the field of popular memory culture. In their discussion on the recent interest in German suffering, Berger and Lorenz make a strong distinction between the popular debate and a historical guild, which had largely freed itself from the victim-centered discourse of the 1950s. According to Berger and Lorenz, the recent focus on German victimhood is a discourse that was carried by non-academic publicists like Jörg Friedrich and not by professional historians, who were “not concerned with somehow offsetting German suffering against German guilt”.

With this, Berger and Lorenz have suggested two things. First, they imply that until recently German historians have addressed German suffering mainly to “balance” German guilt. In his general analysis of the relation of German historians to the Nazi past, Lorenz argues that before 1990 the German historians’ position towards the history of Nazism can be best understood as a tense interrelationship between the way they have dealt with the “German catastrophe” as a tragic history of German downfall and suffering, and with the “Jewish catastrophe” as the history of Jewish suffering and German guilt. Following the conclusions drawn

by Nicholas Berg in *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker* (2003), Lorenz argued that German historians, while accepting “German guilt” and the Holocaust as important symbolic reference points, before 1990 largely ignored the Nazi genocide as a subject of study.\(^{17}\) He also indicates a strong tradition among German historians to “repress” German responsibility for the Holocaust. By distinguishing the Germans collectively from Hitler and a small group of criminal perpetrators, and by balancing the suffering of Jews against the suffering of Germans, both groups were portrayed as equal victims of the Second World War. In this way, discussing German suffering was always under the surface interrelated with the discourse on the Holocaust, either as a form of ignoring the German crimes or as a means to settle scores between what the Germans had done and what they had suffered.\(^{18}\)

Lorenz’ and Berger’s second suggestion is that in recent academic German historiography the air war was approached in a different way and that academic historians dealing with the expulsions or the air war no longer tried to balance German guilt against German victimhood. With this they suggest a paradigmatic turning point in 1990, and a clear difference between recent “popular” works like Friedrich’s *Der Brand* and current academic historical research. Their second conclusion, moreover, does not only indicate a shift in German historiography, but addresses the relationship between popular and academic accounts and the tension between memory culture and historiography since 1990.

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\(^{18}\) Lorenz, “Twee soorten catastrofe” 175-207. E.g. the remarks on this relationship by Aleida Assmann, who argues that the discourses on German guilt and German suffering largely exclude each other. It is from this conclusion that she has explained that themes like the Allied bombings for a long time could not form a coherent and commonly accepted narrative: Assmann, *Der lange Schatten* 184, 185, 199-204; Aleida Assmann, “On the (In) Compatibility of Guilt and Suffering in German Memory,” *German life and letters* 59, no. 2 (2006) 187-200.
What is missing in the few accounts that have addressed the German historiography of the Allied bombings, is a more detailed analysis of these German accounts, and of the question to what extent both before and after 1990, these accounts reflected a narrative of German suffering. While authors such as Lorenz and Berger have given only a very general impression of earlier works and concentrate on recent developments, I will take their assumptions as a starting point for an examination of the German historiography of the Allied bombings since 1945. I will explore to what degree these German historical accounts were concerned with balancing the suffering of Germans under the Allied bombings with the suffering of the victims of Nazism, and whether the history of the air war formed a “counter-narrative” against the idea that the Germans as a collective were guilty of the Nazi crimes.

After first pointing out which interpretations of the Allied bombings became dominant in the early GDR and Federal Republic I will analyze the process of “professionalization” of this German historiography since the 1970s. Under what circumstances did German academic historians begin to study the Allied bombings and to what extent did their work relate to pre-existing “popular” interpretations? The recent developments characterized by Berger and Lorenz can be analyzed from the perspective of a longer existing relationship between academic historiography, popular accounts and public debates on memory. This also opens a new view on their conclusion that after 1990 a German victim’s perspective no longer dominated German academic historiography of the Allied bombings. Did German historians gradually extract themselves from popular myths and develop a more distanced perspective? And to what degree was such a victim-centered perspective contested and replaced by alternative interpretations?
A German historiography on the air war: considerations on approach and methods

In this book I look for patterns in the way German historiography explained, interpreted and narrated the Allied bombings, and locate the conditions under which certain interpretations and narratives became dominant. This approach exceeds traditional historiography in the sense that it does not focus on monographs by academic historians alone. It regards historiography as a part of a wider discourse, in which different groups and actors take part. Also, it is interested in the degree to which general debates over identity memory and coming to terms with the Nazi past in Germany influenced the representations of the Second World War in the works of German historians.19

This means that I will also look beyond the historical works, and look into other levels at which this discourse took place. My analysis will therefore include correspondence, lectures, reviews, press articles and interviews with historians and an examination of their personal, political and institutional backgrounds. In the case of East German historians it will also include reports written for the Stasi, which sometimes directly reflected the political significance of historical disputes. Both published and unpublished texts will be used to analyze the way German historians provided the history of the air war with contemporary meaning.

Also, such an approach to historiography includes the work of non-academic historians and acknowledges that amateurs took part in the same historical discourse as professionals. When regarding the historiography of the air war, it becomes clear that this was the work not only of professionally trained and academically based historians but also of “laymen”. As especially Götz Bergander’s Dresden im Luftkrieg (1977) and Jörg Friedrich’s Der Brand (2002) illustrate, many

19 Berg, Der Holocaust 7-46.
German studies were written by historians who did not hold academic positions, but who nevertheless strongly influenced and interacted with the work of academic historians. Moreover, by discussing non-academic historians like Bergander and Friedrich, the often suggested difference between academic and non-academic approaches can be re-examined.

In my approach to the ways German historians have interpreted the Allied bombings, I also discuss the interrelationship between “memory” and “history”. On the one hand, history and memory can be regarded as distinct ways of approaching the past. While history is engaged in establishing facts and looks for causal relations between different events and for motives, memory focuses on experiences and furnishes these with meaning for the present. While memory is centered on a continuity and connection between the past and the present, history emphasizes the distance between past and present and treats the past as something that can be established in its own right. On the other hand, while such a distinction is useful to understand different ways of approaching the past, it is also important to recognize that these two levels interact with each other. As Ann Rigney has pointed out, the historical discourse necessarily “represents past events at the same time as it considers them retrospectively from a particular distance and reveals their significance for a later public”. Historians therefore are always not only engaged in “establishing facts” but also ascribe meaning to the past retrospectively. Their perspectives and interests are influenced by their political back-

20 Götz Bergander, Dresden im Luftkrieg (Köln: 1977); Friedrich, Der Brand. Both Bergander and Friedrich operate as freelance historians and journalists.
grounds and “horizon of values”.22

The present study does not treat this historiography as a linear process of historical research which gradually develops a higher degree of historical knowledge and insight but poses the question, to what extent is the representation of history also influenced by a memory-discourse, which looks for meaning of the past in the present? It intends to show how the effort to reconstruct the past was influenced by a consideration of what aspects of the past should be remembered and in what ways this past was thought to be meaningful for the present. How did these historians integrate their views on current political and identity-related issues into their historical works on the Allied bombings? Moreover, the question will be asked, to what degree were academic historians more concerned with “history” and amateurs primarily focused on “memory”? Did academic historians gradually reflect a growing distance to the debates over memory?

In my analysis of this historiography I will look into the explicit historical and moral arguments made in these works. Analyzing the way German accounts have explained the Allied bombings also means asking how they have judged the air war morally. The Allied bombings were a highly controversial form of warfare in which many civilians were killed and even during the war they inspired considerable controversy over their morality and legitimacy. Consequently, the question of their moral and legal status has never been absent from the way they have been historically explained and contextualized. On the contrary, the morality of the strategic and political considerations of the Allied leaders has been a central trope in

this historiography. I will therefore also look into the question of how these historical works judged the morality of the Allied bombings. To what extent was there a general consensus that the Allied bombings were illegitimate and immoral and which arguments and narrative structures supported this point?

Parallel to the explicit moral and historical argumentations in these accounts I will analyze their narrative structure. First, I will examine the role of the different “historical actors”. In the history of the air war, the way central actors, such as the British Chief of Bomber Command Arthur Harris, or the often collectively appearing “German people” were portrayed, form a central element of the interpretations and the moral implications transmitted in these histories. The degree to which such actors were morally denounced or exonerated highly influenced the broader narrative of the Allied bombings.

Secondly, though almost all historical texts follow a chronologic order, the question of where a story begins and where it ends has strong effects on the interpretation of history. In the case of the air war, the temporal dimension seems to be a very relevant factor, which is closely connected to the question of causality. Where were the roots of the history of the air war located? Can they be found in the development of military thought in England and America, the nations that

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23 On the analysis of historiography as narratives: Hayden White, *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: 1973). More recently historians like Konrad Jarausch, Michael Geyer, Krijn Thijs and Jan Eckel, though not fully subscribing Haydn White’s theoretical conclusions have attempted to define a set of criteria by which specific German discourses on the past can be analyzed. The following criteria are to an important degree based on their work. While this study, as will be argued below, does not fully adopt such a narratological approach, it does accept their premise that historical accounts can also be seen as narratives and that their narrative stucture is an important element of their construction of the past in historical texts on history. Jan Eckel, “Der Sinn der Erzählung. Die narratologische Diskussion in der Geschichtswissenschaft und das Beispiel der Weimargeschichtsschreibung,” in *Neue Zugänge zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. Jan Eckel and Thomas Etzemüller (Göttingen: 2007) 201-229; Rigney, *Rhetoric of historical representation* ; Krijn Thijs, *Drei Geschichten, eine Stadt. Die Berliner Stadtjubiläen 1937 und 1987* (Köln: 2008) 286-291. Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered past. Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, N.J.: 2003).
were ultimately to execute the massive city bombing of German cities? Or did the Second World War, starting with the German air attacks on cities in Poland, England and the Netherlands, form the beginning of this history?

Thirdly, I will look into the context within which the air war is historically explained. To what extent was the history of the air war related to and contextualized in a broader history of the Second World War? Were the allied bombings seen in a context of German aggression and the crimes committed under the Third Reich? To look more deeply into this problem, I will also analyze the different ways in which German historians in East and West dealt or failed to deal with this broader history of the Second World War. What were the effects for the narrative when specific historical backgrounds of the Second World War were not mentioned? And to what extent did German historians look for “alternative contexts”, like the military history of England and America, to replace the German war aggression as the primary historical framework, from which the massive bombing of German cities could be explained?

In the fourth place, I will specifically examine the functioning of historical comparisons in these accounts. Historical comparisons with other bombings, war crimes and catastrophes have played an important role in applying a broader meaning to the Allied bombings. Such comparisons determine to a significant degree the way the Allied bombings are contextualized both morally and historically. The way the Allied air raids were compared with the German bombings on cities like Rotterdam and Warsaw relates to the question of guilt and responsibility. Also, parallels between the “conventional” attacks on German cities and the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, related the air war against Germany indirectly to the postwar threat of a future nuclear war between the
USA and the Soviet Union. But comparisons could also be made with bombings in current conflicts, for example with the war in Vietnam during the 1960s or more recently with the war in Iraq in 2003, which could apply a contemporary political significance to the British and American bombings of German cities. But comparisons with the Holocaust in particular became a sensitive issue that related the air war to the ultimate symbol of German perpetratorship. I will analyze the degree to which German historians at different moments and from different political perspectives suggested moral and historical parallels between the bombings and the Holocaust, and the aims of such a comparison.

_The Allied bombings and the “master narratives” of German national history_

To be able to locate the extent to which these accounts were influenced by identity issues, this analysis also looks at the way the bombings were integrated into different overarching _master narratives_ of German history. Since the end of the 1990s the term master narrative has often been used to illustrate the interplay of competing versions of German national history, mainly referring to the relationship between historical perspectives and political legitimacy. In particular, the work of Konrad Jarausch, Martin Sabrow and Michael Geyer has shown that German historical culture can be regarded as a discursive field in which various overarching narratives on German history compete with one another.24 In several volumes on German historical culture Jarausch and Sabrow have applied the terms

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24 This does not mean that a master narrative only refers to a _national_ history. Other categories such as class, gender and regional or supra-national territorial spaces can also form the basis of a master narrative. However, the nation as the dominant political entity often serves as the most important starting point for a master narrative. For an analysis of the alternatives to national historical identity see: Chris Lorenz, “Representations of identity: ethnicity, race, class, gender and religion. An introduction to conceptual history,” in _The contested nation. Ethnicity, class, religion and gender in national histories_, ed. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, _Writing the nation series_ (Basingstoke: 2008) 24-59.
master narrative and counter-narrative to illuminate general trends in German historical culture and to define the relationship between academic historiography and popular memory culture. Sabrow and Jarausch see master narratives as coherent versions of the past, with a clearly defined perspective, which do not only serve as a starting point for professional historians but are also accepted as a dominant interpretation in the public sphere. In *Shattered Past* Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer more comprehensively locate different competing narratives of German history. Their study shows that there are different competing versions of the German past and different “counter-narratives” which actively challenged dominant interpretations.

In their efforts to define a set of elements which are at play in the formation of such master narratives, Jarausch, Geyer and Sabrow look for the different discursive and narrative patterns from which a meaningful story is constructed. On the other hand, in studying the *dominance* of certain narratives, Sabrow and Jarausch not only concentrate on the narrative structures but also on the political function and social power of a specific version of the past. As they rightly point out, it is only through materialization, institutionalization and the conveying through symbols and media that a version of the past gains social and political influence. Dominant perspectives therefore also become part of official “memory politics”, in which a certain version of the past is connected to current political issues and utilized by political elites for the purpose of identity construction in the present.


26 Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered past*.

they point out, interpretations always have to compete with other versions, and need to be defended and propagated against other narratives. Even though master narratives are defined by their dominance over other versions, often referred to as counter-narratives, they rarely have a monopoly over the past.\textsuperscript{28}

This means that there is always an interrelationship between different and competing versions of the national past, seeking dominance over earlier or other existing versions. In the case of the divided postwar German states, this also means that a narrative of German history had to deal with the postwar political reality in which the German nation was divided into two new German states with two competing political systems. Due to the political division and the discrediting of German nationalism after the war and the Holocaust, East and West German perspectives on the national past not only had a problematic relationship towards earlier historiography that had dominated German historical culture before 1945. It also meant that now two ideologically competing states defined their master narratives in opposition to each other, each claiming to be the “better” Germany.\textsuperscript{29} But also within East and West Germany a monopoly over the past was never fully reached, and in different degrees master narratives were always contested by counter-narratives, challenging dominant perspectives.

However, as Krijn Thijs has argued, master narratives do not only function as concrete versions of a grand national history. According to Thijs, they can be regarded as dominant frames or models, which manifest themselves not only in general historical overviews but also in smaller histories. Historical narratives deal-

\textsuperscript{28} Jarausch and Sabrow, “Meistererzählung” 21.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. For a comparative approach to the construction of postwar identity in relation to the national past in East and West Germany see: Mary Fulbrook, \textit{German National Identity after the Holocaust} (Malden: 1999); Jeffrey Herf, \textit{Divided memory: the Nazi past in the two Germanys} (Cambridge MA: 1997).
ing with specific themes and subjects within German history can be seen as case studies in which broader frames of (national) history are represented. The discursive dominance of master narratives manifest themselves not only in historical overviews of national histories but also in historical accounts on specific themes, in the sense that these “smaller” histories confirm or contest dominant versions of the national past. This book therefore intends not only to identify different competing historical perspectives on the Allied bombings, but also to examine them in relation to different master narratives or counter-narratives of German history. For this I will look into the competition between East and West German interpretations, but also analyze to what extent discussions on the air war within the Federal Republic, the GDR and post-unification Germany reflected the more general internal disputes on German historical identity, which to a strong degree dominated German public debate.

In analyzing and comparing historical accounts from Federal Republic, the GDR, and reunified Germany, I first ask, to what extent did historical accounts in the two German states share a specific perspective? To what degree can we locate distinct patterns in the ways in which East and West German historical accounts explained and described the history of the strategic bombing against Germany? Did East and West German historians argue over this specific topic and to what extent can these arguments tell us something about the way the history of the air war was provided with meaning for the present? While trying to locate the different perspectives on the Allied bombings I will also look for continuities. While

seen from the perspective of these historians the conflicts and debates may have seemed insurmountable, it is interesting to see what parallels can be found in East and West German interpretations. Similarly, in my analysis of the recent historiography in the reunified Germany, I will ask, whether in the latest debate on the bombings continuities of earlier East and West German interpretations can also be found. To what extent were competing narratives of the Allied bombings based on essentially different interpretations of the Allied bombings? Was there, in spite of all the fierce debates, a basic coherent model from which German historians have explained, narrated and valued the history of the Allied bombings as a narrative of German victimhood? And if so, what was the function of this narrative in relation to the way the three postwar German states have tried to “come to terms” with the Nazi past?

In this way the general assumptions made in the recent discussion by authors such as Lorenz and Berger this way can be re-examined. The present book provides a structural approach to examining the degree to which these German accounts indeed formed a narrative of German victimhood before 1990 and whether academic historiography since the 1990s has abandoned such a perspective. But more importantly, it aims to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of these narratives. It shows how discussions on historical backgrounds of bombing became intertwined with moral judgments and at the same time reflected central identity issues of postwar Germany.

The first chapter deals with the early popular historical accounts in the Federal Republic and analyzes how the Allied bombings were related to a broader discussion of German guilt. The second chapter concentrates on East-West debates on the bombing of Dresden during the Cold War, and explores how authors from
the GDR and the Federal Republic perceived the bombing of Dresden from the perspective of the Cold War conflict. The third chapter concentrates on the professionalization of the East and West German historiography of the Allied bombings since the 1970s. Taking the fierce debate between West German historian Horst Boog and East German historian Olaf Groehler as a starting point, this chapter looks at continuities of earlier narratives in professional military historiography and the interrelation between popular and academic accounts. In the final chapter I analyze the recent work of Jörg Friedrich and its impact on German memory culture and historiography. Here, I also explore the recent attempts of historians to break with earlier narratives and integrate the bombings into a history of Nazism in a different way.