A German catastrophe? German historians and the Allied bombings, 1945-2010
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Introduction

As the popularity in the Federal Republic of the accounts by Axel Rodenberger and David Irving illustrates, the attack on Dresden on 13, 14 and 15 February 1945 became the ultimate symbol for the Allied bombings. It was generally regarded to be the most destructive and most senseless raid of the Second World War, after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The special status of Dresden was nurtured with particular care in the GDR. Here Dresden became a historical symbol that could be integrated into the antifascist self-image of the East German state. During the 1950s and ’60s, public commemorations of the “Anglo-American” attack became important events, in which the antifascist identity of the GDR was reinforced and completed with a virulent anti-Western message. With Dresden as their main symbol, the Allied bombings were a central element of East German memory culture.202

East German historical accounts of the Allied bombings, unlike those that appeared in the Federal Republic, focused on Dresden. Dresden became the only city whose bombing was centrally commemorated, and it also clearly dominated

East German historiography on the Allied bombings. Earlier East German accounts focused exclusively on Dresden and general military-historical studies on the air war did not appear until the 1970s with the academic work of Olaf Groehler. Like the historical accounts in the Federal Republic, East German historiography was written primarily by non-academic historians. The authors often were politicians, who had political interest in a specific interpretation of the Allied bombings and in the appropriation of Dresden as an anti-Western political symbol. Politicians and authors who represented official SED-politics were responsible for the historical accounts of the bombing of Dresden. They reproduced minor variations of a politically centralized perspective that remained more or less stable until the end of the GDR. Their accounts contributed greatly to the establishment of Dresden as a central issue of Cold War propaganda.

This chapter will analyze the way Dresden came to function as a Cold War icon, and how this status became apparent in the way the attack was historically
interpreted in East Germany. For this I will first look at the dominant patterns of interpretation in these East German accounts and their role in the official memory politics of the GDR. What historical causes and backgrounds were thought to be of importance in the air war strategy and practice of the Western Allies? To what extent did East German accounts ascribe certain political and moral meanings to this history and to what extent did alternative interpretations develop parallel to the central memory politics of the SED?

In the second part of this chapter, I will examine the interaction between East German interpretations and Western accounts and analyze how these disputes were connected to ideological differences. The previous chapter has shown that in the Federal Republic the search for positive traditions in German history and the debate over German guilt played a central role in the historical accounts of the Allied bombings. It is nevertheless clear that, particularly in the case of accounts dealing with the bombing of Dresden, West German works implicitly or explicitly reacted to and interacted with GDR interpretations. And similarly, East German accounts polemically reflected on West German interpretations.

Two central issues sparked debates between historians from East and West: the assumed anti-Soviet motives behind the attack on Dresden and disputes over the death toll produced by the attack. On these issues, I will look at arguments between East German authors and historians from the Federal Republic, but also explore the role of David Irving. The work of this British researcher was not only important in the West German debate, but also had considerable impact in the East. In the reception of his work in the GDR, moreover, the two central issues in the debate between East and West, the discussion over the number of dead and the role of the Soviet Union, crystallized.
However, the question is, whether, in spite of the disputes over these issues, the East and West German narrative on Dresden and the Allied bombings did not still have a great deal in common. The final part of this chapter will therefore look for the parallels in East and West German narratives, both on the level of interpretation as well as on the level of political meaning. To what extent did accounts from East and West share basic narrative patterns and interpretations in explaining the bombing of Dresden? Did these parallels also lead to overlaps in the way the attack functioned in the identity politics of the time? Did the air war in the GDR also function as a “counterargument” against German guilt? And did anti-Western rhetoric also find reflection in West German accounts?

2.1. East German historical accounts of the attack on Dresden

Dresden and the emergence of the antifascist myth in the GDR

The official GDR commemoration of Dresden paralleled, to a great degree, developments in the Cold War and reflected important changes in the international political position of the GDR. During the first postwar years, 1945-1949, the official attitude towards the attack reflected the Communist struggle to monopolize power within the Soviet Zone of Occupation (SBZ). During these immediate postwar years the Soviet Military Administration (SMA) enforced denazification-policies to eliminate Nazi influences in the German administration, economy and society in general. While the effectiveness of these policies is subject to ongoing debate, it is clear that the SMA, with the support of the KPD, used the notion of “antifascism”

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to try to impose a new political identity.\textsuperscript{206} The concept of antifascism was used as a demarcation line that separated the SBZ from the recent Nazi past and symbolized a new beginning. Because the Communist notion of fascism encompassed a clear similarity between National Socialism and Western capitalism, antifascism could be used as a “founding myth” for a new socialist German state. Moreover, denazification policies were used not only to remove former Nazis from German society and administration but also to secure the power-position of the Communist Party in the SBZ and to eliminate political opponents.\textsuperscript{207}

During the first years of Soviet occupation, questions of guilt and responsibility for the Second World War were ascribed to the Third Reich. The Allied bombings, together with Germany’s territorial losses and its division into different zones of occupation were presented as the sole responsibility of Nazi Germany itself, as the internal and international interests of the Soviet occupational forces and the KPD dictated against expressing criticism of the Allied war methods. Clear accusations of war crimes directed at the Western Allies were considered to threaten the stability of Soviet rule. In addition, the resentment of formerly persecuted Communists and a general Soviet interest in clearing administration and society of Nazi influences motivated the SMA and the Communist Party to hold “German fascism” responsible for all the suffering the war had brought about.\textsuperscript{208}

This included the bombing of Dresden. In January 1946 Major Broder of the propaganda department of the SMA corresponded with the city administration in Dresden over the commemoration of 13 February 1945. The Soviet authorities recognized the political potential of the Dresden bombing and feared that commemoration ceremonies would possibly generate resentment towards the Western Allies, which the Soviets at this time did not yet want to foster. Public ceremonies marking the bombing were to be limited to local events and the responsibility of fascist Germany was to be stressed. Most of the commemoration speeches and published articles during the first postwar years were reluctant in their accusations of the Western Allies and emphasized the responsibility of the Nazi regime for the destruction of the city.²⁰⁹

One of the arguments used to underline the fascist “guilt” for Dresden was the conclusion that the authorities of the NSDAP had insufficiently provided Dresden’s citizens with air protection. As early as June 1945 the *Tageszeitung für die deutsche Bevölkerung* published a transcript of the interrogation of Dresden’s Gau-leiter Martin Mutschmann. During his questioning Mutschmann was explicitly accused of having neglected the protection of Dresden’s population against the air attacks. Therefore he was “accessory to” Dresden’s “Catastrophe”.²¹⁰ Another argument through which responsibility was ascribed to the Nazi rule saw the attack on Dresden as a direct result of the war that had been started by Hitler’s Germany. In an article in the *Sächsische Volkszeitung* on 13 February 1946, Dresden’s first post-

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war mayor Walter Weidauer claimed that the destruction of Dresden had been “deliberately provoked by the fascist criminals”. Weidauer held the “bandits” of the Third Reich responsible for prolonging a war that had already been lost. According to Weidauer, the fascists, and in a broader sense the Germans in general had not only the concentration camps on their conscience, but also Dresden.²¹¹

For the most part the role of the American and British air forces during the Dresden bombing was not mentioned directly in speeches and articles, although sometimes indirect references to their questionable role were made. Communist leaders in Dresden were aware of the anti-Western potential of a perspective which portrayed the Dresden raid as an unfounded terror-attack. An implicit accusation was hidden in the frequently repeated notion that the Soviet Army had never attacked an “open city” like Dresden.²¹² But explicit accusations were not yet part of the official speeches. Also the gruesome details and the many deaths the bombing had caused went largely unmentioned.²¹³

_Wiederaufbau_ was an important theme in commemoration speeches and in press articles and editorials during the first postwar years. The need for rebuilding the destroyed city and for support for the SED’s reconstruction plans made this topic partly a practical question. On an ideological level the focus on reconstruc-

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²¹³ Likewise, two documentary films on Dresden produced by the DEFA in 1946 followed the same pattern in which Hitler’s Germany was held responsible and the need for an “antifascist” reconstruction was propagated. Neutzner, “Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern” 135-137 and Poutrus, “Bomben auf Elbflorenz” 147-148.
tion also fitted in with a positive notion of the emergence of a new “antifascist” Germany. It marked a clear distance from the war and provided a forward-looking perspective. By rebuilding the city that had been destroyed by fascism, the Wieder-aufbau itself was presented as an “act of antifascism” and a resolute farewell to East Germany’s fascist past.

As recent studies on the socialist reconstruction plans have remarked, the architectural concepts underlying these plans were somewhat confused. On the one hand, the rubble of Dresden and other cities enabled the new regime to impose its ideals of a “socialist” city. The new regulations and nationalization of property provided the regime with a monopolized situation in which they could realize their plans. As a consequence, many artistically unique buildings that were only partly damaged were demolished to make place for the new designs. On the other hand, however, the reconstruction of Dresden focused on restoring its former architectural style of baroque and 19th-century neo-baroque. The “socialist” concept of an ideal city and a modern and industrialized city reconstruction were in conflict with the ideal that in Dresden the old and unique beauty was to be restored. By the second half of the 1950s the policy of the restoration of Dresden’s historical and architectural highlights had been abandoned for a more “socialist” and future-oriented reconstruction. The Frauenkriche was left in ruins, although plans for its reconstruction initially had been made.


In the late 1940s an important shift took place in East German memory politics. The SED had successfully achieved a strong position of power and as a result the politics of Entnazifizierung lost their former urgency.216 With many former NSDAP functionaries still imprisoned in Speziallager or fired from their jobs, denazification seemed to have been successfully accomplished. The need for a focus on the immediate past had vanished and the denazification that had started rigorously was changed into a more pragmatic policy directed at integrating the Eastern Germans -including former NSDAP-party members and others who had been actively involved in the Third Reich - into the new socialist Germany. Also, with the growing international tensions and beginning of the Cold War the need for keeping peace with the Western Allies disappeared.217

From this background the meaning of “antifascism” began to change, especially after the division of Germany became a political reality with the founding of the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic in 1949. The concept of “antifascism” was now increasingly used for anti-Western rhetoric. From now

the “national heritage” of German culture and over which state was the best preserver of national cultural traditions, and who was best in restoring Germany’s destroyed cultural richness. From the Eastern perspective, fidelity to cultural heritage also was suggested to be the main difference between the East and the West. SED politicians regularly implied that the West did not make the same effort as the GDR to rebuild the destroyed cities, because they lacked the antifascist motivation of the socialist state. In a 1952 speech Walter Ulbricht addressed the West German population with an appeal to “take an example to the Nationalen Aufbauwerk in Berlin and to the reconstruction of Dresden” and take the reconstruction into their own hands. Cited in: Friedrich Reichert, “Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte des 13. Februars 1945,” in Verbrannt bis zur Unkenntlichkeit. Die Zerstörung Dresdens 1945. Begleitbuch zur Ausstellung im Stadtmuseum Dresden Februar bis Juni 1995, ed. Stadtmuseum Dresden (Dresden: 1995) 150-161, here: 154.

216 See e.g. Widera, Dresden 420-427.

217 Neutzner, “Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern” 137. In the SBZ, approximately 200,000 former Nazi officials were fired from their positions, 20,000 teachers were disqualified and 30,000 Germans were tried by Soviet and later German tribunals, and over 500 were executed. See Vollnhals, “Entnazifizierung” 383-386 and Andrew John Spencer, Of Literature and Legend. German Writers and the Bombing of Dresden (Dissertation Ohio State University: 1992) 162.
on fascism and Western capitalism would be openly presented as two examples of “imperialism”, a political form that differed fundamentally from “socialism”. As a result, antifascism was seen not so much as a historical concept for coping with Germany’s own fascist past, but more as a political weapon for confronting the new “fascist” and “imperialist” threat.

This shift had strong consequences for the way Soviet and SED propaganda interpreted the outcomes of the Second World War. While during the first postwar years the victory over fascist Germany had been interpreted as a result of the combined efforts of all Allied forces, now the Soviet Union presented itself as the only true conqueror of Germany. The efforts of the Western Allies and especially the Allied air war were portrayed as having been futile compared to the Red Army’s victory on the Eastern Front. While the Soviet Army had fought persistently in an exhausting land war, the outcomes of the British and American air war had been, according to the new perspective, militarily irrelevant.

The view on the Second World War that became dominant in the GDR and other Communist states held that the Red Army had not only disproportionally contributed to the Allied victory against the Third Reich, but had been consciously sabotaged by the Western Allies. Out of fear of Soviet dominance in Europe, England and America had shifted to a policy aimed at the protection of an Anglo-American sphere of influence in Europe at the expense of the Soviet Union. In this process, according to this interpretation, the Western Allies had even cooperated with Hitler and Nazi Germany in the interest of their shared “imperialist” goals.218

218 Wierling, “Krieg im Nachkrieg”.
It was this changed attitude towards the recent past that put the bombing war against German cities and especially Dresden at the center of East German memory politics at the beginning of the 1950s. While the SMA at first had tolerated the commemoration of Dresden rather reluctantly, by the end of the 1940s, Dresden was recognized for its propagandist potential. Using the example of Dresden it was possible to demonstrate that the efforts of the Western Allies had been not only militarily insignificant, but also wicked and morally unjustifiable. The initial reluctance to judge the Allied bombings morally and to discuss the validity of the Western Allies’ methods and strategies gave way to a severe anti-Western propaganda offensive that made Dresden into a central point of reference. Whereas commemoration ceremonies and the first written and visual representations of the bombing up until 1949 had received little attention outside of Dresden, now public remembrance of the bombing of Dresden spread throughout the GDR.219

With this expansion, the interpretation of the event changed dramatically. Where the bombings in the first years had been presented as consequences of failed air protection and the aggression of the Nazi state, now the actual perpetrators of the bombing were identified. This new approach toward the Dresden bombing became apparent in 1948, when an article in the Sächsische Volkszeitung stated for the first time that “Anglo-American airplanes” had dropped their bombs on Dresden. From now on the attack would be portrayed as a senseless act of destruction and as a “crime against humanity” committed by the Western Allies against a nation that had already been defeated.220 In 1949 the announcement of the commemoration activities carried the caption: “13 February 1945 – Dresden

219 Spencer, Of Literature and Legend 88.
accuses”. Although the fascist responsibility for Dresden was still mentioned, now blame was directed at Western Allies because they, like Hitler, had been “willing to murder women and children”.221

With the interpretation of the historical event taking a more aggressive and anti-American character, the scale on which the bombing of Dresden was publicly remembered grew. In 1950 Richard Peter published under the title Dresden – eine Kamera klagt an a bestselling collection of photographs in which pictures of the old Dresden were contrasted with horrific images of ruins and corpses and finally the socialist reconstruction activities.222 In the same year a centrally organized campaign was launched to commemorate the destruction of Dresden on a national level. While previously activities had primarily taken place on a local or regional level, in the 1950 campaign the scale was enlarged.

Various events were organized, press articles were published and new ceremonies were invented to emphasize the significance of the bombing. To pay respect to the catastrophe, in Saxony traffic was brought to a standstill for one minute and in Dresden a march of 100,000 of the city’s citizens was organized at the central event at Karl Marx Platz.223 In the years that followed similar ceremonies were organized and efforts were made to imprint the bombing of Dresden onto the long-term historical consciousness of East Germans. The commemoration was made into an important annual event. Writers Arnold Zweig and Anna Seghers and politicians like Walter Ulbricht and Otto Grotewohl held lectures and up until 200,000 people gathered at the central commemoration ceremony at Karl Marx Platz.

223 Poutrus, “Bomben auf Elbflorenz” 149 and Neutzner, “Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern” 140.
Marx Platz. In 1951 textbooks were ordered to include references to the “Anglo-American terror-attacks” and the DEFA produced several films that reflected the new accusatory and anti-Western perspective.

Dresden and the beginning of the Cold War

It was in the context of the rise of Dresden as a symbol for anti-Western propaganda that the first East German historical accounts that explained the attack were published. During the 1950s and 60’s several articles and books on the attack were published that followed similar patterns of interpretation. While these accounts vary from semi-literary accounts like Max Zimmering’s *Phosphor und Flieder* (1954) to dry historical analyses, they had in common that they directly reflected official memory politics and shared a basic interpretation. According to the East Germans, the actual reason for bombing Dresden had been that the British and Americans wanted to unsettle the future Soviet sphere of influence and at the same time intimidate the Red Army by demonstrating the destructive power of their air forces. This view became the dominant and official interpretation. By bombing Dresden the Allies had not attacked Hitler but Stalin and with this action had initiated the Cold War.

This interpretation had circulated in the Soviet zone since the end of the war and, for example, had been expressed by Victor Klemperer in his diary in April 1947. In the early 1950s various East German authors took the idea as a starting

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224 Neutzner, “Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern” 148-149.
point for a more thorough analysis. An early example of a relatively dispassionate account was the article “Operation Dresden”, published in 1950 by former *Luftwaffe* officer Walter Lehwess-Litzmann in the cultural magazine *Aufbau*. Arguing not so much from political slogans but on the basis of a more distanced historical analysis, Lehwess-Litzmann’s essay can be regarded as one of earliest attempts to work out a Marxist historical perspective on the bombing of Dresden.\(^{227}\) In a relatively nuanced style Lehwess-Litzmann explained the Allied bombings from an East German perspective, while refraining from the decontextualized anti-Americanism of the official propaganda. The author mentioned not only the “terror bombing”, but also the tactical attacks of the Allied air forces, which were supporting the Western Allies’ invasion of Normandy and argued that terror bombings were only a part of the Allied strategy. Also he pointed out that terror bombings had been initiated by Germany, which made the fascist state primarily responsible.

Beyond these nuances, however, he worked out the two explanations that would remain an important starting point for the East German narrative. In his article Lehwess-Litzmann looked for the Western Allies’ central motive for carrying out the bombing of the largely undefended city of Dresden. According to him, the attack on Dresden had not, as the Allies had claimed, been an effort to end the war quickly. The British and Americans, Lehwess-Litzmann argued, knew by 1945 that “moral bombing” and attempts to enforce a revolt against Hitler were not working. Also, he rejected the idea that the British and Americans had wanted to support the Soviet Army’s advance because they had not attacked relevant mili-

\(^{227}\) Also see Elizabeth Corwin’s remarks on this essay: Elizabeth C. Corwin, “The Dresden Bombing as Portrayed in German Accounts, East and West,” *UCLA Historical Journal* 8 (1987) 71-96, here: 76-78.
tary targets in Dresden but the city centre. By bombing the bridges over the Elbe, they had actually slowed the Russians down. Therefore, Lehwess-Litzmann came to the conclusion that the Allied reasons for bombing Dresden had been twofold. They wanted to conclude their work of destruction of Germany, by bombing the last large city that had remained relatively unharmed. More importantly, they had wanted complicate the later reconstruction of what they knew would become the Soviet zone of influence.228

Fascism and imperialism

The idea that Dresden marked the beginning of the Cold War was a vital element in a perspective in which the attack and the Allied strategy were detached from their context of the Second World War. In the light of the virulent anti-Western propaganda of the 1950s, the Allied bombings were, on the one hand, seen as representing continuity and a start of the postwar “aggression” of America and NATO. On the other hand, and in line with the official Communist perspective on the War, the attack on Dresden served to demonstrate the essential similarity between fascism and “Western imperialism”. Dresden was seen as the ultimate proof that the Western Allies had used inhuman methods just like the Nazis. More than in the detached article of Lehwess-Litzmann the continuity of Anglo-American aggression and its similarity with fascism became a main theme in the two most important East German accounts on Dresden that were written during the 1950s and '60’s: Max Seydewitz Zerstörung und Wiederaufbau von Dresden (1955) and Walter Weidauer’s Inferno Dresden (1965).229

229 Max Seydewitz, Zerstörung und Wiederaufbau von Dresden (Berlin: 1955) Seydewitz,
The first lengthy East German historical account on Dresden was written in 1955 by art historian and former minister president of Saxony, Max Seydewitz: *Zerstörung und Wiederaufbau von Dresden*, a year later re-edited as *Die unbesiegbare Stadt*.\(^\text{230}\) The book, based primarily on secondary literature and wild conspiracy theories, had a virulently propagandist tone and strongly denounced the Anglo-Americans and their “inexcusable crime” against the population of Dresden. Following the same arguments as Lehwess-Litzmann, Seydewitz saw the bombing of Dresden in the first place as an attempt to damage the future Soviet zone as badly as possible in order to intimidate and sabotage the Soviet Union.\(^\text{231}\) But more than Lehwess-Litzmann had done, Seydewitz pointed to the parallels between American “imperialist” aggression and fascism. With many horrible details and emotional scenes describing the horrific effects of the attack on innocent civilians and the loss of Dresden’s cultural treasures, Seydewitz depicted the attack as an ultimate act of terror that bore close resemblance to the cynicism of the fascist state.

What is interesting is that, even more than Lehwess-Litzmann, Seydewitz did not exclude the crimes committed under Nazism, but integrated the Holocaust as well as the German bombings into the historical context of the Allied bombing of Dresden. At first instance, therefore, the book seemed to suggest that there was a clear hierarchy of crimes committed during the Second World War and that Germany’s fascist rulers were primarily responsible. This was especially apparent in


\(^{231}\) Seydewitz, *Die unbesiegbare Stadt* 214-215.
the way Seydewitz referred to the Holocaust. Unlike most West German accounts, which had largely excluded the history of Nazi crimes, Seydewitz devoted a chapter to the history of Dresden under Nazi rule. Here Seydewitz addressed not only the persecution of Communists but also Reichskristallnacht which was followed by the gassing and “barbaric mass murder on the Jews, for which there is no comparison in recent history”.\(^{232}\) Also, Seydewitz stressed that it should not be forgotten that it was the German fascist Luftwaffe, which had begun the air war by bombing cities like Guernica, Warsaw and Rotterdam.

However, with these references to the Nazi crimes the author was not implying that Nazi aggression explained or justified the Allied bombing war against Germany. Seydewitz made it clear that there was “no reason for the Anglo-Americans to do the same thing” and that eventually anti-Soviet motives had led the Allies to bomb Dresden.\(^{233}\) Seydewitz’s work was an attempt to integrate both the history of the bombing of Dresden as well as the Holocaust into a narrative of continuous struggle between socialism and imperialism and a view of the Second World War that regarded fascism as an instrument of “monopoly capitalism”. Seydewitz stated that it had been the “monopoly capitalists, Junker, imperialists and military elites”, who had “installed” the Nazi government and suggested that there had been “commercial” reasons for the genocidal killings of the Jews. Moreover, while it seems remarkable that he pointed to the Jews as a distinct victim group, an idea that would increasingly be denied in the “antifascist” ideology of the GDR, Seydewitz made sure to honour the official hierarchy of the victims of fascism. Before committing mass murder on the Jews, Seydewitz stressed, the Nazis had

\(^{232}\) Ibid. 42.  
\(^{233}\) Ibid. 183.

In addition to this emphasis on antifascism, throughout the book Nazis and other imperialists appeared as two interchangeable political entities, which had cooperated during the Holocaust, but also during the attack on Dresden. Seydewitz’s equation of fascism and imperialism culminated in an obscure conspiracy theory, in which the ultimate coordination of the attack on Dresden was seen as the responsibility of one man, who simultaneously represented capitalism and fascism. Seydewitz’s theory focused on Charles Adolf Noble, a German-born American “industrialist” engaged in the photographic processing business and an active Nazi, who had returned to Germany in 1938 and acquired a camera factory in Dresden. For Seydewitz, Noble embodied the entanglement of fascism with American industrial elites.\footnote{See e.g. Poutrus, “Bomben auf Elbflorenz” 154. For more details on the Noble-Myth see: Frederick Taylor, Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945 (London: 2004) 449-454.} He accused Noble of not only playing a fishy role in the acquisition of former Jewish property, but of being largely responsible for the bombing of Dresden. Noble appeared as a double agent working for the Americans as well as for the Nazi government, but in essence serving the interests of big industry.

Deliberately leaking information about Dresden’s unprotected status and the presence of many refugees, Noble apparently had “directed” the Anglo-American attack on Dresden, with the knowing approval of the Nazi authorities. At the end of the story Noble appeared as an evil genius overlooking the bombardment from his safe villa. Seydewitz summarized: “Sure enough, at Shrove Thursday, Mister
Noble waited for the moment when punctually, as had been agreed, the “Christmas trees” appeared. Sure enough Mister Noble stood on the patio of his villa and enjoyed the dreadful theatre of the blazing flames.\footnote{Seydewitz, \textit{Die unbesiegbare Stadt} 254.} In the Noble-conspiracy Seydewitz’s message became clear. The bombing of Dresden was a joint conspiracy of Nazis and American capitalists. Both of them were directed in their actions by big corporations: Ford, Standard Oil, IG Farben and Krupp and the “Gentlemen of Wallstreet”. The reason for bombing Dresden was their mutual anticommunist interest in destroying the future Soviet Zone of Influence. For this cause Dresden had to be erased from the face of the earth, even though there was no military need for the attack, the city was completely defenseless, and the Red Army had already won the war.

\textit{Victims of imperialism}

This political mobilization of “Dresden” in the 1950s, which is so clearly illustrated by Weidauer’s account, apart from being suitable for anti-Western and pro-Soviet propaganda, offered East Germans an integrative myth of collective innocence. Since Nazi crimes and Anglo-American crimes shared close similarity, the status of German victims rose in the hierarchy of suffering. Moreover, Dresden as an act of “imperialist aggression” symbolized not only the continuity of American aggression, but also the continuity of German victimhood. The air war was presented as a historical catastrophe and imperialist crime for which the German population bore no responsibility whatsoever. During the war the “normal” Germans had been “double victims”, first of the Nazis and then of the Western Allies. Now in the Cold War, they were -just as in February 1945- victims of the renewed threat
of imperialist war aggression that could be stopped only by the “peaceful” Soviet Union. By “reconstructing” the destruction caused by “fascists” and “imperialists” and by supporting the antifascist GDR state, the East Germans could take part in the antifascist task of the present. This myth was particularly appealing to the citizens of Dresden and offered a successful vehicle for identification with the Communist regime, a system they had learned to hate and fear under National-Socialist rule. But the collective indulging in the “antifascist” myth of collective victimhood resulted in a willingness to identify with the new Communist system because difficult questions of guilt and responsibility for the crimes committed under Nazi rule could be unproblematically evaded.237

This position was also a central starting point of Seydewitz’s book. Though he mentioned the unique mass murder of the Jews, he especially emphasized that it had been the Germans who had become subject to Nazi terror. In his descriptions of Nazi rule, Seydewitz emphasized that the population of Dresden strongly disliked the political changes that the new regime brought to their city but that their hands were tied. Nazi Germany was a “Zuchthaus” (jail), which held all Germans “under the constant pressure of Gestapo terror”. “And all would be forced by this terror to follow the orders of the Nazi leaders to their doom and Germany’s downfall”238. Here Dresden’s population exemplified the way the German people had first become victims of Hitler’s and later of the Anglo-American terror as Seydewitz concluded: “The destruction of Dresden at the end of the war is only one example of the crimes that the German imperialists, militarists and fascists as well as the Anglo-American imperialists committed against the German peo-

237 Widera, Dresden 415-417; Widera, “Gefangene Erinnerung” 120-121.
238 Seydewitz, Die unbesiegbare Stadt 45-46.
ple during their then still secret cooperation”.239 In this way, Seydewitz created a clear dichotomy between the “German” victims and the “fascist” and “imperialist” perpetrators that was perfectly adjusted to his Cold War rhetoric. The description of the bombing paints the Dresden civilians, indeed, as absolute victims. Dramatically Seydewitz describes the Dresdners as a collective of poor, disillusioned women, children and refugees, waiting for the already lost war to end. Suddenly and unexpectedly they are attacked in a murderous and barbaric bombardment.

By portraying the Germans and their beautiful cities as complete victims of fascism and imperialism, Seydewitz indemnified not only the Germans as a people, but also the German national culture from any kind of responsibility for or connection with Nazism and the Second World War. While at the same time linking fascism to Anglo-American imperialism, Seydewitz detached Nazism completely from Germany’s “national” heritage. Fascism appeared as the enemy of the German Nation and on several occasions Seydewitz emphasized that Hitler’s fascism had acted against the “national existential interests of the German people” and had been “unable to tie in with the beautiful and rich national cultural heritage”.240 Here again, Seydewitz pointed to another continuity between fascism and imperialism. Just as he had criticized the Nazis for their disregard of German national interest, he accused the contemporary West German “imperialists” of acting against the “elementary interests of the German people”. By sabotaging the “peaceful unification of Germany” and risking a Third World War, like the Nazis, the West Germans had become “national traitors”.241

239 Ibid. 254-255.
240 Ibid. 32, 106-117, 259.
241 Ibid. 259-274.
With this, Seydewitz addressed another central issue in East German memory politics: the confrontation with the Federal Republic. By pointing out the continuity of imperialism in West Germany, the GDR not only saw the Federal Republic as the heir of the Third Reich, but also identified it with the bombing of Dresden. GDR propaganda, for example, connected West Germany’s entrance into NATO in 1955 with the bombing of Dresden. West Germany was now directly identified, not only with its fascist past, but with its present collaboration with the same forces that had destroyed Dresden.242

Dresden and the atomic bomb: continuities in Anglo-American aggression

A similar continuity of imperialist war aggression was worked out more thoroughly by former resistance fighter and the first postwar mayor of Dresden, Walter Weidauer in *Inferno Dresden* (1965).243 Though the book was very much in line with Seydewitz’s narrative and the 1950s propaganda about the bombers, it was written in a less emotional style and was based on more thorough research and new material and documents, especially regarding the casualty rates. His estimation of the death toll was quite realistic, and the documents and counting method he had organized himself as the leader of Dresden’s postwar administration are still considered to be of value. While he had initially estimated the 25,000 registered deaths to be the actual number, Weidauer now estimated the death toll at 35,000.244

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244 Weidauer, who already by 1946 had come to the first estimate of 25,000, eagerly showed the Canadian journalist Ross Munro the elaborate statistics produced by the newly
Weidauer’s goal was to unravel the myths and untruths that he felt surrounded the bombing of Dresden. He sharply criticized the huge overestimates of the casualty rates as well as other myths that had spread widely among Western journalists and historians. Weidauer also denounced the “Noble-story” as a fairy tale. He argued logically that the British and American air forces had had no need for an insider directing them to their goal since the weather circumstances were fine and by 1945 the Allies were equipped with navigating devices, sufficient enough to guide them to Dresden. Although Max Seydewitz’s book was not mentioned in the text, nor in the footnotes, it is clear that Weidauer considered Seydewitz’s version of the bombing of Dresden to be lacking. Also in contrast to Seydewitz, the former mayor of Dresden refrained from painting a detailed picture, as he found it “unnecessary” to do so, after so many had already described the “horrors and atrocities”. This was a strategy that clearly was meant to give the book a more academic and distanced aura.245

In spite of these differences Weidauer reproduced an anti-Western perspective that was in essence very similar to the one Seydewitz had produced earlier. In spite of Weidauer’s apparent efforts to give his book an aura of professionalism and to unravel the myths and legends, he quickly made up some of his own. Just like Seydewitz and Lehwess-Litzmann, Weidauer presented the bombing of Dresden as the beginning of the Cold War. “All facts prove, that by destroying Dresden, the English and American governments did not in fact want to hit the Hitlerfaschisten, but

appointed city administration to emphasize its professionalism. Though it is not entirely clear how Weidauer came to add 10,000 to his initial estimate, this number still remains very conservative compared to most others that circulated in the accounts of the bombing during the 1960s. E.g. Neutzner, “Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern” 134. The inconsistency in Weidauer’s counting has been pointed out in: Reichert, “Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte” 160.

in the first place wanted to hit their Soviet Russian allies”, Weidauer concluded.  

Weidauer took this theory, which was widely accepted in the GDR, to another level, by creating a direct connection between Dresden and the present threat of atomic warfare. Introducing his theory, Weidauer argued: “Unlikely as it may sound it is certain: the first atomic bomb was supposed to fall on a German city”. This city was going to be Dresden. Dresden lay in the future Soviet zone of influence and had intentionally been spared for the purpose of experimenting with the new bomb. However, because the development of the atomic bomb took more time than expected and the Red Army had proceeded very quickly, an atomic bombing of Dresden could not be realized, and Churchill had been forced to turn to his only imaginable alternative. To make sure the Soviets wouldn’t reach Dresden as an undamaged city, Churchill had quickly decided to bomb the city with “conventional means”. In this line of argument, the Allied aggression was contrasted with the “heroic” nature of the Soviets. By proceeding so quickly, the Red Army had “saved” Dresden from the atomic bomb.

The arguments Weidauer could bring up to support his theory were very thin. Weidauer quoted some military sources, which supposedly witnessed the planning of an atomic attack on Germany. Weidauer argued that in the fall of 1944 two different plans coincided in the secret preparation of an atomic attack on Dresden. On the one hand, the finished version of the atomic bomb was expected

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246 Ibid. 20.
247 Ibid. 69.
248 See e.g. Rolf Dieter Müller i.Z.m. Florian Huber, and Johannes Eglau, Der Bombenkrieg 1939-1945 (Berlin: 2004) 213-216, Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 187-195. It is noteworthy to mention that the idea of an atomic bomb on Germany is not a complete fantasy of Walter Weidauer. In the recent debate serious historians like Richard Overy have brought up the question of whether Germany might have been the first victim of such an attack had the war lasted longer. See: Richard Overy, “Barbarisch aber sinnvoll,” in Ein Volk von Opfern. Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940-1945, ed. Lothar Kettenacker (Berlin: 2003) 183-187.
in January 1944. At the same time the plan for an “Operation Thunderclap” to end the war with a final bombing offensive was worked out. However possible it may have been that in the headquarters of the British and American forces at some time an atomic attack on Germany had been considered, Weidauer’s claim that Dresden was designated the target for such an attack all along remained wholly unfounded. For example, Weidauer forgot that Operation Thunderclap initially planned for an attack on Berlin, and only by beginning of 1945 was Dresden first mentioned as one of the possible alternative targets for such a concentrated attack. If there had ever been a coinciding of the planned use of the atomic bomb and Operation Thunderclap –for which Weidauer offered no convincing arguments-, by the time that Dresden was considered as a target, it was clear that the bomb would not be ready.

In spite of its obvious propagandistic character, Weidauer’s “atomic bomb” theory was not arbitrarily chosen. It showed the extent to which, as in the case of Seydewitz, the Cold War determined Weidauer’s reference point in his historical representation. Both Seydewitz and Weidauer made the point that, however dreadful it had been, “Dresden” was only a preliminary phase of the “real” and current threat of a nuclear war. This was the reason for still writing about Dresden, as both emphasized in their accounts. The preface stated that Seydewitz had written his book from the perspective of “times of international tension”, in which “cynical Kriegshetzer” were threatening the world with nuclear weapons. This was the starting point for Seydewitz to describe the “barbaric destruction of Dresden” by “those who claim to act in the name of humanity”. 249 Similarly, Weidauer stated in a preface to the second edition of his book that reprinting the text was neces-

249 Seydewitz, Die unbesiegbare Stadt 7.
sary because “the big imperialist states of the NATO (...) unscrupulously are preparing an atomic war, to eradicate other peoples but also our people, our cities and towns with new weapons of mass destruction”. 250

From a rhetorical point of view this strategy had another result for the way Germans were portrayed. Stressing their potential victimization in the near future also meant the extension of German victimhood into the present of the Cold War. Not only were the Germans the real victims of the Second World War, they were bound to become victims of air terror again in the next conflict. The Germans, due to their geographical and political position, were bound to become the first victim in the future. Just as the air war was taken out of its historical context and was instrumentalized in a debate over history politics, the experience of the air war was similarly de-historicized on behalf of a German postwar identity as a ‘nation of peace’ in the Cold War era. The “historical” accounts were more about political issues of the times in which they were published than attempts to understand and academically analyze the backgrounds, impact and consequences of the British and American strategic bombing offensive during the Second World War.

Alternative narratives?

Were there alternative possibilities for remembering the bombing for citizens of Dresden who did not feel comfortable with the harsh political exploitation of the SED? Official speeches and articles left little space for the personal remembrances of what the citizens of Dresden had experienced during 13 and 14 February 1945. While the official perspective focused on accusations towards the Anglo-Amerikaner and on the forward-looking ideology of Wiederaufbau little space was left in the

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250 Weidauer, Inferno Dresden 5-6.
public sphere for mourning those lost. On the other hand, the official discourse never wholly monopolized the commemoration of the bombings. On a modest scale, Christian services provided commemoration services with a less political and more religious message. While in the churches, too, a perspective dominated in which Dresden was seen as a collective of innocent victims, here the virulent accusative slogans were replaced by a message of peace, mourning and reconciliation. However, especially when after 1952, the SED sought to increase its control over the churches the discursive space became more limited by the boundaries imposed by the SED-state. From the 1970s on these boundaries seemed to stretch a little. Though the official interpretation of the Allied bombings didn’t change fundamentally, the radical manner with which Dresden was used for anti-American propaganda decreased especially with the détente in the Cold War during the 1970s.

Already by the mid-1960s there were some initiatives in which seemingly a less radical anti-Western attitude was shown. After Dresden had signed a city partnership with “fellow-sufferer” Coventry in 1965, the German city was visited by the reconciliation project, a delegation of British Christian youths and members of the “peace movement”. In Dresden they met with the German Christian organization Operation Sühnezeichen. For six months British youths worked in Dresden to restore the destroyed deaconess hospital. The symbolic event culminated with the handing over of the “nail cross” made of three nails from the destroyed Cathedral of Coventry. Superficially this project seemed to symbolize a shared message of peace and reconciliation between the former enemies, across the boundaries

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251 Fache, “Gegenwartsbewältigungen” 223-224.

of the Iron Curtain. GDR authorities were initially reluctant but after a period of negotiations, especially by British historian David Irving who was one of the initiators of this project, an invitation to a delegation of youths from Coventry was agreed upon. The GDR authorities came to recognize the potential of such cooperation for informal diplomatic contacts with Great Britain, but more importantly they saw it as a chance to sideline the Evangelische Kirche in Saxony, which was increasingly considered to be an ideological threat to Marxism.

Although initially Operation Sühnezeichen was used as an intermediary between the British church and Dresden’s authorities, the GDR authorities and the Stasi controlled the 1965 event in order to uphold the official GDR perspective on the bombing of Dresden as an act of imperialist terror that was continued in NATO policies and to make sure the Dresden hosts formulated no alternative or dissident perspective. At the same time by accepting a Christian delegation from Coventry the authorities could soothe East German Christians and churches and isolate dissidents like the ministers of Dresden’s Evangelische Kirche, by excluding them from the project. Therefore, for all the idealistic motives of at least the British participants, the reconciliation project did not result in the emergence of an “alternative” or more Christian-based remembrance of the bombing. To the contrary, the

253 It is significant that the initiative for this reconciliation project came from historian David Irving, who had recently published his bestselling account. Following a suggestion made in a reader’s letter in the Guardian, Irving proposed creating a “symbolic act of atonement” in Dresden and sought political support for the project. After first contacting British MP Richard Crossman, Irving got in touch with both Provost Williams of Coventry’s Cathedral and Dresden’s city archivist, with whom he had been in contact during his research. See: Irving’s correspondence with Crossman and Williams as well as with Dresden archivist Walter Lange and Mayor Gerhard Schill. Irving to Richard Crossman, 10-5-1963; Crossman to Irving 17-5-1963; H.C.N. Williams to Crossman 21-5-1963; Crossman to Irving 22-5-1963; Irving to Walter Lange 25-5-1963; Gerhard Schill to Irving; 21-12-1963 Irving to Schill 7 January 1964 in Barch/MA 107/26. Also see: Merrilyn Thomas, Communing with the enemy. Covert Operations, Christianity and Cold War Politics in Britain and the GDR (Bern: 2005) 220.

254 Ibid. 223-238.
event contributed to the cooperation of East German Church leaders with the SED party line and to the isolation of religious and political dissidents. The reconciliation project was used mainly for informal political diplomacy between the GDR and Britain during a period in which official diplomacy was not yet possible.255

Since the late 1960s the contacts between Coventry and Dresden quickly faded, due to the changed international situation. With Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik and with the signing of the foundation agreement between the FRG and the GDR in 1972 and East Germany’s entry into the United Nations in 1974, the SED lost interest in the Dresden commemoration. Since the GDR’s international isolation had been resolved, there was less need for contacts with organizations like Coventry’s “reconciliation project”. Also, with the reduction in tension in the relationship with the West Dresden as a vehicle for anti-imperialist slogans had lost its political value. After the last mass rally in honor of the attack’s 25th anniversary on 13 February in 1970 no more mass events commemorating the bombing were held until 1980.256 In newspapers and magazines coverage of the yearly commemoration of 13 February decreased dramatically. The anniversary was now mentioned only in smaller articles, instead of being front-page news. That Dresden seemed to have lost its former political functions could also be seen in the changed commemoration practices. During the much more sober rituals that were still being held political speeches were replaced with a silent wreath-laying ceremony.257

Though some publications on the Dresden raid still reflected the traditional anti-Western evocation of a vision of imperialist terror and antifascist Wiederaufbau, in some cases it became possible to approach the Allied bombings and

255  Ibid. 261-271.
256  Reichert, “Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte” 160. Also see chapter 4.
257  Neutzner, “Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern” 157-158.
their consequences in a less propagandistic manner. The less politicized and slightly more internationally oriented attitude typical for the 1970s is also reflected in a catalogue of a 1970 exhibition, which showed visual artistic representations of the bombings of Dresden, Rotterdam, London, Warsaw and Leningrad. The usual fierce anti-imperialist rhetoric was missing. Though the Second World War was still generally referred to as an “imperialist war”, the emphasis was on the admission that the Luftwaffe had started the “terror” and had first brought “Hitler’s cynical threat” of “erasing enemy cities” into practice.

The general interest of the citizens of Dresden in the “official” commemoration also had faded through the years. They remembered their experiences of the bombing primarily in a private atmosphere or during religious services, where there had been a longer tradition of a less politicized memory culture that was more focused on mourning than on accusations aimed at the Allies. In the visual

258 For an example of a traditionally virulently anti-Western pamphlet see the memoires of former Dresden Stadtrat Helmut Welz in: Helmut Welz, Die Stadt, die sterben sollte (Berlin: 1972) 49-50.

259 Dresden Kupferstich-Kabinett der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen, ed. Fünf städte mahnen: Dresden- Leningrad- London- Rotterdam- Warschau: zum Gedenken an die Zerstörung Dresdens am 13. Februar 1945: Ausstellung im Albertinum, Februar bis April 1970, Kupferstich-Kabinett der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden (Dresden: 1979) 2-3. Similarly, the 1978 publication of Schicksale deutscher Baudenkmale, a documentation surveying architecture that was lost during the air war in East German cities, mentions the Allied bombings in an almost completely depoliticized perspective. In this art-historical compendium (which was also published in the FRG and meant for the West German market) phrases like “terror attacks”, “imperialism” or “Anglo-Amerikaner” were absent, even in the description of the attack on the Dresden. It simply briefly mentioned the chronology of events and the topographical details of the parts of the city that were destroyed. It ignored the human victims and only summarized and documented the destroyed buildings with photographs and architectonic details. The only reminder of the propagandistic language of the 1950s was the emphasis on the East German efforts to restore important parts of Germany’s cultural heritage, but also in a relatively apolitical setting. Eckardt, ed. Schicksale deutscher Baudenkmale im zweiten Weltkrieg: eine Dokumentation der Schäden und Totalverluste auf dem Gebiet der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik especially: 372-442. For comparison, see the very similarly composed West German documentation. In the introduction Beseler, the editor, stated that it was meant as a sequel to the East German work, which he praised as “highly deserving”. Hartwig Beseler and Niels Gutschov, Kriegsschicksale Deutscher Architektur: Verluste, Schäden, Wiederaufbau: eine Dokumentation für das Gebiet der Bundesrepublik Deutschland vol. Vol. 1-2 (Neumünster: 1988) V.
arts as well it was possible to express a less politicized perspective. Artists like Wilhelm Rudolph, Christian Hasse and Rudolf Nehmer reflected a more universal pacifist message and were more concerned with mourning the losses than with moral accusations. In a series of sketches and woodcuts Wilhelm Rudolph showed Dresden’s destroyed city landscape in a discomfiting manner. Rudolph’s pictures do not express anger or hatred aimed at the English or Americans, but a deep sense of mourning.260 A similar personal reflection on Dresden is reflected in the work of poets like Heinz Czechowski and Eberhard Panitz. Czechowski’s poems like “Auf eine im Feuer versunkene Stadt” (1967) expressed the poet’s despair during the destruction as well as his problematic and uneasy attempt to come to terms with his traumatic memories. In his poems Czechowski did not reject the official GDR perspective completely. He shared the image of Dresden as a “unique” instance of destruction and also the more political notion of the continued threat of aggression that the English and Americans had demonstrated in February 1945. However, Czechowski had problems with the self-justified and unproblematic historical interpretation of official GDR memory politics, which he saw as concerned only with anti-Western politics and not with the painful and traumatic memory of the bombing itself. 261


For the GDR, during the 1950s and '60s, Dresden had become a heavily politicized marker of its antifascist identity. In essence, this interpretation was regarded as an element in an offensive against the Federal Republic. While we have seen that
the history of the Allied bombings played a specific role in the internal West German debate on “German guilt”, the East German anti-Western campaign did not go unnoticed and provoked reactions, which in some cases were characterized by “Cold War” polemics of a similar nature. East and West German authors like Axel Rodenberger, Max Seydewitz and Walter Weidauer increasingly reflected on each others’ work and debated the circumstances of the air raid.

The first point of argument between East and West German historians revolved around the belief that the bombing of Dresden had been motivated by an anti-Soviet political agenda. Like the connections that GDR authors drew between the suffering of Germans under Allied air attacks and the new threat of “imperialist terror”, the Cold War provided West German accounts with a contemporary context in which the bombing of Dresden could be explained. The large-scale GDR commemoration ceremonies and the series of anti-Western accounts caused irritation in West Germany as well as in the United States and Britain. The Cold War often appeared in an indirect manner in West German accounts. It became clear in calls for world peace in prefaces and conclusions, in which the authors often reminded their readers that the real political meaning of the Allied bombings was that they demonstrated the dangers of possible atomic war. The idea formulated in many introductions and prefaces to the historical accounts was that this history should be seen as a “warning sign” and an appeal for world peace. The *Dokumente deutscher Kriegsschäden*, for example, considered the true relevance of the Allied bombings to be its warning to the peoples of the world about the dangers of a “new world burning”.262 According to the general anticommunist sen-

262 E.g. see: Nahm et al., eds., *Dokumente Kriegsschäden*, Vol 1. 68. Exactly the same phrase “new world burning” in Rodenberger, *Der Tod von Dresden* 12.
timents that were dominant in West Germany during the 1950s and ’60s some authors did not identify this threat with the British and Americans, but portrayed the Soviet Union as the main potential aggressor. In spite of the fact that the historical accounts formulated explicit moral accusations against the British and Americans, the current danger was recognized as lying in the atomic power of the Soviet Union. Though sometimes the responsibility for the present situation was partly ascribed to the United States, there was no doubt who was the real present threat and enemy. Hans Rumpf even called it the “irony of fate” that the methods once applied by the British “now turned against its former masters and adepts in a much worse form”. 

In this light, the narratives circulating in the Federal Republic, like those published in East Germany, suggested a continuity of victimhood. The Germans were presented not only as the “former victims” but also served as the “reminders” of the new conflict. They had already experienced a preview of what a new world war would bring. Similar to Weidauer’s theory that Dresden almost had become the first victim of such an atomic war, West German accounts often made direct comparisons between Dresden and Hiroshima, stressing that this attack had caused “as many” or even more victims than the nuclear attack on the German cities. In a review of David Irving’s *Destruction of Dresden*, *Die Zeit* stressed that “the world’s greatest mass murder in the history of mankind that took place during one single day, probably was not suffered by the population of Hiroshima, as one was inclined to presume earlier, but by the inhabitants of Dresden”. 

From a rhetorical point of view this approach had another consequence for

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263 Rumpf, “Das war vorgeplanter Völkermord”.
the way Germans were portrayed. Stressing their potential victimization in the near future also meant the extension of German victimhood into the present of the Cold War. Not only were the Germans the real victims of the Second World War, they were bound to become victims of air terror again in any ensuing conflict. The Germans, due to their geographical and political position, were bound to become the first victims in a future conflict. Just as the air war was taken out of its historical context and was instrumentalized in a current debate over history politics, the experience of the air war was similarly de-historicized on behalf of a German postwar identity as a “nation of peace” in the Cold War era. Both aspects demonstrate that the “historical” accounts were more about political issues of the present than attempts to historically understand and academically analyze the backgrounds, impact and consequences of the British and American strategic bombing offensive during the Second World War.

Another recurring theme in West German accounts is the reference to the GDR propaganda, oppression and failed reconstruction to suggest a direct continuity between the victims of the Allied attack and those of the Communist dictatorship. Paul, especially in his comments on postwar Dresden, expressed such an anti-Soviet undertone. In the last phrase of his book Paul summarized this continuity of suffering by stating: “The city was beautiful, not powerful. Her beauty died; she became an example for death. When she became an example of endurance and survival, she was struck by the division of Germany”. This continuity of suffering also became clear in the frequently echoed criticism on the failed East German reconstruction of former cultural monuments in Dresden. Paul even characterized

265 Ibid. 190-193.
this neglect as Dresden’s “second destruction”. A similar argument, though usually less vehement, recurrently served as a starting point for German press articles on the anniversaries of Dresden’s destruction. German newspapers often discussed the anniversaries of Dresden’s destruction by describing Communist deconstruction. Though these articles sometimes also criticized the pace of reconstruction in West Germany, a certain continuity between the city’s destruction and her unfree postwar status was often suggested in the subtext.

Also, some historical accounts more directly interpreted the bombing of Dresden as a historical case to illustrate the continued German victimhood in the face of Soviet aggression. The most direct way to do this was to make the Soviet Union directly responsible for the bombing of Dresden, a strategy that was pursued by several leading figures in the Allied Air Forces beginning in March 1945, when General George Marshall countered the increased criticism of the Allied attack, by stressing that the Russians had pressured the Western allies to bomb Dresden in support of the Eastern Front.

This would remain a recurring argument in West Germany to counter anti-Western allegations from the GDR. In Germany, this Cold War myth was successfully introduced by Axel Rodenberger in an article for Das Grüne Blatt in 1953 and in a reprint of his book Der Tod von Dresden in the same year. In 1953 the American State Department authorized Rodenberger to make public its official statement that

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267 In an article on the Dresden reconstruction in Der Welt, for example, an uneasiness with the reconstruction is formulated as a “lack of lust for life” “which somehow does not make the visitor feel happy about all this”: “Dresden 1960: Wiedergeburt in Gelb, Rot und Rosa,” Die Welt, 13-2 1960. For a similar uneasiness and criticism of the Dresden political commemorations “Dresden trauert, marschiert und tanzt” Süddeutsche Zeitung, 16-2 1960.

the bombing of Dresden had been executed at the request of Stalin.\textsuperscript{269} The argument that the Soviets were responsible fitted Rodenberger’s stereotypical account, though in the first edition Rodenberger had refrained from direct accusations of any specific party and had blamed “war itself” as an abstract phenomenon.\textsuperscript{270} Rodenberger did more than refer to a general threat of a coming atomic war in which “Dresden’s fate could become the fate of many cities”. In addition to alluding to the Cold War threat and in later editions stressing Soviet responsibility, Rodenberger’s book showed stereotypes of uncivilized Russian forced laborers, who, unlike the civilized West European prisoners, had registered the bombing “without sympathy” and only exploited the situation to plunder the possessions of the suffering Germans.\textsuperscript{271}

Apart from Rodenberger’s statement and a few articles, which voiced similar accusations about the Soviets, the official statement of the American State Department had only limited success in the West German accounts and press articles.\textsuperscript{272} Nevertheless, this version lingered on even after 1953 when an official report ordered by the American department of the Air Force established that there was no evidence that the Soviets had directly demanded the bombing of Dresden. This report, researched by historian Joseph Angell countered the allegation that the bombing of Dresden had been a war crime, by stating that the city had been a communication and industrial centre, but also that there was “no doubt that (...) the Russians never did specifically request the bombing of Dresden”.\textsuperscript{273}

\textsuperscript{270} Also see: Corwin, “The Dresden Bombing” 75. Corwin missed Rodenberger’s temporary acceptance of the American anti-Soviet claims.
\textsuperscript{271} Rodenberger, Der Tod von Dresden 162.
\textsuperscript{273} Cit. By Overy, “The Post-War Debate” 133. In the early 1960s David Irving also tried to
Irving, Weidauer and the counting of the Dresden dead

In addition to the question regarding who had “ordered” the bombing of Dresden and whether it was meant to support or to sabotage the advance of the Red Army, a second point of controversy concerned the counting of the casualties in Dresden. While the Nazi authorities estimated the number of casualties in Dresden at around 25,000, in its attempt to establish Dresden as the ultimate symbol of Allied war crimes, Nazi propaganda had made efforts to exaggerate these numbers and successfully transmitted grossly exaggerated figures like 250,000 to both the German as well as the neutral press. After the war the death toll became the subject of a debate, which still lingers on, but first became a central point of argument between East and West German historians. The grotesque estimates of the death toll, which had had been circulated under Nazi propaganda, were particularly common in West Germany. Based on the assumption that the city was filled with several hundreds of
thousands refugees from Eastern Germany figures of 60,000 up to 300,000 deaths were circulated by press articles and popular works of non-fiction. 275

David Irving was the first to claim to have found reliable documents on which an exact calculation could be based. The definitive determination of the Dresden death toll formed a central aspect of Irving’s research, an aspect on which he would continue to work even after the first edition of his book on Dresden had been published. The claim to have determined the grotesque size of Dresden’s death toll formed a crucial element in Irving’s work on Dresden. What becomes clear from his correspondence with eyewitnesses and archives is his dissatisfaction with the estimates provided by Dresden city authorities and GDR historiography, which estimated a death toll ranging from 35,000 to 40,000. In his determination to establish a high number of casualties Irving relied first on the memory of a former local official in Dresden, Hans Voigt, who estimated the total at 135,000, even though he had added that the “dead persons department” he had worked for had been able identify some 40,000 dead. Shortly after the first publication of his book, Irving acquired a new document, which has become known as the Tagesbefehl 47 (TB 47), which seemed to establish the number of dead at 202,040. 276

275 In Der Tod von Dresden, published 1951 Rodenberger repeatedly pointed out the “uniqueness of annihilation” with which the city was confronted, a claim supported by the grotesque estimates of the death casualties. In his book Rodenberger estimated the death toll at between 100,000 and 450,000: Rodenberger, Der Tod von Dresden 137, 168-172. E.g. Hofmann, “Als Dresden in Trümmer sank” Also see: Neutzner, “Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern” 149-151; Bergander, Dresden 152-167.

276 Even though this document had been dismissed as a falsification by East German author Max Seydewitz in 1955 – a conclusion Irving was aware of and had previously accepted - Irving changed his mind after he had acquired a copy of the document himself in 1964. This TB 47, which Evans has described as a “carbon copy of a typed-up transcript of an extract of an unknown document” and with good arguments denounced as a wholly unconvincing historical source, came to serve as the basis for Irving’s exaggerations. Evans, Lying about Hitler 149-184.
A remarkable difference between these accounts and GDR historiography is that, though GDR propaganda cultivated Dresden as a singular war crime, it was much more modest in its estimates of the number of casualties of the raid were than West German accounts. Lehwess-Litzmann, Seydewitz and Weidauer estimated Dresden’s death toll much more realistically at 35,000. Weidauer, in particular, made a point of ruling out the possibility that the number could be much higher.\textsuperscript{277} The exact reason for this difference is hard to find. A possible factor might be that the enormous exaggerations were based on the assumption that Dresden was overfilled with Germans who had fled from the Red Army in Eastern Germany. While these refugees are not wholly ignored by authors like Seydewitz, the sensitivity in the GDR of the issue of the flight and expulsion of Germans by the Russian army might have contributed to the tendency of East German authors not to base high estimates on the assumption that Dresden was crowded with poor refugees from the East, a theme which was quite central to accounts like Rodenberger’s \textit{Der Tod von Dresden}.\textsuperscript{278}

The more modest estimates also provided the East German authors with an offensive argument to disqualify Western accounts as falsifications and products of Nazi propaganda. The high estimates made by authors like Rodenberger or Irving were taken as a starting point by GDR accounts for a heavy polemic against “bourgeois” accounts of the air war. In particular, Weidauer’s \textit{Inferno Dresden} was for a large part concerned with challenging these high figures and exposing them as conscious exaggerations. Subtitled “on the lies and legends surrounding

\textsuperscript{277} Lehwess-Litzmann, “Operation Dresden” 111; Seydewitz, \textit{Die unbesiegbare Stadt} 157; Weidauer, \textit{Inferno Dresden} 110-132. Though both Lehwess-Litzmann and Seydewitz assumed that there were many more dead buried under the ruins their estimates were still moderate compared to most West German accounts.

\textsuperscript{278} Rodenberger, \textit{Der Tod von Dresden} 66-67, 168-169.
“Operation Thunderclap” Weidauer’s account typifies how East German authors directly challenged and attacked Western historiography. Weidauer fiercely criticized recent accounts by Czesany, Rodenberger and also David Irving. In addition to his fierce criticism of attempts to ascribe responsibility for the raid to Stalin or to in any way dismiss the guilt of the Western allies for this dreadful crime, Weidauer also criticized the tendency to exaggerate the death figures.

At the same time, however, Weidauer maintained the uniqueness of the attack by arguing that Dresden had been foreseen as the first target of an atomic raid. He emphasized that, contrary to what many accounts had claimed, during the attack of 13 February “only” 35,000 people had died, less than at Hiroshima or Nagasaki. However harsh the attack on Dresden might had been, Weidauer kept reminding his audience, it was nothing compared to what a coming war would bring. In this way the special status of Dresden could be preserved while at the same time Western historiography could be criticized for overemphasizing the casualty rates for a revisionist view of German history and to defend the “honor” of German imperialism and militarism. But more strikingly, according to Weidauer, Western accounts tried to excuse NATO actions and to downplay the impact of the atomic bomb by stating that the “conventional” attack on Dresden had been more destructive. Apparently the deal with the dead is profitable for the imperialists; it serves to help to ideologically prepare for atomic warfare.279

Walter Weidauer’s *Inferno Dresden* provided the first serious challenge to Irving’s presentation of TB 47 as the definitive proof of the immense casualty figures. While Weidauer’s book was marked by a strong propagandist style and con-

tained wild, ideologically charged theories, on the issue of the determination of the death rate Weidauer drew on a source, whose reliability was increasingly hard to deny. According to Weidauer, in 1964, he had recovered a copy of the Final Report of the Dresden city police, which stated that on 10.3.1945, 18,375 dead had been registered. In 1966 in the West German Federal archive another document, this one from the Berlin Police department, was discovered, which was dated the same day as Irving’s TB 47 but confirmed the death toll reported in Weidauer’s document: 18,375.280 The appearance of these two documents, both proving the TB 47 document to be virtually worthless, brought Irving to a temporary acceptance of these much lower estimates.

On July 7 1966, Irving sent a letter to the Times stating that he wanted to “correct a mistake”. The “final report” presented by Weidauer showed that the Dresden casualties were expected to reach 25,000 by March 1945, which indicated that the casualties of the Dresden raid were on “much the same scale as in the heaviest Hamburg raids in 1943”. Irving stated that he “had no doubt as to this document’s authenticity”, and pointed to the second document which confirmed the authenticity of the “final report”, which was found by the Bundesarchiv the same year.281 This acknowledgement clearly meant a victory for Weidauer, who celebrated Irving’s letter to the Times in the later editions of his book. “It is pleasing that David Irving dissociates himself” from the “lies and legends” which he had

280 In a letter to Irving, archivist of the Federal Archives Heinz Boberach wrote that from files from the Reichsfinanizministerium the “Lagemeldungen über Luftangriffe auf das Reichsgebiet” of the Ordnungspolizei were discovered. Like the TB 47, this file was dated on 22-3-45 but counted 18,367 registered deaths with a total estimate of 25,000 deaths. “These figures blatantly contradict the information of the also at 22-3 dated Tagesbefehl”, Boberach concluded. Boberach to Irving, 13-5-1966, Barch/MA 107/34.

earlier defended and which, Weidauer stressed, originated in Nazi propaganda. And in personal correspondence with Irving, Weidauer even thanked the British historian personally for this gesture.282

David Irving and the GDR narrative on Dresden

Though celebrated as a victory for Weidauer and the East German interpretation, this expression of gratitude also reveals the ambiguous reception of David Irving’s work in the GDR. While East German reviews and commentaries on The Destruction of Dresden all criticize elements of this account, it is interesting to see that Irving’s

282 Weidauer, Inferno Dresden 123-124. This comment was added after the second edition of Inferno Dresden Weidauer to Irving, 21-11-1966 in Barch/MA 107/35. This gesture not only marks an interesting moment in the struggle of authors from the East and West to establish “the truth” about Dresden to support their interpretation. It also casts light on the position of David Irving in this period. His letter to the Times has often been seen as a half-hearted gesture, for instance by Richard Evans, who emphasized that, in spite of this brief statement of self-criticism, Irving in later editions and interviews returned to his old exaggerations of the death toll. Evans has argued that Irving’s search for larger numbers and his refusal to acknowledge more convincing arguments illustrate his willingness to manipulate and distort the historical truth, and thus form a prelude to his later controversial work on the Holocaust. One must ask, however, whether Evans’s evaluation is determined by Irving’s later statements and publications, expressing a direct relationship between the Nazi genocide and the air war, a blunt apology for Hitler’s actions and a denial of the existence of gas chambers. Irving’s high estimates were not higher than those given by most West German accounts and that his moral judgments of the Allied bombings were mild in comparison to most German accounts. As his considerable efforts to correct his earlier statements indicate, in 1966 Irving seems to have been serious in his acceptance of this new information on the casualty figures. This becomes clear not only from his letters to Britain’s leading media but also from his intention to publish the new document, which estimated the number of dead at 35,000 in the German historical journal Vierteljahresschelte für Zeitgeschichte. His correspondence with the editors makes clear that he intended to publish the “Final Report” in 1966. After an initial interest in Irving’s contribution the journal turned the piece down, pointing to the poor quality of the copy and stating that the editors regarded the document as only a “preliminary account”. Irving to Helmut Krausnick, 18-10-1966; H. Auerbach to Irving, 4-11-1966; Irving to Auerbach, 8-11-1966, Auerbach to Irving 10-2-1967. In: IfZ ID 90. Also notice that while now the range of 20,000-30,000 dead is more or less established this was far less clear in 1965. Moreover, despite Bergander’s convincing arguments, until very recently esteemed historians such as Hans Ulrich Wehler or Norman Davies have accepted 135,000 as a probable number of victims. See: Norman Davies, Europe at War 1939-1945. No simple victory (London: 2006) 29, 125; Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Vierter Band. Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkriegs bis zur Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten, 1914-1949. (München: 2003) 933; e.g. Evans, Lying about Hitler 171 ff; David Irving, Apocalypse 1945: the destruction of Dresden (London: 1995) 244-245.
work was also discussed in positive terms. As in the Federal Republic, the GDR authors welcomed a critical account by a young British author, which confirmed several basic elements of the East German perspective. What becomes clear from the considerable press coverage of Irving’s discussions with East German authors as well as reviews, and remarks by East German authors, is that Irving’s book was regarded as international recognition of the imperialist crimes against the Germans.283 The East German Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte concluded that the most important contribution of the book was that it showed that the attack on Dresden demonstrated the “military senselessness of the British-American terror attacks”. Furthermore, the review concluded, Irving did not leave any doubt that “reactionary circles” in London and Washington wanted to demonstrate their strength to the Russians.284

For East German authors, as in the West, Irving could be pointed out as a relatively “neutral” outsider, who confirmed that Dresden was a symbol of imperialist terror. However, in the view of the East Germans, David Irving did not go

far enough in his conclusions and “shied away from the consequences” of his doc-
umentation. In their attitude towards Irving, there is a tendency to appropri-
ate the universal message of German suffering of his book for the East German
narrative. East Germans often suggested that Irving, although basically a sensible
author, was restricted by West European “reactionary circles” and afraid to draw
the logical conclusions from his findings. Even Irving’s fiercest East German critic
and competitor Walter Weidauer suggested that Irving’s shortcomings were partly
the result of his dependency on other forces. For example, Weidauer pointed out
that Irving had to confirm to the “anticommunist” demands of his publisher. Wei-
dauer supported this statement by quoting and even printing a copy of a letter
Irving had sent to archivist Walter Lange. In this letter, Irving stated that his pub-
lisher had demanded the inclusion of “one or two references to the supposed bru-
talities of the Soviet army after May 1945”, because his publisher had feared that
the book would appear as a “communist propaganda lie” to the reader.

Irving’s statements, whether true or not were surely also a tactical move to
stay on a friendly basis with the city archives of Dresden. But for Weidauer they
provided the proof that Irving’s account had become subject to reactionary power
politics. More generally the strong interest in the Dresden attack on the part of
West- as well as East German authors shows how important The Destruction of Dres-
den was for both. Moreover, it shows that in a number of basic elements the East
and West German narratives on Dresden were very similar to each other. Just as in
David Irving’s account, Dresden was seen as the ultimate symbol of the suffering

285 Kühne, “Kritik”. Also, the help Irving received from the Dresden city archivist Lange
and the willingness of Weidauer and Dresden Mayor Gerhard Schill to cooperate with
Irving in the organization of a reconciliation project with citizens from Coventry reflect
the political interest of the GDR officials in David Irving’s position. E.g. footnote 254 in this
chapter.
286 Weidauer, Inferno Dresden 126-127.
of innocent Germans, who had become victims of the Nazi regime, of the senseless attacks by the Allied air forces, and of the Cold War conflict between the two super powers.

2.3 Parallels between East and West

A shared Dresden myth

The question therefore arises: how should we in hindsight understand the rivalry over Dresden? While debates raged about the role of the Soviet Union and the size of the death toll, a number of basic interpretations and narrative elements were shared by East and West German accounts, as well as by Irving’s *Destruction of Dresden* and many other non-German accounts of the bombing of Dresden. First of all, Dresden was seen as a singular symbol of war atrocity. Here a city with unique cultural beauty had been completely erased from the face of the earth. Accounts of Dresden’s destruction were always preceded by an (over)emphasis on the absolute beauty of this “Florence of the Elbe”. A second recurring element in the storytelling of Dresden was the characterization of the city as absolutely innocent. Dresden, it was claimed, was a cultural city without industrial or military significance. The inhabitants were women, children and refugees, all of them innocent victims. The third common narrative element was that Dresden’s destruction was seen as absolutely unique and fundamentally different from that of the other bombed cities. Because this city had been destroyed only for its cultural beauty and for the sake of causing as much terror as possible among the “innocent victims”, it stood out as a symbol of a senseless war crime. And because the city apparently had no
connection to the Nazi state and the German war industry Dresden could easily be disconnected from its historical background and from the Nazi war aggression. Dresden became a timeless symbol of terror against innocent civilians. By reducing the history of the Allied strategic bombing campaign to this mythical image of the unique destruction of the innocent city of Dresden, certain elements also present in West German interpretations were stressed. As in West German accounts, East German authors interpreted the Allied bombing war as a senseless act, without any effects on the German military potential. Unlike the Soviet Army the Western allies had failed to find means to attack the German army directly and had turned to an indirect “cowardly” method of bombing German civilians. The ultimate symbol for the senselessness of the bombing war was, of course, Dresden. Even more than in the Federal Republic the development of the Allied bombing strategy and especially the American offensive on German oil, communication and military-industrial targets were ignored.

Like the accounts of Rodenberger and Irving, GDR accounts focused primarily on German suffering. This was especially the case in Seydewitz’s *Zerstörung und Wiederaufbau von Dresden*. Seydewitz’s research on the historical background of the bombing of Dresden remained very limited. He reproduced a wide variety of myths and legends, such as the widespread “*Tieflieger*-myth”, suggesting falsely that the Allied fighter planes had engaged in “strafing”: Allied fighter planes accompanying the bombers were accused of flying low and firing at fleeing civilians. The key element of his book was to give an compelling account of German suffering. In his description of the attack Seydewitz painted a horrific scene on

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287 Neutzner has labelled this as the “*chiffre Dresden*”. See: Neutzner, “Vom Alltäglichen zum Exemplarischen” 126-127; Neutzner, “Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern” 132.
the basis of eyewitness accounts and his own fantasy. When Seydewitz described
the air raid itself he depicted a deliberate attack on hospitals and cemeteries
and used vivid and ghastly images that included a burning school “from which
screams could be heard”, women ablaze as “human torches” and a “burning baby
carriage”.288 Also, the Allied strategic bombing campaign was presented as a
crime. It had been a ruthless terror-attack against German women and children for
which the Anglo-Amerikaner were solely responsible. In this way the Western Allies
could be pointed out as the only “guilty party”. The language used to describe the
attacks was charged with dramatic metaphors and horrific images. More directly
than West German accounts, Seydewitz labeled the bombing of Dresden as “mass
murder” and an “inexcusable barbaric crime”. According to Seydewitz, the attack
had been a “brutal act of violence against innocent civilians” and he therefore
denounced the bombing as a “crime against humanity”. The British and Ameri-
cans were depicted as “remorseless murderers of children and their mothers”.289

These explicit moral accusations show that, even more strongly than in the
West German accounts, the GDR authors made use of language and arguments
that were remarkably similar to way this bombardment was exploited by the
NSDAP during the last months of the war.290 The terminology used to describe
the attacks demonstrates the continuity of Nazi propaganda. Not only were such
words as “murder” and “terror attacks” copied in the same uncritical manner as
in the West. The GDR propaganda even allowed the reuse of terms such as anglo-
amerikanische Luftgangster which even more emphatically and directly reflected

288 Seydewitz, Die unbesiegbare Stadt 86-87, 92-100, 106-118, 135-139.
289 Ibid. 7, 181, 208.
290 This point was made as early as 1977 by Götz Bergander and has recently been
illuminated in the work of Gilad Margalit, Patrice Poutros and Mathias Neutzner.
the terminology invented by Goebbels’s propaganda apparatus.291

What is interesting is that, while the propaganda campaigns of the SED tended to focus on American responsibility for the bombing of Dresden, most East German accounts nevertheless focused on British commanders Arthur Harris and Winston Churchill. *Inferno Dresden* presents the bombing of Dresden as a scheme, instigated and perpetrated by Churchill. The book makes this point not only as a formal argument but also in its detailed description of the British prime minister. Weidauer supported his argument that Dresden was bombed out of anticommunist motives by describing Winston Churchill’s irritation upon learning of the rapid progress of the Soviet Army. While the Red Army’s advance, according to Weidauer, “exhilarated not only the British people, but all the states of the anti-Hitler coalition in East and West”, Churchill was deeply distressed by this progress and looked for ways to sabotage the Russians. Weidauer not only identified Churchill as a main perpetrator of the attacks, but also emphasized his isolated position as a representative of the “reactionary circles”, who acted contrary to the will of the people.292

Another continuity was the way in which the mythical status of Dresden as the ultimate symbol of Anglo-American criminality was adopted.293 The image of Dresden as an innocent and uniquely beautiful city had already been developed under Nazi propaganda. Like the wartime press articles and pamphlets which were issued immediately after the attack the postwar East German accounts portrayed

Dresden as an innocent victim of ruthless American terror, and consequently perpetuated all kinds of legends and falsifications.

Other aspects of the GDR narrative echoed elements of Nazi propaganda as could be found in West German historiography. As in the West, the assumption that bombing had not only been senseless but even counterproductive by strengthening the mutual bonds between the Germans and their regime, for example, often was uncritically adopted. Former mayor of Dresden Walter Weidauer in his account *Inferno Dresden* (1965) reused this argument by claiming that because of this “militarily senseless, murderous air attack on the civilian population” many Germans “again started to believe in Goebbels-propaganda”.

Also some GDR accounts repeat the argument that the Allies had attempted to erase German culture in Dresden. This element is especially present in Max Seydewitz’s work. Not only did Seydewitz depict Dresden as a uniquely beautiful city of arts, an image largely created by Nazi propaganda. Seydewitz even portrayed the Allied attack as “cultural barbarism” and as a deliberate attempt to “erase” the unique German national culture. Though he did not directly refer to Dresden as a representation of “Occidental” culture as did some West German authors, the argument that the Allied bombers were attempting a “culturocide” on German culture illustrates another continuity of the wartime narrative.

*Comparisons between Dresden and Auschwitz*

Another striking parallel was that both East and West German historians writing on the air war in some cases made direct or implicit comparisons not only with

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295 Seydewitz, *Die unbesiegbare Stadt* 118.
Hiroshima, but also with the Holocaust. Examples can be found of accounts from both sides which explicitly put the Allied bombings on the same moral level as the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{296} The question, however, is: to what extent did these comparisons made by different authors serve a similar argument? In the GDR Auschwitz and Dresden were often seen as inherently related symbols of war atrocity. Here it was suggested that the bombings and the Holocaust were two equally horrific manifestations of imperialism. A good example of this linking can be seen in the wreath-laying ceremony at the \textit{Heidefriedhof}, which after 1950 became part of the official commemoration. Here, stone markers in half a circle carried the names of places of Nazi terror like Auschwitz but also commemorated the air attacks on Warsaw, Rotterdam and Dresden.\textsuperscript{297} Similarly, in East German accounts by Zimmering or Seydewitz, the comparison served to add an extra dimension of horror to the air war but also to stress the comparability and close relationship between the methods of fascism and Western imperialism.

This linkage became especially apparent in the novel \textit{Phosphor und Flieder} by the East German novelist Max Zimmering, a Dresden native who lived in exile during the war and described the two phenomena as directly related crimes: “How few guessed, that the death in the German concentration camps was only the brother of the death caused by the Anglo-American flying fortresses. And how few had understood, that the flame of Auschwitz, in which the millions of gassed Jews, Poles, Czechs, Russians, Gypsies and also Germans were burnt, was the sister of the flame that choked and burned Dresden and hundreds of thousands of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{296} E.g. Elizabeth Corwin, who concludes that German historians tended to avoid such comparisons, especially in the GDR. The following examples however illustrate that this was far less the case than she suggests. Corwin, “The Dresden Bombing” 79, 84. 

Zimmering’s novel focused on the reconstruction of the city and denounced the “crimes” that “Anglo-American imperialists” had committed in his hometown. Zimmering drew a clear parallel between the Holocaust and Dresden and compared Dresden’s “flames” metaphorically with the burning of bodies in the concentration camps.

Seydewitz’s fantasy story about Charles Noble also involved an absolute distinction between perpetrators and victims, who were reduced to wholly exchangeable categories. Just as the perpetrator group consisted of German fascists and Western big industry, the victim group included the persecuted victims of Nazism as well as the German people, who were “under the continuing pressure of Gestapo terror”. To emphasize this shared victim-status Seydewitz began his story by mentioning the “beastly terror” committed by Nazi Germany. Seydewitz’s suggestion that both the mass murder of the Jews in the concentration camps and the bombing of Dresden were committed by the same “secret cooperation between fascism and monopoly capitalism” bore a similar message. Seydewitz did therefore not refer to the Holocaust to inspire contemplation of the guilt and responsibility of the German people but, on the contrary, to emphasize that the citizens of Dresden and the German people in general were part of the same universal “victim community” as the victims of Nazism.

In the Federal Republic, as was seen in chapter 1, it was mostly conservative-oriented authors such as Hans Rumpf and Karl Dietrich Erdmann who suggested comparability between the Holocaust and strategic bombing. Rumpf’s argument

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300 Seydewitz, *Die unbesiegbare Stadt* 45-46.
that the Allies had committed “planned genocide” (Völkermord) bore a different message than that found in the East. Rather than serving to bring general discredit on Britain and America as “imperialist states” or to suggest that these countries resembled the Nazi regime, the comparisons implied by Rumpf and Erdmann challenged the singularity of the German crimes, in the context of the West German discourse on German guilt. Many authors like Rumpf even explicitly stated that it was important to counter the one-sided discourse on German collective guilt to heal old wounds in the “relationship between old war rivals”. For this reconciliation, acknowledgement of the “genocidal” character of the Allied bombings was needed, not the antagonism propagated by the Cold War slogans of the GDR. These comparisons therefore served not only to add an extra dimension to the hierarchical status of German suffering during the air war but also included an implicit critique of the singular status of the Holocaust as the ultimate symbol of human cruelty and suffering.

Comparisons between Auschwitz and Dresden could therefore carry different political messages and the examples above reflect some clear distinctions between the East and West German narratives. While in the GDR Dresden served to underline anti-Western politics and confirmed the country’s antifascist identity, in the West, Dresden and the Allied bombings functioned primarily as a counter-narrative of German guilt. The question is, however, whether in spite of these discursive differences, the stories did not have more in common. First, it is clear that, while in the GDR Dresden was instrumentalized for current politics of confrontation against NATO, the Federal Republic and the United States, the antifascist interpretation of the bombing also included an almost complete exonera-
tion of the Germans for the crimes committed under Nazism. This interpretation did not so much define itself as a “counter-narrative” against the idea of German collective guilt, but simply pointed the finger at Western “imperialism”. By identifying a guilty party of both past and present crimes, further reflections on the responsibility of the East German population could be avoided. On the other hand, the accusations against the Allies often bore elements of anti-Western rhetoric. While Gilad Margalit has identified such anti-Western elements in West German accounts as the result of a “gradual Westward dissemination of the Communist narrative” it is questionable whether this is an accurate conclusion.³⁰² As chapter 1 has shown, an anti-Western tone was often implicitly present in West German accounts, which reflected not so much parallels to the Communist discourse, but continuities with Nazi propaganda. The proof of British “guilt” in initiating “terror bombing” depicted the Allied bombings as “anti-European” attempts to eradicate the continent’s ancient culture.

**The West German left and Vietnam**

That is not to say, however, that the rhetoric of GDR propaganda did not influence the West German discussion. Especially with the growing opposition to the war in Vietnam leftwing and liberal Germans often adopted a rhetorical strategy that associated NATO simultaneously with Dresden and Auschwitz. This approach was not limited to West German Communists or the extreme leftwing *Rote Armee Fraktion*, which in a 1972 *Kommandoerklärung*, linked Vietnam, Dresden and Aus-

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Chwitz as three equal examples of imperialist terror. A similar point was also made by playwright Rolf Hochhuth, who after his success with Der Stellvertreter had become interested in the Allied bombings and became friends with Irving. As a controversial young intellectual who could claim to have been the “first to represent Auschwitz on stage” in Der Stellvertreter, Hochhuth felt free to draw parallels without risking the accusation of wanting to exonerate the German responsibility for the Holocaust. His play Soldaten (1967) made a strong moral argument in which Churchill was accused of committing great crimes, while on the other hand explicitly naming the German war crimes and stressing German responsibility for causing the air raid on Coventry. In an article for Der Spiegel entitled “Churchill und wohin er führte” Hochhuth drew comparisons with the Holocaust by claiming that Churchill “had on occasions descended to the same level Hitler”.

Two years earlier, in 1965 Hochhuth presented the issue he was working on for his new play in an article for Der Stern. Here he described an interview he and David Irving had held with a former “Masterbomber” of the RAF who had participated in the attack on Dresden. In this article Hochhuth argued though differences in the intentions of the perpetrators must be acknowledged, it was important to “combine these two places, Auschwitz and Dresden, where probably more people were burnt than anywhere in the history of the world”. The main reason for this comparison was, according to Hochhuth, that he was feeling doubts about

304 Hochhuth cited in: Esslin, “Ein Dramatiker”.
305 Hochhuth, Soldaten F.e. 18,28, 173ff.
whether the British military leaders truly believed that bombing German city centers would win the war. Hochhuth stressed that he had always believed that this issue was the “main difference between Harris and Eichmann”, “I would say” Hochhuth continued, “Eichmann can’t have believed that gassing Jewish families would bring the ‘Endsieg’ one bit closer. He can’t have believed that”. Then he turned the argument around and asked “And Harris? Without doubt he believed that burning cities would lead to our downfall. But what about the burning of the city’s inhabitants? A General truly believed this?” It was therefore a “matter of life and death” that one day the world would “look on the destroyers of Belgrade and Rostock with the same resentment as one regards the Schergen (crooks) of Treblinka and Auschwitz”.

While his play Soldaten refrained from drawing such parallels, it clearly portrayed Churchill as a war criminal. Hochhuth’s article in der Stern, however, had been an exceptional example of an equation of the air war with the Holocaust. It was much more explicit than the hints and implicit parallel drawn by Hans Rumpf the same year. On the other hand, it was clear that Hochhuth was coming from another point of view. Instead of limiting the discussion to the German crimes, he had actively pursued introducing subjects that were still hardly discussed in the public debate. It is important to see Hochhuth’s interest in the air war in the context of current political events. Soldaten was not only a commentary on the British actions during the Second World War, but also a direct critique of NATO and American foreign policy in a period in which the war in Vietnam was increasingly

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308 Ibid. It is therefore interesting that in 2000 Hochhuth would claim to Volker Hage, that he would “never compare the bombings with the Holocaust”. Hochhuth stated that absolutely no kind of historical comparison should ever be considered. Hage, Zeugen der Zerstörung 184.
attacked by the liberal left in West Germany. An important theme in the play as well as in his Stern article was that, according to Hochhuth, NATO and the United States were still led by the same mentality, in which innocent civilians were ruthlessly murdered for political goals.

By drawing these parallels in his critique of Churchill’s role, Hochhuth also criticized NATO’s atomic weapons and the American bombings in Vietnam. In Soldaten a direct comparison was made between American rocket attacks in Vietnam and the German V1 attacks on Britain. And in his Stern article Hochhuth pointed out that it was exactly their significance for the present that had brought him to refer to “Auschwitz and Dresden in the same sentence”. Because of the lack of recognition that the Allied bombings had been criminal and morally wrong the world was facing worse crimes, since the present air forces “take for granted” what had still been disputed during World War II: killing defenseless civilians. Therefore recognizing the Allied bombings had been wrong was a central issue “on which our future depends”. The Allied air war needed to be compared not only with the Nazi crimes, but also with current NATO policies and the American bombings in Vietnam.

**Conclusion**

During the 1950s and the ’60’s Dresden became an important historical symbol that represented not only the history of the Second World War, but also the current “Cold War” between the two power blocs. This was especially the case in the

311 Hochhuth, “Warum musste Dresden sterben?”. 
GDR. Here, the British-American attack on Dresden was often linked to current issues, not only in political commemorations but also in historical accounts. In East German historical texts, the bombing of Dresden was interpreted in a manner that confirmed the antifascist self image of the Communist state. Like the West German accounts, and often recycling terminology of Nazi propaganda, the bombing was seen as a singular catastrophe and a dreadful crime against innocent civilians. While these accounts did not completely ignore the role of the German Army in waging a “total” war, which included the bombing of civilians in cities like Warsaw, and stated that “German fascism” was ultimately responsible, they focused on the barbaric crimes committed by the Anglo-Americans. The “criminality” of the attack on Dresden was confirmed by the theory that the Allies had not bombed the city to win the war against Hitler, but had wanted to intimidate and sabotage the Red Army’s advance westward. Thus the attack on Dresden was decontextualized from the Second World War and presented as the beginning of the Cold War. Moreover, the attack showed that both in their anti-Soviet motives as well as in their cruel methods Western imperialism and German fascism were ultimately two sides of the same coin. Directed by the forces of “monopoly capitalism” the “in und ausländische Verderber Deutschlands” had worked together at the expense of the Germans. Moreover, by comparing the attack to current NATO and American foreign policies, the authors used Dresden as an example of the barbaric “fascist” nature of the imperialist states in past and present.

Furthermore, the Cold War heavily influenced the inter-German debate on the bombing of Dresden. The East German accounts deliberately ignited debate on the Allied air war with “bourgeois” historians from the Federal Republic and other parts of the imperialist West and their propagandistic tone often provoked
reactions among Western authors, which sometimes reflected the confrontational atmosphere of the Cold War. The dispute between East and West German authors mainly focused on two issues. In the first place, West German authors reacted to the GDR accounts by turning their argument around by claiming that it had been Stalin, who had ordered the ruthless destruction of Dresden. Moreover, from their perspective Dresden, a victim of Stalinism, had not only been destroyed during the final phase of the Second World War, but afterwards had become a victim of Communism. With this approach, West German authors sought to undermine the basic starting point of the East German anti-Western propaganda.

On the other hand, the East German accounts attacked Western accounts not only for idly attempting to blame Dresden on the Soviet Union but also focused in a second issue. While remaining relatively modest in their estimates of the number of casualties in Dresden East German historians, especially Walter Weidauer, blamed West German historians and David Irving for deliberately exaggerating the number of casualties. According to Weidauer, Western historians not only adopted Nazi propaganda, but wanted to downplay the impact of a nuclear war by overstating the effects of the conventional attack on Dresden. Weidauer not only criticized Western accounts as inaccurate but portrayed their authors as apologists of a coming atomic war.

In spite of this heated dispute, there are many parallels in the East and West German narratives of the bombing of Dresden. In both cases Dresden was seen as the ultimate symbol of the air war. Dresden had been a uniquely beautiful city that had been destroyed in a senseless act of terror against innocent civilians. Moreover, Dresden has been compared to and implicitly or explicitly equated with the Holocaust, by GDR authors like Zimmering and West German conservative authors like
Hans Rumpf, as well as by leftwing liberals like Rolf Hochhuth. The political context in which such a comparison was made and the current issues to which both Dresden and Auschwitz were related could vary greatly. In the GDR this argument was used to underline official anti-Americanism, and in the Federal Republic it often served to relativize the singularity of the Nazi crimes. In spite of these differences there are structural continuities and parallels in both discourses. In both cases anti-Western rhetoric was combined with a tendency to avoid or counter a critical discussion of the responsibility of normal Germans for the crimes committed during the Nazi rule.