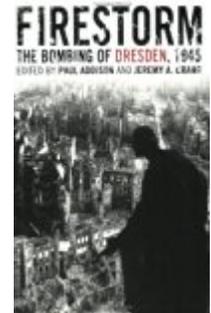


Paul Addison, Jeremy A. Crang, eds.. *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945.*
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Reviewed by Andy Spencer

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Towards the end of the tenth and final contribution to this collection of essays, derived initially from a colloquium hosted by Edinburgh University in May 2003, co-editor Paul Addison notes that "the debate over Dresden is likely to end in a stalemate" (p. 217). By this he means that some will always defend the actions of the Allied air commanders who ordered the Dresden raids in February 1945, just as some will always condemn them. In his contribution to the present volume, Donald Bloxham succinctly fleshes out this state of affairs, writing of the other essays collected here: "Besides revealing the deliberate targeting of civilians, they have pinpointed Churchill's leading role, showing that the campaign was not just a question of Arthur "Bomber" Harris getting carried away. On the other side of the ledger they have shown that, in the light of the Ardennes offensive, the Allies were far from complacent that the war was already won in early 1945; that in terms of its industries and transport links Dresden contained legitimate military-related targets, if they were not of the front rank; and that the mixture of high explosive and incendiary used in the Dresden bombing was not unusual. Overall,

they have illustrated that from the side of the bombing powers, there was little unique about the Dresden attack within the renewed bombing campaign of 1944-5, and that the city was selected as one target among many for rather mundane military and political reasons" (p. 183).

I cite Bloxham at length as he condenses much better than I ever could, but also because, in a prefatory remark to the above summation, he claims, with a somewhat unfortunate turn of phrase, that the essays have "exploded some of the more prevalent myths" connected with the raids. Here, I believe, Bloxham unwittingly puts his finger on a structuring principle of the book that does not bear up particularly well under scrutiny. Surely the "explosions" have long since resounded, and while the various contributors marshal their evidence effectively, they actually do little more than trail in the wake of Jörg Friedrich on the one hand and Frederick Taylor on the other, whose study also fits Bloxham's summary.[1] While the contributors to the present volume are careful to make correctly disapproving noises about the former's charged accounts of the

raids--Hew Strachan suggests that he lacks restraint (p.14) and Bloxham calls Friedrich's equation of bomber squadrons with the murderous *Einsatzgruppen* "provocative" (p.197)--it is doubtless that the German historian's contentious work has challenged orthodoxies and opened the gates through which would-be taboo-breakers now rush. Taylor's study, described in *The Guardian* as "a robust defence of the raid," appeared after the Edinburgh colloquium but is cited by four of the contributors.[2] Assiduous in their research, the contributors thus succeed in providing a serviceable overview of the current state of research that does not offer many surprises to anyone familiar with the above-mentioned works.

Conceived as a wide-ranging overview of the historical event that was the bombing of Dresden, or "Dresden" as Bloxham coins the complex of events (p. 181), the chapters proceed from an investigation into strategic bombing before Dresden by Strachan, to an extremely detailed account of the planning and execution of the raids by Sebastian Cox, to Sönke Neitzel's view of life on the ground. Essays follow on wartime reactions to the raids in Britain, the United States and Germany by Tami Davis Biddle; on postwar opinions by Richard Overy; and on postwar reconstruction by Nicola Lambourne. Finally, the book includes Bloxham's bluntly titled discussion of the legal issues, "Dresden as a War Crime." Along the way, the volume includes a discussion by Jeremy Crang of Victor Klemperer, whose Nazi-period diaries offer unique insight into the life of a Jew in the Dresden of the 1930s and 1940s and an essay by Alan Russell on the Dresden Trust, an organization that contributed greatly to the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche, paying for copies of the original gold cross and orb on the cupola atop the church, and which also co-sponsored the colloquium. Addison's final chapter ties the various strands together.

Although the preface denies that the book as a whole represents "a particular school of

thought" (p. x), the points of contention are few and relatively minor. An exception to this general mood comes when Neitzel strays from the Taylor narrative to claim that Dresden's industrial plants "played no significant role in German war industry at this stage of the war" (p. 76), an assertion noticeably at odds with an earlier one made by Sebastian Cox: "Dresden was a major contributor to the Reich's war effort, and those who would deny or downplay such importance are factually in error" (p. 56). Cox relies on Taylor to argue that "five weeks after the raid two of the four tracks across the Elbe rail bridge were still blocked" (p. 58), whereas Neitzel tells the reader that "the railway lines were out of action for only a few days" (p. 76). Despite these differences, Cox's view, that the raids "however awful, did have a strategic purpose and rationale and were not merely wanton" (p. 61), is generally accepted by all contributors, with only minor reservations. The degree to which the contributors concur is also mirrored in the overlapping of evidence proffered. Although the chapters would appear dedicated to discrete aspects of "Dresden," the book reveals a general reliance on a core of materials and talking points and thus a good deal of repetition.

Winston Churchill's aspersion that the raids represented "a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing" is cited no fewer than four times by Biddle, Overy and Addison, twice; U.S. Air Force Commander-in-Chief Henry Arnold's admonition, "We must not get soft. War must be destructive and to a certain extent inhuman and ruthless" is cited twice as well, by Biddle and Overy. The debate as to the actual number of casualties is repeated three times, each time with a similar conclusion: Cox is of the opinion that it is "highly unlikely that the final death toll exceeded 35,000 to 40,000" (p. 51); Neitzel tends toward the lower end, but ultimately accepts Taylor's "compromise" of "25,000-40,000 deaths" (p. 75); Overy tells us that "latest estimates suggest a figure of 25,000 in total" (p. 137). That David Irving, author of *The Destruction of Dresden* (1963) should figure

in five of the contributions is not surprising; that Overy should use a particular quote of his twice in the same essay, however, is to belabor the case.

The two essays not directly concerned with the historiography of the raids, Crang's on Klemperer and Russell's on the Dresden Trust, do not fit easily in the volume. Crang dutifully summarizes Klemperer's diaries without adding to our knowledge, somewhat compromising the lot of the materialist historian elsewhere in the volume by calling the raids "something of a miracle" for Klemperer, "an act of divine intervention" (p. 78). The author also avails himself of the obligatory reference to Dante's *Inferno*, as does Cox (pp. 88, 48). Russell's essay on the Dresden Trust, misleadingly entitled "Why Dresden Matters," is one long advertisement for an undoubtedly reputable organization, but how this paean fits in the context of the other contributions is unclear. Nicola Lambourne does her best to smooth the way for Russell by ending her essay on postwar reconstruction with a stirring defense of the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche, which nonetheless pales besides Russell's ecstatic prose. He concludes his essay with the affirmation that "Dresden's beacon is indeed shining brightly," following a litany of the city's recent cultural accomplishments. One such is the classification of Dresden as a "UNESCO World Heritage Site." This declaration took me back to last summer, when UNESCO threatened to withdraw its seal of approval if the planned construction of a bridge across the Elbe went ahead. Aware of the threat, but more concerned about the commute home, the good citizens of Dresden voted for the bridge in a referendum. Russell's rose-tinted view of Dresden, "a name to conjure with," could run into problems on the ground.

Fortunately, Russell's piece is followed by the most engaging essay of the book, Bloxham's discussion of "Dresden" as a war crime. The legal argumentation might strike one initially as verging on the arcane, but having set the parameters Bloxham is in a position to ask questions that go

to the heart of our understanding of the raids, their continued instrumentalization, and their implications for future actions. The easy faith in progress of Russell is not for Bloxham: "the western, Christian culture that Dresden embodied [i.e. before 1945] is itself far too deeply implicated in bringing about the cataclysm of the Second World War for the guilt to be washed away by architectural 'rebirth' in a more peaceful age" (p. 206). Now that's how to explode a myth.

Notes

[1]. Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2002), translated as *The Fire. The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: 13 February 1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

[2]. Michael Burleigh, "Mission Accomplished" *The Guardian*, February 7, 2004, available online at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/history/0,6121,1142632,00.html> (accessed March 1, 2007).

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