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## Make Do And Mend The Commemoration of Dresden in Reunited Germany

“Dresdeners are burdened with their fate. Each of them carries the proud suffering of their city inside themselves. It’s not a legacy. It’s a soul-gene, handed down from generation to generation, and it’s contagious. New-Dresdeners expose themselves to the danger of infection unconsciously and voluntarily. Suddenly they find themselves in the thick of it, and feel it, the proud suffering.”<sup>1</sup>

The collective memory of the bombing of Dresden on the 13th and 14th of February 1945 is a fixed point in Dresden’s identity and culture of remembrance. It is so pervasive that local journalists create abstruse metaphors like “a soul-gene” to explain it. The annual commemoration of the bombing is a pivotal event in the city, and, since the reunification of Germany, has been infused with a new symbolism. This essay offers an overview of the two decades of commemoration of the bombing of Dresden, and focuses on the developments in its meaning and content.

### New Nations and Old Myths

13 February 1990: For the first time since the dissolution of the GDR, Dresden commemorates the bombing of the city. 500 Dresdeners crowd into the Kulturpalast to listen to a special speaker who was invited to Dresden on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the event – David Irving, historical revisionist and Holocaust denier. A Dresden newspaper lauded his book, *The Destruction of Dresden*, which speaks, among other things, of 250,000 deaths, as “this honest book, which so unreservedly settles the score about the strategic bombing of civilian targets.”<sup>2</sup> That was only one of numerous events in the commemoration ceremonies in which myths of the innocent city of art and culture were to be heard – the city, which had no military significance, that was suddenly, without warning, and unnecessarily destroyed shortly before the end of the war. This established interpretation of the events of 13/14 February 1945 was not swayed by the changed political conditions. On the contrary, the well-known tales, told by contemporary witnesses, were put in the spotlight. Stories of man-hunting, low-flying airplanes, of phosphorous rain and of hundreds of thousands of dead are printed in the local newspapers and told at presentations. The action group Interessengemeinschaft 13. Februar carried these stories of woeful

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1 Peter Ufer, *Der unschuldig schuldige Tag* [The Innocent Guilty Day], *Sächsische Zeitung*, 04 March 2010.

2 Christine Wosnitza, *Dresden hat mir das Leben verdorben* [Dresden ruined my Life], *Die Union*, 15 February 1990.

fate into other cities with their exhibition Lebenszeichen (Signs of Life). In this way they made their contribution to perpetuating the symbolic nature of Dresden for the legend of "Germans as victims," and to solidifying the Dresden myth.

Facts find no place in this Dresden myth. Doubts are not welcome. Ten years later the publication of *Tiefflieger über Dresden?* by the historian Helmut Schnatz caused an uproar. In it he raises qualified objections to the assertion that low-flying aircraft were deployed over Dresden, and, using German and Allied sources, proves in detail that these stories are nothing but legend. When he was invited to present his analysis and conclusions to the public at the Dresdner Stadtmuseum, the event erupted into open hostility, name-calling and outright tumult. Calling into question the established legends of the bombing of Dresden, especially by an outsider, was an affront to the Dresden identity, and it was countered as such. "One question. Did the historian Helmut Schnatz experience the attack on Dresden on 13/14 February 1945? If not, how dare he speak of legends! I, my family and friends did experience the cruel attack on Dresden and were eye-witnesses to the inhumane 'man-hunt of the low-fliers,' as I'd like to call it."<sup>3</sup>

Year after year, the 13th of February drew attention. The routine for the day of memorial had become established: the wreath laying ceremony at the Heidefriedhof in the morning, followed by memorial concerts and church services throughout the day, panel discussions with contemporary witnesses, and then in the evening, the gathering of thousands at the ruins of the Frauenkirche. At 9:45pm the bells of all the churches in Dresden ring, and people place candles. Dresden sees itself as a monition against all wars. The 13th of February is, after all, "that apocalyptic event that, like no other, has become the symbol of destruction, the horror, and the suffering that this war brought upon mankind,"<sup>4</sup> as the Director of the Dresden Music Festival wrote in 1995. Dresden styled itself a symbol for the horrors of war and people's suffering, all the while ignoring the historical facts about the military and political role of Dresden and relativizing historical contexts. And thus does Dresden, with its legend of innocent victimhood, fit perfectly into the reunited Germany's self-concept as a nation of peace which has put its past behind it and now wants to include its own victims in its commemoration. Accordingly, in 1995 the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden was celebrated as an act of state, with the attendance of the country's highest political officials. President Roman Herzog honored the city in his speech as a "beacon against

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3 Letter to the editor, Gabriele Merthen, "Dresden", *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, Easter 2000.

4 Director of the Dresden Music Festival Michael Hampe in the 1995 Music Festival program, which had "Apocalypse" as its theme; quoted from: N.N., "Tränen lügen – nicht?" [Tears – don't – lie], *Analyse & Kritik*, 376, 03 March 1995, p. 16.

war.”<sup>5</sup> The highlight of the “national requiem, a Pietà of urban dimensions,”<sup>6</sup> was the collaboration of more than 100 of Dresden’s churches.

With the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche, Dresden gave itself that symbol, visible from afar, that it needed to be a “beacon against war,” its symbol for peace and reconciliation. The starting signal for this undertaking was sounded by the city’s cultural elite, such as the musician Ludwig Güttler<sup>7</sup> and the actor Friedrich-Wilhelm Junge, in 1990, when they published the “Appeal from Dresden” for the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche as a “Christian center of world peace in the new Europe.” In order to let “a testimony in stone of the Christian faith” arise again, they, together with 20 other Dresdeners, asked for donations, especially in the countries of the former Allied forces. “We appeal to the victors and the many people of good will in the USA, in Great Britain and in the entire world: make possible this European “House of Peace!”<sup>8</sup> Only four years later, the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche began. After the “Appeal from Dresden,” the Dresden Trust was founded in Great Britain in 1993. This foundation not only collected donations, it also had a new, highly symbolic cross built for the dome of the Frauenkirche. The cross was presented in 2000, at an ostentatious ceremony with the title “Building Bridges – Living Reconciliation,” by the Duke of Kent, the foundation’s patron, and blessed by the Bishop of Coventry. The appropriate words for this staging of Dresden as a reconciliatory gesture were also found: “A newly crafted cross gleams on the dome of the Frauenkirche. It symbolizes, in a very special way, the power of reconciliation. Donated by the people of Britain and the royal house of the United Kingdom, crafted by the son of one of the pilots who once dropped bombs on Dresden, it now heralds the Frauenkirche’s tidings: Building Bridges – Living Reconciliation – Strengthening Faith.”<sup>9</sup>

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder participated in this ceremony, which took place on the 55th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden. His presence was not without reason, since Dresden, with this ceremony, was near to reaching its peak in an era with a heavy focus on politics of memory. During the first decade after the unification of Germany, Dresden’s role in the history of National Socialism was virtually ignored, but this would slowly change in the following years. Until 2000, the years between 1933 and 1945 seemed simply not to have happened in the city. It was otherwise impossible to uphold Dresden’s identity as a symbol for peace and reconciliation. The realization that the recognition of the

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5 President Roman Herzog, speech on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the destruction of Dresden in World War II; [http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Roman-Herzog/Reden/1995/02/19950213\\_Rede.html](http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Roman-Herzog/Reden/1995/02/19950213_Rede.html) (retrieved 12 October 2012).

6 Klaus Naumann, “Deutsche Pietà” [German Pietà], *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 3, 1995, pp. 263f.

7 Güttler always steps into the spotlight when the topic of setting Dresden’s history and identity in scene. The last time was with the Dresden Path of Commemoration; see the essay Dresden Christ Superstar by Andrea Hübler in this book.

8 “Ruf aus Dresden” [Appeal from Dresden]; <http://www.frauenkirche-dresden.de/ruf-aus-dresden.html> (retrieved 30 August 2012).

9 <http://www.frauenkirche-dresden.de/turmkreuz.html> (retrieved 30 August 2012).

“twelve dark years” had advantages came slowly. The SPD/Green coalition government in Berlin led the way. It put forward the idea that Germany was the world champion in coming to terms with the past, that Germany could once again wage war “not in spite of, but because of Auschwitz,” that Germany’s exemplary analysis of its own history gave it not only the qualification, but also the moral responsibility to intervene anywhere in the world where injustice occurred. The analysis of its own “dark history” was thus instrumentalized as a moral bonus point within the international community. Since the time of the SPD/Green coalition, Germany’s handling of its past is no longer marked by suppression, denial and “leaving it behind,” but rather by acknowledgement and even the incorporation of its National Socialist past into the German identity. Germany’s image was now one of a modern and purified nation. This image began to assert itself in Dresden.

### Commemoration in transition

It would take five years, but by the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden the changes in the commemoration of the city were in full swing. Instead of holding fast to myths and ignoring its role in the history of National Socialism, Dresden began to acknowledge its past, and, first and foremost, to distance itself from the thousands of Nazis who, in 2005, paraded through the city in a “funeral march.”

In 2004 a commission of historians was appointed to establish a historically unobjectionable fundament for the city’s memorial events. The commission presented its conclusions in 2008 at the annual Convention of German Historians, held that year in Dresden. Their report stated facts that had long been known, but never recognized: a death toll of 20,000 to 25,000, and no proof of low-flying bombers. The military importance of Dresden during the war and the role the city played in the National Socialist regime also began to be acknowledged, for example in the historical pageant in 2006 on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the city’s establishment. Rather than simply leaving out the years between 1933 and 1945, one of the floats was specially designed to portray slave-labor, deportation, Aryanization and militarization. Nevertheless, the established facts were not enough to make the myths disappear. While they made headway among political activists and public representatives, many Dresdeners still deny them today. If one asks “the man on the street” in front of the Frauenkirche about the 13th of February, the answer remains the same: a senseless attack shortly before the end of the war on an innocent city of art and culture full of refugees, a death toll in the hundreds of thousands, low-flying bombers firing at fleeing civilians in the Elbe meadows, phosphorous rain. As late as 2010, the Saxony Center for Civic Education published a booklet with several uncommented eyewitnesses accounts.

In the run-up to the 60th anniversary of the bombing, a group of Dresden citizens, with the support of the mayor, published a statement called “A Framework for Remembrance,” which was intended to initiate a change in the culture of remembrance among the broad masses. It called for expanding the

focus of the ceremonies to include not only the city's fate, but also the suffering of others. Not only should the city's victim status be recognized, but also its role as perpetrator. It spoke of learning from history. With reference to the fact that Germany initiated the war and that Dresden has learned from its sorrowful history, the city presented itself as a repentant symbol of peace and reconciliation. "We are remembering because the events of history constitute a duty and obligation to stand up for peace, against violence and war. [...] We want the 13th of February to be the starting point for an ongoing process of learning and commitment for peace and humanity."<sup>10</sup> An interpretation of Dresden as an anti-war memorial is made possible by combining everything together into a single horrific fate, regardless of the historical context. This universalization of sorrow was exemplified on a poster printed by the city of Dresden on the occasion of the 2005 ceremonies: Baghdad, Coventry, Dresden, Grozny, Guernica, Hamburg, Hiroshima, Leningrad, Monrovia, New York, Sarajevo, Warsaw – Destruction is Destruction. The singularity of the German crimes disappears into the universal suffering caused by war, which Dresden was also forced to endure.

The "Framework for Remembrance" was also meant to serve as a dissociation to the ever-growing number of Nazis who migrated to Dresden for the ceremonies: "We stand up against the abuse of our remembrance to play down the crimes of the National Socialist German society between 1933 and 1945."<sup>11</sup> The branding of the Nazis' agenda as abuse makes an actual debate with them and their speeches on the occasion of the 13th of February seem unnecessary, as superfluous as analyzing common points of interest in the commemoration of Dresden, or even with the common core – the commemoration of the German victims. Instead a real, irreproachable commemoration is purported, one that has nothing to do with what others make out of it.

Following this "Framework for Remembrance," the memorial program for the 60th anniversary was full of concerts, readings, plays and panels of eyewitnesses who not only recalled the bombing of Dresden, but dutifully recounted the "preliminary events leading to this event." For the annual lecture series, the *Dresdner Reden*, at the Dresden State Playhouse, Ruth Klüger was invited to speak on the 13th of February 2005 about Victor Klemperer. In an open letter she refused to comply with the attempt to use her presence as a symbolic dissociation and as an acknowledgement of the "preexisting events": "[...] I have only now realized that right-wing extremists hold a march every year on the 13th of February in Dresden. You should not have kept this information from me, but you probably didn't even think about what kind of effect such rallies have on a Shoah survivor. [...] When a formerly persecuted Jew – as I am primarily known in Germany – holds a lecture about another persecuted Jew, namely Victor Klemperer,

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<sup>10</sup> *A Framework for Remembrance*, [http://www.dresden.de/en/02/07/03/c\\_01\\_remembrance.php](http://www.dresden.de/en/02/07/03/c_01_remembrance.php) (retrieved 20 November 2014).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

while thousands (sic) of anti-Semitic party members are demonstrating outside on the street, it will inevitably result in a political three ring circus. I could not have expected this, and for this reason I would prefer not to participate. [...] The role I am expected to play as a visitor is, as I see it, incommensurable. For me personally, this role is, to put it bluntly, unacceptable."<sup>12</sup> And while several tens of thousands of people held their silent commemoration in front of the Frauenkirche, and inside the cross of Coventry was presented to the regional bishop as a sign of reconciliation, 6,500 Nazis marched through the city center of Dresden. The commemoration itself was set in scene as a protest against the Nazis. City notables called for participation in the "10,000 Candles for Dresden" campaign, which would create a large symbolic candle in front of the theater as a "sign of admonition and commemoration." Another group of citizens, who also made use of the candle tradition, but were satisfied with 4,000, spelled out *Diese Stadt hat Nazis satt* [This city is sick of Nazis]. The working group 13. Februar called on the residents of Dresden to wear a white rose as a sign of silent protest, and thus established the symbol of "truthful commemoration." But despite all symbolic exertions, thousands of Nazis marched through the city. They also pinned white roses to their lapels – "In commemoration of the victims of the Dresden Holocaust!" as they reasoned, since with this commemoration they were the true opposition to the "debt bondage" imposed on the Germans.

The shift in the discourse was also visible in the official commemoration ceremony. The officials had refused for some time to change the schedule of events even slightly, but the pressure finally became too much when Dresden's Jewish community refused to participate due to the presence of the Nazis. In 2009 Mayor Helma Orosz broke, for the first time, with the tradition of silent commemoration. Her speech reflects the current interpretation of the bombing and the remembrance of it. While she used the typical tropes such as "a jewel of art and culture" in her speech, she also put the blame for the suffering on the "National Socialist band of criminals." Orosz declared, in the name of all citizens of Dresden: "[The Nazis] defile the memory of the dead, they do not belong in this city." Just as this speech externalized the Nazis of the 1930s and 1940s as a "band of criminals" from German society, thus making them victims of National Socialism, the modern Nazis were shut out of the collective of truthful commemoration and stylized as defiling trouble-makers from outside the community. Dresden thus once again became a victim.

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth Klüger made her letter to the director of the State Playhouse available for publication to the MDR radio station FIGARO; quoted from: <http://venceremos.sytes.net/archiv/13februar/2005/ruthklueger.htm> (retrieved 01 November 2012). See also: Hubert Spiegel, *Das Gefühl, in Dresden fehl am Platz zu sein* [The Feeling of Being out of Place in Dresden], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 February 2005.

## All's well that ends well?

The placement of the bombing of Dresden in historical context and the acknowledgement of German culpability – both of which are core elements of the commonly lauded modern German culture of remembrance – remain purely formal. An actual debate about German history, about blame and responsibility, about a war of annihilation and the Shoah neither takes place nor is it desired. Instead the focus is shifted to suffering and blame in general. The universalization of suffering was epitomized in the poster of 2005, the universalization of blame in the phrase “War returns to Dresden,” which can be read on the monument at the Altmarkt: “This is a place of admonition, of remembrance, and of commemoration. The bodies of thousands of victims of the air raids of the 13th and 14th of February 1945 were burned here. On those days the horrors of the war that Germany inflicted on the world came back to our city.” The bombing of Dresden was, however, not an instance of the war of annihilation perpetrated by the Germans backfiring. This assertion can only be upheld if human suffering, seen from a moral perspective, is the only point of reference. In it, war makes everyone into both perpetrator and victim at the same time. The specificity of the German crime and the preexisting conditions that made it possible disappear when the focus is shifted to a backfiring of the war. This idea generalizes and moralizes, which, in the end, serves only to relativize the German guilt.

When it is abstracted in this way, the “preexisting conditions” become compatible with the myth of victimhood, which can then be transposed into a modernized form of commemoration. This culture of remembrance of the world champion of coming to terms with the past is as useful for a modern Dresden identity as it is for a modern German identity.

## Commemoration re-invents itself

The annual Nazi rallies refused to disappear by themselves, and increasingly dominated the image of the commemorations in Dresden. By the 65th anniversary in 2010, a simple change in the schedule of events at the Heidefriedhof and the insistence on a truthful commemoration that excluded the Nazis per se were no longer sufficient. Participation in the commemoration at the Frauenkirche had declined continually since 2005, and attempts to revive it with large stages, guest speakers and candle installations were unsuccessful. The commemoration found new meaning in its function as a bastion of truthfulness against extremists: against those who abused the commemoration – meaning the Nazis – and against those who instrumentalized the anniversary – meaning the left-wing groups, who, year for year, used the 13th of February as an opportunity to formulate a fundamental criticism of commemoration in general. A human chain with the motto “Remembering and Acting for my Dresden,” initiated

by Mayor Helma Orosz together with the working group 13 February,<sup>13</sup> was considered the ideal form of commemoration. "The human chain will encompass the historical city center. It is a representation of commemoration, admonition and resistance combined. I invite you to send this peaceful signal together with us. Only in this way can we commemorate, powerfully and emphatically, the horrific events of 1945 and protect our city from violence and extremism."<sup>14</sup> In the end, however, it was thousands of anti-fascist activists, who hindered the Nazi demonstration with organized blockades placed directly in its path.

Because of the developments in the past three years – the increasing focus on the protest against the Nazi demonstration, the international attention to Dresden and how it deals with its past and the annual migration of thousands of Nazis to the city, and the reorientation of the commemoration ceremonies as an appeal against "abuse" – the wish to return to the tradition of silent commemoration is making itself heard more and more frequently. Thomas de Maizière, for example, asked in the *Sächsische Zeitung* in 2010 "Is there no way back to silent commemoration?" and demanded: "To all demonstrators from outside the city: stay out of Dresden on the 13th of February. Leave us in peace. In peace to commemorate with the power of candles and the power of reconciliation."<sup>15</sup> Thus a debate about the "correct" form of commemoration in Dresden has arisen, whose outcome cannot be foreseen. In April of 2012 the Dresden City Council, in response to a proposal by the CDU faction, resolved: "On the basis of the experiences of the past years, the mayor is charged with submitting proposals for the future organization of the main activities for the day of commemoration in Dresden – the 13th of February. The peaceful commemoration of the victims of the devastating bombing raids of the 13th and 14th of February 1945 and the idea of reconciliation between nations should once again be the primary focus."<sup>16</sup>

Translated by Amy Lee

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**13** The working group includes representatives from the city's Christian churches and the Jewish community, as well as from political leadership, industry, academics, civil society, sports, cultural institutions and the Dresden city administration. "The '13 February' working group was first convened by Mayor Helma Orosz in 2009, the aim then and now being for many important social groups to agree upon a joint course of action for the anniversary of the destruction of Dresden." <http://13februar.dresden.de/en/working-group.php> (retrieved 21 November 2014).

**14** Statement to the press by the City of Dresden, 13 January 2010.

**15** Thomas de Maizière, *Lasst uns in Ruhe gedenken* [Let us Commemorate in Peace], *Sächsische Zeitung*, 10 February 2010.

**16** Transcript of the public part of the 39th meeting of the City Council (SR/039/2012), 04 April 2012.