A German catastrophe? German historians and the Allied bombings, 1945-2010
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Conclusion: The Allied bombings as a German catastrophe

Competing narratives

As one of the major symbols of German suffering, the Allied bombing war left a strong imprint on German society. After 1945, to a much wider extent than is often claimed, the Allied bombings became part of German debates on the Second World War. Contrary to the often proclaimed idea that the memory of the bombings had been taboo in Germany, in both the GDR as well as the Federal Republic the air war became a topic of public and political interest as well as the subject of many popular and academic historical accounts. In both cases this historiography until the 1970s consisted mainly of popular accounts that were written by non-academic authors. To a large extent, East and West German historiography clustered around two competing views on the air war.

The discussions of the Allied bombings reflected a direct competition over the past between East and West German narratives during the Cold War. East German authors integrated the Allied bombing war into the central “antifascist” master narrative of German history and the Second World War. According to this overarching perspective, “Western imperialism” shared basic characteristics with Nazism. Both political systems were forms of imperialism, ruled by “reactionary circles”, which represented capitalist interests of powerful industrialists and made use of similar inhumane methods. Moreover, according to the official East German vision, Britain and the United States had only half heartedly joined an alliance
with the Soviet Union and had left the larger part of the struggle to defeat Hitler to the Red Army. But even before the war ended the Western Allies had already become primarily driven by fear of Soviet influence in Europe and had attempted to frustrate the progress of the Red Army.

The bombing of cities during the Second World War provided a very useful example to support the East German narrative. The massive bombing of civilians seemed to mark an important parallel between the “Anglo-Americans” and the Fascist Germans. Contrary to the “humane” Russians, both Nazi Germany and the Western Allies had conducted the cynical “terror bombings” of innocent civilians. Closely connected to this theoretical starting point was the interpretation that the bombing of Dresden had not been motivated by the will to defeat Nazi Germany through military means, but that bombing this city was an attempt to create chaos in the Soviet sphere of influence, to obstruct the progress of the Red Army, and above all to intimidate the Russians with an immense display of Allied air power. From this view Dresden marked the beginning of the new global conflict between the two Superpowers.

Another level on which the Allied bombings reflected the antifascist master narrative was through ascribing to the bombings a political significance in the present, by suggesting a direct continuity of imperialist aggression and by drawing parallels between the bombing of Dresden, NATO politics and the threat of a future nuclear war. This view on the air war supported the antifascist identity of the GDR in several ways. The implication that “socialism” had never supported area bombing during the Second World War underlined the idea that it was only the imperialist West that threatened the world with a nuclear war and could only be stopped by a strong conglomerate of “peace states”. By drawing parallels
between fascism and Western capitalism and by presenting the German people as a victim of both forces, the GDR was able to externalize the Nazi past, while claiming the legacy of the anti-fascist resistance.

This anti-fascist master narrative was strongly contested by the West German postwar views on history. Here, during the 1950s the concept of totalitarianism to a certain extent served the same purpose of externalizing the Nazi past, by suggesting that the Soviet Union and Nazism shared basic characteristics. In particular, the expulsions from East Germany well fitted the negative image of the Soviet Union and could be exploited for Cold War purposes in the West. But to a certain extent this anti-totalitarian perspective was also reflected in West German accounts of the bombing of Dresden. By ascribing responsibility for the destruction of Dresden to Stalin, or by implying a continuity of suffering for the inhabitants of Dresden, who first faced total destruction and after the war had to endure Soviet occupation, attempts were made to turn the Communist argument around or at least to contest the anti-imperialist claims made by East German propaganda. Moreover, often the Allied bombings were presented as a “warning sign” for a future nuclear war, which was most likely to be started by the Soviet Union.

However, while the “Cold War” conflict therefore played a certain role in the West German historiography of the Allied bombings, it more strongly reflected an inner conflict in the West German process of coming to terms with the Nazi past. Here, two central arguments and story lines can be identified. The first is that of the catastrophe. A view on the air war as a tragic “catastrophe” was represented in West German accounts that focused more on the description of losses and suffering than on historical explanations. The “German catastrophe” emphasized the difficult position of the Germans, who had been terrorized by a criminal regime,
lost a war, and had been laden with immense guilt for crimes “committed in their name”. The bombings were “catastrophic” in the sense that they represented an aspect of the war, which was totally beyond German civilians’ control or influence. Their powerlessness was emphasized by the conclusion that the attempt of the British military leaders to provoke a political uprising by breaking German morale had been a complete failure. The Germans were ruled by an increasingly aggressive dictatorship and could only react with apathy. According to this narrative, the Germans underwent the catastrophe, without being able to change the course of history.

Closely related to this view was the underlying argument of the air war as an Allied war crime. Many of the early West German accounts can be read as “court cases” against the British and American military leaders. These accounts not only described the catastrophe or searched for historical explanation but concentrated on the moral and legal implications of the air war. The criminal character of the Allied bombings was, however, more often only implied, or cloaked by the argumentation that the Allies did not live up to international law, rather than being explicitly labelled as “war crimes”.

It is striking that parallel to the increasing public interest in the Nazi crimes, since the late 1950s many West German historical accounts focus on moral and legal pleas in which the Allied bombings were portrayed as crimes and the German Luftwaffe bombings were, at least in legal terms, exonerated. Here a fundamental distinction between a “clean” Luftwaffe and Wehrmacht as opposed to the Allied bombings as well as to the Nazi leaders and SS was made. A central implication made in these accounts was the idea that Germans had been falsely accused of “collective guilt”. These accounts implied that “neither party” had the
moral position to pass collective judgement on the other. In order to restore normal international relations, it was argued, moral and legal charges should be stopped. The British and Americans should therefore, it was implied, be careful about passing one-sided “victors’ judgement” on the Germans, while seeing their own position only from the perspective of the “just war”. Especially from the late 1950s on, making implicit or explicit comparisons with the Holocaust became an important element in this rhetorical strategy, in which the Allied bombings clearly served to settle scores. Where all the parties were guilty there was no place for one-sided allegations, and where Germans appeared as victims of equally severe crimes, there was no need for them to adopt an identity based on collective guilt. The bombings thus became a central argument in a “counter-narrative” against the narrative of German guilt.

Historiography of the air war and the question of German guilt

While the dominant East- and West-German narratives were initially carried mainly by non-academic authors, they also remained dominant in academic historiography after the 1970s, especially in the works of Horst Boog in the Federal Republic and Olaf Groehler in the GDR. Though these historians based their research on a vast study of the archives and differentiated argumentations, which in many ways clearly distinguished them from earlier accounts, they both supported two main lines of argumentation that had become dominant since the 1950s. While Boog continued to argue that the Luftwaffe had been accused of “starting” the “terror bombing war”, Groehler saw the bombing of innocent civilians as an outgrowth of imperialism and tried to point out that the bombing of Dresden had resulted from anti-Soviet motives. This strong continuity illustrates
the power of these earlier narratives and the strong extent to which historical interpretations were related to central identity issues in both the GDR and the Federal Republic. The position of Groehler and Boog illustrates how historical research provided an academic basis and a methodology to consolidate views which had previously been supported only by suggestive arguments and political rhetoric.

Moreover, this continuity with earlier narratives shows that academic historians like Boog and Groehler were not only concerned with a “historical” discourse about establishing facts and causal relations. Though these historians worked in academic institutions and wrote mostly for an academic public, they were nevertheless strongly engaged in a “memory discourse”. They discussed the question as to how these bombings should be remembered and interrogated their political and moral meaning for the present.

The present book shows that a historiography-analysis of the air war tells us more about the relationship between historical interpretations of the air war and the debates on mastering the past and postwar German identity. The historiography and public debates on the Allied bombings can be seen as an example of a historical discussion, in which the central dispute over coming to terms with the Nazi past was fought out. Especially in the Federal Republic, the debate on the Allied bombings cannot be understood outside of the context of a parallel debate on German guilt.

After the 1970s, the public interest in the Allied bombings seemed to fade parallel to a shift towards a more critical view on German history and an increased focus on German responsibility. This resulted in a historical discourse, which centred on the symbolic recognition of German guilt and of the Jews as the main victims group of the Second World War. Caution against “repressing” German
guilt and a fear of offsetting the Holocaust against German suffering, as had been common during the 1950s, made the bombing war a politically charged subject.

This tension seemed to increase, when during the 1980s in German public debates two grand narratives of German history increasingly collided; one that focused on positive traditions in German national history and searched for “normalization” and another, which took the Third Reich as a main reference point and called for a constant process of “working through” the German responsibility for the Holocaust. This conflict, which reached a climax during the Historikerstreit, is vital to understanding the relationship of German historians towards the Allied bombings. While the Allied bombings were largely ignored by the new group of leftwing and liberal historians such as Hans Mommsen and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, they became once again part of the counter-narrative of conservative historians, who saw the increased focus on German guilt and the Holocaust as harmfully one-sided. Ernst Nolte provoked fierce reactions by suggesting a moral equation between the bombings and the Holocaust.

Interestingly, this competition took place not only on the level of public debates on the Holocaust, but also was fought out on the level of professional historiography on the Allied bombings. In particular, military historian Horst Boog railed against the increased dominance of the narrative of German guilt, by repeatedly arguing that for the sake of “political correctness” Germans had either ignored the Allied bombings or ascribed all responsibility to the Luftwaffe and falsely claimed that the Germans had initiated terror bombings against civilians. In this light it is significant that recent statements by Jörg Friedrich and Winfried Sebald, according to which the bombings had been a taboo, were not only incorrect but had long been an important element of a rhetorical strategy argu-
ing that due to a single-minded focus on German guilt the suffering of Germans had been repressed.

But there were also historians working on the bombings who represented another position by criticizing the ways in which East and West German authors had abused the bombings for memory politics and propaganda. In 1977 Götz Bergander’s *Dresden im Luftkrieg* took a critical position towards West German attempts to balance the Nazi crimes with the bombing war and exploit the bombing of Dresden for the cause of rightwing revisionism during the 1950s. But interestingly enough, the fiercest criticism of West German historians who made moral distinctions between the *Luftwaffe* and the Anglo-Americans, came from GDR historian Olaf Groehler. By accusing West German historians such as Horst Boog of “revanchist motives,” Groehler could integrate the arguments of liberal historians from the Federal Republic into his “anti-fascist” view of the air war. In an attempt to discredit West German military historiography Groehler emphasized that from his perspective, the “German guilt” for the air attacks and the war in general was acknowledged, while his opponents were only seeking to “balance” German guilt.

Therefore, although the Cold War context of their debate had disappeared after 1990, strong continuity persisted especially in the dispute between Boog and Groehler. Groehler could easily adapt to the West German conflict between conservative and liberal historians. While his work after 1990 also included a critique of GDR propaganda and occasionally reflected a hint of self-criticism, his main argumentation against West German attempts to exploit the air war for the rehabilitation of the German *Luftwaffe* remained topical and easily fitted into a West German liberal discourse on the Second World War. On the other hand, Boog could also integrate his criticisms against “SED chief” Groehler into his more gen-
eral polemic against the West German narrative of German guilt, whose defenders in his eyes were even willing to accept the “communist” propaganda of someone Groehler.

Against the background of this ongoing quarrel, certain parameters for the context of discussing the Allied bombings were certainly changing in the course of the 1990s. In the first place the Allied bombings and especially Dresden provided a potential historical symbol for a shared East-West memory of the Second World War. Secondly, during a series of fierce public debates the participation of “ordinary Germans” and Wehrmacht-soldiers in the Holocaust was widely discussed during the 1990s. Thirdly, the concurrent generational shift, in which the last German wartime generation was past retirement age, sparked a renewed interest in the experiences of normal Germans during the war. In TV documentaries or in documentations of eyewitness reports this generation could be given a final chance to tell their personal stories.

The broad public confrontation with German guilt and the proven political stability of reunified Germany led to a new confidence in German memory, including among leftwing intellectuals. By the early 2000s the expulsions and the Allied bombings were extensively discussed in a broad debate, in which the earlier polar-ization seemed to have faded. In this new historical climate, intellectuals such as Grass, Sebald and Friedrich, each in their own way, catalyzed a massive discussion and intense public interest in German suffering, in which broad consensus was reached over the need to make issues like the expulsions and the Allied bombings part of German cultural memory. Therefore, many commentators concluded that finally the Germans were able to discuss German suffering beyond a “revanchist discourse” from which the Allied bombings were used to qualify, evade, or “bal-
ance” the Holocaust. The Germans were at last able to discuss their own suffering within a narrative that acknowledged the broader framework of the Second World War and German responsibility for the Holocaust.

**Continuities in the German narratives of the Allied bombings**

However, the grounds for such a conclusion become less firm when we consider the forms and arguments with which the Allied bombings have been recently discussed in both the public debate as well as in different historical accounts. The present book has shown that, while the polarization and general political sensitivity of the Allied bombings may have diminished, the way this history has been recently narrated and interpreted has not essentially changed. Both in historiography and in the public discussions on the bombings a basic set of conclusions and assumptions prevailed. It can be concluded that, though the discussions on the Allied bombings often reflected many different political positions, there were strong continuities in the way the Allied bombings were narrated.

The parallels are particularly striking when looking at the way these accounts have portrayed and judged the main “perpetrators” of city bombing. Winston Churchill and Arthur Harris appeared as main protagonists, while American military leaders only played a role on the sideline. While some histories emphasize that Churchill had doubts about the morality and effectiveness of city bombing, but was pressured to order the attacks by Harris, others stressed that Harris was merely following orders and pursuing a strategy, which was already commonly accepted before he became chief of Bomber Command in 1942.

Interestingly, also in East German accounts before 1990, in spite of the propagandistic focus on the Americans, Churchill appeared as the main perpetrating
actor, and in this aspect the portrayal resembled West German accounts. On the other hand, in the East Churchill and Harris were also seen as personifications of the anonymous “reactionary circles” that formed the basis of capitalist power-cynicism. In some cases East German historiography even downplayed the role of individuals like Churchill and Harris to emphasize that they were only a small part of the inhumane imperialist system.

After 1990, there was a strong continuity in depicting Churchill and Harris as the persons who were mainly responsible for the mass deaths of German civilians. In Jörg Friedrich’s *Der Brand* but also in works by Rolf Dieter Müller and Lothar Fritze, Churchill appeared as the main instigator of the Allied bombings. In almost all German historical accounts, with the exception of Bergander’s *Dresden im Luftkrieg* and a few recent studies that focus on the social history of the Allied bombings, German accounts in both East and West morally denounced the bombing of civilians and explicitly held its main advocates, such as Churchill and Harris, responsible for their consequences.

More disputed was the role of the *Luftwaffe* as an historical actor. In the Federal Republic, strategic differences between the Allied bombing campaign and the air attacks by the German *Luftwaffe* were emphasized. By pointing out that the *Luftwaffe* had used bombings only to support ground actions, a moral distinction was made, leading to different, partly implicit conclusions on the historical and moral status of the Allied bombings. This argumentation summoned an image of a “clean *Luftwaffe*” which had been wrongly accused of functioning as a criminal instrument of the Nazis.

East German accounts saw the German bombings and the *Luftwaffe* in a different light. Here, Rotterdam, Coventry and Warsaw were seen as terror attacks
that were equally immoral and had initiated the bombing war against civilians. However, GDR historians argued that this illustrated the extent to which Western Allies had used cruel and immoral methods of warfare similar to those of Hitler’s Germany. Interestingly, however, while making this argument East German accounts of the air war never addressed these German bombings in more than a few lines. While often repeating that the German Luftwaffe started terror bombing of civilians they nevertheless concentrated almost exclusively on the Allied bombings and their victims.

After 1990, both views on the role of the Luftwaffe persisted. On the one hand, often following the work of Olaf Groehler, several accounts show a similar tendency to name Hitler’s Luftwaffe as the instigator of terror bombings, while actually focusing primarily on the Allied bombings. Such a view also became dominant in commemoration practices. On the other hand, military historians like Horst Boog and Rolf Dieter Müller maintained a perspective in which not only the strategic differences between German and British bombings were emphasized but also were connected to a moral distinction between RAF and Luftwaffe. And even in the works of Friedrich and Fritze, who also explicitly denounced the German bombings, the rhetorical argumentation that these German bombings had been “not as bad” and based on different strategic premises, played a significant role in emphasizing the singular victim position of the German civilians.

These different perspectives also had consequences for the temporal and spatial structure of these histories of Allied bombings. The opposing narratives resulted in differences in the way the bombings were placed in time and space. Most East German accounts begin their history of the Allied bombings with short remarks on the Luftwaffe bombings, which imply a causal relationship or at least
make clear that the Fascists started using bombings. Here the Second World War was modelled as a conflict that started as a coalition between Western Allies and the Soviet Union, and ended with a Western betrayal of the Russians. The bombing of Dresden then marked a turning point in Western strategy, in which the “reactionary circles” finally managed to turn the Second World War into a conflict with the Soviet Union. In contrast, West German histories commonly chose the development of the spread of theoretical ideas on area bombing among British military leaders as a beginning, sometimes also reflecting on British strategy during World War I or The Hague Conventions of 1907. The radical distinction between Allied and German bombings led to a strong focus on British military thinking and the first British experiments with area bombings during the 1920s. While these background events also appeared in East German accounts, they were presented as a less important factor in Allied bombing.

In spite of these differences, there remained many parallels in the narratives. Both in East and in West the focus was almost entirely on the effects of bombing in Germany and the planning and conduct by British and American leadership. The accounts largely refrained from placing these events in the wider context of the Second World War. In describing the Allied bombings, both East and West German accounts had in common that they focused on the period after 1942, when bombing to destroy enemy morale became central British policy. This also had consequences for the way the German civilians were addressed. By focusing on the Allied bombings, it was almost exclusively the suffering of Germans that was depicted. While German bombings sometimes were mentioned and even morally denounced, the sufferings of British, Dutch or Polish civilians were largely ignored. The main reference point was that of German suffering, which was often

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illustrated with eyewitness reports and vivid descriptions, especially in popular accounts.

A striking parallel between most German accounts of the Allied bombings, both in West and in East, was that the Germans appeared as a collective “double victim” of Nazism and Fascism. They were seen as subjected to a double terror of Allied bombings and repression by the Nazi dictatorship. A similar perspective can be found in Jörg Friedrich’s radical focus on the perspective of the German victims. While lengthy descriptions of horrific details were largely excluded from the professional military historiography of authors like Boog and Groehler, the perspective of the German victims is present in the work of both. Both point to the Germans as the main victims of this form of warfare. The portrayal of Germans as an undifferentiated collective of victims was therefore a central continuity throughout postwar historiography.

Apart from these parallels, many historical arguments were used that show strong continuity with tropes that were already present in Nazi propaganda. East as well as West German books on the bombing of Dresden not only include romantic descriptions of the cultural legacy that was destroyed. But the notion that with the bombing of these German cities a central peace of Europe or the “Abendland” had been erased from history, a propaganda theme introduced under Goebbels’s direction, was continuously present in these accounts. Another continuity in East as well as West German accounts was the way the German civilians were described as a closed community of suffering, which bravely endured the futile attempts of the Allied to break their morale. In their argumentation these accounts show clear continuities of the ideal of a German Volksgemeinschaft, which had been a central element of Nazi propaganda. This continuity was especially striking in the work of
Jörg Friedrich. By entitling chapters “I” and “We”, Friedrich’s book openly identified with the fate of the Germans under the Allied bombings and portrayed them as members of a closed community.

Another continuity can be found in the way the responsibility for city bombing was one-sidedly ascribed to the British and Americans. The trope of “England’s Alleinschuld” had been central to Nazi propaganda and, especially in West German accounts, continued to provide a basic line of argument. This highly influenced the way the bombings were judged morally. In both East and West the Allied bombings were radically denounced as inhumane or criminal acts of warfare.

Interestingly, the strategies to emphasize the moral questionability of the bombings differed in East and West Germany. In the GDR the criminal character of the bombings was explained by the political motive of anti-Communism that lay behind them. In the West authors often concentrated on legal arguments. West German historians wanted to show the immorality of the Allied bombings by pointing at their illegitimacy according to international law. From this point of view they could not only denounce British and American bombings as “war crimes” but also were able to find arguments to portray the German bombings as “military necessities” or as legitimate retaliation.

While East and West German accounts laid different accents in pointing at the immorality of British and American leaders, they shared a common view of the bombings as the main catastrophe of the Second World War. Dresden became an important symbol and in both East and West many attempts were made to emphasize or exaggerate the attack of 13 February 1945 in order to raise its status as a symbol of human suffering. This was often accomplished by drawing historical comparisons. By comparing Dresden with Hiroshima, or by even suggesting
that in Dresden more people had died than after the nuclear attacks on Japanese cities, the suggestion was made that the Germans had suffered more than others from the Second World War. The gross exaggeration of the number of casualties in Dresden by David Irving and West German authors such as Axel Rodenberger have to be seen in this light, as well as the suggestion made by GDR author Walter Weidauer that the first atomic bomb had actually been meant for Dresden.

Similarly, different authors such as Max Seydewitz and Max Zimmering in the GDR and Karl Dietrich Erdmann, Hans Rumpf in the Federal Republic drew implicit or explicit comparisons between the Allied bombings and the Holocaust. The idea that the Allied had attempted to “erase” the German people through the deliberate bombing of their cities became an important basis for the attempt to “balance” the Allied bombings against the Holocaust. It is interesting to note that historians and intellectuals from different political starting points were willing to draw parallels between the Allied bombings and the Holocaust. The suggestion that the Holocaust and the Allied bombings shared similarities could lead to different political positions. While especially West-German historians like Erdmann and Rumpf were mainly concerned with avoiding and repressing the issue of German perpetratorship, others seemed to focus on the air war primarily to criticize the British and American methods of war in current conflicts. The latter position was often represented by intellectuals like Rolf Hochhuth who had contributed to a critical view on the German past and had not wholly avoided painful issues, like the Holocaust.

The suggestion of an essential similarity between Allied bombings and the Holocaust shows that authors like Friedrich shared more with the 1950s historiography than the moral denunciation of the Allies. In the view of authors like
Friedrich, the bombings were seen as part of an Allied mentality in which all Germans had been collectively punished for their shared guilt for supporting Nazism. Friedrich implied that this mentality had led to a form of warfare, which sought to annihilate a whole people and its culture. The Allied bombings therefore were presented as a form of genocidal warfare, which bore close resemblance to the Nazi crimes. The notion of German collective guilt had not only led the Allies to an inhumane form of warfare, but had also complicated the process of bringing those responsible for war crimes to justice. Friedrich argues that the unwillingness to acknowledge the Allied war crimes during the Nuremberg Trial had distorted the process of justice so much, that it had also led to a failure in the trials against Germans who were responsible for the Nazi genocide. This illustrates that, while making slightly different arguments, all these implicit or explicit comparisons with the Holocaust in some way contained a critique of the assertion of German collective guilt.

*The Allied bombings beyond a German victims discourse?*

More recently historians have narrated the Allied bombings in an essentially different way. Social historians such as Ralf Blank and Dietmar Süß emphasize the interrelationship between the Allied bombings and Nazi propaganda and point to the dependence of Germans on their regime. By showing that to a certain degree the persecution and expropriation of minorities was directly related to attempts to compensate Germans for their material losses due to bombings, they unambiguously narrated this history within the context of the Nazi crimes. This has strong consequences for the presentation of the central actors as well as the historical context in which they are placed. The “Germans” now no longer appear as
a collective of innocent civilians but as members of a wartime society. Here, the Germans are portrayed as members of a society that first largely supported and later increasingly lost faith in the Nazi leadership. This approach has shifted the focus from the motives of the British and American generals to the effects and reactions of the bombings on the Germans and their regime. With a focus on the propaganda-apparatus, Goebbels and Nazi institutions were brought into this history as “historical actors”.

Also, these studies have concentrated less on the moral considerations of the Allied leaders. Without exonerating the Allies, their narrative shifts the issue of morality to the relation between the Nazi government and the German population. By showing how Germans adapted to Nazi propaganda and profited from the material compensation by the Nazi government at the expense of Jews and other persecuted groups, the question of morality now directly concerned the German population, who in earlier accounts had appeared as a collective of innocent victims.

Another point in which recent studies have altered earlier narratives, was in the temporal framework from which they regarded this history. By focusing on processes of post-war interpretations and memory, their histories of the Allied bombings do not end in 1945. A focus on memory and reflection on the role of the air war in memory politics in East and West shifted interest from the air war itself to the question what effects the air war had had on the Germans after the war. Such effects were now not only seen in terms of collective suffering and trauma, but also as a starting point for postwar German identity construction. After the pioneering work of Götz Bergander in the late 1970s, such a reflective approach has recently enabled different studies to narrate the story of bombing from the
perspective of its victims, without creating stereotypical images of a community of innocent victims.

By critically reflecting on concepts and interpretations, by differentiating “the Germans” and by pointing to the interrelationship between the German population and its regime, these recent studies have therefore abandoned the “victim’s perspective” in a radical way and offer an alternative narrative to the Allied bombings. This does not only reflect a different methodology but also corresponds to a different position in the German debate on the memory of Nazism. As the critical offensive of authors such as Ralf Blank against the “German victims” discourse indicates, their alternative narrative not only reflects different historical arguments and perspectives but also a different position in the German discourse over memory. These new studies often express an identification with a memory culture that focuses on the recognition of the Nazi crimes rather than on collective German victimhood. Moreover, they share the premise that the responsibility of normal Germans for the Nazi crimes should not be ignored even though they recognize that Germans too had suffered during the war.

In this sense Lorenz’ and Bergers’ conclusions on the recent historiography can be supported up to a certain point. Recently, in the work of various German historians the “victim’s perspective” has been strongly criticized and replaced with a different narrative that broke through earlier stereotypes. However, the idea that such a “victim’s discourse” no longer concerns academic historians since the 1990s has to be nuanced. The continuities of older narrative structures in the views of leftwing historians such as Hans Mommsen or Hans-Ulrich Wehler and in academic military historiography illustrate that the issue is more complex. Though offering at times very nuanced historical perspectives, these historians did not break
with earlier narrative patterns. The works of Rolf Dieter Müller, Olaf Groehler and Horst Boog have often been regarded as differentiated alternatives to authors like David Irving and Jörg Friedrich. The impression has remained dominant that these historians approached the Allied bombings in an essentially different way. But these conclusions fail to recognize the extent to which historical interpretations were intertwined with a discourse over German victimhood. While there are definitely important differences between Friedrich, Müller, Boog, and Groehler, the present book has shown that much more than has been acknowledged until now, they all in some way or the other have written narratives of German victims and Allied perpetrators.

Therefore, while it is important to see the different political, institutional and temporal contexts from which their work originated, the present book has pointed out that their commitment to this narrative of German suffering has led them to share a basic problematic position towards the discussion on German responsibility. In all these works the “German catastrophe” of the Allied bombings to some degree opposes, diminishes or balances “German guilt”. Instead of integrating the Allied bombings into a narrative of German responsibility German historians have done the opposite, either by directly criticizing the “Guilt debate”, by showing that the Germans have suffered as severely as the victims of Nazism, or by portraying them as a collective of victims.

This also indicates the extent to which the Allied bombings continue to touch a sensitive nerve in Germany. The accounts that continue to address the air war from a victim’s perspective and the recent attempts to find an alternative narrative have in common that they are never about interpreting the Allied bombings alone. They also reflect opposing positions within the ongoing struggle of com-
ing to terms with the Nazi past. While the recent debate on German suffering has often been celebrated as a breakthrough in this struggle, this can be seriously doubted. Far more, the present book shows that the balance between the “Jewish catastrophe” and the “German catastrophe” continues to occupy and divide the German historical debate.