

civilian populations to the greatest extent possible. A sense of urgency, and a numbing and wearing down of moral sensibilities over the long years of war, made possible a decision that was to have fateful consequences for thousands of civilians trying to flee the fierce battles then playing themselves out on the Eastern Front. Dresden speaks directly to the brutalising effect war has on all those who find themselves in its deadly and corrosive clutches. Ironically, perhaps, all the machinations, 'clarifications' and imperfect explanations in the days after the raid revealed that Anglo-American sensibilities had not been eroded into obtuseness. In their compulsion to explain, to shape interpretations, or simply to distance themselves from the event and its implications, they exposed a collective conscience that was not unburdened by what had been done – and could not now be undone.

6

RICHARD OVERY

## The Post-War Debate

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In 1978, in an article on the law of bombardment in the *British Yearbook of International Law*, the Swedish lawyer Hans Blix argued that 'most writers' now agreed that the bombing of cities in the Second World War amounted to nothing less than 'the terror bombing of civilians'.<sup>1</sup> A year before, in August 1977, The Hague Land Warfare Regulations were modified by the Diplomatic Conference on the Reaffirmation and Development of Humanitarian War convoked by the Swiss government between 1974 and 1977, following a two-year initiative by the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1971–2 to get the international community to think of ways of reducing civilian casualties in war.<sup>2</sup> In what were known as Additional Geneva Protocols I and II 'Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflict' real limitations were set on what constituted legitimate forms of bombardment. Articles 48, 51, 54 and 57 restricted military action, including all forms of bombarding and shelling, to internationally recognised and readily identifiable military targets. Parties in conflict, under paragraph 48, should 'at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants' and 'direct their operations only against military objectives'.<sup>3</sup> The purpose was to reduce any prospect of the signatory powers resorting to military means in excess of that required to achieve their military objectives.

International agreements to protect civilians from attack from the air did not exist in 1945 when the city of Dresden was partially destroyed in a massive air raid by British and American bombers. This attack has come to symbolise since 1945 the use of 'excess force' and the deliberate killing of civilians which it entailed. By the time the Additional Protocols were drawn up in the 1970s Dresden was one of the major benchmarks for those international lawyers and human rights officials, like Blix, who argued that the bombardment of predominantly civilian target areas was unlawful. Blix mentioned Dresden twice in his article, once to observe that the death-toll of 135,000 (which he took from David Irving's book on the attack, published in 1963) exceeded that of the atomic attacks on Japan, and a second time bracketed with the conventional bomb attacks on Tokyo and Hamburg as examples of excess force.<sup>4</sup>

Blix was wrong to assume that the Dresden attack was universally viewed as an example of terror-bombing, or that there was general acceptance that it had violated the established laws of conflict. From 1945 onwards Dresden, to an even greater extent than Hamburg, where the death toll from the attacks in July 1943 was higher, came to be seen as a test case in the whole argument about whether the bombing of German cities in the Second World War was justified. The immediate response was, nonetheless, hostile. In December 1945 the Bombing Restriction Committee, founded during the war under the initial title of 'Committee for the Abolition of Night Bombing', published a pamphlet on 'The End of Dresden' which reproduced a graphic account by a Swiss eyewitness of the city's destruction. The committee claimed that anywhere between 200,000 and 300,000 people had died in an attack against a beaten enemy on an unprepared and undefended city of no military significance.<sup>5</sup> These claims became the central planks of the post-war argument that Dresden had been at best a terrible blunder, at worst a deliberate war crime.

The critical discussion of the Dresden raid has focused on a number of complex moral issues on the nature and limits of permissible violence. Even the victors realised that there were awkward questions to be raised, and bombing was removed

as part of the indictment of the major German war criminals put on trial at Nuremberg. The attacks on Hamburg and Dresden were raised only by a number of defendants, who realised that two moral standards might be in operation, one for the German leadership, one for the Allies.<sup>6</sup> Much of the early writing in Germany on the raid compared it with other examples of unrestricted total war, including the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Axel Rodenberger, in one of the earliest books on the fate of Dresden, first published in the German Federal Republic in 1951, described the Dresden attack as 'the atomic bombs for Germany'.<sup>7</sup> A general history of the world wars, published in 1959, placed the attack on a moral equivalence with the genocide of the Jews: 'Next to the names of Belzec, Treblinka and Auschwitz as symbols of horror . . . stands the name of Dresden.' An article published in the magazine *Sonntag* in 1965 in the German Democratic Republic asked rhetorically: 'How many Dresden ruins atone for the barracks of Auschwitz?'<sup>8</sup> This line of argument, with the implicit suggestion that the Allies had also engaged in crimes against humanity during the war just as readily as the Germans, took the issue of Dresden beyond a practical discussion of bombing strategy and its intentions and made it part of the wider discourse on the extent to which Germany alone bore responsibility for the horrors of the Second World War. In a television interview in 1991 the historian David Irving, whose influential book on Dresden was the first in English to present the case against the legitimacy of the attack, claimed that 25,000 people 'may have been executed in Auschwitz', but that five times that number had been killed in Dresden in one night.<sup>9</sup> The journalist Jörg Friedrich in *Der Brand* (The Fire), which became an instant best-seller in Germany in 2002, described the firestorm that engulfed the city's inhabitants as something deliberately planned by attackers who were driven by the logic of pure 'mass destruction' (*Massenvernichtung*).<sup>10</sup>

Most detailed post-war histories of the raid did not go as far as to suggest that the Allies pursued their own form of genocide against the Germans, but there was a general consensus that the attack was not necessary for the defeat of

Germany, either to shorten the war or to undermine any further the crumbling German war economy. There was never any question, even for those who believed the raid was permitted within the rules of war, that the massive loss of life was deeply to be regretted. The introduction to David Irving's account was given by Air Marshal Robert Saundby, who had worked side by side during the war with the Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, Arthur Harris. Saundby deplored the raid as 'a great tragedy' and accepted that it had not been driven by 'military necessity'. He hoped that it would act as a lesson to the human race of 'the futility, savagery and utter uselessness of modern warfare'.<sup>11</sup> Twenty years after Irving's account, Alexander McKee, a veteran of the Allied invasion of Germany, described Dresden as a 'famous massacre' from the outset, for which there was no military or strategic justification whatsoever.<sup>12</sup> The history of the raid by Götz Bergander, first published in 1977, but revised after 1989 when documents became available from the former German Democratic Republic, provided the most balanced account of the attack, but Bergander, though he thought there were grounds for regarding the city as 'a completely legitimate bombing target', found the means used were 'bizarrely out of proportion' to any expected gain.<sup>13</sup> For many of those who wrote about the Dresden raid, the attack symbolised a broader failure on the part of Anglo-American strategy in assuming that war from the air could have any decisive impact on the outcome of the conflict: not a mistake or a crime in itself, but part of a campaign that in its entirety was miscast, ineffective and morally unacceptable.

It is around such issues that much of the public argument surrounding the Dresden raid has revolved. The defence of the operation has always implicitly embraced a wider justification for the purposes of the bombing campaign and for the specific military necessities occasioned by the last stages of the land war on German soil. Much of this defence related specifically to the charge that the Dresden raid was illegitimate as an act of mere terror or retaliation, out of step with the established directives for the bombing war. The previous chapter has shown how sensitive air commanders were to

these charges even during the war. Early in March 1945 Henry Stimson, Roosevelt's Secretary of War, following American press coverage of the attack ('TERROR BOMBING GETS ALLIED APPROVAL' ran one headline), demanded an investigation.<sup>14</sup> The deputy air commander in the European theatre responded that the attacks represented 'no change of policy' but 'only a change of emphasis in locale'. When Henry Arnold, the US Air Force Commander-in-Chief, read a report of the critical reaction to the raid while convalescing in Florida in March 1945 he scrawled on it: 'We must not get soft. War must be destructive and to a certain extent inhuman and ruthless.'<sup>15</sup> A few weeks after Stimson's intervention, Winston Churchill wrote to the Air Ministry to suggest that Dresden had been an example of airpower used 'simply for the sake of increasing the terror' and 'a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing'. He received a stinging rebuttal from Harris that such attacks were 'strategically justified in so far as they tend to shorten the war'. Harris continued: 'Dresden was a mass of munitions works, an intact, government centre, and a key transportation point to the East. It is now none of those things.'<sup>16</sup>

Churchill chose in his history of the Second World War, published in the decade after 1945, to ignore the Dresden raid entirely and to gloss over his differences of opinion with Harris. Despite its popular public impact, other wartime leaders also avoided the post-war controversy by leaving the Dresden raid out of their memoirs. Arnold's autobiography, published in 1949, made no mention of the raid. General Dwight Eisenhower, from whose Paris-based headquarters (SHAEF) the formal orders had come for the attack on Dresden, made no reference to the attack in his widely read memoirs *Crusade in Europe*, although he did include a map under the title 'Bombers over Axis Industry' in which Dresden featured in a shaded area designated a 'secondary target'.<sup>17</sup> Harris was therefore the first of those closely involved in the raid to publish an account of its purposes when his memoirs were released in 1947.

Harris insisted on his view that the attack on Dresden was consistent with the policy he had pursued since he took over

Bomber Command in February 1942 under the existing directive to destroy the military-economic potential of Germany by systematic attacks on Germany's major industrial cities and the morale of their working populations. Dresden ranked twenty-second on the list of one hundred city targets drawn up by the Ministry of Economic Warfare in 1942, though many cities lower down the list, but easier to reach, had been attacked long before Dresden.<sup>18</sup> In his memoirs Harris justified the raid in the following terms:

Dresden had by this time [i.e. spring 1945] 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.<sup>19</sup>

This view reiterated what Harris had previously written in his 'Despatch on War Operations' which was submitted to the Air Ministry in December 1945, though not released to the general public. Rather than disguise the raid, Harris chose to highlight it 'as one among many other highly effective operations' against a city of 'industrial significance' and a 'communications centre and control point in the defence of Germany's eastern front'.<sup>20</sup> He remained sensitive to the charge that he had instigated the raid, and to the insinuation that it had been unnecessary and terroristic. Some time after the publication of the official history of the strategic bombing campaign in 1961, Harris composed a private memorandum under the heading 'Notes on Bomber Command' in which he set down his own thoughts about the Dresden raid. 'I am often asked ... why Dresden was bombed and, more particularly, why I bombed Dresden ...' he wrote, and then continued, 'though why Dresden deserved special dispensation any more than other German, French, Belgian and Italian towns is difficult to comprehend.'<sup>21</sup> Harris remained wedded throughout his post-war retirement to the argument that the attack on Dresden was consistent with attacks on other targets in Germany and with the directives under which his force operated.

The response to criticism of the raid in the United States

provoked a very similar reaction. In 1953, following accusations from Fred Busbey, an American Republican representative from Illinois, that 'the Americans murdered 250,000 innocent persons - mainly women and children', the Department of the Air Force requested a detailed report, based on the available records, of the motives for and conduct of the raid on Dresden.<sup>22</sup> The subsequent report, prepared by a historian of the Air Force Historical Division, Joseph W. Angell, was completed in 1953, and formed the basis of official responses to the charge that Dresden had been, in effect, a war crime. Angell set out to answer a number of questions posed at the start of the report, but the most important were: 'Was Dresden a legitimate military target?' and 'What strategic objectives ... underlay the bombings of Dresden?'<sup>23</sup> His conclusions were identical with those drawn by Harris. Dresden, Angell wrote, was 'a primary communications center' and 'an important industrial and manufacturing center'.<sup>24</sup> He used charts of comparative destruction and bomb-loads in attacks on other German cities to demonstrate that there was nothing peculiar about the raid on Dresden. 'The bombings', he continued, 'were in no way a deviation from established bombing policies set forth in official bombing directives.' Nor did he regard them as inconsistent with the 'forces and means' employed by both the American and the British air forces in other operations over Germany.<sup>25</sup> These views formed the basis of a public statement by the State Department in 1953 repudiating accusations of terror bombing.

The views expressed in defence of the Dresden raid appeared in largely the same form in the official histories of the British and American air campaigns. The American official history, published in 1951, had little to say about the Dresden raid, except to observe that the city was part of an important communications web and a 'great industrial center', which despite 'tragedy to thousands of German civilians' was effectively 'blotted out'. The official historians indicated that the Dresden attack had created alarm in the American press until General Carl Spaatz, in command of American air forces in Europe, had informed Arnold that attacks remained consistent with the conventional directives issued to the

American air forces, and could not be construed as 'terror'.<sup>26</sup> When Spaatz later, in 1969, was asked to explain the attack on the city he retorted laconically: 'Now maybe some of the bombs fell on Dresden, but the target was a military target.'<sup>27</sup> The British official history, on which many of the subsequent histories of the raid were based, was published in 1961. The authors again observed that Dresden had occasioned an immediate debate about the purpose of the bombing campaign, but insisted that the raid was not an aberration pursued for its own sake by Harris. 'These mass attacks on east German towns', they wrote, 'did not constitute any fundamental change in bombing policy.' They concluded that the air force did not wage war 'in a different moral sense from that approved by the Government'.<sup>28</sup> The bombing offensive, the official history continued, 'was at no stage of the war ... wanton. On the contrary it was a carefully designed strategic plan intended to contribute to the most rapid and economical defeat of Germany.' In their view the Dresden raid had to be understood in these terms.

At least some of this interpretation depended on identifying clearly who had been responsible for ordering the raid in the first place and with what intention. The establishment of responsibility ought to have been evident from the nature of the wartime apparatus of control and command of Allied air forces in Europe, but in reality the chain of events which led to the attack on Dresden were not entirely clear, and because of the adverse publicity that surrounded the attack, the allocation of responsibility became, *ipso facto*, an allocation of blame. The motive for the raid was also ambiguous, for while on the one hand it could be shown to be consistent with the conduct of the Combined Bombing Offensive agreed between the two Western Allies in 1943 (to reduce the German economic and military capacity to wage war and to undermine the morale of its working population), this particular raid was also closely related to the course of the war on land, which was orchestrated not by the air force commanders, but by the Allied Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower.

Immediate responsibility lay with Allied Supreme Headquarters in Paris (SHAEF), which issued an operational

instruction to RAF Bomber Command and to the US Eighth Air Force on 8 February 1945 to bomb Dresden as part of a strategy to prevent the German movement of troops between the Western and Eastern Fronts.<sup>29</sup> But the background was more complex than this. Harris in his memoirs simply recorded that 'The attack on Dresden was at the time considered to be a military necessity by more important people than myself'.<sup>30</sup> Not until the publication of the British official history in 1961 was the role of Churchill fully exposed. As Harris had known perfectly well, Churchill had thrown his weight in late January 1945 behind the idea of large bombing attacks on the cities of eastern Germany as a direct Western contribution to the Soviet military advance into the Reich. Though he did not order the attack directly (this was done via SHAEF), he insisted that Bomber Command should take action in February against the cities of eastern Germany, and chided the Air Ministry for its lack of urgency. Churchill became the key figure in Irving's account, completed two years later. He plays a malign part in Friedrich's general indictment of bombing policy, in which are cited Churchill's bloodthirsty threats in the summer of 1940 to turn Germany 'into a wasteland', with 'exterminating attacks'.<sup>31</sup>

The effect of the revelation that Churchill had pressured the Air Ministry, and Harris, into making the attacks exacerbated the tendency, evident from the American official history ten years before, to see the destruction of Dresden as a result of the British area bombing campaign, for which the American bomber force, with its stated commitment to bombing 'precision' targets (in this case the Dresden railway marshalling yards), could not be made responsible. In 1958 the sociologist Fred Iklé published an influential study of the social effects of bombing in which the Dresden attack was carried out 'by the British'.<sup>32</sup> A later study insisted that American bombing of pinpoint targets was 'good the first day' but became less accurate because of the smoke caused by British area bombing; as a result bombing of the marshalling yards 'probably contributed to the casualties'.<sup>33</sup> The American Air Forces Commander Carl Spaatz defended the actions of his force in 1969 with the argument that they attacked only identifiable

communications targets. Only thirty years later, with the publication by a historian from the US Air Force history office of a biography of Spaatz, did it become clear that the American air force was a full partner in the destructive raid. After the names 'Chemnitz' and 'Dresden' on the draft of the American plan was written 'Beat 'em up'.<sup>34</sup>

Establishing the purposes behind the raid proved even more controversial, not only because once again the historical narrative was confused, but because the differing interpretations of its purpose became readily politicised. The Dresden debate became inextricably bound up with the evolving Cold War confrontation after 1945. For the Western powers, the Dresden attack was more comfortably presented as a consequence of pressure from the Soviet Union rather than as a direct result of the escalating Anglo-American strategic bombing war and Churchill's desire to use its greater power for the final stages of German defeat. For the communist bloc, Dresden came to represent an example of cynical, unrestrained and militaristic Western imperialism. Western willingness to suggest that the motive for attacking Dresden lay with Soviet requests for assistance began almost as soon as news of the raid reached their populations. In March 1945 General George Marshall, the Army Commander-in-Chief, responded to adverse criticism of the raid by publicly announcing that the Russians had requested the attack to support their offensives in the east, which was not wholly inaccurate. By the 1950s anti-Soviet hysteria in the United States provoked one critic to argue that American airmen had undertaken the raid 'as dupes of the Communists'.<sup>35</sup>

The Angell report was produced partly in response to these charges as well as the accusation of terrorism. The report confirmed that the raid was the outcome of negotiations between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union, beginning in December 1944, on how best Western forces might assist the Soviet breakthrough in the east. The report made clear that much of the initiative came from the Western side, and that the decision to include Dresden came from a SHAEF planning document, drawn up by Eisenhower's deputy commander, Air Marshal Arthur Tedder, on 31 January 1945, two weeks

after he had personally talked with Stalin in Moscow. Though much of the subsequent debate on Dresden assumed that the Soviet side had been responsible for requesting the bombing of Dresden at the Yalta Conference in early February 1945, Angell found not only that the decision to include the city had been taken some time beforehand on the advice of the Western Joint Intelligence Committee, but that there was no mention by the Soviet side of Dresden, only a request that Western air forces 'paralyze the [rail] junctions of Berlin and Leipzig'.<sup>36</sup> In a separate letter to the chief of the air force historical division, Angell wrote: 'I think there can be no doubt that . . . the Russians never did specifically request the bombing of Dresden', but he expressed his willingness to make out a case 'that the Russians wanted us to bomb Dresden, that we bombed "in concert" as it were, with Russia'.<sup>37</sup> By a sleight of hand he included in his final report the conclusion that 'The Russians requested that the Dresden area be bombed by Allied air forces', and this argument, too, was included in the official statement on the raid.<sup>38</sup> In the file copy of the report the word 'area' is heavily underlined by one of those who read it and understood its implications.

The British official history accepted more candidly that the Soviet request for the bombing of Berlin and Leipzig was neither central to the discussions at Yalta, nor insisted upon by the Soviet side, and that instructions 'had already and independently been given to Bomber Command and the Eighth Air Force'.<sup>39</sup> But by the time Harris came to write his later 'Notes on Bomber Command' he had altered the judgement he had presented both in his despatch and in his memoirs – that Dresden was an important economic and military target like other cities, attacked as part of the general air offensive – and had come to accept the responsibility of the Soviet Union not only for the raid, but for sustaining adverse opinion of it since: 'This criticism originated of course from the other side of the Iron Curtain – as did the original demand for bombing that area.'<sup>40</sup> The idea that Soviet leaders had deliberately requested the bombing of Dresden became one of the myths of Cold War history. One of the British interpreters at the Yalta conference in February 1945, Major Hugh Lunghi,

recalled fifty years later that he had distinctly heard the Soviet chief of operations, General Alexei Antonov, request the bombing of Dresden and that the request was strongly endorsed by Stalin himself.<sup>41</sup> Though no other witnesses recalled Antonov or Stalin saying anything of the kind (even Harris accepted that Stalin had asked only about 'Leipsic'), the view that the Soviet military command insistently requested the bombing of eastern German cities, including Dresden, passed ultimate responsibility to the Soviet side.

This was a view strongly contested from the communist bloc. In the German Democratic Republic, established under Soviet pressure in 1949, Dresden was transformed into a symbol of what had divided the socialist east from the imperialist west. 'The Soviets', complained one West German writer, 'want Dresden to be a "beacon" in the struggle against the Americans.'<sup>42</sup> In 1950 the writer Walter Lehweß-Litzmann rejected the idea that the Soviet Union had asked for the bombing of Dresden, partly because Soviet forces 'had never during the entire war engaged in massive attacks against the civilian population', partly because the raid on Dresden helped the Red Army very little. Lehweß-Litzmann planted the seed of a different idea: that there had been political motives for the west in the attack on Dresden, perhaps to weaken the communist reconstruction of eastern Germany, but more probably, he concluded, as an expression of sheer Western power in order to increase capitalist influence in post-war Germany.<sup>43</sup>

The suggestion that the Western powers had 'unrealized goals of an imperialist stamp' when they bombed Dresden became the central feature of most communist accounts of the attack, which accepted *a priori* that the operation was militarily 'senseless' and could only be explained in political terms.<sup>44</sup> Dresden came to be coupled with Hiroshima as an attack undertaken as a demonstration of ruthless imperial power to frighten the Soviet Union into compliance. The German writer Max Seydewitz, who was minister president of Saxony between 1947 and 1952, later wrote in his account of the reconstruction of the city, published in 1955, that the assault on Dresden, like the atomic attacks, was no less than 'one of

the early steps towards preparation of a new war for the seeing through of American imperialist plans for world mastery'.<sup>45</sup> In 1965 a journal article in the Democratic Republic marking the twentieth anniversary of the raid asserted that Dresden had already been perceived by the Western Allies as a 'capital' of the Cold War, a forerunner of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Hanoi and a direct consequence of the 'inhuman system of imperialism'.<sup>46</sup> By the 1980s these views were embedded in the anti-Western rhetoric of the German communist regime. At a memorial ceremony in Dresden in 1984 the banners read: 'Dresden demands – an end to the arms race, US rockets out of Western Europe!'<sup>47</sup> One Dresden tourist guide about the raid published in the late 1970s claimed that the city was deliberately destroyed because it fell within the Soviet zone of occupation: 'The idea was that the Red Army should find a dead city when it entered Dresden.'<sup>48</sup>

In 1990 the East German military historian Olaf Groehler produced a major account of the effects of bombing on Germany in which he rejected completely the idea that the Soviet Union had either asked for the attack on Dresden, or approved it once Soviet leaders were notified of their Allies' intention. The request made by General Antonov at Yalta, cited from the Soviet transcript of the negotiations, contained specific mention of Berlin and Leipzig, as was well known, but no mention of Dresden. Groehler highlighted the subsequent request that a 'bombing line' should be agreed, running from Stettin in the north, through Dresden to Zagreb in the south, beyond which the Anglo-American bomber forces would not penetrate. The American representatives refused to accept the line on the ground that there were at least twenty major strategic targets that lay beyond it, and the Soviet side had to be content with the promise that they would not only be informed of any raids, but would also be expected to approve them. Though Dresden appeared on the list of possible targets handed to the Soviet side on 8 February 1945 (most of which were pinpoint targets of oil production, communications and armaments output) the Soviet military authorities were never asked or given the opportunity to approve the Dresden raid.<sup>49</sup> Instead, argued Groehler, the raid was mounted largely to

impress the Soviet ally with the exceptional destructive power that the Western states were capable of exerting if they chose to do so, and in defiance of Soviet requests to respect the need for agreement over targets little more than 60–70 kilometres from their front line.<sup>50</sup> Groehler was no crude 'cold warrior', but he could see no sense in attacking Dresden with such overwhelming force when a much smaller operation would have achieved the more modest plans for the elimination of rail communications first suggested by the Soviet side.

The debate on the questions of responsibility and motive for the raid has remained unresolved. Although the balance of scholarly evidence clearly suggests that the raid was the product of Western strategic planning and operational preparation, and was neither sought specifically nor formally endorsed by the Soviet high command, there remains sufficient ambiguity in the historical record to permit a variety of interpretations to survive. This is no less true of the vexed issue of casualties, which has remained a central part not only of the wider debate on the intentions behind the attack, but in defining Dresden as a particular act of deliberate terror and, by extrapolation, a major war crime. The initial figures publicised for the dead in Dresden, cited by the Bombing Restriction Committee in December 1945, were around 200,000 to 250,000 (though the committee also presented a separate estimate of as many as 300,000 dead). The figure of approximately a quarter of a million deaths was supplied shortly after the raid by the German Ministry of Propaganda for the consumption of foreign journalists and was reproduced regularly in the early condemnations of the raid published both inside and outside Germany. The Dresden regional party propaganda office suggested that the final death-toll might reach 300,000 to 400,000.<sup>51</sup> The Dresden authorities themselves never made such exaggerated claims. There was some difficulty in establishing the number of dead precisely, but by the middle of March 1945 the grisly work of counting and identifying bodies reached a total of 18,375. A report a few weeks later by the Berlin Chief of Police stated that 22,096 bodies had been recovered or accounted for, but more work needed to be done.<sup>52</sup> A city commission appointed

in 1946 confirmed that by May 1945 around 32,000 dead had been identified and discovered, but added that perhaps as many as 3,000 more might come to light. Between 1945 and 1966, as the ruins were gradually cleared, a further 1,858 victims were unearthed. Since it was reasonable to assume that some bodies might have been incinerated entirely, the city authorities announced a figure of approximately 35,000 dead, and this statistic remained for a long time the most plausible estimate of casualties, consistent with levels of damage and fatality in comparable city bombing attacks. In the early 1990s cemetery records were discovered which showed that a total of 21,271 victims were recorded for burial. With the addition of bodies discovered after the end of the war, the latest estimates suggest a figure of 25,000 in total, precisely the figure suggested by a Dresden police report drawn up in 1945 not long after the raid.<sup>53</sup>

The issue of casualties was muddled by a number of factors. The precise population of Dresden on the night of the attack was difficult to calculate because of the flow of refugees and air raid evacuees. The early impression of the raid suggested that perhaps a million extra inhabitants were crammed into the streets and parks of the city, but this figure has been shown to be as implausible as the early estimates of total casualties. The best estimates arrived at since 1945, based on the numbers known to be sheltering in Dresden's railway stations, those in transit through the city and the statistics of those billeted on Dresden households, suggest a figure of between 100,000 and 200,000 additional inhabitants, with the lower figure the more likely. Because some of Dresden's population was drafted away for war service, the net additional population would have been smaller than this total. Thousands of people fled from Dresden in the immediate aftermath of the bombing, and many were reported as 'missing' who subsequently returned. These uncertainties fuelled early estimates that the number of casualties must have been hundreds of thousands, and made it possible for most of those who wrote about Dresden, including Hans Blix in the 1970s, to suggest figures far in excess of the numbers acknowledged by the city's own authorities, which had been



independently confirmed in the 1960s by surviving documentary evidence.

The reasons for not believing the official figures were complex, but in most cases the higher estimates were exploited as a means of demonstrating that this was an attack unlike any other on a German city, comparable with, indeed in excess of, the casualties inflicted on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The scale of the horror was intended to single out the Dresden attack as morally distinct from other examples of area bombing – even of Hamburg in 1943 – because the major part of the victims were refugees, women or children. The accuracy of the figures mattered under these circumstances very little; the larger the loss of life, the more easily the Dresden raid could be mobilised as an instrument to demonstrate the hideous character of modern warfare and the ruthless, even genocidal, ambitions of the two Western states who perpetrated it.

The discussion of figures became a small part of a broader phenomenon defined in Germany as the *Historikerstreit*, or 'historians' conflict'. The presentation of Dresden as an atrocity of overwhelming proportions allowed the idea of Germans as victims to be set in the account book against the crimes of which the German people stood accused. The moral relativism that this implied was resisted by many German historians, who accepted that there was no real equivalence between the genocide of the Jews (and of other peoples) and the human consequences of the bombing war, however exaggerated the figures claimed for the victims at Dresden. But the willingness to sustain these overestimates, in the face of the evidence, rested on prior assumptions about the criminal character of the bombing campaign or of the moral equivalence of the two sides. This was an argument easily appropriated by historians of the radical right.

The deliberate distortion and exploitation of numbers were most closely identified with the British historian David Irving, whose book on Dresden, first published in 1963, but subsequently reissued with alterations up to 1995, always carried estimates of total deaths well beyond the figures suggested by the Dresden authorities. The story of Irving's manipulation of

the evidence is now well known following the publication of his private correspondence and notes on the question during the libel action Irving took against Penguin Books and the historian Deborah Lipstadt in 1999.<sup>54</sup> Irving's unscholarly and misleading presentation of the number of dead at Dresden was designed to show that this was an atrocity of exceptional callousness and magnitude, in order to demonstrate that the Western liberal states were just as capable of massive crime as the states they opposed. His first estimate of 135,000 was a figure suggested to him by a Dresden official, Hans Voigt, whose job it had been to draw up a register of the dead. Though Voigt had reported only 35,000 in 1945, the figure later used by the city authorities, he apparently told Irving that the final tally could have been 100,000 higher. This figure was taken at face value and was subsequently reproduced regularly in discussion of Dresden. Hans Blix used the figure in his indictment of city bombing in 1977, and the figure was still used as authoritative in the 1990s, despite the absence of any direct evidence to corroborate it.<sup>55</sup> In 1964 Irving was given a copy of a report, TB47, which purported to come from a statement by the police president of Dresden, which gave figures of 202,040 dead and a probable final tally of 250,000. Irving grasped the new evidence to show that Dresden had been a crime quite unparalleled. Though the document was found to be a propaganda forgery a few years later (an '0' had been crudely added to the original figures of 20,204 and 25,000), Irving remained committed to the idea that the true figure of fatalities was massively greater, even if TB47 was no longer a reliable source. In 1989, when releasing in Britain the Leuchter Report, in which it was denied that there had been gas chambers at Auschwitz, Irving spoke of between 100,000 and 250,000 deaths in the Dresden raid.<sup>56</sup>

The higher figures allowed critics of the raid to argue that Dresden was spectacularly different from other attacks. Wilhelm Berthold writing on Dresden in 1986 claimed that the 135,000 dead made the operation 'the most murderous of the whole war, Hiroshima included'.<sup>57</sup> In 1995 the German airpower historian Franz Kurowski wrote a book on 'The Massacre of Dresden' (including a chapter titled 'Dresden, the

German Hiroshima') in which he reiterated the now discredited figures from the forged TB47 document among a number of other very high estimates of casualties and concluded that the final figures for the dead lay between 100,000 and 300,000. He blamed the 'game-playing with figures' on a general tendency to play down the total dead at Dresden in order to reduce any prospect that the victorious Allies might have been held to account before an international court, as German leaders had been, but also as a reflection of a German tendency to take the blame as an act of atonement for manifest German crimes.<sup>58</sup> Both sides, concluded Kurowski, were equally guilty of hideous atrocities, but German historians 'felt compelled to remain silent and to write of the ever enduring German guilt towards everyone else'.<sup>59</sup>

It was this sense that a gross historical injustice had been perpetrated by the wartime victors that encouraged those who deliberately distorted the casualty figures to couple the destruction of Dresden with the record of the Holocaust. On several occasions in the 1990s David Irving invited his listeners to draw these comparisons. The television documentary in November 1991, in which Irving commented that 25,000 people may have been executed at Auschwitz, but five times that number were murdered in a single night in Dresden, has already been noted, but it was not an isolated case.<sup>60</sup> In a speech in Toronto in 1990 Irving told his audience that even the statistic of 25,000 killed at Auschwitz was a 'grossly inflated figure', but nonetheless a crime, conducted slowly over four years. He contrasted that with the death of 25,000 in Pforzheim in 'twenty-five minutes' through bombing. 'When you put things into *perspective* like that, of course, it diminishes their Holocaust.'<sup>61</sup> In 1986 he called Dresden itself 'a Holocaust', and over the following years he developed the argument that following the forced marches of Jewish prisoners into the Reich in the spring of 1945, it was the Allies themselves who killed many of the Jewish wartime victims when they bombed the eastern cities of Germany. 'Nobody knows how many Jews died in those air raids,' he claimed in 1993. These were, he insisted, 'alternative solutions to where the people [European Jews] went'.<sup>62</sup>

Few modern accounts of the Dresden raid accept either the exaggerated figures or the explicit link with the genocide of the Jews. But the idea that the attack, irrespective of numbers, was in a real sense a crime of war, though not formally a war crime, has persisted since the discussion in the 1970s over what constituted legitimate use of violence in modern war. The Dresden raid played a significant part in the efforts to create the conditions for more 'humanitarian' forms of warfare. It is perhaps a reflection of the use made of Dresden in communist discourse on the war that the delegate from the German Democratic Republic to the International Red Cross conference on humanitarian law emphasised, in response to the view of the British and West German delegates that the legitimacy of bombing might depend on circumstances, the necessity for an absolute ban on all forms of warfare involving 'indiscriminate violence or of attacks which employed methods of combat that could not be directed at a specific military target'. He regretted 'the uncontrolled development of barbarous uses of highly sophisticated weapons and means of warfare'.<sup>63</sup> The British delegation, on the other hand, interpreted the new protocols banning attacks on civilians in anything but an absolute sense:

It had noted in particular that a specific area of land might be a military objective if, because of its location or for other reasons specified in the article, its total or partial destruction, capture or neutralisation, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offered a definite military advantage.<sup>64</sup>

In the formal diplomatic language of the conference could be detected the echoes of the debate prompted by the Dresden raid since 1945 for and against the bombing of predominantly civilian areas in war. Since the 1970s the bombing of cities from the air has been confined almost entirely to the British and United States air forces. A decade later neither state had ratified the Additional Protocols signed in 1977, though they signed the original agreement; both states insisted that the Protocols did not apply to the use of nuclear weapons, which

rendered the agreement meaningless. The German Democratic Republic ratified the Protocols almost immediately.<sup>65</sup>

NICOLA LAMBOURNE

## The Reconstruction of the City's Historic Monuments

The extent of the material damage caused in Dresden in February 1945 makes the subject of the city's reconstruction an immense one, covering the post-war revival of all aspects of the life of what was the fifth largest city in Germany, from housing and industry to urban planning and historic monuments. The focus here is on the reconstruction history of Dresden's most famously ruined buildings, the churches, palaces and museums most often mourned in accounts of the Allied raids and their aftermath. Detailed catalogues of war damage to Dresden's historic monuments are published elsewhere – my interest is rather in the attitudes taken towards their reconstruction by successive administrations from 1945 until the present day, and how these attitudes affected the pace and choice of rebuilding projects.<sup>1</sup> The reconstruction of damaged buildings, even damage so extensive, caused in such controversial circumstances and provoking such strong reactions, gave a particularly heightened significance to the post-war reconstruction of this city's historic monuments.

As much of this reconstruction took place when Dresden was an East German city, in the eastern European showcase state for socialist living, the GDR approach to rebuilding the architectural ruins must be taken into account, raising the question as to whether 'socialist reconstruction' differed from