Summary

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

My dissertation explores the question, how historians in the GDR, the Federal Republic and the United Germany have interpreted and debated the Allied bombings. I analyze academic as well as popular historiography in the context of German academic and public debates on the Nazi past. My central question concerns how this historiography relates to broader developments in the German process of coming to terms with the Nazi past and with attempts to construct German identity in the three post-war German states.

Chapter 1 discusses the early West German historiography between 1945 and 1970. In this chapter I point out that during the 1950s and 60’s the bombings became an important symbol of German suffering and victimhood. A central argument in these West German works was that the German Luftwaffe had refrained from “terror bombing” and that hence the whole responsibility and guilt for the horrors of the “bombing war” should be ascribed to the Allies. In this vision, the Germans were presented as the main victims of the war. This Chapter shows that in West Germany, the debate on Allied bombing was affected to a strong degree by the growing public interest in the Holocaust. By the end of the 1950’s, parallel to a new series of court cases against Nazi perpetrators, in West Germany the interest in German victims of the war increased. The Allied bombings became part of a “counter narrative”, in which the idea was contested that all Germans were
guilty and that only the Jews had suffered during the war.

In Chapter 2 I discuss the debates between East and West German authors on the bombing of Dresden. After the war, two competing interpretations of the bombing of Dresden became dominant among German historians. East German authors saw the attack as the result of “Western imperialism” and drew direct parallels between the Allied air attacks against the Third Reich and American and NATO foreign politics after the war. Here, the idea became dominant that the Allies had attacked Dresden with the aim of intimidating Stalin and creating chaos in the Soviet Zone. At the same time, in the Federal Republic authors too saw parallels between the Second World War bombing and the Cold War. Some conservative historians suggested that the bombing of Dresden had followed a request by Stalin. However, this chapter shows that there were also many parallels between East and West German interpretations. In both states the attack on Dresden was seen as a militarily senseless destruction of an “innocent” city. Also in both cases the attack was subject to many myths, with the main purpose of exaggerating the dimensions and severity of the destruction.

In Chapter 3 and 4 I discuss the process of professionalization of East and West German historiography since the 1970’s, by analyzing the work of Horst Boog and Olaf Groehler, who have dominated the historical debate. In Chapter 3 I show by the example of West German military historian Horst Boog that though he approached the air war from an academic and differentiated perspective, his central argument defended the Luftwaffe as a “clean” air force. What is also striking is that, like the earlier works, Boog’s too pointed at the Allied bombings to criticize a one-sided emphasis on German guilt, which he felt had become dominant and was obstructing an open and objective view of the past. This chapter
moreover argues that Boog’s arguments have to be understood in the context of an increasing confrontation between conservative and liberal historians on the way Germany should remember and come to terms with the Nazi past, which reached its climax during the Historikerstreit.

In Chapter 4 I analyze the GDR historiography, using the example of Olaf Groehler. I discuss Groehler’s position within the East German academic climate as well as his role as a prominent historian and Stasi-informer. I analyze his perspective on the Allied bombings in relation to the “official” GDR interpretations. While Groehler sometimes was remarkably critical of earlier East German works and, like Boog, developed a much more differentiated perspective on the bombings, in many ways Groehler too drew on earlier patterns of interpretation. In his work Dresden still was seen as a victim of anticommunist politics and as the actual beginning of the Cold War. This Chapter also analyzes the discussions between Boog and Groehler and points out that in their debates Cold War rhetoric played a prominent role.

Chapter 5 discusses the recent debates that followed the publication of Jörg Friedrich’s Der Brand. I argue that both in his implicit equations between the bombings and the Holocaust as well as in his radical focus on German suffering Friedrich could draw on a narrative that had dominated 1950’s historiography in the Federal Republic. However, it is also striking that, unlike the conservative authors of the 1950’s, Friedrich had intensively studied the history of Nazi crimes. Nevertheless, his work is characterized by a strong tendency to suggest a moral similarity between the Holocaust and the bombings and to portray the Germans as a collective of victims, of the war and of their regime. In the second part of this chapter, I address the renewed public interest in the Allied bombings since 1990.
I argue that this can be explained by various changes in German memory culture, including German reunification, the recent shift of generations and the decreased historical sensitivity among leftwing historians and intellectuals. Finally, this chapter explores, to what degree this new debate on German suffering relates to recent developments in academic historiography. I argue that, contrary to what is often suggested, only a few academic historians have abandoned a “victim’s perspective”. Only a small group of historians have shifted perspective, by concentrating on the effects of bombing on German war society and on the different attempts during and after the war to exploit the bombings for propaganda and the construction of political identity. They have integrated the bombings into a narrative which focuses on the relationship of “ordinary Germans” with their regime instead of one that portrays them as mere passive victims of the war.

In my dissertation I draw two central conclusions. First, I show that the Allied bombings were discussed and became the subject of historical accounts to a much wider degree than is often assumed. This can be explained by the relative ease with which the Allied bombings could be related to current political and identity issues, and could be integrated into the different master narratives of German history. Before 1990 the German debates on Allied bombing to a strong degree reflected the ideological conflict between East and West Germany. After the reunification they reflected the search for a new united German identity as well as a slowly decreasing distrust in the German nation.

My second conclusion is that there is strong continuity in the way German historians have written about the air attacks on German cities. In spite of the interpretative differences historians in the Federal Republic, the GDR, and reunified Germany shared a perspective in which the Second World War in the first
place was regarded as a catastrophe for Germany and not so much as a catastrophe for the victims of Nazi persecution. This resulted in the neglecting of the circumstances under which England and the United States had come to conduct a large-scale bombing campaign against Germany and also led to the persistence of several stereotypical images, which often originated in Nazi propaganda. The bombings were continuously depicted as militarily senseless attempts to eradicate innocent Germans. These works denounce the bombings as immoral war crimes and portray the Germans as a collective of innocence. In several cases the bombing war was implicitly or explicitly compared to the Holocaust, to show that Germans had suffered as greatly as the victims of the Nazi crimes. Only in a few recent studies, which focus on social history and memory culture, has such a victim’s perspective been truly abandoned.