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## Dresdner Monument Stories Contradictions between Reconstruction and Victim Identity

For a long time Dresden had a very prominent site that reminded one of the bombings of 13–15 February 1945. The ruins of the *Frauenkirche* [Church of Our Lady] were a widely acknowledged symbol that made two specific points. On the one hand they were a marker of the outcome of the Second World War which Nazi Germany lost. On the other hand they indicated the intensity with which National Socialism and Germany society had bonded – further intensification was impossible. Every social institution – including and especially the Evangelical church – had been corrupted and incorporated into the *Volksgemeinschaft* [German National Community]. Any questions about the ‘other Germany’ that rejected National Socialism became superfluous at the very latest with the outbreak of war in 1939.

Instead, Germans committed themselves to ‘total war’, swore an oath of loyalty to the death to the Führer and, right to the end, implemented the merciless annihilation of Jews and other ‘worthless’ lives. Bearing in mind the nature of the enemy, the reaction of the allies was not moderated in any way, as the bombing of Dresden showed – they simply had no choice.<sup>1</sup>

Germans were not prepared to acknowledge either the defeat nor their responsibility for National Socialism and the anti-Semitic and racist crimes. However, the defeat could certainly not be denied and for that reason they took refuge in the victim role and its associated myths. This allowed their role as perpetrators to be covered up and avoided questions of guilt. Dresden, and in particular the ruins of the *Frauenkirche*, were the places where the aggressive takeover of victim status was underpinned. Henceforth they would stand for the wounds sustained by Germany and thus were predestined as the site for the appropriate staging of victimhood. In fact, this interpretation was only supposed to be a temporary solution. The reconstruction, a demand that was made early on, would solve both problems at a more fundamental level. By reconstructing the building the detour via the victim myth would become unnecessary: National Socialism? War? Bombing? That didn’t happen here. We had nothing to do with that. Those were logical and consequential answers. However, a few decades would have to pass until then. It was only with the end of the GDR – during which the project had been rejected on various

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Overy, *Die Wurzeln des Sieges. Warum die Alliierten den Zweiten Weltkrieg gewannen*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2002, 171ff.

political and strategic grounds – and the reunification that the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche found its way back on to the agenda.

The 'Ruf aus Dresden' [Call from Dresden] that initiated the reconstruction of the *Frauenkirche* was simultaneously the starting shot for a reconstruction marathon in the historic old part of Dresden. It continues to the present day. Since then the 'old Dresden' facades round the Neumarkt have been slavishly imitated down to the last detail, formerly asphalted streets have been repaved with bumpy cobblestones and demands made for inhabited and completely intact GDR era buildings to be acquired and demolished. The city centre is like a huge open air museum that not only encourages the lucrative tourist industry but also pushes a kitschy and romanticised 'backward-looking utopia'<sup>2</sup> which causes any historical connections to National Socialism and its suppression to be forgotten. That might well make the Baroque fundamentalist faction happy but, in what appears to be a paradox, it creates serious problems for 13 February commemoration. That this was once a war-torn city, Dresden supposedly the site of a 'war crime', is no longer discernable (at least from the architecture). The more Dresden is 'restored', the more the city loses its identity as a victim. But since that has been a central element in the city's self-conception for decades,<sup>3</sup> it needs some form of compensation. And Dresden would not be Dresden if it could not combine the two: importunate in asking for donations to heal the alleged 'wounds of Dresden' and, at the same time, prolonging its victim status into the eternal future so that no one can ever doubt the suffering the Dresden Germans endured. The solution is simple: there has to be a memorial.

The demand had been floating around the debate like a ghost for years and originated in the local Nazi *Kameradschaften* [former regimental comrades] and the NPD [Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands, German National Democratic Party].<sup>4</sup> However, since the re-opening of the Frauenkirche and declining interest in the remembrance events for the 13 February, it has been also taken up by the bourgeois conservative faction without any noticeable embarrassment. That numerous memorials already exist and in recent years some new ones added, plays no role.

As recently as 2010 the city inaugurated the *Tränenmeer* [Sea of Tears] memorial in the *Heidefriedhof* [Heide Cemetery] expanding a pre-existing memorial site.<sup>5</sup> It depicts a girl with crossed and outstretched arms crying into a pool at her feet which collects her tears. The memorial is dedicated to

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<sup>2</sup> Karl-Siebert Rehberg, 'Dresden als Raum des Imaginären', *Dresdner Hefte*, 84, 2005, 88–99.

<sup>3</sup> Amongst other things in connection with the Nazi marches which even today are regarded as being undertaken by people from 'elsewhere' who are said to be 'misusing' the city and the remembrance.

<sup>4</sup> Thus the neo-Nazi 'Aktionsbündnis gegen das Vergessen' [Action Group Against Forgetting] demanded on 11 November 2008 'a worthy memorial for the victims of the 13 February'. Cf. <http://www.gedenkmarsch.de/dresden/archiv/11-11-2008-die-chance-verspielt> (last access 03 Dec. 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Philipp Klein, 'Eine Stadt pflegt ihren Mythos' in: *analyse und kritik/Der Rechte Rand* (ed.): *Dresden Speciale 2012*, Hannover: Verlag Der Rechte Rand, 2012, 8–11.

the 'victims of the 13 February 1945' and was financed by a legacy left to the City of Dresden which imposed a condition that a memorial to the 13 February be built. The bronze statue takes up one of the most frequent motifs of Dresden memorial discourse: the incontrovertible innocence of children who have lost their lives or their relatives. This allows the bombing carried out by the British and American air forces to appear particularly monstrous and despicable and its primary appeal is to the viewer's emotions. No space is left over for historical knowledge. And so questions about the responsibility (adult) Germans have to accept and why they went along with National Socialism and the war of aggression are not raised. The motif of the innocent child buries memory work, generalising their innocence to cover everyone killed by bombs. What is left behind is either a more or less accusatory 'certainty' that the allies were just as guilty as the Germans or turning the Second World War into an overwhelming jungle of individual experiences of suffering that is quite simply incomprehensible. The avowal which follows on top of that – Never again!<sup>6</sup> – sounds appropriately hollow. If all confrontation with history is exhausted in finding out that there was pain and suffering, any subsequent acknowledgement can only be arbitrary and thereby without consequences. That the arms and body of the figure form a cross and thus intentionally open up a Christian context is only logical. The dead who are being remembered become victims who have atoned for their sins. This retrospective imposition of religious connotation and the ascribed reconciliation places humans in the position of being passive and simply following a superordinate divine plan without, however, being able to exercise any real influence. Here, history is deliberately obscured in favour of the victim mythos.

The situation is also much less concrete in connection with the memorial space inaugurated in 2009 in the Dresdner Altmarkt – though only with regard to certain points. While the number of the bombing dead that were cremated there after their corpses had been recovered is clearly stated at 6,865 and the molten metal that flowed between the cobblestones was fixed, it becomes a lot less precise when it comes to classifying events on the additional memorial plaque: 'The bodies of the thousands of victims of the bombing on the 13 and 14 February 1945 were burned here. The horrors of war originating from Germany spread out into the world only to return to our city'. Naming the victims is not difficult but this is otherwise in the case of the perpetrators: There are no direct mentions of Germans as belligerents. Instead, the war seems to develop a life of its own. It began in Germany and spread out from there finally coming home to roost. Everyone was equally affected. This depiction does not square with reality. The military campaigns to defeat National Socialism cannot be equated with the racist campaigns of annihilation and destruction – especially in Eastern Europe – carried out by Germans. That war did not come back (as is suggested by the text on the plaque) because it was only Germany that carried on that type

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<sup>6</sup> For example the Lady Mayor of Dresden, Helma Orosz, on the 13 February 2009 at the Heide Cemetery; quoted in [http://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/oberbuergemeister/20090213\\_Heidefriedhof.pdf](http://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/oberbuergemeister/20090213_Heidefriedhof.pdf) (last access: 03 Dec. 2012).

of war. Conquering new Lebensraum [territory for settling] as foreseen in the Generalplan Ost [General Plan for the East] was not one of the allied aims, nor was the general annihilation of Germans – even if present-day neo-Nazis assert otherwise by talking of a Bombenholocaust [bombing holocaust].

In addition to these relatively recent memorials there are others that make statements that are no less questionable. One example is the grove of honour in the Heide Cemetery.<sup>7</sup> The site of official memorial events of the City of Dresden up to the present day, it locates Dresden as one of a series of event which includes concentration and extermination camps as well as other destroyed German cities. The *Trümmerfrau* ['rubble woman'] is also still in front of the city hall and there is also the nameless bronze sculpture by Wieland Förster with the inscription 'Dresden mahnt' [Dresden warns] in George Treu Square, the memorial stone in Dresden-Nickern with the inscription 'The victims of the Anglo-American bomb terror' that is regularly visited by Nazis, the new memorial complex – inaugurated in 2006 – in the grounds of the Alten Annen Cemetery with its obelisk on which one can read: 'How desolate lies the city that once was full of people'.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore there is the memorial stone on Prießnitzstraße put there to commemorate a house on the site that was destroyed by a blockbuster bomb. Everything was devastated including, it is said, a wedding party that had taken shelter in the air raid shelter. At best this 'information' is fifth hand and even today it remains unverified.<sup>9</sup> In addition there are further monuments<sup>10</sup> and uncounted memorial plaques such as those on rebuilt houses. In truth there is no shortage of memorials and monuments. The time has surely come to critically examine some of the statements made on them instead and to question the memorial practice they express. It is difficult to score points in Dresden with that though. While one section of the Dresdner public -is at least prepared to take small doses of criticism and reflect on them, the bourgeois conservative right-wing majority attempts to put the 'proper perspective' on their memorial ideology with a yet another memorial or better perhaps: a monument to selective forgetting.

The city centre of Dresden is to be treated to a super memorial achieved by merging two projects. It links the *Erinnerungsinitiative zur Busmannkapelle* [Busmannkapelle Memorial Initiative] to the proposal for a memorial displaying all presently-known names – 19,000 – of those who died in the

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7 See the article *Nicht Gedenkort, sondern Lernort* by Swen Steinberg in this volume.

8 From the Requiem by Rudolf Mauersberger 'Wie liegt die Stadt so wüst ...', after the *Book of Lamentations*. The obelisk was erected in the 1990s and the memorial complex extended in 2006.

9 See: Gunnar Schubert, *Die kollektive Unschuld. Wie der Dresden-Schwindel zum nationalen Opfermythos wurde*, Hamburg: KVV konkret, 2006, 18f.

10 Further memorial sites are listed in: Herbert Goldhammer/Karin Jeschke, *Dresdner Gedenkorte für die Opfer des NS-Regimes*, Dresden: ddp goldenbogen, 2006 und Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V./Stadtverband Dresden (pub.), *Dresdner Kriegsgräberstätten. Erinnerungsorte für die Opfer von Krieg und Gewaltherrschaft*, Dresden, 2010.

bombings. Even considered separately the projects are in a class of their own. Together they are certainly the clearest expression for the continuing historical revisionist content of the Dresden victim mythos.

The *Busmannkapelle* was a side chapel of the Sophienkirche and so severely damaged in the February 1945 bombings that, following a resolution of the City of Dresden Council and the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED), the governing party of the GDR, the remains were completely demolished in 1962. A large-scale pub and restaurant was built in its place. After the reunification and as a consequence of the reconstruction marathon that was getting underway the Dresden City Council decided in 1994 in favour of building a memorial for the oldest of Dresden's churches. A few years later the decision was taken in favour of a design which envisaged a replica of the side chapel with a number of church columns protected by a glass construction. The first concrete column was erected on the 13 February 2009. Since then building work has progressed gradually depending on available funds. The memorial space will cost a total of 2,7 million Euros.

It was also in 2009 that an appeal for donations was published and outlined the idea of a memorial space which was intended to become a 'place of reflection and understanding'.<sup>11</sup> Doubts are justified as to whether that will be successful. The site became something special after bombing had rendered it useless, after it became 'the victim of the ideology of the new socialist state', goes the argument and furthermore, the demolition of the church could have been avoided but mercy was in short supply in the GDR so that steps were undertaken for 'the total destruction of the *Sophienkirche*'.<sup>12</sup> While this is certainly a lie – on the one hand material from Sophienkirche was used to repair and maintain other churches,<sup>13</sup> while on the other various parts of the building and gravestones were secured and stored in such a way that they could be used in a planned memorial building – an alternative interpretation would mean that evidence for 'the 55 years of continuous misuse of power under two political systems'<sup>14</sup> was absent. That, however, is precisely what the initiators intend, exactly as if the demolition of a crumbling ruin was the same as the intentional and planned extermination of millions of people. As if the GDR implemented the Shoah, carried out a war of aggression or eliminated 'foreign bodies' in the 'Volksgemeinschaft'[community of people defined racially] in a way that was even vaguely similar to the Third Reich.

The debate about a memorial that is to bear the names of the 19,000 bombing dead has a slightly different emphasis. The names are the result of work of the historian commission on the air raids on Dresden between 13 and 15 February 1945 and rapidly stimulated certain appetites. The collection of

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11 The call 'Wider das Vergessen – Erkenntnis und Erinnerung': <http://busmannkapelle.de/index.php?PHPSESSID=55864c38efa430cf29830adf2c5bdaa1&page=appeal> (zuletzt eingesehen 03.12.2012).

12 Sitting of the *Gesellschaft zur Förderung einer Gedenkstätte für die Sophienkirche Dresden e. V.*, §2, Absatz 1.

13 Matthias Lerm, *Abschied vom alten Dresden. Verluste historischer Bausubstanz nach 1945*, Rostock: Hinstorff 2000, 85.

14 The call 'Wider das Vergessen,' op. cit.

names 'shows better than any monument in stone or metal the dimensions of suffering,' said Matthias Neutzner, a member of the commission. He continued: 'it is now up to the democratic public of the city to use the results responsibly'.<sup>15</sup> An unnecessary invitation. Because it concerns the suffering of the city, the Dresdner public did not take long to make all sorts of suggestions. And it was not long until the *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP) Mitte [Free Democratic Party] to propose – in 2010 – a memorial for the city centre on which the names should be presented. The CDU [Christian Democratic Union], the *Volksbund Kriegsgräberfürsorge* [War Graves Commission] and the Stiftung Sächsische Gedenkstätten [Saxony Memorial Trust] welcomed the idea. For them the bomb dead are, without exception, all victims. It plays no role whatsoever that among the names there are a number of Jews, forced labourers and politically persecuted persons of both sexes. And it plays no role that the majority of the names are those of people who implemented the persecution as convinced Nazis, secret denounciators, members of the armed forces, the *Volkssturm* or the party or were even just silent collaborators.

In October 2012 Dresden City Council decided – with the votes of the CDU, FDP, Bürgerfraktion and NPD – to link the idea for the memorial with the pre-existing *Busmannkapelle* project. The motion also agreed the financing of the further building work on the Busmannkapelle while charging the mayor of the city with 'making plans for a place of silence and individual remembrance of the dead of the air raids on the 13 and 14 February 1945'.<sup>16</sup> A committee (still to be appointed) consisting of the mayor, city councillors and experts is to work out a concept. The expectations of the proposal are clear: the 19,000 names should be publicly presented. A CDU city councillor explains: 'We are not concerned with "sorting the dead into good and bad" because that is exactly what differentiates our society from dictatorships and ideologies'.<sup>17</sup> With that he puts expresses in a nutshell the universalisation and de-contextualisation of the concept of victim now prevalent in the German discourses about re-allocating or reducing responsibility.

The compulsion to continually move on to erecting the next memorial takes on a grotesque aspect. It is the expression of a memorial practice that begins and ends with the 'Dresden's suffering' and wants to place this at the service of the nation by cementing it in place. When, in 2010, there was a discussion in London about a memorial space to British bomber pilots, the Lady Mayor of Dresden was not slow in expressing her opinion: 'I find it disconcerting that after all these years a memorial should be erected.

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<sup>15</sup> Matthias Neutzner, 'Zwanzigtausend Namen, zwanzigtausend Schicksale', *Sächsische Zeitung*, 24 March 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Motion on proposal A0626/12: 'Errichtung eines Mahnmals für die Opfer der Bombenangriffe auf Dresden vom 13. bis 15. Februar 1945 in der Gedenkstätte Busmannkapelle', *Stadtrat Dresden*, 18 October 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Speech by Councillor Sebastian Kieslich in the Dresden City Council sitting on 18 October 2012: [http://www.dresden-cdu.de/no\\_cache/news/newsdetail/article/stilles-und-individuelles-gedenken-in-der-busmannkapelle//cHash/a92a85895b5bbd3133c1acacb254b3c8.html](http://www.dresden-cdu.de/no_cache/news/newsdetail/article/stilles-und-individuelles-gedenken-in-der-busmannkapelle//cHash/a92a85895b5bbd3133c1acacb254b3c8.html) (last access 03 Dec. 2012).

I consider it a retrogressive step'.<sup>18</sup> A remarkable point of view for a city with such a density of memorials and monuments. But Dresden has gone through a learning process: we might have lost the war but in the battle for remembrance the same mistakes will not be made again.

Translated by Tim Sharp

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**18** Quoted in: Jochen Wittmann, 'Coventrys Stadtfest will Bomberdenkmal', Sächsische Zeitung, 08 September 2010.