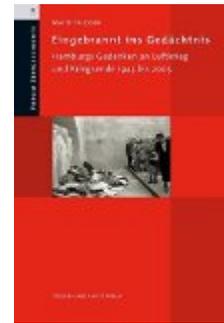


Malte Thießen. *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis: Hamburgs Gedenken an Luftkrieg und Kriegsende 1943 bis 2005*. Forum Zeitgeschichte Series. Munich: Dölling und Galitz Verlag, 2007. 502 pp. ISBN 978-3-937904-55-9.

Reviewed by Douglas Peifer

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Hamburg's Public Memory of Firebombing, Defeat, and Liberation

The inhabitants of Hamburg experienced over thirty-seven air raids during the first three and half years of World War II, but nothing approached the ferocity of the air attacks of July 24-25 and July 27-28, 1943. The attack of July 27-28 ignited a firestorm that raged throughout the city center, overwhelming all firefighting efforts, and costing the lives of over thirty-four thousand Hamburgers. Some nine-hundred thousand residents became homeless, and the city center smoldered for days. For survivors, the terrible days of July 1943 became burnt into their memory, never to be forgotten. Yet as Malte Thiessen makes clear in this study, constructing a collective municipal memory from hundreds of thousands of individual experiences proved complex, with the concerns of the present interacting with perspectives from the past. Thiessen addresses a series of interrelated questions in this work. Who were the main actors seeking to attach meaning to the city's past? How enduring were the narratives they constructed? What were Hamburg's competing *lieux de mémoire*, and why did three in particular come to dominate memory of World War II, specifically the July 1943 firebombing, the Neuengamme concentration camp, and the war's end? When and why did dominant narratives of Hamburg's wartime experience shift, and did Hamburg follow or deviate from the broader patterns of post-war West German public memory?

Thiessen's study, published as part of the series Forum Zeitgeschichte by the Forschungsstelle für Zeit-

geschichte at the University of Hamburg, answers these questions in its painstakingly detailed analysis of Hamburg's public memory since 1945. The study rests on written sources drawn from over a dozen archives, encompassing memorial speeches, newspaper articles, exhibit guides, serialized historical specials, popular histories, memoirs, newsletters, and the scholarly studies emanating from historical institutes, museums, and universities. One of the major benefits of Thiessen's city-specific study of memory is its increased granularity: while broader studies of German memory have captured the tension between German memories of themselves as victims, perpetrators, bystanders, or resisters, in Hamburg these general narrative frameworks found specific historical expression in the memory of the thousands of innocent German women and children killed in the July 1943 firebombing of the city, in the brutality of the wardens and guards at the Neuengamme concentration camp, in the indifference of Hamburg's citizenry to the vicious treatment and callous execution of prisoners assigned to gather and bury the bodies of air raid victims, and in the idealized construction of Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann as a quasi-resistance figure during the final days of the war. This increased granularity and specificity illustrates how memory was "constructed." Thiessen lays bare the mechanics of narrative construction. Different groups attached competing meaning to the same historical event (the Hamburg firestorm could thus be seen as terrible retribution or as barbarous escalation). Different groups therefore disagreed about what dates should be

publicly commemorated (May 3, the surrender of Hamburg; May 4, the liberation of Neuengamme; May 8, Germany's unconditional surrender?), advanced opposing perspectives (the war's end as defeat or liberation), and mobilized the same historical events to support diametrically opposed contemporary agendas.

While Thiessen's approach is to be commended for clearly illustrating how municipal memory is constructed and changes, a word of caution is in order for the non-specialist. Thiessen assumes that his readers have a good deal of pre-existing knowledge about the events and figures associated with the memories he explores. He assumes his readers know who Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann and Kampfkommandant Alwin Wolz were and what role they played during the final phases of the war in north-west Germany. He assumes his readers know about the sinking of the *Cap Arkona* on May 3, 1945, and understand that the loss of some seven thousand lives had little resonance in Hamburg's public memory because the ship was filled with concentration camp inmates rather than German refugees from the East. Thiessen devotes one sentence to summarizing what happened on Bullenhusen Damm (on April 20, 1945, SS men hanged twenty Jewish children who had been subjected to tuberculosis experimentation and were about to be liberated by British troops), yet returns to the topic again and again in his discussion of commemoration and memory. Thiessen explains that his study seeks to analyze memory rather than investigate the historical events themselves, and he understandably does not want to inject his interpretation of the past into his analysis of memory construction. Yet by providing no assessments of the historical reality of certain historic events, whether Kaufmann's actions, *Cap Arkona*, Neuengamme, or the Bullenhusen Damm, Thiessen provides his readers with no sense of how far the memory schemas he discusses diverged from the historical experience from which they sprang.

Historians of memory may dismiss the above concern by noting, as does Thiessen, that memory has as much to do with contemporary issues as it does with the historical past. Thiessen breaks his analysis into five historical periods (1943-45, 1945-55, 1956-79, 1980-95, and the sixtieth anniversaries of Hamburg's destruction and liberation/defeat in 2003 and 2005), and clearly shows how contemporary concerns colored the construction and celebration of public memory. Thiessen's chapter on the period 1943-45 is particularly interesting, as he explores how two narratives developed during this period persisted for decades: a narrative of a *Gemeinschaft* (or coming together) and tone of hope, rebirth, and renewal.

Thiessen asserts that although church officials stressed Christian *Gemeinschaft*, and religious hope, these narratives paralleled rather than confronted the regime themes of *Volksgemeinschaft* and the promise of a physical renewal of the city. Nonetheless, after an initial period of limited tolerance for religious commemorations for bombing victims, within a year the regime answered a pastor's request that he be allowed to hold a service at the mass grave for bombing victims with the response that religious commemorations should take place inside churches. The pastor's church was among the many churches that no longer existed.

The chapter on 1945-55 focuses on the establishment of memory. Thiessen notes how early post-war commemorations embraced the left and the right; they included concentration camp survivors and homeless Germans. Attendance at public events dedicated to the victims of Nazism fell precipitously by 1947 and 1948, in part due to the critical food shortage which forced the average citizen's to concentrate on the daily grind of survival, but also because these events did not resonate with the public. Instead, two narratives became increasingly popular in print and speech: the first was a narrative of Hamburg's surrender on May 3, 1945 as an expression of a practical Hanseatic spirit resistant to the irrational Nazi fanaticism (and Gauleiter Kaufmann as a quasi-resister who had risked his life rejecting orders to destroy all infrastructure during the final phase of the war). By the 1950s, the second narrative emerged, this one a story of Hamburg's destruction and rebirth as proof of its unique spirit and of Germany's *Wirtschaftswunder* in general.

Thiessen's analysis of the 1950s and early 60s echoes the findings of Norbert Frei, Robert Moeller, and others in that he substantiates a growing focus on Germans as victims.[1] If in the immediate post-war period many public speeches acknowledged the suffering of those groups and individuals who had been persecuted, tortured, and exterminated by the Nazis, by the 1950s the Hamburg Senate asserted that soldiers, POWs, and bombing casualties had likewise been victims of Nazism (p. 129). The conventional periodization of West German memory posits that 1968 served as a watershed in Germany's relationship to its past. Thiessen, however, detects little immediate change in Hamburg's public memory. Although students protested against the persistence of old elites in the Federal Republic, Hamburg's public memory remained largely wedded to the historical narratives, commemorative dates, and perspectives established in the 1950s. Only as the intellectual descendants of 1968—the Greens, the *tageszeitung*, and the *Hamburger Rundschau*—came to

the fore in the late 1970s did Hamburg's public memory shift (p. 3). Rather than viewing 1968 as a watershed moment in Hamburg's relationship with the Second World War and the Nazi past, Thiessen posits that 1968 began a process that only gradually changed Hamburg's perception of its past. As 68ers became teachers, as "Barfusshistoriker" published alternative accounts of the past, and as the generation of 1968 progressed through the institutions, Hamburg slowly adjusted long-standing narratives.

The final sections of the study deal with "memory boom" of the 1980s and 90s, and the sixtieth anniversary of 1943-45. Thiessen rejects Jörg Friedrich's assertion that remembering German victims of the Combined Bomber Offensive had become taboo by the end of the twentieth century. Carefully analyzing the fortieth (1983), fiftieth (1993), and sixtieth (2003) anniversaries of the 1943 firebombing of Hamburg, Thiessen documents a wealth of speeches, newspaper accounts, exhibits, and books dedicated to the topic. While rejecting the concept that German bombing victims had been pushed to the fringe of public memory, Thiessen affirms that the narrative of Germans as victims had come under increasing attack during the memory boom of the 1980s and 1990s. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the firebombing, demonstrators disrupted the memorial service in the "Michel" by unveiling a banner proclaiming "*Operation Gomorrha. Es gibt nichts zu trauern*" ("Operation Gomorrha. No cause for mourning"). Thiessen's rebuttal of the "taboo thesis" will surprise few who have researched the topic. Far more interesting is how he demonstrates the

interaction between contemporary concerns and public memory. Hamburg's agony, used during the 1950s as an argument for entering NATO in order to ensure that totalitarianism would never return to Germany, had become, by the 1980s, a potent weapon against NATO's dual track decision on intermediate range missiles (the Pershing II controversy). Yet while the book convincingly demonstrates the link between contemporary concerns and public memory, it offers no analysis of this linkage. One wishes that the author would provide some thoughts on the relationship he so amply documents. Does public memory steer policy in a loose manner, or do politicians and activists simply select potent sites of memory that reinforce and support positions they favored without reference to the past?

Overall, *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis* adds depth and specificity to the growing field of German memory studies. The hundreds of thousands of Hamburgers who experienced the July 1943 firebombing of the city and the confusion and fear of the final phase of the war shared a common trauma that dominated and dominates Hamburg's public memory. Yet how these events have been remembered has changed and continues to change as past, present, and politics interact.

Note

[1]. Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: Dtv, 1997).

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