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Frauenkirchen Mania
The Frauenkirche, 'Dresden Cathedral' And The Reconstruction

At the very moment when Germany cast off the last sanction imposed as a result of losing the Second World War, a campaign began in Dresden to rebuild the *Frauenkirche* [Church of Our Lady]. Germany was on top of the pile again and that was something that had to be underlined. Forty-five years after the end of the war the *Frauenkirche*, a well-known and visible symbol of German defeat, was to be restored to its prewar state. The idea speaks for itself: no-one wanted to talk about National Socialism and it was best to suppress memories of it. The result is a perfect example of an 'urban coming to terms with the past'.[1]

The *Frauenkirche* was consecrated in 1743 after seventeen years of building according to George Bähr's concept and plans. It was regarded as a bourgeois building since it was mainly financed by donations from Dresdner middle class. The court was also not averse to the project and lent its support in the form of infusions of cash and planning know-how.[2] Despite some mistaken assumptions about the statics – the side walls did not take up the weight of the dome as expected – the sandstone building held and for the next two hundred years it dominated Dresden's cityscape. That was not to change until the attack by the British and American air forces on the 13 and 14 February 1945. On the 15 February the building collapsed as a result of the intense heat developed from the damage and fire ignited by bombs dropped beforehand. What was left was a ruin and a substantial heap of rubble.

It is an interesting but almost unnoticed fact that, at the time of the collapse, the church was known as the *Dom zu Dresden* [Dresden Cathedral] indicating a chapter in its history that – following the normal Dresden way of looking at things – receives little attention: the period of the church during National Socialism. If one is to believe the depiction presented in the 2006 ZDF event movie, *Dresden,* which attempted to don a cloak of historical authenticity with the help of a few documentary ornamentations, then the *Frauenkirche* was one place where there was resistance to National Socialism. The minister of the *Frauenkirche*, portrayed by Wolfgang Stumph in the film, is depicted as an anti-fascist who rescues

1 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld/Paul B. Jaskot (eds.), *Beyond Berlin. Twelve German Cities Confront the Nazi Past,* Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008, 1.

2 Gunnar Schubert, *Die kollektive Unschuld. Wie der Dresden-Schwindel zum nationalen Opfermythos wurde,* Hamburg: KVV konkret, 2006, 83.

a downed British pilot and his German lover as they try to escape from the German army. However, that has nothing to do with reality.

The National Socialist assumption of power in 1933 was received by the church in Saxony with goodwill and the boycott of Jewish businesses on 1 April 1933 brought no protests.[3] Tensions and struggles within the church manifested themselves only in connection with the future relationship to the new rulers of the German Reich and the question of how much influence the church would still be able to keep. German Christians close to *Frauenkirche* minister (and future head of the provincial church), Friedrich Coch, strove for modernising the church along National Socialist lines whereas the *Pfarrernotbund* [Emergency Covenant of Pastors], a forerunner of the *Bekennende Kirche* [Confessional Church], wanted to preserve the traditional ecclesiastical legacy.[4] It was headed by Hugo Hahn of the *deutsch-nationale Pfarrerschaft*[5] [German National Pastors], also a minister at the *Frauenkirche*. Both factions were agreed that they wanted to 'build a church for the people and serve the "nationaler *Volksstaat*"[6] [people's state]. The community members grouped around Hahn who were of a similar persuasion were, however, a thorn in the side of the Nazi supporters who regarded them as dragging their feet, hindering the effort to create a new order and the *Gleichschaltung* [enforced conformity] of the church. They were gradually forced out of the church and church posts that became vacant as a result were filled by German Christian applicants. In 1937 Hahn was forced to leave Dresden. The German Christians were victorious in their bid for power. For the majority of the congregation members, however, this confrontation was only a side issue. As a general rule, they chose their ministers on the basis of personal sympathies and had been familiar with the closeness of state and church for generations: the 'prophetic and critical sermon' was something unknown.[7] The changes in the Frauenkirche congregation could be seen in a number of situations such as the appearance of the magazine Christenkreuz und Hakenkreuz[8] [Cross and Swastika] or the incorporation of the Evangelischen Jugend [Evangelical Youth Movement] in the Hitlerjugend [Hitler Youth] on the 200th anniversary of the consecration.[9] Another example is to be found during the ceremony of consecration transforming the church into a cathedral presided over by Reichsbischof Müller – he received members of the public with the

3 Gerhard Lindemann, *Christenkreuz und Hakenkreuz. Dresdner Kirchen im Dritten Reich,* Dresdner Hefte, 29, 2, 2011, 27–34

4 Christoph Wetzel, *Das kirchliche Leben an der Frauenkirche zu Dresden von ihrer Weihe 1734 bis zu ihrer Zerstörung 1945.* part 5: 1934–1945", in: Gesellschaft zur Förderung des Wiederaufbaus der Frauenkirche Dresden e. V. (ed.), Die Dresdner Frauenkirche, Jahrbuch 2005, Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2005, 207.

5 Lindemann, *Christenkreuz und Hakenkreuz* , 2011, loc. cit. 28

6 Wetzel, *Leben an der Frauenkirche,* 2005, loc. cit. 208.

7 Ibid. 207.

8 Lindemann, *Christenkreuz und Hakenkreuz,* 2011, loc. cit. 28. The monthly was published by Friedrich Coch and first appeared in July 1933.

9 Wetzel, *Leben an der Frauenkirche,* 2005, loc. cit 209.

German salute.[10] Furthermore, numerous lectures were given with titles such as *Race and Religion, Germanness, Being German and Christianity or The Brown Church in Adolf Hitler's Germany*. This is only a selection of those given at events that took place between January and April 1934.[11] Even the congregation offered questionable fare: it organised a lecture on the subject of the *Der Sinn des Opfers. Im Anschluß Lichtbilder über Leo Schlageter*[12] [The Meaning of Sacrifice. Followed by a Slide Presentation about Leo Schlageter]. Schlageter, a Nazi and member of the *Freikorps*, was sentenced to death in 1923 by French court following bomb attacks. In Nazi propaganda he was regarded as the 'first soldier of the Third Reich'. All of this took place openly, right before the eyes of the congregation and cannot escaped their notice. Thus it can be assumed that there was at least acceptance of it. The Frauenkirche or *'Dom zu Dresden'* developed into a centre of German Christianity and therefore Nazi activity.

The ruins that survived February 1945 offered ample space for projection especially because Germans felt there was a real loss. In his novel, *Billard um halbzehn* [Billiards at Half-past Nine], Heinrich Böll had one of his protagonists blow up an abbey during the Second World War. Ostensibly the demolition expert acted from compelling grounds – the necessities of war – but in reality his intention was something quite different. He wanted to memorialise those persecuted under the Nazis: he wanted to create 'a monument of dust and rubble to those who were never cultural history monuments and whom one should not have had to spare'[13] After the bombings Dresden was also a cultural monument poorer and a memorial of dust and rubble richer. However, the viewpoint of the explosives expert in Böll's novel is different to the way the ruins were seen by others. That involves the gaze of the perpetrators who cannot take what they see with equanimity.

In the GDR there were discussion about what to do with the remains. Opinions oscillated between clearing them away and preserving the ruins in situ, thus keeping the option of rebuilding open. By 1967 discussions were brought to a provisional end when the city affixed a plaque to them. It bore with the remarkable and programmatic text: 'The Frauenkirche in Dresden destroyed / by Anglo-American bombing in February 1945 / Built by George Bähr / 1726–1743/ The ruins remind us of the tens of thousands who died / and urges the living to struggle / against imperialist barbarity / For the peace and happiness of mankind'. 14 In Dresden during the subsequent decades the spin given to events in the text was to be perfected. National Socialist crimes were given no mention and culpability and responsibility are not simply denied, the blame is laid at the doorstep of the allies, the very people

10 Ibid. 212.

11 Ibid. 208.

12 Ibid.

13 Heinrich Böll, *Billard um halbzehn,* Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 176.

14 Quoted from: Schubert, *Die kollektive Unschuld,* 2006, loc. cit. 82.

who paid a high price to liberate Europe from Nazism. It was impossible to tolerate living within sight of the ruins or construct an anti-fascist state without repudiating one's guilt and ensuring one's status as a victim. By avoiding the past and directing the gaze towards the future instead, it was possible to garner acceptance and support. That former allies had become Cold War enemies further favoured that course of action.

The ruins, from then on a monument against war and destruction, became the focus of a Peace Movement in the final years of the GDR. Under the motto 'swords into ploughshares' it took a generally anti-military stance. However, even in the anti-war stance there are nevertheless linkages to a relativising point of view. German reunification put wind in the discursive sails once again. Following the nationalistic frenzy, demands in favour of reconstruction of the Frauenkirche soon began to surface. The 1990 *Ruf aus Dresden* [Call from Dresden] combined with Helmut Kohl's 'Wunden heilen, statt Wunden offen halten' [Healing the wounds instead of keeping them open] led to a fundraising campaign that was intended to finance the rebuilding. Former allies Great Britain and the USA were intentionally targeted for contributions. While the German version of the appeal openly speaks of the Frauenkirche being rebuilt as a 'symbol of the healing of wounds opened by the war', it was decided to omit this from the English version which only talks of the church as a 'monument to the reconciliation of the peoples and a visible demand for lasting peace'.[15] As in the case of its historical precursor, the reconstruction is regarded as an excellent example of middle class commitment even though there were substantial contributions from the authorities – federal, provincial and local – to the extent of 38% or seventy-two million Euros of the total project costs of 182,6 million Euro. In addition, it was the Dresdner Bank that was most active in the acquisition of donations, the very institution that was the 'in-house bank of the SS'[16] and linked to the Nazi regime more closely than any other. The very bank that profited from Aryanisation and the annihilation campaigns in Eastern Europe and was closely involved in building the concentration and extermination complex at Auschwitz-Birkenau took on the task of 'healing German war wounds'.

At the same time this context made it impossible that the destroyed Frauenkirche and German Nazi-era crimes could be associated in any way whatsoever. Under the slogan 'archaeological reconstruction' the form of the old Frauenkirche was mimicked down to the last detail, it was as if nothing had happened. Today, there is only a little of the original sandstone in the exterior wall to indicate the intervening non-existence of the building. This piece of information has a 'sell by date' because when the new sandstone assumes the patina and colouring of the old due to weathering, this visible historical reference will also have disappeared. The 'manic wilful forgetting' that Alexander and Margaret

15 Susanne Vees-Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt. Literature of Wartime Bombing in Germany,* Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2003, 62ff.

16 Klaus-Dietmar Henke (ed.), *Die Dresdner Bank im Dritten Reich,* München: Oldenbourg, 2006, 502.

Mitscherlich detected in their analysis of how the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s related to National Socialism, flowered once again in Dresden forty years later. Its expression can be seen in the Frauenkirche and the fierce struggle to transform the Dresden inner city into a pretty Baroque vignette that is as homogenous as possible.

With its consecration in 2005 Frauenkirche reconstruction mania reached its interim climax. The re-opening of the church became a major event nationwide event thanks to a media partnership with the ZDF television, a public service broadcaster, and wide coverage in the other media. Anja Pannewitz, in her analysis of reporting in the print media, examined the depiction of the Frauenkirche and its symbolism.[17] She shows how reports reproduced the victimhood myths and propagandised using nationalist sentiment. The study identified six semantic concepts: unity, wonder, freedom, reconciliation, admonition and reparation. The evaluation showed a distinct dichotomy: where the rebuilding of the church was described as a symbol for unity and freedom or as a 'wonder' there were no references to National Socialism whatsoever. References to the present, the future and religious connotations dominated instead. Where the authors made the Frauenkirche a symbol of reconciliation, admonition and reparation, the Nazi past and the Second World War were also mentioned. The way, in which historical relationships were constructed, speaks for itself: most frequently German suffering was thematised,[18] the bombings were often linked to the semantics of terror by being termed 'terrorist acts', or 'violent terrorism', or using 'fall' or 'inferno'.[19] The question of German culpability was avoided or rejected outright.[20] When it was addressed it was done in connection with an assertion that others were 'more' culpable.[21] British or US American voices were used to speak of allied blame or spoke in favour of reparations.[22] Differentiated reporting was scarce and yielded to the national consensus. In the light of this material the author was justified in asking whether it might be the case that the Frauenkirche was simply an 'architectonic Freudian slip'[23] which, behind the empty phrases concerning reconcilia-

17 Anja Pannewitz, Die wiederaufgebaute Dresdner Frauenkirche und die Erinnerung an NS und Zweiter Weltkrieg. Eine semantische Analyse, Deutschland Archiv, 41, 2, 2008, 204–214.

18 Ibid. 212.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid. 214.

21 Ibid. 210.

22 Ibid. 213.

23 Ibid. 214.

tion and admonition, manifested, above all else, British culpability and German refusal to assume the burden of guilt.

During the reconstruction it was repeatedly pointed out that the new Frauenkirche was to be a 'Centre for World Peace'[24] because in the final analysis the church was an anti-war memorial 'not only here but worldwide' (Gerhard Schröder, 2005).[25] Against the background of donation gathering, this was a claim that was particularly effective. Nowadays it engages in spectacular 'peace work': every day at noon a so-called peace bell calls for remembrance, the old dome cross reminds us of 'old wounds', i.e. the destruction of the church – and, in addition, everyone is encouraged to pause and think so that he or she can re-enter everyday life a little more 'peaceful' than before. Furthermore, there are a few events which are supposed to have something to do with peace: a 'Peace Academy', for example, which was organized with the support of the Military History Museum (part of the Federal Armed Forces) and pastoral care provided by an armed forces minister who otherwise appeared to be concerned with proselytizing young people. The priorities implemented in the construction also continued over into the church's everyday business: the staging of Dresdner suffering sufficiently garnished with empty phrases to conceal that very staging.

Translated by Tim Sharp

24 *Ruf aus Dresden,* 1990.

25 Quoted from: Sächsische Zeitung, 01.11.2005, 2.