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## “Yesterday Dresden, Today Korea, and Tomorrow the Whole World.” The Ideological Charging of 13 February Commemorations in the Soviet Occupied Zone and the GDR: Early Days and Later Developments

When the seventh anniversary of the bombing of Dresden was commemorated, there was already a very broad range of events and activities within the framework of the city's culture of remembrance. This is well-illustrated by a series of photographs taken in 1952, documenting various slogans and pledges in connection with the destruction of Dresden. Some of them showed very personal commitment: “The toll in this street through the Second World War and the bombing on 13 and 14 February 1945: 35 families completely bombed-out, 14 families partially bombed-out, 24 family members killed, 11 missing in action, 21 killed in action. Should this happen again? We have had enough of this cruelty, all our efforts are for reconstruction, the neighbours of *Timaeusstraße* nos. 1, 3, 5, 11, 18 pledge to join in setting up a playground in *Alaunplatz*.”<sup>1</sup> And the official propaganda also showed a creative side: one street exhibit was a mock-up of a crashed American bomber plane with the words “U.S.A. Killer, *Tod von Dresden* [death of Dresden], and the slogan “Yesterday Dresden, today Korea, and tomorrow the whole world - let us unite in the struggle for peace!”<sup>2</sup> By this time, after an initial and very brief admission of Germany's guilt, the official line taken in the German Democratic Republic in the historical and political debate over National Socialism and the Second World War had already turned anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. What were the conditions and the political context within which this shaping of commemoration and its rhetoric in the Soviet Occupied Zone and the GDR developed?

As early as 1946, and thus earlier than other cities, Dresden held a commemoration ceremony. Although the Soviet Military Administration issued instructions to avoid any suggestion of “mourning”, the speakers at the actual ceremony made references to the pointlessness of the bombing and

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- 1 df\_hp\_0042727\_029: Dresden, Neustadt, Timaeusstraße, Serie: „Verpflichtungen“ on the occasion of the 7th anniversary of the destruction of Dresden, neighbours in front of a billboard with pledge of the Timaeusstrasse community to set up a playground in Alaunplatz, February 1952, Photograph: Erich Höhne & Erich Pohl, 1952.02.013.
  - 2 df\_hp\_0042734\_002 Verpflichtungen“ on the occasion of the 7th anniversary of the destruction of Dresden, Dresden street exhibition with a mock-up of a bomber plane as a reminder to maintain peace in the world. Photograph: Erich Höhne & Erich Pohl, February 1952.

the innocence of the city, and they differentiated between the Allied powers. While the Red Army was credited with "never having bombed undefended cities or the civilian population"<sup>3</sup> the Western Allied Powers were viewed critically. The tolling of church bells, an ecumenical act which is still carried out on 13 February, provided the religious framework for this first commemorative event.<sup>4</sup> In 1947 and 1948, there were no major commemorative ceremonies, only smaller ones in official institutions. From 1948 onwards, however, political tension increased, and manifested itself in the formation of major power blocks and the founding of two German states. This was reflected in the shaping and organizing of remembrance in Dresden.

The historical and political discourse in the GDR dealt with the tension in foreign relations by re-writing and replacing the narrative of the joint victory of the Allies over National Socialism with the story of the lone struggle of the Soviet Union against National Socialism. The aim of this rhetorical shift was to legitimize the founding of the new German state under an anti-fascist label. Thus a concept of anti-fascism was constructed which both forged identity and was consistent with the official state line on the self-image of the GDR.

Immediately after the war, in view of the realization of the full dimension of Nazi crimes it was understood that there must have been widespread complicity among Germans. However, this understanding was very soon replaced by the concept of an anti-fascist national identity.

As an argument to relieve the German population of the burden of guilt and responsibility, Dimitroff's definition of fascism was called on. According to this definition fascism is the "open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinist, imperialist elements of financial capital."<sup>5</sup> Thus National Socialism and the Shoah were entirely the work of the "Hitlerclique" and the "financial capitalists". In the rhetoric of the *SED* [Socialist Unity Party of (East) Germany], the German 'Volk' was Hitler's first victim. "Never before in history has a people been so shamefully abused", forced as they were by the Nazis "by means of deceit and terror up to the unconditional surrender [...] to conduct the war unleashed by the Hitlerites and their hidden backers."<sup>6</sup> A degree of guilt and responsibility on the part of the German people was thus not explicitly denied, but deliberately minimized, and became simply a non-issue.

3 Friedrich Reinchert, *Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte des 13. Februar 1945*, in: Landeshauptstadt Dresden/Stadtmuseum Dresden (ed.), *Verbrannt bis zur Unkenntlichkeit. Die Zerstörung Dresdens 1945. Begleitbuch zur Ausstellung im Stadtmuseum Dresden, Februar bis Juni 1995*, Altenburg: DZA Verlag, 1994, p 151.

4 A detailed study of the content of the commemorations held in 1946 can be found in: Thomas Fache, *Allierter Luftkrieg und Novemberpogrom in lokaler Erinnerungskultur am Beispiel Dresdens*, Masters thesis, TU Dresden 2007: [http://www.qucosa.de/fileadmin/data/qucosa/documents/6440/Thomas\\_Fache\\_Magisterarbeit.pdf](http://www.qucosa.de/fileadmin/data/qucosa/documents/6440/Thomas_Fache_Magisterarbeit.pdf). pdf (accessed 08.12.2012), pp 33-36.

5 Georgi Dimitroff, *Die Offensive des Faschismus und die Aufgabe der Kommunistischen Internationale im Kampf für die Einheit der Arbeiterklasse gegen den Faschismus. Referat auf dem VII. Weltkongreß der Kommunistischen Internationale am 2. August 1935*, in Dimitroff, *Gegen Faschismus und Krieg. Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, Leipzig: Reclam Verlag, 1982, p 50.

6 Thomas Haurly, *Antisemitismus von links*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002, p 375.

Seen from this perspective, the Shoah played a marginal role, Jewish people as a persecuted group were barely mentioned, and the term "Holocaust" was virtually non-existent in the GDR version of history.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, anti-Semitism had traditionally been described by the *KPD* [German Communist Party] as a "tool used by reactionary forces to distract and confuse the working class, for the purposes of enrichment and the removal of competition."<sup>8</sup>

Essentially, the *KPD* leaders and officials who emigrated from the Soviet Union dominated over the Western emigrants, who showed a greater awareness of the Shoah. It was the Soviet group that was responsible for the construct of the "anti-fascist state".

The culture of remembrance of the different persecuted groups often took spontaneous forms and showed considerable variety in the early days. However it was soon instrumentalized in the Soviet Occupied Zone by the *KPD/SED* party with its vested political interests. The political identity the GDR gave itself led to a hierarchy of the different persecuted groups: the communist resistance fighters were afforded the greatest significance, since they were regarded as politically motivated in contrast to other groups that put up resistance and protest. Thus the *KPD* came to be regarded as the most important force of active resistance to National Socialism, which had already started in the Weimar Republic. The defeat of the *KPD* in the elections of 1933 and the failure of the resistance in Germany were re-interpreted, and the party thus became part of the victorious Soviet military power. The communist resistance was charged with a significance that did not result from the historical context alone, but was also vindicated by the very founding of the state. This ideological bridge was necessary for the *SED* to uphold its claim to political power.<sup>9</sup>

The culture of remembrance was given an abstract framework, and the official staging and representations were symbolically heavily charged and strongly ritualized.

In February 1953, the *Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes (VVN)* [association of groups persecuted by the Nazi regime] was disbanded, an association to which a good many members of the Jewish community belonged. The polarizing nature of the remembrance culture was an issue behind this move: the work of the survivors was linked to concrete memories of Nazi crimes and thus to the debate over guilt and compensation. It was thus diametrically opposed to the official GDR ideological line with its assertion of blamelessness.

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7 Cf. Ulrich Herbert/Olaf Groehler, *Zweierlei Bewältigung. Vier Beiträge über den Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit in den beiden deutschen Staaten*, Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1992, p 41.

8 Thomas Haurly, *Antisemitismus von links*, 2002, p 300.

9 Cf. Jürgen Danyel, *Die Opfer- und Verfolgtenperspektive als Gründungskonsens? Zum Umgang mit der Widerstandstradition und der Schuldfrage in der DDR*, in Danyel, *Die geteilte Vergangenheit. Zum Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in beiden deutschen Staaten*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag: Berlin 1995, pp 31-46.

This ideological framework made it possible to establish a remembrance of the bombing that saw the inhabitants of Dresden as primary victims, an interpretation which was a direct continuation of the myth propagated by the Nazis.<sup>10</sup> Instead of reflecting on guilt and responsibility for the Shoah and the war of annihilation, citizens were to concentrate on social consolidation and the reconstruction. From this basis, it was possible to commemorate the people of Dresden as victims of the Second World War. The question of guilt was aggressively denied without the slightest qualms, the people of Dresden were cast as victims of National Socialism and, without any consideration of the political and historical context of cause and effect, the Allies were accused of destroying Dresden.

Thus, starting in 1949, official commemoration ceremonies were held and for the first time given full media coverage throughout the Soviet Occupied Zone. The overall denial of guilt and responsibility for National Socialism was evident: one case in point was the description of the Western Allies as "Anglo-American war-mongers". Further elements of the ceremony were accounts by those who had lived through the bombing, and pictures of burning pyres of corpses.<sup>11</sup> From 1950 - the fifth anniversary - onwards, the bombing of Dresden played a central role in the propaganda war between the two block powers. The integration of the Federal Republic of Germany in the West and the treaties of Paris in 1955, which ended the state of occupation in West Germany, clearly marked this development. The question of German guilt faded into the background, while the communist leaders followed a line of argument that the National Socialist propagandists would have been proud of. The *SED* party officials drew on the Nazi interpretation of the bombing and adopted Goebbels' term "Terrorangriffe" [terror attacks] in their rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> Further elements taken over from Nazi propaganda were the defamation of the Allies as barbaric and wantonly destructive of culture, and the interpretation of the bombing as senseless, given the lack of military targets and the strategic insignificance of aerial warfare. This

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**10** The Allied forces carried out altogether eight air raids on Dresden from early October 1944 to mid-April 1945. It was however those carried out by the American and British air-forces from 13-15 February that left an indelible mark on the collective memory of Dresden's citizens. The raids destroyed most of the old part of the city and approximately 25,000 people died on these two days. Because Dresden was so well known, it was possible for Nazi propaganda to present a version of the events which was to determine public perception to the present day. The Nazi leaders decided to use the occasion to start a campaign to reinforce the *Volkssturm*, already in progress since 18 October, and at the same time to discredit the Allies in the eyes of the neutral world. Dresden became a symbol internationally for the wanton military destruction of European art and cultural artifacts. An exaggerated death toll and inaccurate representation of political context were taken over not just in Germany but in the Allied countries as well, where they are still part of the discourse today. In both places they were given substance by the many-layered accounts of those affected. The version matched their subjective experience and was accepted as the hegemonial interpretation. See Fache: *Alliiertes Luftkrieg*, 2007, p 20 ff and Gunnar Schubert, *Die kollektive Unschuld. Wie der Dresden-Schwindel zum nationalen Opfermythos wurde*, Hamburg: KVV konkret Verlag, 2006.

**11** Fache, *Alliiertes Luftkrieg*, 2007, pp 39-40.

**12** op.cit. p 38.

nationalist rhetoric was topped only by the *SED* leaders attributing the sole responsibility for the “suffering of Dresden” to the Allies.<sup>13</sup>

This evaluation and categorization of the Allies in turn reflected the political conflict of the time. The first step was to stigmatize the military actions of the USA in the struggle against National Socialism as war crimes equivalent to those of the Nazi regime. The next step was to cite these so-called war crimes, in classic anti-American propagandist manner, in order to argue that the USA was a war-monger in other political conflicts. Shortly after the Korean War began in 1951, the GDR daily paper *Tägliche Rundschau* wrote: “The glow of fire from the bleeding city of Dresden that turned the skies crimson for miles around in the final days of the Second World War thus lit up the rapacious face of American imperialism, the worst enemy of mankind.”<sup>14</sup> And in January 1955, on the tenth anniversary, the National Council of the National Front of the GDR issued directives in which the bombing of Dresden was implicitly equated with the German army’s war of annihilation and the Shoah. One such statement was: “The destruction of Dresden was an element in the greatest crime against humanity, set off by German militarists and imperialists in 1939 when they invaded Poland and destroyed Warsaw.”<sup>15</sup>

This line of political argument was decisive in shaping remembrance over the decades to follow. It was not only the contents that appeared to have been laid down for some time to come. The rituals were also carried out in official acts right into the 1980s: the wreath-laying at the *Heidefriedhof* cemetery, the gathering of citizens in the *Altmarkt*, the tolling of church bells, to mention just a few. After a relatively calm phase in the debate over remembrance, and continuity in the traditional forms of commemoration, the 1980s saw attempts to challenge these readings and forms. Leading figures in the peace movement chose 13 February to take a stand for peace and against the militarization of the GDR. And they attempted to implant a political statement into the anniversary day, beyond mere commemoration.

Translated by Teresa Woods

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**13** See op cit. on the influence of the larger political scene on establishing the Dresden remembrance discourse and on its rhetorical development.

**14** Anne von Fischer, *Dresden is a monument for peace*, in *Tägliche Rundschau*, 13.02.1951.

**15** Quoted after Gilad Margalit, *Der Luftangriff auf Dresden. Seine Bedeutung für die Erinnerungspolitik der DDR und für die Herauskristallisierung einer historischen Kriegserinnerung im Westen*, in: Susanne Düwell/Mathias Schmidt (eds.), *Narrative der Shoah. Repräsentationen der Vergangenheit in Historiographie, Kunst und Politik*, Paderborn et al :Schöningh, 2002, p 197.

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