

CHAPTER 3

Dresden: 13, 14 and 15 February 1945

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Dresden after February 1945 bombings (Bundesarchiv).

The bombing of Dresden¹ on 13, 14 and 15 February 1945

On 13 February 1945, Shrove Tuesday, at 10.15 p.m., the first wave of Avro Lancaster heavy bombers of the Royal Air Force (RAF) accompanied by de Havilland Mosquito fighter bombers flew over the city of Dresden, the capital of Saxony, and dropped tons of high-explosive bombs – some of which weighed almost two tons – and thousands of incendiary devices of all sizes. First, an advance party consisting of a few Lancasters known as Pathfinders dropped flares, in the light of which the Mosquitoes, flying low, dropped their target indicators. They were immediately followed by the main bomber force, which released its load. After 25 minutes, the first wave withdrew leaving a considerable trail of destruction in its wake and thousands of fires. Three hours later, at 1.20 a.m. on 14 February, Ash Wednesday, a second wave of RAF planes, once again consisting of Lancasters accompanied by Mosquitoes, dropped yet another load of bombs. This time they flew largely blind thanks to the column of fire and smoke produced by the previous wave. A total of 772 Lancasters took part in the two waves and dropped 2,659.3 tons of bombs, of which 1,477.7 tons

¹ The lecture and the text that we present here are largely based on the extraordinary collective book edited by Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden*, which, over 10 years ago now, quite brilliantly focused on many of the topics and historical controversies surrounding the bombing of Dresden. Likewise, we have used the book by Taylor *Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945*, the basic bibliography on the Allied bombings of Germany and the memoirs of the events' protagonists. We have also had recourse to two archive sources: the documents United States Air Force Historical Division–Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden" 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>; and Tustin, J.P. "Headquarters US Air Forces in Europe. Why Dresden Was Bombed. A Review of Reasons and Reactions." 11 December 1954. Available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2013/May/23/2001329959/-1/-1/0/Dresden%20again.pdf>>; Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006; and Taylor, F. *Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945*. London: Bloomsbury; 2004.

were high explosives and 1,181.6 were incendiary devices.² The latter literally added fuel to the fires that had already broken out and in the Altstadt, the old quarter of the city of Dresden, created a devastating firestorm. That is to say, a fire that is sustained by oxygen being sucked into the spaces created by the flames caught in the updraft, feeding the combustion and creating such high temperatures that many civilians burned to death despite not coming into direct contact with the flames³ while others died from asphyxia after inhaling carbon anhydride. As Sönke Neitzel has explained, many of the people in the area of the city that was targeted were obliged to take refuge in the basements of their own homes, which is where they met their fate, because the city only had a few air-raid shelters – all reserved for the authorities – and it was the only option available to them. The only action that the local authorities had taken with respect to these impromptu shelters had been to ensure that they were all connected up⁴ so that the people could move from one to another if any particular building should collapse. However, after the doors and windows of the buildings had imploded, allowing the firestorm to penetrate the interior, this underground system allowed the carbon anhydride to flow freely through the passageways, poisoning all the people sheltering there.

Those who did manage to get out found themselves roasting in an open-air oven. In fact, many people who threw themselves into ponds or water tanks ended up being boiled alive while those who tried to run away were trapped in the asphalt that had turned into a sticky glue. When the sun rose on 14 February, its rays could not pierce the enormous column of smoke billowing above the city and which could be seen from over 100 kilometres away.

A few hours later, at 1.20 in the afternoon, after some of the city's firemen had been killed by the second British attack, a third wave approached the city. This time it was the United States Air Force (USAF) with their Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses. Their main target was the city's railway yard but the lack of visibility meant that they had to release their loads indiscriminately. And on the following day, 15 February 1945, there was yet another American incursion of B-17s. In all, 527 heavy bombers took part and in the second and third raids a

2 United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden". 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>.

3 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Cragg, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden*, 1945. London: Pimlico; 2006. pp. 74–75, 70.

4 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Cragg, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden*, 1945. London: Pimlico; 2006. pp. 74–75, 69.

further 1,247.6 tons of bombs – 953.3 tons of high explosives and 294.3 tons of incendiaries – were dropped on Dresden.⁵

The most recent official statistic, from 2010, sets the loss of human life at about 25,000. This figure coincides with the official, rigorously calculated, Nazi estimations of the time even though the Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels proffered estimations that were much higher. In the immediate aftermath, on 15 February, the local SS informed of 18,375 deaths, 2,212 serious injuries and 13,718 minor injuries. And the last official Nazi report known to be published before the fall of the regime gave a figure of 22,096 deaths. Dresden cemetery records 21,271 corpses, and a further 1,858 were found at various moments after the end of the war. It is unlikely that the figure of 25,000 will increase any more and, if it does, it will not increase by much.⁶ So the final death toll is a long way from the 250,000 that Goebbels insisted on making public, adding a 0 to the real figure as part of the propaganda campaign he launched in response to the raids. Even so, the figures of 250,000 and even 300,000 have become fully accepted in some historiography, as we shall see below. In his attempts at deception, Goebbels resorted first to the press of neutral countries such as Sweden and Switzerland, to whom he leaked his figures so as to ensure much wider circulation than if he had used the domestic press.

As Söre Neitzel states, the true figure of 25,000 deaths, out of a total population of 650,000 inhabitants, is particularly striking if it is compared with the casualties caused by other Allied bombings of more populated German cities, such as Berlin, located in the heart of industrial areas. But it is striking precisely because the figures in the other cities are considerably lower. This is probably due to the fact that they were well protected with radar, anti-aircraft artillery and squadrons of interception fighters. In the case of Berlin, the 19 major air strikes the city suffered between August 1943 and March 1944 caused 9,390 fatalities, and the massive bombing of Cologne in 1942 only 500. And in Essen, a city of 320,000 inhabitants in the industrial zone of the Ruhr, which had air-raid shelters for the population, the raid by 1,000 British aircraft on 11 March caused 482 deaths.⁷ On the other hand, the raid on Hamburg in

5 United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden, 1945". Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>. p. 8>.

6 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. pp. 74–75.

7 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 76.

July 1943, which created a firestorm that was bigger than the one in Dresden, caused 40,000 fatalities because there were no air-raid shelters for the general population.

The differences in terms of lethal impact on the bombed cities, then, seems to depend not only on the effective protection provided by networks of air-raid shelters for the population as a whole but also on effective anti-aircraft defences, prevention and warning systems, and an active response by the Luftwaffe. All of these features were present to a much greater extent in the major western cities and in the more industrialised areas of Germany than in the more eastern cities which, until the end of 1944 were thought to be safe from large-scale air attacks because of their distance from the Allied bases and because in the past they had only been subject to isolated raids. On top of this, in eastern Germany the lack of large-scale raids before the beginning of 1945 meant that many of the anti-aircraft guns located there had been sent to the Eastern Front to be used as anti-tank guns in an attempt to halt the advance of the Soviet forces in Poland. In fact, Dresden had never had more than 52 anti-aircraft batteries – a number that after 1942 was reduced quite considerably – as opposed to, for example, the 436 in Berlin.⁸

To sum up, the cities, towns, railways, synthetic fuel production plants and military industries throughout eastern Germany were highly vulnerable when the Allies decided to attack at the beginning of 1945. The extent of their vulnerability obviously depended on the information that their secret services were able to supply, which was often lacking, in the sense that it was insufficient. In this regard, Dresden was no exception. During the aerial offensive of the last four months of the war on German soil, the most extreme case of loss of human life was in Pforzheim, a small city in the south with an important precision machining industry: on 23 and 24 February 1945 it lost approximately one-third of its 65,000 inhabitants.⁹ Other bombings that caused a great loss of life with respect to the size of the towns were the raids in February on Kassel and Darmstadt, each of which suffered 10,000 fatalities. Dresden was important but, as can be seen, it was just one of many other similar cases.

As far as material damage was concerned, the bombing of the city destroyed 75,000 flats (a third of the total) as well as 85% of the old quarter or Altstadt,

8 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 67.

9 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 77.

although some suburbs were hardly touched. Many schools and hospitals were razed to the ground. It was a cultural and artistic city – known as the German Florence or Florence-on-the-Elbe – and of its 30 emblematic buildings two were completely obliterated (the *Frauenkirche* and the *Semperoper*) and 21 were damaged. A total of 136 of the 200 factories, including three belonging to the Zeiss-Ikon company, were totally devastated, as were the railway yards and the two stations, the communications centres and the transport centre for the whole area.¹⁰ The railway bridge over the River Elbe was also hit. However, rail communications were partly re-established shortly afterwards. Even so, the Allied raids on Dresden were a success in that they temporarily interrupted the full capacity to send men and material to the Eastern Front from the city or for rail transport to pass through it.¹¹ At the same time they aggravated the refugee situation, which had already got considerably worse in the previous months because thousands of people had arrived in the city fleeing from the Soviet advance. Thus, they made a further contribution to disrupting the economic and daily life of the city.

Dresden and the new Allied strategy of bombing Germany: January/February 1945¹²

The bombing of Dresden must be studied as an example of a new strategy of Allied airstrikes designed in the summer of 1944, but implemented at the end of January and during February 1945 in the middle of a wave of pessimism in the high command about the state of the land operations on the Western Front and the long-awaited end of the war in Germany. As Sebastian Cox explains the German offensive in the Ardennes and the subsequent battle (16 December 1944–25 January 1945) had put an end to the optimism that had prevailed up to that point and raised fears that the conflict on German soil would not

10 United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden". 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>; Tustin, J.P. "Headquarters US Air Forces in Europe. Why Dresden Was Bombed. A Review of Reasons and Reactions." 11 December 1954. Available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2013/May/23/2001329959/-1/-1/0/Dresden%20again.pdf>>.

11 Neitzel, S. "The City Under Attack". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. pp. 57–58.

12 United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Volume 2A: Statistical Appendix to Over-All Report (European War), Chart 1 (<<http://www.wwiarchives.net/servlet/action/document/page/113/12/0>>); Richards, D. and Saunders, H.S.G. *The Royal Air Force 1939–45 (vol. III)*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office; 1954.

be over before the summer but would last throughout 1945. The difficulties encountered by the British and American forces in the north of France, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg highlighted the need to provide some sort of decisive assistance to the Soviets who were advancing on the Eastern Front.¹³ This meant that the aim of the aerial bombings was not only to destroy all communications in East Germany but also to continue with and step up the strategy of destroying industrial complexes – with particular focus on plants manufacturing synthetic fuels – and railways. In addition to this, the bombings were to target cities of all types in an attempt to increase the confusion and the number of refugees inside the country, and, therefore, weaken the country's resolve and ability to resist. The first idea was to launch an all-out attack on Berlin, with the alternative options of Dresden, Chemnitz and Leipzig.¹⁴

This new strategy involved a change in the doctrine advanced by the Americans since 1939 – and put into practice as soon as they entered the War in December 1941 – of focusing bombings on military targets, carrying them out with maximum precision and avoiding the indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations. This doctrine never changed but the practice did: now there was going to be greater flexibility in an attempt to bring the war to a quick end and prevent Allied casualties, which had been increasing at an alarming rate in previous months. On the other hand, the British doctrine – or rather, the actual approach to bombing adopted by the head of Bomber Command, General Sir Arthur T. Harris – had always been much more aggressive and had targeted not only rail yards and railways, factories and oil companies but also as many German cities as possible in the belief that this would make a decisive contribution to the end of resistance.

Generally speaking, by this stage of the War all restrictions on using tactics that involved civilian casualties had been abandoned and it was now accepted that all available means had to be used to bring the conflict to a speedy end and prevent Allied casualties. It should not be forgotten that only in February and March 1945 the Allies had had 96,000 casualties, while the Soviet casualties on the Eastern Front were much higher.¹⁵ Neither should it be forgotten that the

13 United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden". 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>.

14 Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How" In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 61.

15 Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 58–60.

atmospheric conditions in East Germany were hardly conducive to precision attacks, most of which had to be carried out at night because of the extent to which the bombers had to penetrate into the country.

According to Sebastian Cox, the origins of the new strategy can be traced back to a memorandum sent by Sir Charles Portal, chief of staff of the British air force, in August 1944, which proposed that Berlin, or another similar city, should be subject to a bombing of such enormous proportions that it would force the Germans to surrender. The plan eventually came to be known by the code word Thunderclap, but it was put to one side for four months because the Allies were making inroads on the Western Front and the end of the War seemed imminent. At the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, however, the situation changed. The Battle of the Bulge coincided with the increasingly frequent use of the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighter and the launching of V-2 missiles over England. This led to the period of pessimism already mentioned and the activation of Thunderclap, albeit with a different target: now the aim was not to make Germany surrender after an airstrike on a major city but to make it easier for the Soviets to advance on the Eastern Front.¹⁶ Thus, the focus of the massive bombings turned to eastern Germany and a massive bombing offensive was launched against synthetic fuel plants, military factories, railway lines and stations, communication centres and cities such as the capital of the Reich itself and Dresden, Leipzig and Chemnitz. Harris insisted that these last three cities should be included as options as well as other cities that had not been targeted to date. The new strategy also included targets that were not on German soil, but in Germany the aim was to prevent troops and supplies from reaching the Eastern Front and for the bombings to cause such a flow of refugees that the resulting chaos would be to the benefit of the Red Army.

The plan was accepted by the Allied high command and received the support of the British prime minister Sir Winston Churchill just when he was about to set off for the Yalta conference via the island of Malta.¹⁷ In Yalta, during the fourth of the three-party plenary sessions on 4 February 1945, the Soviet general Antonov asked for attacks to be made on East German rail centres in

¹⁶ Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 22.

¹⁷ United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. "Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden". 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>; Tustin, J.P. "Headquarters US Air Forces in Europe. Why Dresden Was Bombed. A Review of Reasons and Reactions". 11 December 1954. Available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2013/May/23/2001329959/-1/-1/0/Dresden%20again.pdf>>).

order to prevent German reinforcements from easily reaching positions in the north and the east, and in Poland. The idea met with the immediate approval of the Western allies, who had already discussed the issue. The Soviet demands coincided with British-United States plans so they went on to draw up a list of ten possible targets. Dresden was in second place, after Berlin.¹⁸

The joint Anglo-American air-force high command set to work at once. The reason they opted to attack Dresden on 13, 14 and 15 February was that the atmospheric conditions and night-time visibility were better. The attack was carried out in conjunction with an attack on the oil plant in Bohlen near Leipzig. Dresden was home to military factories and a major administrative and rail communication centre. The Allies ranked it as the twentieth most important city in terms of the support it gave to the war effort. We now know from German sources (from 1944) that its military importance was much greater than that. A total of 127 factories manufacturing military goods were located in the city, among which were the Zeiss-Ikon factories mentioned above.¹⁹ As we have pointed out, the bombing of the city aimed not only to destroy these factories but also to sow panic and chaos, demoralise the civilian population and hinder the transport of reinforcements to the Eastern Front.

Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that at the time the major effort of the Red Army on the Eastern Front was not focused on the region of Saxony, of which Dresden was the capital. Western Silesia was under attack, certainly, but fighting was fiercest further north in Posen/Poznan, a major communications centre, and in Pomerania. This, however, did not prevent the Russians from being interested in interrupting supplies and reinforcements to the whole of the Eastern Front.

The bombing of Dresden: only a minor controversy during the II World War

As Tami Davis Biddle states, unusually, the bombing of Dresden raised some controversy even at the time, although only on a minor scale and it was soon forgotten. Dresden, then, was unlike the massive air raids that were launched on Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne (not to mention the destruction of Tokyo

¹⁸ Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 29.

¹⁹ Cox, S. "The Dresden Raids: Why and How". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 54.

with incendiary bombs at the beginning of March 1945). In the days prior to the attacks on the capital of Saxony there had been differences of opinion – which had gone unnoticed by the general public – among the officers responsible for the bombing: the American general, James H. Doolittle, and the British general, Sir Arthur T. Harris. However, a press conference and its subsequent interpretation by an American journalist sparked the most important controversy of the time although, as we have said, it soon petered out. In fact, the news published immediately after the raids by the Allied press had not generated any controversy at all: the general public had been told of the British and American attacks on the city of Dresden because it was a major communications centre, home to factories that were fundamental to the war effort and key to the Russian offensive on the Eastern Front.²⁰ No attempts were made to conceal the destruction of many of the city's cultural treasures and the details were readily available in the press, particularly the *New York Times*.²¹ What is more, on 26 February *Newsweek* stated that Dresden, despite all its architectural beauty, had been attacked because of its strategic position, which “unfortunately, lay in the path of Marshal Ivan S. Koneff’s First Ukrainian Army”.²² But it was the press conference given by Air Commodore Grierson of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) that sparked the controversy. Grierson said that the objective of the Dresden bombing was the same as that of all other raids on towns and cities: they forced the Germans to find solutions to the problems of supplies, transportation of refugees and other issues, all of which contributed to the disruption of the economy. One of the journalists at the press conference, Howard Cowan from the news agency Associated Press, sent a report – which inexplicably managed to get past the censor – stating that the Allies had taken the decision, after long discussions, to carry out “deliberate terror bombings”²³ on German cities. Saying that Dresden was quite specifically targeted was not exactly true and neither was the use of the word “terror” but the journalist was correct about the major targets being communications centres and factories that were essential to the war effort. The report had also mentioned causing chaos in the rearguard with new masses of

20 Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 97.

21 *New York Times*, 16 February, 1945. p. 22.

22 *Newsweek*, 26 February, 1945, p. 37.

23 Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 106.

refugees and supply problems, all part of the strategic aim to assist the Soviet advance on Germany.

So, there had been a change – albeit not explicitly stated – in the intent to avoid mass harm to the civilian population, and this is what Cowan had picked up on. As we have already mentioned, this change in strategy had come about because of the predicament of the Allied armies on the Western Front and the desire to use whatever methods necessary to bring the conflict to a speedy end and prevent Allied casualties. By no means had they adopted a specific and explicit strategy of “deliberate terror bombing” but they had not discounted it either, as had just been witnessed by the destruction of much of Dresden, and as would be seen with the bombings that were still to come.

According to Tami Davis Biddle this first controversy sparked some debate in the American media – in the United Kingdom orders were issued not to discuss it – and the high command responded by confirming that the doctrine on airstrikes was still that which had been expressed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1939: the aim was to carry out precision bombings, not target the civilian population. They pointed out that the bombings of East Germany were targeting synthetic fuel production plants, factories that were key to the war effort and railroad centres, and that their main aim was to help the Soviets. As we have just seen, this was not entirely true and the American high command was approving and taking part in attacks that, despite being largely British initiatives, they accepted despite all the civilian deaths they involved.

In the following weeks the intensity of the bombings was scaled up. A policy of massive night strikes with incendiary bombs was implemented against Japan and, in Germany, Operation Clarion was initiated, the large-scale, general bombardment of railroad centres, ports and factories, which led to the destruction of many towns and cities that had been left untouched until then.²⁴

The only sign of public controversy in Great Britain at the time was the occasional question in Parliament. However, internally – and quite exceptionally – it was Prime Minister Churchill who, on 28 March 1945, made the first complaint about the events in Dresden. He wrote to those responsible for planning the raids, saying that perhaps it was time that the attacks on cities “simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts,

²⁴ Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 112.

should be reviewed.”²⁵ The commanders involved were outraged because they were still very aware of the pressure they had been put under by the Prime Minister before Yalta. What is more, they did not believe they were engaged in deliberately spreading terror; the campaign was more complex and had priority military objectives although these objectives necessarily had an impact on the German civilian population.

For their part, the Nazis successfully exploited the bombing to create controversy. As we have seen, they used the press of some neutral countries to publish highly exaggerated numbers of victims. They also used shortwave radio broadcasts, which could be listened to all over the world, accusing the Allies of acting like criminals and cowards for bombing Dresden and other German cities full of refugees. But quite unexpectedly the bombing of the capital of Saxony prompted various leading Nazis in Germany – for example, Dr Robert Ley, the head of the organisation *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy) – to publish articles claiming that the destruction of Dresden had released the country “from the burden of its freethinking, humanist past” so that now it could be reconstructed along the lines of Nazi ideology with no architectural reminders of the past.²⁶

The Dresden controversy and historical revisionism

According to Richard Overy the controversy surrounding Dresden in 1945 had little impact although in the 1960s it resurfaced with greater force and is still with us today. But in the early post-war period it disappeared from the public scene. It re-emerged in the United States in 1953 when a Republican representative for Illinois, Fred E. Busbey, claimed that the attack had caused 250,000 deaths and that it was an example of terror bombing. However, he had been influenced by the hysteria generated by McCarthy’s anti-Communist witch hunt in the middle of the Cold War (that is to say, in the confrontation between the former Allies of the II World War that had been going on since 1947-48). With his claims, Busbey was attempting to show that Dresden had been nothing more than a trick played by the USSR to deceive the high

25 Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 114.

26 Biddle, T.D. “Wartime Reactions”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 118–119.

command of the American air force.²⁷ The government responded by making public an official USAF report that denied that it had been a trick and refused to accept the figures put forward by the representative. It explained that Dresden had been bombed because it was a “primary communications and important industrial and manufacturing center.”²⁸

The bombing was also subject to interpretation by the Soviet bloc: some historians from the German Democratic Republic, for example, claimed that the objective of the raids on Dresden had been to destroy it so that it would be of no use to the Soviets once it had been occupied, United States capitalism would subsequently be in a position of greater strength and the Soviets – impressed by a show of force that was on a parallel with Hiroshima and Nagasaki – would feel obliged to their Western allies in the peace process, thus paving the way for the United States’ imperialist domination of the world. In fact, a tourist guide in Dresden at the end of 1070 claimed that the city had been destroyed because it had been assigned to the Soviet-occupied zone.²⁹

In the United Kingdom, however, more light was shed on the reasons underlying the raids on Dresden in 1961 when the official history of the British aerial bombing offensive was published.³⁰ This publication revealed details about the attitude of Churchill himself – who as we have seen was against the attack – and denied that the city had been attacked gratuitously and with no military objectives. In fact, it claimed that the raids had been designed to make a contribution to the Soviet war effort in the east of Germany and to ensure its economic defeat.

27 Overy, R. “The Post-War Debate”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 132.

28 Overy, R. “The Post-War Debate”. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 129. See also the 1954 report, surely drafted for this reason, Tustin, J.P. “Headquarters US Air Forces in Europe. Why Dresden Was Bombed. A Review of Reasons and Reactions”. 11 December 1954. Available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2013/May/23/2001329959/1/-1/0/Dresden%20again.pdf>>).

29 Overy, R. “The Post-War Debate.” In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 134–135.

30 Webster, S. Ch. and Frankland, N. *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939–1945* (4 vols). London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office; 1961. See also Andrew Knapp, “The horror and the glory: Bomber Command in British memories since 1945”, *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*. Available at <<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/horror-and-glory-bomber-command-british-memories-1945>>, ISSN 1961-9898. Wilson, K. *Journey’s End. Bomber Command’s Battle from Arnhem to Dresden and Beyond*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 2010.

But the fact that Dresden was an uncomfortable issue can be seen in the reluctance of Churchill³¹ and the supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe, Dwight E. Eisenhower³² to discuss it in the memoirs they published in these years. General Harris did discuss the bombing in his own memoirs where he vehemently argued that the city was number 22 on the list of the top 100 cities to be bombed because of their military importance and that by the time the raids were carried out it “had become the main centre of communications on the southern half of the Eastern front As a large centre of war industry it was also of the highest importance.”³³

As Richard Overy explains, a major controversy broke out in 1963 when the non-academic English historian David Irving published the book *The Destruction of Dresden*³⁴ in which he described the bombing of the city as a deliberate massacre and set the number of deaths at between 100,000 and 250,000. Subsequently he settled on a more precise 135,000. At that time, books also came out in the two Germanies comparing the massacre of Dresden with the Nazi concentration camps. In fact, in 1991 Irving himself claimed that there had been five times more deaths in Dresden than in Auschwitz. This was the beginning of a line of interpretation that was soon picked up by others: the air raids perpetrated by the Allies had been an attempt at the genocide of the German people.

The bombing of Dresden also re-emerged as a matter of public debate thanks to the publication in the United States of the famous anti-war novel *Slaughterhouse Five*,³⁵ by Kurt Vonnegut, who had witnessed the bombing and taken part in excavating bodies from the rubble in Dresden as a prisoner of war captured in the Ardennes. The novel came out in 1969, when the Vietnam War was in full swing and it gave figures of casualties in Dresden that were far higher than the real ones.

In the following decade, and after the regulations on land warfare had been modified by the Hague Convention of 1977, an article by the Swedish expert on bombings, Hans Blix, revived the Dresden case and reproduced the figures given by Irving, pointing out that the raids had been more deadly than

31 Churchill, W. S. *The Second World War*. London: Cassell & Co. Ltd; 1948–54.

32 Eisenhower, D. E. *Crusade in Europe*. New York: Doubleday; 1948.

33 Harris, S. A. “Bomber Offensive”. London: Collins; 1947. Overy, R. In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 128.

34 Irving, D. *The Destruction of Dresden*. London: William Kimber; 1963.

35 Vonnegut, K. *Slaughterhouse Five*. New York: Dell Publishing; 1969.

the atom bombs that had been dropped on Japan and comparable in terms of the excessive use of force with the raids on Hamburg and Tokyo.³⁶ These references and other subsequent ones tended not only to exaggerate the number of fatalities – it is quite common to read that there were between 250,000 and 300,000 – but also to make comments along the lines that, at the time of the bombing, the War had virtually been won so Dresden could by no means be regarded as a military target.

But in 1977 the German historian Götz Bergander³⁷ once again argued that it had been a military target after consulting the documentation on file in the archives of the German Democratic Republic. In his study, he stated that Dresden was a legitimate military target because of the importance of the factories based there and the fact that it was a major communications centre, although he also believed that the means used by the Allies to neutralise the city's threat had been exaggerated and ineffective.³⁸

In these years there was no let up in the publication of invented stories: for example, the alleged machine-gunning of a group of people by United States planes when they were taking shelter on the banks of the River Elbe between the waves of day-time bombings. Of course, these biased accounts – and particularly Irving's, which evolved to such an extent that he became a Holocaust denier and openly pro-Nazi – made no mention of the context of the first two months of 1945 nor of the Allies' tactical and strategic objectives in East Germany at a time of extreme pessimism among the High Command. The stories portrayed the Germans as victims, just as the Jews themselves had been, in an attempt to place the two opposing sides in the War on the same level. In some cases, it was claimed that the Third Reich was not responsible for the War.

These versions have been largely rejected by most German historians but they have been turned into arguments by the far right, which uses the inflated figures of casualties in Dresden to support the false idea that it was the worst massacre of the World War, much worse than the destruction caused by the atom bombs and with more victims than Auschwitz.

36 Overy, R. "The Post-War Debate". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 124.

37 Bergander, G. *Dresden in Luftkrieg*. Berlin: Medimops; 1977.

38 Overy, R. "The Post-War Debate". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 126.

In terms of historiography, in recent years books such as Frederick Taylor's *Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945* was published in 2004,³⁹ *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden*, edited by Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang, came out in 2006, and the report by the commission of historians who worked at the request of the mayor of Dresden was published in 2010. All these studies have put an end to the controversy, at least as far as the number of deaths is concerned (we have seen the importance that this figure has had): it was 25,000.⁴⁰ As Richard Overy says in one of them, what seems to be clear is that the indiscriminate bombings during the last stage of the War on German soil – one of which was Dresden – by no means decided how the War was to end. Neither were they a deliberate crime, but links in an inadequate and ineffective campaign which lowered the moral standards according to which the Allied hoped to conduct the War against the Nazis and the Japanese, who they were constantly accusing of barbaric behaviour.⁴¹

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Dresden is that, alongside other major events of the War, it was one of the reasons for the 1977 revision of the Geneva Conventions on the rules governing warfare, in particular the so-called Protocol I, which adds clarifications and new dispositions – articles 51 and 54 – which make indiscriminate attacks on the civil population and civilian targets illegal.

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³⁹ Taylor, F. *Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945*. London: Bloomsbury; 2004.

⁴⁰ Figure cited in *La Vanguardia*, 19 March 2010. It matches the United States report in 1945 drafted by the United States Air Force Historical Division-Research Studies Division. Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden. 1945. Available at: <<https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458943/bombings-of-dresden>>.

⁴¹ Overy, R. "The Post-War Debate". In Addison, P. and Crang, J.A., editors. *Firestorm. The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*. London: Pimlico; 2006. p. 126.

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