A German catastrophe? German historians and the Allied bombings, 1945-2010
von Benda-Beckmann, B.R.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
4 — “Imperialist Air War”
East German historiography and the work of Olaf Groehler, 1965-1995

Introduction

In this chapter I will analyze the process of professionalization of Air-war historiography in the GDR. In East Germany, Olaf Groehler (1935-1995) was almost solely responsible for the development of an academic perspective on the air war. His major works Geschichte des Luftkriegs (1975) and Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland (1990) together with various essays, smaller works and contributions to historical overviews form the output of the research, to which Groehler had committed himself to for almost three decades. His works can be seen as the only real academic approach to the Allied bombing in the GDR. In the academic historical field in the GDR, Groehler was considered to be the absolute expert on the Allied air war and strategic bombings, and was even nicknamed “Bomben-Groehler”.

In this chapter I will analyze Groehler’s perspective on the bombing war in light of the official GDR memory politics and of the position of academic historiography in the GDR. For this I will also elaborate on the institutional framework.

---


Groehler worked in, considering that he was not only a leading historian at the Zentral Institut für Geschichtswissenschaft, but as party secretary for the SED and informant of the Staatssicherheit he played an active part in the academic politics of his institute.

His work and position raise a couple of questions. Should his work be regarded as a more elaborate repetition of the official view or did his work collide with official memory politics? Since on a few important matters the latter seems to be the case, the additional question is: to what extent was Groehler’s perspective different and how is this difference to be explained? Can one even go so far as to say that Groehler created a specific Eastern German academic narrative? Or was it possible to provide the official memory politics with historical argumentation and documentation? And to what degree did Groehler change his position after the collapse of the GDR in 1989/1990?

In the second part of this chapter I will discuss his work in relationship with West German historiography by looking at debates between Groehler and West German historians such as Götz Bergander and Horst Boog. Did the debates between Bergander, Boog and Groehler reflect earlier “Cold War” disputes or did a new kind of debate develop on the air war? And to what extent did their old dispute change after 1989? With regard to this question I will try and look beyond the differences of opinion that existed between these historians and look for similarities in the way they interpreted the Allied bombings. While they themselves seemed to be focused on ideological differences, the question remains to what extent they truly provided different narratives of the air war.
4.1. Part of the system: Olaf Groehler

Like Horst Boog, Olaf Groehler (1935-1995) had personally experienced the Allied bombings in his youth and concentrated on this history for the major part of his career. By 1968 Groehler had specialized in the history of the Allied air war and written a major article for *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte* on the theory and practices of the Allied bombing campaign.\(^{399}\) In 1972 he defended his *Promotion B* (Habilitation) on the same topic for the *Zentralinstitut für Geschichte* (ZIG) at the *Akademie der Wissenschaften*. Here he became professor and SED-Parteisekretär in 1981 and in 1986 deputy-acting director of the ZIG.\(^{400}\)

Immediately after 1989 Groehler, like many of his colleagues, had to struggle to defend his position as a former GDR historian. In 1990, when his most important work *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* was published, he was dismissed from his former position and institute. In spite of his entanglement with the SED state, Groehler was one of the few historians who were given a second chance in one of the newly founded East German academic institutes. Respected as a serious historian by quite a few of his West German colleagues such as Lutz Niethammer, with whom he had worked closely during his ZIG-years, he was given the opportunity

\(^{399}\) Groehler, "Der "strategische" Luftkrieg". Groehler began his career working on the invasion in Normandy and the war strategies of the Western Allies and wrote his dissertation on the "The English and American political and military prearrangement of the Second Front" in 1964 at the Humboldt University in Berlin.

to work for the new *Forschungsschwerpunkt Zeitgeschichtliche Studien* (later *Zentrum für Zeitgeschichtliche Forschung*) led by prominent West German historian Jürgen Kocka in Potsdam. Here he stayed until 1994 when he was exposed as a former *Inofizieller Mitarbeiter* (IM) for the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (MfS or Stasi) and was dismissed. In 1995 Groehler passed away. During his last years as an historian he was repeatedly attacked by West German as well as East German dissident historians for his political complicity with the GDR state.

The exact nature of Groehler’s involvement with the repression of the GDR dictatorship and the Stasi, however, is complicated. Approached by the Stasi in 1957, he was asked as “IM Ferdinand” to spy on fellow students and colleagues at the military publishing agency *Militärverlag*, where he worked as a lector. The reports stress that Groehler was clearly “frightened” when the secret agents made clear that they wanted his intelligence on an “interest group” of students, who had recently begun to study the history of Stalinism. While providing the Stasi with some details on the opinions of other students, his information was considered to be of little use to the secret service. In spite of repeated pressure, Groehler’s attitude made it clear to the Stasi that he felt uncomfortable in his position, and was


consciously reluctant to give information. Groehler avoided confrontations with the agents and repeatedly failed to show up for appointments. After leaving the Militärverlag in 1960 for a position at the Akademie der Wissenschaften, he openly stated that he did not want to continue to cooperate and was relieved from his duties.403

In the mid-1970s, when Groehler had become an important historian at the ZIG and increasingly visited military archives in Western countries, the contacts were revived. Groehler became a member of the SED in 1969 and, after having functioned as a “contact person” for some years, in 1984 Groehler was once again appointed as an IM, now under the name “Ernst”. The MfS regarded him as one of the most productive members of his institute and also as “politically reliable” and an “excellent propagandist”, who as one of the few GDR citizens, who had access to West German military archives, could be of great value to the foreign intelligence. Groehler had to report regularly on his foreign visits and his meetings with Western colleagues.404 In these reports Groehler mainly commented on the political attitudes and academic opinions of foreign colleagues and the workings of institutes. He concentrated on political and academic opportunities of cooperation between East and West German historians. As in his earlier days, he showed a certain reluctance to report deviant behavior or compromising information about his East German colleagues.405

404 See: Vorschlag zur Werbung eines IM, 15-12-1983, MfS AIM/17697/91 Bd. 3, folder 163-218 and Werbungsbericht, 29-4-1984, Ibid., folder 156-157. Groehler’s official assignment was to gather information on Western academics during conferences, their attitudes towards the GDR and its academic institutes, as well as the relationship between East and West German academics.
405 Nicknamed “Ernst”, Groehler was IM for the Haubtabteilung XVIII/5, which his fellow-informants in the ZIG were also part of. On the balance between internal control
Nevertheless, reports on dissenting colleagues were not absent from his works for the Stasi. Groehler’s involvement in the Stasi illustrates that he was strongly integrated into the political and academic system of the GDR. Groehler made a successful academic and political career and being Reisekader, he was allowed to travel abroad and visit archives and conferences in Western Europe. Not only was Groehler Reisekader, one of his main responsibilities as deputy-acting director was the coordination of the foreign travel of the institute’s associates. Because he was the one who gave permission to travel and organized funds, he had influence on the travel possibilities of his colleagues. As a party member and Parteiseketär he was clearly a historian who not only conformed to the regime, but also represented the political conformity of the GDR academic climate. Groehler was convinced of the interdependence and inseparability of politics and history, and also applied political pressure on colleagues, who did not share this view. For example, in a speech to his colleagues at the ZIG in 1981 he emphasized the need to conform to the party politics, of which “especially the neutral (parteilose) associates” had to be convinced.

Moreover, as deputy acting director of the ZIG, Groehler was responsible for administrating the foreign travel of the members of his institute. His position of

of colleagues and the reports on foreign academics among Groehler’s fellow IM in the Hauptabteilung XVIII/5, see the conclusion drawn by Martin Sabrow for the 1950s and ’60’s. Sabrow concludes that while the MfS mainly demanded that the IM focus on internal political attitudes within the ZIG, the informants emphasized their relationship with Western historiography, mostly out of their personal initiative. Martin Sabrow, Das Diktat des Konsenses. Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR 1949-1969, ed. Dietrich Beyrau, Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, and Lutz Raphael, Ordnungssysteme. Studien zur Ideengeschichte der Neuzeit. Band 8 (München: 2001) 157-182. In the case of Groehler, it is clear that also from the side of the MfS, his interaction with West German military archives and the MGFA were the primary starting point for his activities, as this was emphasized in his assignment. Vorschlag zur Werbung eines IM, 15-12-1983, MfS AIM/17697/91, Bd. 3, folder 163-218.

406 For example in 1984, Groehler reported on a conflict between two associates the “political-ideological stability of his institute”. But again, here Groehler tended to emphasize the political reliability of his colleagues. MfS AIM/17697/91, Bd 2. folder 121-123.

approving travel applications made him a powerful man in the institute, whose opinion on the political credibility of his colleagues had consequences for their academic possibilities. The MfS files also reflect a certain strategic behavior by Groehler, especially considering the travel possibilities and academic exchange of the researchers of his institute with the West. His politically relevant reports on his visits to important West German historians, conferences and institutes ensured him of a certain freedom to travel and build up an international network. Also, Groehler used his cooperation with the Stasi to represent the interest of his department by addressing the difficulties of East German academics travelling abroad. According to Groehler, his associates faced unnecessary and excessive controls and interrogations about their contacts by the GDR.408

The MfS reports as well as his academic interests and attitude shows that Groehler had a strong interest in a serious academic exchange and made efforts to avoid the stereotypical and shallow historical propaganda that had characterized SED politics of the past. From the mid-1960s on Groehler, while carefully avoiding confrontations with the SED regime, looked for the margins within the system to take part in serious international academic discussions and avoid mere propagandist perspective on history. On more than one occasion Groehler made efforts to find ways to discuss sensitive subjects, especially since the mid 1980s, when the changed political climate allowed some space to discuss previously taboo topics such as the conservative resistance and 20 July 1944 and by 1989 even the Molotov-Ribbentropp agreement of 1939.409 Groehler’s attitude as an historian was

408 Note by “Ernst” (undated) MfS AIM/17697/91, Bd.2, folder 87-88.
409 See for example: Olaf Groehler, “Miszellen. Die Erforschung der Geschichte des zweiten Weltkrieges. Stand und Aufgaben,” Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft 33, no. 4 (1985) 316-322. Here Groehler called for a positive reevaluation of 20 July 1944 and of new developments in West German social history. Especially the work of historians like Hans Mommsen, according to Groehler brought a “more differentiated and realistic” perspective
characterized by an interest in serious participation in an international academic discussion, a feeling shared by many of his colleagues of the ZIG.

The case of Olaf Groehler illustrates the difficulty of deciding in retrospect how to value modern historical research in the GDR. After 1990 Groehler made strong efforts to adapt to the new situation and published several critical articles on the deficits in East German historiography and memory culture, especially the lack of interest in the Holocaust and the Jewish victims of Nazism. With regard to his personal role, Groehler later claimed that in spite of the very clear political limitations GDR historians had to work under, he himself had always made an effort to write history “as close to the truth as possible”. In order to continue to the “bürgerlichen Geschichtsschreibung” of the Federal Republic. Groehler also published his views on 1944 in several print media outlets such as Neues Deutschland in June 26, 1984 and on the East German radio on July 18, 1984. During an international conference in West Berlin on 21-23 August 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Communist system, Groehler was also one of the GDR historians who carefully began discussing the Stalin-Hitler pact of 1939 in the context of the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War. During an international conference organized by the West German Historische Kommission zu Berlin Groehler debated the origins of the Second World War with West German historians like Klaus Hildebrand and Eberhard Jäckel, and also briefly referred to the Pact between Hitler and Stalin. A few days later in East Berlin Groehler organized a similar conference, where according to an internal report of the ZIG, over several issues, like the Hitler-Stalin pact “a free discussion” took place, even though the report soothingly concluded, the “ensured conclusions of renowned East German historians were shared by the large part of the audience”. See the report dated 19-1-1990, ABBAW/ZIG/106. Also see: “Tagungsbericht. Die Entfesselung des Zweiten Weltkrieges und das internationale System,” Informationen der Historischen Kommission zu Berlin, no. 15 (1990) 4-10. Groehler’s unpublished paper for the conference of 21-8-1989, a “Fragespiegel” of the radio interview on 20 July (9-7-1984) and revised concepts for articles on 1944 and the Hitler-Stalin pact in: private collection heirs Olaf Groehler.


411 For examples of Groehler’s discussions about GDR historiography and Groehler’s own position see: Ulrich Herbert and Olaf Groehler, eds., Zweierlei Bewältigung. Vier Beiträge über den Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit in den beiden deutschen Staaten (Hamburg: 1992); Schroeder and Staadt, “Die Kunst des Aussitzens” 351-353. Groehler’s IM allegations are also mentioned and Groehler is characterized as an active member of the SED oppression; Also in 1994, Groehler defended his position in discussion platforms and the like: Ralf
writing academic history, Groehler argued, the GDR historians had been forced to operate within the framework of the dictatorship. In practice this meant that they had to be “inconsequent”. They had to ignore crucial politically undesirable questions, while at the same time trying to write as truthfully as possible about their historical subjects.\textsuperscript{412} His West German friend and colleague Lutz Niethammer backed up this interpretation. Niethammer calls Groehler a “\textit{realpolititischer Diplomat des Geistes}” who engaged in “continual tightrope act” of keeping the authorities satisfied, while at the same time trying to create an open academic discussion within the boundaries of what was possible.\textsuperscript{413} Considering Groehler’s active role in enforcing the “political stability” in his institute, this might be too euphemistic. But at least it is clear that he was by no means considered to be a dissident. Groehler made an academic and political career, published a vast number of books and articles, and being \textit{Reisekader}, he was allowed to travel abroad and visit archives and conferences in Western Europe. His work was generally accepted as being the academic answer to West German historiography and was reviewed mostly positively by Groehler’s GDR colleagues.\textsuperscript{414}
Moreover, Groehler regarded history from a Marxist perspective. Like many other Eastern German historians Groehler tried to find an alternative for West German historical narratives. This Marxist philosophy of history saw the writing of history as a complementary component of the political struggle of Marxism. In Marxist historical philosophy historical insight and political interpretations were seen as two sides of the same coin. History therefore always had a political meaning and could never be regarded as something neutral. The ideal of political partiality was therefore preferred over neutral objectivity, which was seen as a naïve “bourgeois” concept that denied the real meaning of history in the class struggle. Historical publications had to fit into this struggle and were always supposed to underline a Marxist interpretation of history. The dominance of the political struggle over historical neutrality also meant that the space for different opinions and academic plurality was limited. Marxist history was meant to give a coherent perspective and inner contradictions were regarded as damaging to its political aims. Censorship and a strong “force of consensus” characterized the academic historiography in the GDR. Publications were censored and differences of opinion were often settled and muted in editorial committees. There was hardly any space for real academic debates and open discussions. Historians – and especially those who wrote about politically sensitive subjects, made careers and were allowed to travel abroad like Groehler – were strictly bound to the premises of a Marxist concept of history.

While it is important to regard Groehler from his institutional and political backgrounds, what is especially interesting for this research is the question of how Groehler’s work on the Allied bombings is to be interpreted. To what extent was

he able to develop a serious academic perspective on the bomber war and in what ways did Groehler’s accounts support or contradict the official SED memory politics? This, of course, is a very complicated matter and touches the difficult problem of determining the possibility of independent historical research within the SED dictatorship. In the first half of the 1990s this problem led to major controversies among historians from the former GDR and FRG and remains an unsolved matter. After the minor scandal surrounding Groehler’s alleged IM activities and his subsequent dismissal from his position, the question of how he is to be valued returned, although not explicitly, in various recent articles on the historiography and postwar perceptions on the Allied bombing war.

**New perspectives**

Considering his role as a prominent GDR historian Groehler’s perspective on the Allied bombings has often been regarded as a mere extension of the official SED memory politics. This perspective was dominant in the West German reception of Groehler’s work before and shortly after 1989 and recently has been represented by historians writing critically on GDR memory culture. Gilad Margalit and Thomas C. Fox pointed to Groehler to demonstrate how much even the academic historians contributed to the central “East German tropes” and SED propaganda concerning the air war and especially the bombing of Dresden.416 On the

---

other hand, the recent renewed attention to the Allied bombings has also led to a revaluation of Groehler’s work and particularly of *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland*, which was published shortly after the collapse of the GDR. Jörg Friedrich and others who express concern over the apparently limited number of serious historical accounts of the Allied bombings have praised Groehler’s work as an exception to this rule. 417 Similarly historians like Richard Overy and Dietmar Süß have also recognized *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* as an important and valuable historical account. A recent publication even characterized the book as one of the 50 “classics in German contemporary history”. 418

A closer analysis of Groehler’s work shows that these seemingly contradictory interpretations both are partly valid and not necessarily incompatible. Olaf Groehler wrote academic as well as more popular works, which becomes clear in the absence of annotation in some of his works. 419 Also, the timeframe in which

---


418 In a recent article, for example, British historian Richard Overy positively discusses Groehler’s perspective on the bombing of Dresden and stresses that Groehler was “no crude ‘cold warrior’”. Similarly Dietmar Süß praises Groehlers “central contributions” to the social history of the air war that are, in spite of Groehler’s occasional “Marxist distortions”, to be valued as serious and important research. In 2007 *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* was even elected as one of the “50 classics of contemporary history” and praised along similar lines: e.g. Friedrich, *Der Brand* 543; Overy, “The Post-War Debate” 135-136. Süß, “Erinnerungen an den Luftkrieg” 21; Dietmar Süß, “’Massaker und Mongolensturm’”. Anmerkungen zu Jörg Friedrichs umstrittenem Buch “Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 124 (2004) 521-542, here: 541; Angelika Ebbinghaus, “Deutschland im Bombenkrieg - Ein missglücktes Buch über ein wichtiges Thema,” *Sozial.Geschichte* 18, no. 2 (2003) 101-122, here: 105-106; Nicole Kramer, “Die deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft im Visier. Olaf Groehlers Klassiker der Luftkriegsforschung,” ed. Jürgen Danyel, Jan-Holger Kirsch, and Martin Sabrow (Göttingen: 2007) 209-212. Besides her praise for this “classic” Kramer however also makes note of the fact that Groehler “could not completely rid himself of old explanatory patterns”.

419 For instance *Geschichte des Luftkriegs* and *Kampf um die Luftherrschaft*, though
he researched the bombing war spans almost three decades. Starting with archives that were available in the GDR (such as the *Militärarchiv der DDR*) Groehler initially had only limited access to files that were kept in the West, while in his later work he had managed to see most relevant archives in the Federal Republic, Great Britain and the United States.\(^{420}\) The later work of Groehler therefore is often much obviously based on serious research, wholly lack annotation. In articles and in more serious works such as *Berlin im Bombenvisier* and *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutchland* Groehler did use footnotes quite precisely.

\(^{420}\) For his first publications he visited only the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz for files on the German Ministry of Finance and the Ministry for Armament and War Production. For British and American sources he had to rely on material that was made available by Anglo-American historiography, such as the “official history” by Webster and Frankland. Since the beginning of the 1980s Groehler could also include material from the FRG-Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv in Freiburg and from the Public Record Office in London and in
more richly documented and more differentiated than his earlier accounts. This is especially the case with *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland*, whose manuscript he had finished largely in the spring of 1988, but was to be published only in the Reunited Germany in 1990. Here, Groehler distanced himself cautiously from some of his former beliefs as well as from the radical propaganda, with which the SED had exploited the Allied bombings for political benefit.\(^{421}\)

Still, there is a strong continuity in Groehler’s approach to the Allied air war. Though a certain distance from his GDR past seems to be present in *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* and this work definitely is more balanced and better documented than his previous work, Groehler’s main arguments remained largely the same and are only complemented by new data and documents. Though the specific historical context of his last work should be kept in mind and certain minor developments in Groehler’s thinking can be traced, it was not essentially different from the rest of his work.\(^{422}\)

What is interesting in Groehler’s work is that he explicitly connected the importance of determining historical and causal relations and at the same time addressing problems of guilt and responsibility. Both had to be regarded in a differentiated manner, and in relationship to each other. In the introduction to


\(^{422}\) See for example review Peter Voegeli, who denounces *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* as a clear “Marxist” – and therefore completely irrelevant – historical research. Voegeli, “Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland”.

---

1982 published some key documents, which he had found there in *Berlin im Bombenvisier*. For his comprehensive and final major account (*Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland*), Groehler also included archival material from The Imperial War Museum and the National Archives in Washington. What is interesting to note is that Groehler could hardly visit every archive of all German cities that had been bombed and visited only a limited number of them. For information on casualty rates, destroyed buildings and the like he relied on the work of local historians from East and West German cities. Groehler, “Der “strategische” Luftkrieg,” e.g. 447 (footnote 26); Groehler, *Geschichte des Luftkriegs* 687-688; Groehler, *Berlin im Bombenvisier* 3, 55-97; Groehler, *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* 6.
Groehler stated: “When we look back to what German cities suffered (...) we should preserve a sense of proportion and historical perspective that has been missing here and there in heated discussions. This mainly concerns the question of cause and effect and also the question of guilt and responsibility.” This connection between the question of guilt and historical causality was central to Groehler’s approach. It resulted in a much more differentiated and elaborate depiction of the historical context of the Allied bombings than other GDR accounts of the bombing war had provided.

The relationship between Groehler’s work and earlier East German accounts is similar to Boog’s position in the Federal Republic. Like Boog, Groehler made an effort to gather factual information on military decisionmaking processes and on technical and statistic issues. Also, he looked for differentiated explanations for the air war in the context of the Second World War. Where previous accounts by Seydewitz and Weidauer addressed the development of air war theory and practice only marginally, Groehler describes them extensively. Like Boog, Groehler traced the British strategy back to military theories of the 1920s. He saw the new concept of total war and the military theories of Guilio Douhet and Hugh Trenchard as important to the decision to undertake the bombing campaign. Contrary to the official propaganda these theoreticians had learned lessons from the First World War and had concluded that to avoid a lengthy stalemate, the enemy hinterland-rather than its military forces should be attacked by heavy bombers. By putting pressure on civilians with bombardments on their residential areas and their economic resources the enemy regime could be undermined.

Groehler emphasized that Douhet and Trenchard had foreseen that air war and strategic bombing would determine the war of the future.424 He argued that theories like these spread throughout Europe and were received positively in most countries (though not in the Soviet Union) and especially in Britain and Germany. In his major article “Der ‘strategische Luftkrieg’ Großbritanniens gegen Hitler-deutschland”, written in 1968, Groehler argued that the theoretical basis for the British concept of strategic bombing was developed after WWI. At this moment a crisis in Western military theory and the adoption of the new concept of “total war” coincided with the very fast development of military aviation. In Britain, in particular, this led to the increased belief that heavy bombers would be essential in a future war.425

Who sows the wind, reaps the storm

While here Groehler drew conclusions similar to those of Horst Boog, there was one crucial point where their interpretations parted. Groehler saw the role of the German Luftwaffe in a wholly different light. Though Groehler recognized that ideas of total warfare and strategic bombing on enemy hinterland had spread in Britain and the United States immediately after WWI, he contested the idea that the Western Allies had started mass bombings in practice. In fact this is a point that Groehler made in all his accounts on the topic. Fascist Germany started the practice of deliberate attacks on civilians. Groehler emphasized the fact that German Luftwaffe had started bombing cities in Spain, Britain, Poland and the Netherlands, before describing the British and American attacks on Germany. With

these deliberate “terror attacks” on Guernica, Warsaw, Rotterdam and Coventry the fascists had consciously crossed new boundaries of warfare and had provoked the Allies to use the same means in return. The main responsibility for the “bombing war” therefore was explicitly ascribed to fascist Germany. In *Geschichte des Luftkriegs* Groehler left no doubt regarding this point. “Because while the British commanders still shivered at the thought of bombing Germany, the Luftwaffe brought death and decay over hundreds of Polish villages, towns and cities.” The German air force had already tested the possibilities of strategic bombing when Legion Condor bombed Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, and had also initiated bombing cities at the beginning of World War II. Here Göring’s *Luftwaffe*, in addition to operative cooperation with ground troops, used “terror bombings”. According to Groehler the *Luftwaffe* followed the line of the Douhet-theory and used “terror” to put pressure on the enemy civilian population.

Groehler denied the idea, first suggested by Nazi propaganda and later often repeated by West German historians, that the German bombings had only been directed at military targets. He emphasized that the death of civilians had not been regarded as collateral damage by the *Luftwaffe*’s command, but had actually been the main target of the German bombers. “Terror bombing” had been an important strategic concept for the *Luftwaffe* that played a part not only in the attack on Poland, but also during the Battle of Britain. Groehler argues that during the air battles over British territory Germany had prepared a “ruthless terrorizing of the British people” in order to demoralize the British and force Churchill’s

426 Groehler, *Geschichte des Luftkriegs* 217. It is also on this issue that Groehler praised David Irving for “pointing to the responsibility of German fascism and militarism”. Groehler, “Der Untergang Dresdens” 557.

427 Groehler, *Geschichte des Luftkriegs* 221.
government to its knees. Also, Groehler rejected an oft-heard idea that the destruction of Rotterdam’s city centre had been the result of “tragic misunderstanding” and clearly perceived this as “planned murder”.428

By its actions, the fascist regime had “caused” the Western Allies to equally shift the moral boundaries of their bombing methods. This causality was closely connected to the question of guilt and responsibility. According to Groehler, it was the Nazi regime which by “causing” the Allied bombings was responsible for the massive deaths that followed them. To illustrate this causal connection between the fascist bombings and the Allied response Groehler often used the metaphor “who sows the wind, reaps the storm”.429 This metaphor (supposedly introduced regarding this topic by Arthur Harris when he witnessed the bombing of the London City in 1940) plays a central role in Groehler’s argument. Groehler’s use of Harris’s metaphor functions as a constant reminder that German fascism was guilty for starting the war and “unleashing” the Allied bombs.

By explicitly holding German fascists responsible for the Allied bombings, Groehler seems to dissociate himself from the official interpretation that since the 1950s had abandoned a focus on the fascist responsibility and had placed the Allied bombings outside of the context of the war against Germany. Groehler never lost sight of the historical context and military significance of the Allied air war. Not only must the Allied bombings be seen as a “reaction” of German terror-bombings, Groehler also denied the dominant idea that the Allied strategic air war against Germany had been militarily insignificant and a result of senseless rage and destructiveness. He stated that while the Allies had overestimated

428  Ibid. 242, 265. Also in: Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 13.
429  Groehler, Geschichte des Luftkriegs 284 and Groehler, Kampf um die Luftherrschaft 23, 51. Also as a chapter title in Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 15.
the outcome and effectiveness of their air forces throughout the war, it could not be denied that the attacks had significantly damaged German military and economic resources and had thus played an important role in the defeat of Germany. Groehler’s conclusion in the 1985 military historical overview *Deutschland im zweiten Weltkrieg* was therefore: “While individual sectors of the German war-industry (especially the chemical industries) were damaged severely, the Air War was not a decisive element in the Allied victory, though it was able to quicken the defeat of the fascist regime”.430

**Criticizing Weidauer**

In a partly very critical book review on Walter Weidauer’s book *Inferno Dresden* for *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* in 1965, Groehler sought to distance himself as a serious historian from some of the more radical propagandist statements and unfounded theories. Though he took Weidauer’s work seriously and praised its many informative assets and especially Weidauer’s “balanced” estimate of the death rate, Groehler also criticized Weidauer’s propagandist pamphlet in a surprisingly direct way. Groehler concluded that, while Weidauer had filled some information gaps and had introduced some interesting points of discussion, “it would have been more beneficial, if the author had expressed some of his statements in a more careful and balanced manner - in spite of all his propagandist aims”.431

---


When discussing Weidauer’s main thesis, Groehler still remained careful. He called Weidauer’s argument for the theory that the first atomic bomb was meant for Dresden “worthy of discussion”.\textsuperscript{432} At another point, though, Groehler was more explicit. It was the absence of historical context and the brusque simplification of Weidauer’s portrayal of the Allied strategic bombing war that troubled him. By reducing the British and American bombings to “a principle of criminal imperialist military strategy” Weidauer “underestimated” the important role the bombings had played as “a component of the efforts of the anti-Hitler coalition against the fascist Axis-Powers”.\textsuperscript{433} Groehler called for recognizing the importance of differentiation and chronology. He emphasized that city bombing had mainly been a British strategy and not—as was often suggested in the anti-American climate of the GDR—in the first place an American strategy. The Americans had engaged in “terror-bombing” but only relatively late.\textsuperscript{434} While a strategy that focused on military targets had initially also dominated in the British air force, from 1942 on, Bomber Command turned towards a strategy of city bombing. The objective of these bombings was to put pressure on the enemy industrial resources and on its civilian population. An important reason for this new strategy, according to Groehler, was the unwillingness and inability of the British army to open a

\textsuperscript{432} Considering the vagueness of this statement and the fact that Groehler later emphasized that “Operation Thunderclap” had never been planned to be an atomic attack, it is certainly possible that Groehler was holding back his real thoughts here. E.g. Olaf Groehler, “Annotationen. Walter Weidauer: Inferno Dresden. Über Lügen und Legenden um die Aktion “Donnerschlag”,” Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft 33, no. 2 (1985) 187-188 and Groehler, Berlin im Bombervisier 41.

\textsuperscript{433} Groehler, “Inferno Dresden (1965)” 1447.

\textsuperscript{434} Groehler clearly had a problem with a simplistic anti-Americanism that blamed the Americans for everything and completely negated their military contribution to the war against Hitler. This also is reflected in his relatively mild and almost friendly descriptions of American politicians like Roosevelt. In his review, Groehler criticizes Weidauer for insufficiently differentiating between the “militant anti-communist” Churchill and “personalities like Roosevelt and Morgenthau”: Ibid. 1447.
“Second Front” in Western Europe, for which the British had sought to compensate by the bombing offence. This way they could make clear not only to Hitler, but also to their ally Stalin that they had at their disposal a strong offensive weapon.\footnote{Groehler, “Der “strategische” Luftkrieg” 444-445.}

After Hitler’s failed attempts of the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, the danger of a possible German invasion in England had disappeared. The British army and armament industry could recover, and from then on it increasingly focused on the production of heavy bombers. With this offensive weapon England could demonstrate that it was seriously contributing to the victory over Hitler, without the risk of losing relatively many soldiers in battle. Moreover, according to Groehler, “certain circles” in the British military also wanted to punish the Germans for supporting Hitler. After the bombing of Hamburg during Operation Gomorrah, this strategy of bombing city centers was perfected. The strategy of city bombing was for a while abandoned to prepare and support the Allied invasion in Normandy. When the Western Front and the Allied achievements came to a halt, the British and later also the Americans again turned to the method of massive “terror-bombings” in the fall of 1944, actions that came to a climax in the bombing offensive of 1945. These bombings were in their very essence “inhumane, terrorist and aimed at people”.\footnote{Ibid. 444-446.}

By eventually classifying the Allied bombings as inhumane and terrorist, Groehler expressed a clear condemnation of the bombings. Especially in his descriptions of the final phase of the bombing war from the fall of 1944 onwards, Groehler also used language and terminology that wholly corresponded with the propaganda language of the official SED discourse. When writing about the
city bombings of the Western Allies, Groehler continuously used such adjectives as “barbaric” and “terrorist”. The bombing of Dresden was described as a “massacre from the skies”. The terminology in his post-1989 work remained similarly vivid. The memorandum from November 1942 in which Bomber Command declared that the bombing of German civilians would become the central aim of British bombing raids, according to Groehler, was a “vision of horror”. Britain had tried to win the war with “massive terror”, a strategy that had proven to be of very limited effect. Although effects on German morale by 1945 certainly were evident, Groehler stated that a concentration on German armament and industrial resources would have delivered considerably better military results.

By describing the bombings with this terminology, Groehler clearly integrated the language of the official discourse into his academic work. However, this did not mean he had lost his sense of historical differentiation. While denouncing this specific element in first German, then British and later American strategy, Groehler did not think that the British and American air war and their bombings in general were to be condemned as “terror”. His accusative language was used specifically to emphasize the increasing importance of the focus on civilian morale and city centers in British air war strategy. Groehler pointed at vital documents of the Bomber Command air staff, which showed that from 1942 on, Bomber Command had focused on city centre bombing in order to cause maximum damage to the German civilian population to break their morale. Groehler used the word “terror” to describe the character of this theory and of the final phase of the

---

437 Groehler, Geschichte des Luftkriegs 458; Groehler, “Der "strategische" Luftkrieg,” 446, 450.
438 Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 294-300.
439 For example see the documents Groehler printed in the appendix of Groehler, Groehler, Berlin im Bombervisier 55-97.
bomiting war, in which the theory of massive city bombing to cause massive terror was realized. Since the mass killing of civilians had been a strategic starting point, according to Groehler, they could be described as “murder” and “massacre”.

This combination of historical nuance and moral judgment meant that Groehler also remained relatively reluctant to express general moral accusations. Though he called the bombings “barbaric”, Groehler also pointed out that these actions had to be seen within a “broader political framework”. The Allies were confronted with an opponent that had unleashed a “total war” and had consciously provoked the bombing of its own cities. “This does not really justify the principle (of city bombing, BvBB); but it delineates the unique historically irrefutable framework”.440

This approach also had consequences for the “historical actors” involved. However critical Groehler was of the plans, ideas and decisions of Allied strategists like Churchill and Harris, he was quite reluctant to pass direct moral judgment on them individually. Groehler warned that simplistic moral accusations aimed at individuals held the danger of an overly simplistic intentionalist historical perspective. Also it ignored the efforts of these men to win the war against Germany. The moral position of individuals had to put into perspective when it came to the bomber-crews that executed the massive bombings in practice. Groehler defended their position by stressing that: “The pilots (...) did this in the conviction that by bombing military targets and armaments industry they contributed to the justified warfare of the anti-Hitler coalition and that this would shorten the war”.441


441 Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 14.
Imperialist Air War Doctrine

Groehler’s apparent distance from Weidauer—who was broadly considered to be the authority on the bombing of Dresden—comes across as something quite remarkable and should be explained more explicitly. The question is, whether Weidauer’s lack of objectivity and his ahistorical political standpoints were really fundamentally questioned by Groehler. On closer look, it is clear that Groehler’s emphasis on “German guilt” and his call for historical differentiation did not mean that he dissociated himself from a Marxist perspective on history. A key aspect in better understanding Groehler’s position can be found, by looking more closely at his theoretical approach and at his concept of “guilt” and “responsibility”. For all Groehler’s emphasis on German guilt and the causal connections regarding the initiative of terror-bombings, this is not where his conclusions on responsibility end. Reading his work more carefully makes it clear that Groehler’s reluctance to make general accusations aimed at American and British air forces or even at certain individuals like Harris and Churchill, is somewhat misleading. While they suggest a remarkably balanced and distanced standpoint, it is questionable whether this impression means that Groehler also abandoned the principles of Marxist history writing.

This becomes clear when we regard the role of the main historical actors in Groehler’s narrative. Groehler ascribed the responsibility for the massive and “murderous” bombing of German cities in the final phase of the war not only to the fascists, but also to those who had pursued and promoted the use of “terror-bombing” within the British and American army and government. What is interesting is that this responsible “group” remains almost entirely anonymous. Instead of pointing the finger at individuals he rather refers to “certain circles”,

238
“reactionary groups” or “specific elements of imperialist warfare”. Although between the lines it becomes clear that at least people like Harris, Churchill and Portal were part of these “circles”, the vagueness of this terminology seems to be chosen with care.

It reveals that there was another and perhaps more important reason why Groehler was reluctant to accuse individuals. Groehler wanted to illuminate that these individuals operated within a certain “political framework”. When discussing Churchill and Harris, whom he clearly condemned, Groehler did not so much want to deny their individual responsibility for the planning and execution of the bombing war. Groehler’s point was that their strategy was not a result of personal hatred or ruthlessness, as was sometimes suggested. These decision makers in the Western Allied forces wanted to win the war against Germany, but they also had a more far-reaching political agenda.

This political agenda was determined by the politics of “imperialism”. Groehler’s use of the concept of “imperialism” is key to his explanation of the Western Allied warfare. This Marxist concept categorized different non-socialist systems under the same denominator. Capitalism and fascism therefore were seen as two related forms of society and states. While Western European and American states were seen as examples of “bourgeois imperialism”, fascism was seen as a more aggressive form. This did not mean that “Western bourgeois imperialism” and “German fascist imperialism” were seen as natural allies or that they could not be in competition or even at war. But by their oppressive nature, their anti-

442 Groehler, “Der “strategische” Luftkrieg” 446; Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 338, 391.
443 See e.g. Groehler, “Der “strategische” Luftkrieg” 443. Groehler refers to the work of Irving, who sees Churchill’s personal motivations as an important driving force behind the British air strategy.
socialism and by the fact that their inner dynamics were created and dominated by Big Industry, they were essentially connected.

In the central theoretical premise of his work, Groehler argued that the German as well as the British and American bombing strategies were grounded in an “imperialist air war doctrine”. This imperialist doctrine differed “fundamentally” from “socialist” strategy, because it accepted the use of terror against civilians as a legitimate method of warfare.444 While it was significant that German fascists had started the practice of this doctrine the Western Allies came to use same concept in the course of the war. By stressing the “humanity” and “tactical premise” of the Soviet Air force Groehler evoked a propagandist and affirmative perspective on the Soviet Army and ignored the often savage and brutal practices that the Soviet forces had demonstrated on a massive scale during their advance on German territory. This dichotomy between Soviet and “imperialist” methods also resulted in the situation that the Western Allies and Nazi Germany eventually were portrayed as two sides of the same “imperialist” coin. Along the way the Western Allies had descended to the moral depths of fascism. The “reactionary” circles in the Allied Army, politics and industry but above all, “imperialism” as an abstract political entity, had determined British and American war strategy.445


445 Groehler, “Inferno Dresden (1965)” 1447; Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 180, 227, 336-338, 391. Even after 1989 Groehler kept, apart from some minor corrections, to this interpretation. In a somewhat schizophrenic manner Groehler criticized the way in which the “political abuse” of this topic in East Germany had “undifferentiatedly interpreted the bombing war as an overall expression of imperialist violence” and had “equaled dollar sign and swastika”. Groehler corrected some of his previous interpretations, such as the accusation that the British and Americans had deliberately bombed Eastern Germany more extensively than the West to damage and sabotage the future Soviet Zone of Influence. His theoretical starting point and central approach however underlined exactly this interpretation of the Allied bombing war as an example of “Imperialist warfare”. Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 393, 450.
The role of certain individuals could therefore be morally wrong, but they could never be made wholly responsible for the dynamics of “imperialist” politics. It was the “system” that generated immoral methods of warfare and provided “fanatics” like Arthur Harris with a framework in which they could pursue their radical ideas. In his valuation of the role of Arthur Harris and Winston Churchill in the British war strategy Groehler’s focuses on this relationship between “individuals” and the “political framework”: “Harris was not the creator of the new strategy of area bombing, but the qualified executor (...) who undisturbed by criticism or objections and in spite of the severe losses and sacrifices the crews of Bomber Command had to endure, (...) stuck to his conviction that the bomber would decide the war in favor of the British empire”. And while Groehler saw Churchill as one of the most important representatives of reactionary imperialism and a supporter of immoral methods of war, he concluded: “Sympathies and antipathies of a bourgeois statesman are by no means sufficient to explain the phenomenon of the air war, because it eventually was determined by forces that root in the domain of politics and economics”.

A social history of German victims?

In many ways Olaf Groehler was the first German historian to extensively address the social impact of the bombings on the German population. In a lengthy sec-

---


447 Groehler, “Der “strategische” Luftkrieg” 443. Groehler’s criticism of Churchill nevertheless was very strong. This was especially the case when Churchill’s call to examine the possibility of the use of gas and biological weapons was mentioned. See: Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 330-334.

448 This is the main reason why Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland was labelled as one of the 50 “classics” in contemporary German history. See: Kramer, “Die deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft”.
tion of *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* Groehler described various aspects of “life under the hail of bombs”. Often focusing on subjects that had received little attention previously and employing many new source materials, *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* has been rightly regarded as a pioneering work. Groehler addressed the development and mechanisms of air protection, sirens, and the building of air shelters and bunkers as well as the regime’s attempts to “manage” the air war, by organizing evacuation and housing programs and attempts to compensate Germans who had lost homes and goods. Also, Groehler problematized the possibilities of analyzing German morale. 

*Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* used secret SD reports and other official reports on the opinions of Germans to reflect both on the attitudes of Germans as well as on the regime’s attempts to find ways to influence them. Groehler came to a nuanced analysis of these attitudes and pointed out fluctuations and differences. First, Groehler challenged the assumption that Nazi propaganda had managed to mobilize feelings of hatred among the Germans towards the Allies. Though the propaganda campaigns indeed managed to provoke an increase in negative feelings towards the Allies, this did not lead to a substantial growth in solidarity with the regime or a stronger will to resist, due to strong feelings of hatred of the Allies. Groehler pointed out that the reactions to the bombings were far more differentiated and also varied among different regions. The calls for retaliation, Groehler argued, were often stronger in regions that had not experienced heavy raids themselves, whereas the bombings also provoked a questioning of

---

449 Groehler also reflected on the methodological limitations of determining morale, stressing that it “cannot be precisely determined, neither qualitatively nor quantitatively”. Groehler, *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* 294-295.

Luftwaffe raids by Germans who had been affected by bombings. Groehler concluded that the strongest moral effects had been achieved in 1943, when the heavily intensified bombing coincided with the defeat of the German Army in Stalingrad and the collapse of the Mussolini regime in Italy.

Groehler stressed that especially after the bombing of Hamburg in the summer of 1943 a general gap between German public attitudes and private opinions began to manifest itself. While in public the will to survive was trumpeted, in private fear, resignation and fatalism dominated. Groehler also illustrated the few cases in which bombing indeed had led to more than private resignation and fatalism. He pointed out that under the “collision of different extraordinary circumstances, which increased in the final phase of the war, this passive attitude broke”. After an attack on Munich-Freimann, mass panic broke out after air warnings. Due to the lack of air shelters in this part of town, the inhabitants repeatedly fled the neighborhood and the fear and panic over the lack of protection was accompanied by fierce criticism of the party and local authorities. After the attacks on Vienna in February 1945, the atmosphere was tense and small-scale riots broke out among workers, who expressed their explicit hostility towards the Nazi leaders and directly blamed them for the Allied bombings. Though these examples remained exceptions, Groehler argued that they represented extreme cases of a general resignation and war fatigue.

In spite of certain innovative aspects in his approach, there is also a strong continuity in the way the German civilians were presented as “historical actors”. Though Groehler continuously stressed the fascist “guilt” for starting the bomb-

---

451 Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 296-297.
452 Ibid. 296-303.
ing war, this “guilt” and “responsibility” hardly seemed to apply to the “German people” in general. In his work they appear as “double victims” of fascism and imperialism once more. Though he continuously emphasized that the “Germans had started” the war, Groehler’s actual focus was entirely on German suffering and Allied bombings. In his accounts Luftwaffe bombings were only briefly addressed, and their criminal nature described in only one or two sentences, while the backgrounds and effects of the Allied bombings were given lengthy descriptions.

In Groehler’s work the political concept of fascism became a coercive force that was imposed by the “fascist and imperialist” elites on the German people. The “normal Germans” subsequently were absolved from responsibility for the fascist rule. The German civilians appear as puppets through whom the imperialists played their sick games, not in any way as members of the NSDAP, collaborators or as administrative associates of the fascist state. Instead their status as victims is confirmed in various ways.

First, the Germans civilians and especially the German workers became victims of false expectations of the impact the bombings would have on their morale. The Western Allies put the Germans under increased pressure to bring about a revolt. However, the Germans were so tightly controlled by the fascist terror regime that political resistance was not a realistic option any more. The bombings left the German civilians “no way out of the imperialist war” and made them even more dependent on the fascist state. As a result, the Germans reacted with “passivity, lethargy and fatalism” and had to endure the horrors of the bombings powerlessly.\footnote{Groehler, \textit{Kampf um die Luftherrschaft} 218-219; Groehler, \textit{Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland} 294-295.}
Secondly, the Germans became victims of the cynical policy of the Nazi administration. Groehler stressed that the Nazis had provided the German civilians with totally insufficient air protection. Air shelters and bunkers held too little space and were opportunistically claimed by party members. Moreover, the authorities deliberately falsified and withheld crucial information about the bombings, and left the civilian population unprepared and uninformed. Thus the Nazi authorities had knowingly contributed to the enormous scale of destruction and killing.\textsuperscript{454}

Finally, by the time that the Allied leaders had lost their belief in a victory brought about by “morale bombing” the Germans civilians had become the victim of anti-communist actions. The imperialist struggle for political dominance in Germany had made the German population into a plaything. Groehler concluded: “Under the perspective of a strategy that was focused on the postwar period, the German Hinterland came to act as an experimental ground, in which the German population played the part of a laboratory animal”.\textsuperscript{455}

While the Germans became victims of different factors: strategic miscalculations and anti-communist power plays in addition to the terror and malfunctioning of the Nazi state, what remained constant was the “victim status” of the German people. The people that were bombed were not responsible for their fate: they were innocent. This judgment was constantly present in Groehler’s work on an implicit level and sometimes was expressed more directly. When discussing the question whether the German people were “punished” for the Nazi crimes, Groehler dismissed the responsibility of the Germans altogether. Rhetorically Groehler asked: “Because if the unlimited area bombings were supposed to

\textsuperscript{454} E.g. see: Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 140, 205.
\textsuperscript{455} Ibid. 391.
be retaliation for these immense crimes (of the extermination camps BvBB) who exactly was it that was being punished? Was it the SS-executioners from Maidanek, Treblinka or Auschwitz or the profit-making directors of IG Farben, who literally made capital of the sweat, blood and death of the concentration-camp prisoners?”.456 This quotation reveals Groehler’s view of the status of the “normal Germans” living in the cities that were bombed by the Allies. These were not the brutal SS men and capitalist profit-makers that together had enabled the rise of the Nazi state. These were innocent victims, who suffered disproportionately and submitted to their fate passively.

The question therefore is, whether a more differentiated perspective on the social responses to Allied bombings basically challenged the victim-centered perspective that had dominated German historiography on the theme. As we have seen, though adding essential differentiations and nuance, following a perspective still dominant in the historiography of the air war, Groehler depicted the Germans largely as a collective of victims.457 Not only in his military-historical analysis but also in his approach to the social impact of the bombings, he concentrated on their passive position. The Germans described here were subject to Nazi pol-

456  Ibid. 378.
457  This, however, was also the case for other studies concentrating on the impact of the bombings. Though differentiated in its moral judgment of Allied strategy, Earl Beck’s Under the bombs still strongly focused on the Germans as stereotypical victims. Beck stressed the passiveness of the Germans by showing them as “prisoners of Nazi ideology” and even suggested a Holocaust comparison similar to that given by Jörg Friedrich, by stressing in a chapter title that in its intensifying phase bombing was “achieving Holocaust”. Earl R. Beck, Under the bombs. The German home front 1942-1945 (Lexington: 1986) 26, 30, 55. And a similar suggested comparison in an earlier article: Earl R. Beck, “The Allied Bombing of Germany, 1942-1945, and the German Response: Dilemmas of Judgement,” German Studies Review 5, no. 3 (1982) 325-337. It is therefore not surprising that Beck wrote a relatively positive review of Groehler’s Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland, stressing that the book “comes very close to the designation of ‘definitive study’”. Though Beck made some critical remarks, he did not address Groehler’s thesis that the final phase of the air war had been determined by anti-Soviet politics: Earl R. Beck, “Review. Olaf Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland (1990),” American Historical Review 97, no. 4 (1992) 1243-1244 1243-1244.
cies and Allied strategy, but, aside from few exceptions, did not appear as actors in their regime. Moreover, they still largely appeared as a coherent “double victim” community, in opposition to their regime. While the reactions of the Germans were differentiated, “the Germans” themselves were not. Very little attention was given to the various groups within this “community”, the regime’s opponents, different regions or even different classes. The emphasis on the passiveness of the Germans’ reactions confirmed their status as victims.  

The beginning of the Cold War

Another parallel with earlier East German accounts can be found in the temporal structure of Groehler’s narrative. While Groehler saw the strategic thinking of theorists such as Douhet and Trenchard and the beginning of the Second World War as central backgrounds for the bombing of German cities he especially focused on the final phase of the Second World War. Groehler’s interpretation of the last phase of the war shows that his notion of the “imperialist doctrine” was explicitly integrated into his historical narrative. According to Groehler the “imperialism” in British and American air strategy was expressed in the fact that the Western Allies were increasingly concerned with postwar power structures. When it became clear that the Allies were going to win the war against Germany, motives that looked beyond this war increasingly influenced Allied strategy. The main force that drove this policy was anti-communism and the desire to impose political dominance in post-war Germany.

458 Also see chapter 5. For examples, compare Groehler’s account to Blank, “Kriegsalltag und Luftkrieg” 433-450.
Groehler motivated this interpretation by analyzing the development of “Operation Thunderclap”, the plan that was originally meant as a massive attack on Berlin and is generally seen as the “blueprint” for the bombing of Dresden. Groehler argued that “Thunderclap” was supposed to have different functions. On the one hand, it was supposed to knock out Berlin as Germany’s economic, military and administrative centre. By doing so, a quick victory should be secured. With this final blow to Germany’s morale the elites and Wehrmacht generals were supposed to be forced to recognize their defeat. Since the first draft of the “Operation Thunderclap” plan was conceived only a few days before the assassination attempt on Hitler on the 20 July, the plan was also meant to bring about a quick settlement with Germany’s new military leaders. One important reason for this was that the British, in particular, wanted some form of central authoritarian rule to stay intact in Germany to prevent the danger of a socialist revolution. Another anti-communist motive was that Thunderclap was meant to be a clear demonstrative sign to Stalin. By turning Berlin into a complete wasteland the Western Allies could claim to have delivered the final blow on Germany, in spite of the fact that the real collapse of the German forces had been brought about on the Eastern Front. More importantly, Berlin would be an example of what the air forces of the Western Allies would be capable of in the future.\(^{459}\)

The joint, concentrated strike on Berlin was not put into effect. The exact timing for such an attack did not never arrived, and when the city was bombed on 3 February, the attack, though causing much damage, lacked the concentration necessary for total devastation.\(^{460}\) By February 1945 there was hardly anyone among

\(^{459}\) Groehler, *Berlin im Bombervisier* 33-42.

\(^{460}\) Groehler, *Kampf um die Luftherrschaft* 262-263.
the British or American army leaders who still believed that a final blow would cause an immediate victory. Also the plan to bomb Berlin had been postponed after the disappointing attack on 3 February. Still, the desire for a clear demonstrative act remained intact and was ferociously promoted by those “reactionary circles” that had come to the conclusion that after the war the only real opponent of “British and American imperialism” would be the Soviet Union. First Dresden and later other cities like Magdeburg and Pforzheim became the victims of this ruthless first step in the Cold War. Still in 1990 Groehler concluded that “the enormous area-bombing attacks during the spring of 1945 (...) did not only aim at a final wearing down of the (...) fascist regime, but at the same time were supposed to be a demonstration of power as well as a warning and a threat. In the first place these were aimed at the Soviet Union but also at the people of Europe (...).”\textsuperscript{461}

Interestingly (and contrary to the GDR historians and politicians who had made a similar argument) Groehler came up with convincing documents that supported his theory. Not only had an internal directive that preceded the Dresden raid mentioned that an important reason for the attack was to “show the Russians what Bomber Command is capable of”. Groehler showed that this motive had been repeatedly mentioned during the planning of Thunderclap. A draft of the “Thunderclap plan” that was prepared by the Joint Planning Staff on August, 15 1944 clearly stated that the destroyed Berlin could function as a “monument” to remind the Russian Allies of the effectiveness of the Anglo-American bomber force. When visiting Berlin the Russians would see with their own eyes what devastation the strategic bombing had caused, and “what could be repeated at any time”.\textsuperscript{462}

\textsuperscript{461} Groehler, \textit{Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland} 391.
\textsuperscript{462} Document printed (translated into German, with archival annotation to the original in the Public Records Office) in: Groehler, \textit{Berlin im Bombervisier} 83-84. Also see: Boog,
Although it was generally accepted that a desire to intimidate the Soviet Union played a role in the bombing of Dresden, in the work of Groehler this became the central argument. Groehler also saw the final phase of the bombing war as a preliminary stage of an atomic war. Though he rejected Weidauer’s theory that Dresden was supposed to have been the first target for an atomic bomb, he put the impact of the Allied strategic bombing offensive almost on the same level. Also the strategy that the Western Allies had chosen by bombing Dresden as a warning sign applied more to postwar atomic strategy than to the anti-Hitler war. Here Groehler saw the main political significance of the Allied bombings, the “many connections to the present” and the current threat of an “atomic world inferno”.

Challenging the GDR narrative?

Seen in this light Groehler’s review of Weidauer’s book and his apparent alternative academic perspective on the Allied bombings remain somewhat puzzling. Groehler seemed to be very critical in his review of Weidauer’s book. Groehler’s remarks certainly have to be placed in the context of the 1960s, when East German historians were increasingly struggling against the attempts of the SED to control academic historiography. Taking Groehler’s institute as a starting point, Martin Sabrow has described the 1960s as a period in which SED control over the academic climate of the ZIG grew and a Marxist view of history became the dominant starting point for the members of the institute. Also, especially in the years 1964 and 1965 when the SED was limiting academic exchanges with West Ger-

man historians, Marxist historians like Groehler were faced with the problem of defining East German historiography as a serious alternative.\textsuperscript{463} In this period, when Groehler had recently stopped his cooperation with the Stasi and was yet to become a member of the SED, his remarks towards Weidauer can be seen as a part of his attempts to become more outspoken. In private notes in 1964, Groehler criticized the official SED memory politics, which equaled fascism with present day capitalism.\textsuperscript{464} While such a view never found its way into his published work, Groehler was certainly critical of a simplistic propagandist approach to the history of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{465}

While such a critical view of East German colleagues would only reappear in Groehler’s publications only after 1989, it is clear that in the rest of his work during the GDR, his views seem to be remarkably differentiated and diverge from the simplistic GDR propaganda. While integrating certain elements of the official discourse he also seemed to contest, sometimes even very explicitly, dominant perspectives that portrayed the Allied bombings as generally militarily insignificant. Moreover, when coming to moral judgment, Groehler emphasized the “fascist guilt” for causing the bombing war, and at the same time put the Allied strategic considerations that led to “terror-bombing” in historical perspective.

Another indication of his relative distancing from the official propaganda is Groehler’s position towards the development of an alternative memory discourse in Dresden during the 1980s. In the beginning of the 1980s East German software engineer Matthias Neutzner, who had increasingly become interested in the his-

\textsuperscript{463} Sabrow, Das Diktat des Konsenses 318-341.
\textsuperscript{464} See the citation and interpretation of Groehler’s private notes, dated 11-10-1969 in Ibid. 322-323.
\textsuperscript{465} Groehler, “Inferno Dresden (1965)”.
tory of 13 February, had started interviewing eyewitnesses. He tried to create an exhibition of the results within the Stadtmauseum Dresden in 1985, but encountered unwillingness and was waved off. However, with the help of Groehler, who, by claiming their work was “certainly of interest” to his institute, legitimized the group’s work, Neutzner was able to found a Fachgruppe within the Kulturbund of the GDR in 1987. The Fachgruppe 13. Februar engaged in the collection of eyewitness testimonies and was now able to do so in public and with the help of newspaper ads. These interviews often showed a perspective that was very different even openly contesting the GDR propaganda of the continued imperialist threat of a “new Dresden”. Shortly before the peace demonstrations of 1989 the first exhibition of eyewitnesses to the Dresden raid was held under the title Lebenszeichen. This was continued on 13 February 1992 with a series of exhibitions that started in the Dresden Rathaus and received broad public attention.

Moreover, in cooperation with this group, Groehler initiated a conference on East and West German memory of the air war. Planned for February 1990 Neutzner and Groehler wanted to bring together East and West German historians working on local histories of Allied bombings, including Götz Bergander. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall had a clear effect on the conference. While conceived as an exchange between local historians several politicians and mayors took the conference as an opportunity for pleading for a shared East and West

German memory of the air war.\textsuperscript{469} The involvement of Groehler in the work of the \textit{Interessengemeinschaft} during the late 1980s, also indicates Groehler's interest in a depoliticized memory culture and distance from the propagandist GDR discourse.

On the other hand, a look at his work also makes it apparent that until 1990, Groehler did not try to really contest the central East German narrative, nor the political system he worked in. This becomes apparent in Groehler's career, which would not have been so successful had his work not been regarded as politically legitimate according to the official political discourse. For example, \textit{Geschichte des Luftkrieges} was not only re-issued several times, it was also used for educational purposes at German military schools.\textsuperscript{470} An annual report of the ZIG in 1983, concluded that Groehler's work had been of an increased political significance “in the light of the constantly aggravating war risk, caused by the NATO politics of armament, confrontation and provocation”.\textsuperscript{471} This only confirms how strongly Groehler's work was integrated into the official East German view on history. In earlier works as well as in \textit{Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland} Groehler explained the air war not only from the perspective of Marxist-Leninist history. He was interested in an elaborate, academic and historically founded perspective and on a limited level was prepared and able to challenge opinions of SED politicians that he perceived as short-sighted or insufficiently explanatory. On the other hand, he did not challenge the basic historical interpretations of SED memory politics, nor its

\textsuperscript{469} The program “Deutsche Städte im Luftkrieg” organized by URANIA, the ZIG and the Gesellschaft für Heimatsgeschichte on 8-2-1990 invited the mayors of Potsdam, Mainz, Würzburg, in private collection Neutzner. As will be discussed in the next chapter, in the following years the air war would become an important historical symbol for the United Germany.


\textsuperscript{471} Jahresbericht, 1983, ABBAW-ZIG, 716/1, 15.
emphasis on the current moral and political meaning of the air war.472

Groehler’s approach did not challenge the main historical and political aspects of the GDR perspective. By using the theoretical concept of an “imperialist air war doctrine” he underlined the official interpretation that saw “imperialism” as the main driving force behind war atrocities. Just like the official propaganda view Groehler interpreted “Operation Thunderclap” and the bombing of Dresden as a first step in the Cold War, but he did so in a more differentiated way and supported this assertion with far more elaborate arguments. He explained the last phase of the Allied bombings as a change of strategy from a generally legitimate attempt to win the war to a criminal phase in which senseless terror and anti-communist motives became increasingly important. A clear distinction between the “legitimate” side of the Anglo-American bombings and the final phase of terror bombing enabled Groehler to create a differentiated perspective, and at the same time integrate important elements of the dominant East German narrative.

But even though Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland, which was largely finished by 1988, reflected these views, it is Groehler’s paper, which he presented in February 1990, that shows that he quickly reacted to the political changes. In his lecture for this conference Groehler for the first time openly challenged the GDR narrative, by claiming that he believed that especially in Dresden a harmful propagandist discourse had dominated, which had led to an “equation between dollar sign and swastika”.473 Groehler’s 1990 paper is especially interesting, because

472 Further connecting the political and the historical, Groehler summarized the duties of the institute as follows: “The basic challenge of the Zentralinstitut remains to secure the necessary political and theoretical development by basic historical research on a high theoretical level and with Marxist-Leninist disputability (...) and more effectively (...) contribute to the strengthening of socialist historical consciousness”. Referat Groehler, 16-6-1981 ABBAW-ZIG 572/1c. 189-192.

much more than his book it reflected a radical change of perspective. Groehler here fully concentrated on the abuse of the history of the air war not only found among the West German “rightwing” authors, who tried to “equate Dresden and Auschwitz” but especially in the East German propaganda. A certain sense of self-criticism was implicit when the historian pointed towards GDR historiography and memory culture in general: “But were we wholly free of this? The talk of Allied war criminals and Luftgangster celebrates its harmful and poisoning renaissance in our country”. Groehler continued by claiming that he believed that in the GDR “often a self satisfied, distorted vulgar and hate-evoking use of the past” had obstructed “everyone, who wanted to do justice to” the attack on Dresden.474

In Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland, which was published in the same year, Groehler would include similar statements.475 However, here his criticisms often were contradicted by the anti-imperialist rhetoric that underlies the basic narrative of the account. What is so interesting in this paper is that Groehler not only criticized the GDR propaganda but also undermined two basic narrative elements which still dominated Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland. First, while his book still supported the idea that Dresden marked the beginning of the Cold War, Groehler now even contested this central plot by claiming that the “poisonous spirit of the Cold War had led to the assumption among some authors in the GDR and the Soviet Union, that these attacks had anticipated the confrontation between the Superpowers”. Secondly, while in his account an image of the Germans as a collective of innocent victims was still largely intact, now Groehler also termed this as a myth and drew a far more differentiated and critical conclusion. “This German

---

474 Ibid. 1-4. Groehler would make a similar argument in: Groehler, “Dresden”
475 Groehler, Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland 14, 450.
Volk had turned into a formless mass of self-centered individuals, who remained true to the authorities, partly out of fear, partly out of conviction, partly out of the lack of perspective”.476

4.2. Debates with the West

“Imperialistische Luftkriegshistoriker”

Groehler’s devotion to Marxist-Leninist history explains how, without trouble, Groehler was able to publish his criticism on Weidauer. However, it does not sufficiently explain why he was critical and why he was troubled by the conclusion that Weidauer’s approach was insufficiently “balanced”. Like many other East German historians, Groehler did not feel that political slogans and propagandistic discourse were able to clear the matter satisfactorily. A reason for Groehler’s emphasis on differentiation, historical context and documentation can probably be found in another constant element in GDR Marxist-Leninist historiography. The East German historical discipline perceived its own identity strongly in a constant competition with Western historiography. This competition with the “bourgeois historians” was a strong element in the self-perception of East German historians.477 Groehler’s work was aimed at these “reactionary” historians, in particu-

476 Groehler, Deutsche Städte 1-18. Also see: Groehler, “Moralbomben im Zweiten Weltkrieg” 579.
477 It is clear that Groehler strongly believed in the importance of this competition and interaction. Groehler actively devoted himself to an academic intercommunication with Western historians and, being in a position to travel and organize exchanges, was able to bring this about in practice. It is interesting to see, as is reflected in his reports to the Stasi, that Groehler clearly made a distinction between left-liberal historians such as Lutz Niethammer, Jürgen Kocka and Hans Mommsen, with whom he became friends and organized exchange projects and military historians and institutes like the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, from whom he maintained a distance. For example see Groehler’s report on a conference in Hagen in 1984, Undated report on Groehler’s visit to Hagen 6-9 December 1984, MfS AIM/17697/91 Bd. 2, folder 44-46.
lar. Groehler repeatedly and energetically devoted himself to discussions with “imperialist Air War historians”. For these discussions the more political rhetoric of Weidauer and Seydewitz was insufficient. In private notes Groehler made in 1964 he concluded that in these discussions the DDR side had rightly been scolded for its cut-and-dried opinions and lack of nuance.

In the discussion over the appropriate level on which GDR historians should engage their Western counterparts, Groehler was one of the GDR historians who wanted a serious academic debate with Western historians. Though not challenging the political relevance of the Allied bombing war he wanted the discourse with the West primarily to be based on archival research and sound arguments.

As the analysis of the discussions and debates between Groehler and his Western

---

478 E.g. Groehler, “Der “strategische” Luftkrieg” 439; Groehler, Geschichte des Luftkriegs 265.
479 See the citation and interpretation of Groehler’s private notes, dated 11-10-1964 in Sabrow, Das Diktat des Konsenses 322-323. Here Groehler even doubted the strong connection between capitalism and fascism. This seemingly very dissident thought never found its way into Groehler’s published work. Though he repeated this complaint towards GDR historiography in Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland, the use of “imperialism” as a comprehensive and inclusive concept that connected reactionary capitalism and fascism remained a central theoretical premise in his work. This evidently shows the intellectual balancing act of Groehler’s obviously not very successful attempt to integrate Marxist history into the Western academic discourse.
480 Historiography is an internal opinion concerning a planned volume on the role of the “German elites” in the planning of the Second World War. This volume, edited by Martin Broszat, was planned as a cooperation between East and West German historians on the issue of German military and social economic elites and their role in the Third Reich. Groehler was one of the GDR historians who had to give his advice on the possible publication of this volume. While Groehler was critical of some East German articles, which failed to give satisfying counterweight to the West German interpretations, and felt that Broszat’s explicit polemic against East German historiography was “unacceptable” and should be more clearly be answered with an East German response. Eventually, Groehler vouched in favor of the publication in both the Federal Republic and GDR. His final opinion was that “the political and academic advantages of such a volume appear to be larger than the unavoidable losses”. However, the volume would eventually fall victim to East German censorship and appeared without the contributions of the GDR historians. See: “Stellungnahme zum Sammelband “Deutsche Eliten” von Historikern aus der DDR und der BRD zum 50. Jahrestag der Entfesselung des zweiten Weltkrieges, 22.12.1988 in private collection heirs Olaf Groehler. Also see Broszat’s sharp criticism of this act of censorship in: Martin Broszat, “Erfolg und Scheitern eines deutsch-deutschen Zeitgeschichts-Dialogs,” in Die deutschen Eliten und der Weg zum Zweiten Weltkrieg, ed. Martin Broszat and Klaus Schwabe (München: 1989) 7-24.
colleagues will elaborate more specifically, it can be assumed that Groehler’s critical distance from Weidauer’s book and from the more propagandistic aspects of official GDR memory politics can be primarily explained by his focus on an academic debate with the West. The East German historical discipline perceived its own identity strongly in a constant competition with Western historiography. This competition with the “bourgeois historians” was a strong element in the self-perception of East German historians.

Groehler’s work can be understood in the context of his discussions with what he called “imperialist Air War historians”. As his work and his numerous essays and reviews on Western historiography illustrate, Groehler energetically devoted himself to the critical discussion of “Western” accounts of the Allied bombings by historians and publicists such as Spetzler, Rumpf, and Irving. By criticizing their positive perspective on the Luftwaffe and the tendency to deny the terrorist nature of bombings of Rotterdam and Warsaw, Groehler accused Western historians of ignoring and denying Germany’s “main guilt” for the introduction of terror bombing into the war. He sharply criticized historians like Rumpf and Spetzler for making fundamental moral distinctions between the Luftwaffe and the Allied air arracks. Strongly politicizing the work of West German historians, Groehler stated that their perspective on the Luftwaffe should be regarded as rhetoric of a “neofascist” movement in the Federal Republic. For him, these works only served a nationalist apology for the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe.

On the other hand, he felt that many English and American accounts and
such West German exceptions as Götz Bergander’s *Dresden im Luftkrieg* did exactly the opposite and tended to make excuses for the Anglo-American bombings and that denied their “terrorist” nature.\(^{483}\) By differentiating these Anglo-American and West German dominant views Groehler claimed an intermediate position for himself that was supposed to emphasize his distanced and academic point of view. Groehler was convinced that the tendency of other historians to apologize for either Anglo-American imperialism or fascist imperialism was a strong force distorting the academic interpretations of the bourgeois historians. He wanted to counter these distortions, not by simplistic propaganda but by historical and academic arguments based on a Marxist-Leninist historical perspective.

*Boog and Groehler*

West German historians like Boog and Bergander criticized Groehler in turn. In *Dresden im Luftkrieg* Bergander contested Groehler’s argument that the Dresden raid represented anti-Soviet politics, an argument he attributed to the anti-imperialist propaganda of the GDR. Bergander stressed that the Soviet Army was aware and approved of the British-American plans to bomb transportation centers near the Eastern Front. While, like Irving before him, Bergander found no evidence of an explicit demand from the Soviet side, he stressed that the bombing at least was part of a strategy to support the Soviet army in the East, and not intended to sabotage its advance, as was suggested by Groehler in *Geschichte des Luftkrieges*.\(^{484}\)

But it was Horst Boog who repeatedly challenged Groehler’s perspective. In


\(^{484}\) Bergander, *Dresden* 222-235.
a review of *Geschichte des Luftkrieges* Boog countered Groehler’s attack on West German historiography, by denying Groehler any academic value whatsoever. For example, Boog stressed that Groehler’s decision not to include academic references had given him the freedom to set his prejudices free. The book was a textbook example of the “obligatory act of propaganda” typical for academic publications from the “East bloc”. In a general attack on GDR historiography, Boog concluded that it was “especially in the Federal Republic, where today a free and critical-academic military history was being written, which had not, as in *Mitteldeutschland* degenerated to a compliable weapon” in a political-ideological struggle with the West.485

This would be the beginning of a long dispute, in which Boog and Groehler contested each other’s main arguments and narrative. From the late 1970s Boog and Groehler repeatedly met at international conferences.486 During these meetings and in reviews and articles the Cold War debate of the 1950s was repeated in a more academic form. This became especially apparent during an international conference on the “conduct of the air war” organized by Boog in Freiburg in 1988. For this conference, Boog invited Groehler and suggested that he would address the Soviet air war. In his reply, in which Groehler accepted the invitation, however, he insisted on taking part in Boog’s panel on “air war and humanity.”487 While Boog once more stressed that until 1942 the *Luftwaffe* had refrained from terror attacks, Groehler presented himself as the critical historian, who, unlike his

---

486  According to Boog in an interview with the author, the first encounter was during a conference in 1978 in Helsinki. Groehler stated that he had known Boog “since the late 1970s”. E.g. Bericht 10-9-1988, MIS A/M/17697/91, Bd.2 folder 345 ff.
West German colleague, acknowledged German guilt. Obviously aiming at Boog, Groehler concluded in his paper, that as before there was a “group of historians” in the Federal Republic, “who tried to deny the historical responsibility of Nazism for starting the terror bombing war”.\footnote{Groehler, “The Strategic Air War” 281.} While not explicitly citing him, it is apparent that Groehler here implicitly criticized Boog, who in his paper had made the point that the \textit{Luftwaffe} bombings of Warsaw, Rotterdam and Coventry had not been terror raids.\footnote{In general it can be concluded that while Boog reviewed and cited Groehler, Groehler only indirectly reacted to Horst Boog’s work.}

Groehler did not by any means regard this conference, organized by an academic department linked to the West German \textit{Bundeswehr}, as a “neutral” academic event. He expressed his sensitivity for the political dimension of his visit to the conference in a lengthy report he wrote for the Stasi. He stressed that for the participating NATO officers, the main perspective was that of what a future air war would look like. Also, Groehler reported extensively on the different political and military attitudes among the participants, who included not only British, American and French and West German military officers but also several former members of the fascist \textit{Luftwaffe}. It was especially among these \textit{Luftwaffe} officers that Groehler saw a strong continuity of nationalist attitudes. “Whether they were discussing the fascist \textit{Luftwaffe} or the Air Force of the \textit{Bundeswehr}, they were only talking of “we”. In other words: in an unaltered mentality and tradition”. While Groehler concluded that a group of young West German officers clearly dissociated themselves from this perspective, he saw his own lecture on the air war as a politically relevant topic. “My topic”, Groehler reported, “referred directly to the effects of the bombing war on the German civilian population. Here a message
of peace could most clearly be made on the grounds of historical research”.\footnote{Bericht 10-9-1988, MfS AIM/17697/91 Bd 2, folder 345-352. Groehler’s acknowledgment and the subsequent message of “peace” gave his work the political significance that was required by his Marxist historical starting point. On the other hand, Groehler, being an East German historian was also regarded with suspicion by his West German hosts. Amused, Groehler concluded in his report that the reactions to his speech were highly interesting, because most of the participants had expected to hear a “plebian tribune” speaking. That Groehler was regarded as a possible threat to national security also becomes clear from his exclusion from the general excursion to an intelligence air squadron at the military air port of Bremgarten, a situation Groehler was neither surprised nor offended by. Also, Groehler stated that he had the “lively impression of being constantly controlled and guarded” by a “friendly gentleman” who he suspected as an West German intelligence agent.}

It is, of course, questionable, whether, as Groehler implied, this political motive was decisive in his choice for this theme. Groehler’s report, like his other reports on foreign visits, reflected in the first place what he thought the Stasi would be interested in and his reports are obviously colored by this consideration. On the other hand, it is clear that Groehler felt more comfortable in a position from which he could criticize “reactionary” West German military historians than having to directly defend Soviet military strategy. It is obvious that he interpreted Boog’s request to address the Soviet air force as an attempt to identify him with the Soviet military position, something he deliberately wanted to avoid. But it is also clear that Groehler wanted to debate the central issue of their dispute, rather than discuss an issue that had never been a central focus in his work.

*Changing sides? 1989/1990*

The polemic between Boog and Groehler was to a certain degree continued after 1989. It is interesting to see how the changed political situation affected their polemic. In a (compared to his earlier one) relatively positive review of *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* in 1992 Boog, on the one hand, praised the study as a “diverse” account with many new facts and information, but, on the other hand, empha-
sized Groehler’s entanglement in the East German political system. Highly polemic Boog labeled Groehler a “Reisekader Chef”, referring to Groehler’s privileged position, which allowed him to travel to the West. According to Boog, Groehler’s book “contained many myths and untruths about the old German Luftwaffe” and offered many views, which were “distorted by the ideological blinders of the author”. Here Boog pointed to the still very clear elements of Groehler’s theory on the “imperialist air war”. Boog also criticized other West German historians, who shared Groehler’s conclusions on the bombing of Rotterdam, Coventry and Guernica. Interestingly, it was primarily Groehler’s ideologically charged language and his ideas on the Luftwaffe that Boog criticized rather than his interpretations of the Allied air war. One of Groehler’s central arguments, however, as a Boog’s most recent publication shows, was not refuted by Boog. In discussing the planning of “Operation Thunderclap” Boog concluded that the Allies had “also wanted to demonstrate allied air power to the Soviets”.

In his critical perspective on the Luftwaffe, Groehler found West Germans, such as Klaus Maier, Manfred Messerschmidt or Götz Bergander, who shared his opinion that the Luftwaffe had initiated the conscious bombing of civilians. What is interesting about Groehler’s position in the late 1980s, however, is that, while towards the GDR colleagues and authorities he grounded his view on the air war with the argument that it served the anti-fascist ideology of the GDR, in the context of West German debate he tried to avoid this position. This is already clear

---


in his position during the Freiburg conference, where he presented himself as a critical historian who acknowledged German guilt. But especially in his critical reflections on the *Luftwaffe* and on the way the history of the air war had been distorted in the light of memory politics in East and West he successfully could adjust his views to a more critical West German perspective on the air war, which was represented by historians like Bergander, but also by military historians as Klaus Maier and Manfred Messerschmidt. For example, while Groehler in *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland* still criticized Bergander’s work as an attempt to legitimize the “imperialist barbarity”, the criticism on GDR memory politics he included in the introduction are for a large part based on Bergander’s book.494

Especially after 1990 this critical approach to German memory politics would be a main starting point for Groehler to integrate his views on the air war within a broader narrative on German history, now that the old “anti-fascist” myth had lost its validity. As already in his 1990 paper in Dresden, his post-1989 publications are all characterized by a critical commentary on the dangers of a “new patriotism” based on “self pity”, which risked overlooking German responsibility for the Second World War. Considering the similarities in argumentation, this was actually a small step from his earlier critique on the “imperialist air war historians”.495

494 Groehler for example uses the same quotes as Bergander, and also draws a very similar conclusion. See: Bergander, *Dresden*; Groehler, *Bombenkrieg gegen Deutschland*.  
495 For example see: Groehler, “Moralbomben im Zweiten Weltkrieg” 579; Groehler, “Dresden” 141.
Conclusion: German historical accounts on the air war in the light of personal memory and competing narratives

Once again the role of these historians shows that it is important to see their work not merely as an academic exchange of interpretations but also to see these interpretations in the light of competing narratives and collective memories and in their historical context. While Bergander’s work was academic in tone and perspective, he also worked as a journalist. Moreover, the “professionals” Boog and Groehler also took part in a broader memory discourse by contributing to newspaper articles and interviews and by reflecting on the broader questions regarding the appropriate memory of the air war. Boog’s recent contributions to the rightwing newspaper Junge Freiheit reflect a clear position on the conservative end of the German debate on the appropriate memory of the war. Bergander’s attempts to deconstruct popular myths about Dresden, on the other hand, are also motivated by an aversion to the political appropriation of Dresden by both Communist propaganda as well as rightwing revisionists. Groehler positioned himself as a defender of a critical emphasis on German guilt, first as an anti-fascist, and later in the context of the liberal-left discourse on Vergangenheitsbewältigung.

Moreover, while these historians all concentrated on an academic debate on the air war, because they had been born in the 1920s and 1930s, they had all personally experienced the air war and were at least partly talking from personal experience. And while all try to appropriate the role of the “neutral” historian, their work often reflected the tension between these experiences and their work as historians. While Bergander based his alternative perspective not only on his archival research but also on personal memories that contradicted interpreta-
tions that became dominant after 1945. Boog and Groehler saw their personal experience more problematically. For example, in his introduction to the publication of Arthur Harris’s *Despatch on War operations*, entitled “Harris- A German view”, Boog stated that writing on Harris from the perspective of a German who had experienced the air war as a schoolboy, he felt “honoured and embarrassed at the same time”. On the other hand, Boog continued “as a historian, one should at least be able to try to give a dispassionate, balanced, differentiated and critical account of the past”. A similar argument can be found in the work of Groehler. In *Bombenkreig gegen Detuschland* Groehler stated that the attacks were a formative childhood experience, in which one had to “confront himself in one way or the other”. Like Boog, Groehler claimed that the goal of his historical account was “to objectify” his own “subjectivity”, “without renouncing his personal concern”.

This implicit notion of a certain partiality, which had to be overcome by historical research illustrates that both historians were aware of the tension and interdependence between their historical accounts and their personal memories. But their perspectives can best be explained in the context of their academic institutions and collective memory discourses, or master narratives on the German pasts. While Bergander’s and to a different degree also Messerschmidt’s perspective can be seen as leading to the pluralistic view on the air war that will be discussed later, some concluding remarks can be made about the historical debate on the air war in Germany up to the early 1990s. The thoroughly researched works of Olaf Groehler and Horst Boog can be seen as the first serious attempts to write compre-

---


497 Boog, “Harris” XXXVII.

hensive accounts of the Allied bombings and their consequences. Both Boog and Groehler took a certain distance from earlier West German accounts, especially in their contextualization and differentiated analysis of the military effects of the Allied strategic bombings. While earlier accounts had often given a stereotypical denunciatory view in which the entire bombing campaign was considered militarily senseless and a criminal terrorizing of civilians, Boog and Groehler distinguished different phases of the air war, the variety of strategic concepts and aims, and different levels of military effectiveness and moral legitimacy. Sometimes this went hand in hand with a critique of earlier narratives. At times, as is illustrated by his critical review of a popular East German book on Dresden, Groehler even openly criticized certain aspects of the politicized discourse of SED propaganda.

On the other hand, like the work of Boog, Groehler’s accounts reflect continuities with earlier narrative structures. Their work shows how the popular narrative of German suffering was continued in academic historical work from the 1970s and 1980s. Apart from the exceptional study of Bergander and few other articles like Messerschmidt’s essays on air war and international law, even with the professionalizing of air war historiography in the 1970s and 1980s, the basic elements of earlier narratives prevailed. In the work of Boog a certain exaggeration of strategic differences between methods of the RAF and the Luftwaffe continued to lead to a basically one-sided moral denunciation of the Allied air war, in which the trope of “German suffering” formed the core element.

The arguments of both Boog and Groehler are similar to earlier accounts and can be seen as efforts to integrate these narratives into a professional academic historiography. As influential members of their academic institutions they not only provided earlier narratives with more thorough research and more nuanced argu-
ments, but also canonized their versions of the Allied bombings in historical overviews that were developed by the ZIG as well as the MGFA as “official” perspectives on the Second World War. Both historians not only represented personal views on this issue, but represented a more general view on the Second World War. Like earlier works Groehler’s “imperialist air war doctrine” interpreted the history of World War II from the perspective of a political struggle of socialism against imperialism. Imperialism, with fascism as its most aggressive form, was the responsible and “guilty” force behind the Allied bombings. Dresden in effect was a first step in the Cold War and not so much part of the heroic battle against the Third Reich. The “innocent” German people had endured its consequences, just as they would should Western imperialism unleash a nuclear war.

In spite of the fact that in debates Groehler identified himself with the critical West German discourse of German guilt, his accounts until 1990 reflect a perspective on German suffering that bore certain resemblances to earlier GDR accounts but also underlined an image of the Germans as a group of collective innocent victims. The Germans were dissociated from their regime and seen as double victims of the Nazi dictatorship and Allied experimental power politics. Groehler even stressed that in the German cities it was defenseless civilians, not the “henchmen of Maidanek” who were targeted.

The parallels between their narratives are remarkable. In spite of their fierce debates on the role of the Luftwaffe and the “imperialist” motives of the Allies, the work of Boog and Groehler shares some basic narrative elements. The Germans appear as an undifferentiated and passive collective of victims. Moreover, the Allied air forces and their leaders are seen as the driving forces behind a strategy. While Boog emphasized this by making the formal argument that the British
had “started” the air war, in Groehler’s account this focus was different. While he stressed that the Luftwaffe had begun the bombing war and morally criticized the “terror bombing” of Rotterdam and Coventry, the actual focus of his accounts is wholly on the suffering of Germans due to Allied bombings. While he made the argument that the fascist regime and the Luftwaffe were guilty for starting the war, the actions linked to the suffering of German civilians are those of the “imperialist” forces and historical actors like Churchill and Harris. His adoption of the West German discourse on German guilt found its way only to a limited degree into his historical narrative on the air war. Only in a few articles written after 1990, did Groehler, to varying degrees, challenge the basic elements of his earlier narrative.

It was only in studies like Bergander’s Dresden im Luftkrieg, the articles by Manfred Messerschmidt and, as will be argued later on, in new social historical works on the air war, that this narrative of German suffering was contested and problematized. The work of the two central German academic historians working on the air war, however, shows that in terms of central argumentation and narrative structure strong continuities can be located. But while Groehler and Boog still focused on the military history of the air war, in 2002 a new account by Jörg Friedrich turned the perspective wholly toward the suffering experience of the German civilians, and with this opened a wide public debate in the German press and academic discourse on Germans as victims.