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Preface

It is not hard to understand why the Allied bombings continue to raise moral questions and emotional responses. Through my family, I am familiar with the personal memories of people who experienced the bombings. My father, who was two years old at the time, experienced the large-scale attack on Kassel in a bomb shelter in October 1943, together with his mother, older brother and two sisters. Their house was the only one in their street still standing. My aunts and uncle clearly recall the image of the largely destroyed and smoldering city landscape.

Such stories are part of numerous German family memories. They remind us that for Germans – and especially for the generation that directly experienced the war – writing about the bombings was always in some way connected to personal experiences. The German historians whose work I analyze in this book only rarely reflected on their personal relationship with the subject they wrote about: they largely maintained a self image of objectiveness in which reflections on their personal experiences had no place. I, however, am convinced that their seemingly ‘detached’ and historical narratives were very strongly connected to memory and identity issues: to the refusal of being seen as a perpetrator in the light of the experience of suffering.

By choosing this angle of historiographical analysis, I refrain from directly passing moral judgments on the morality of bombing myself. Instead, I critically reflect on the often one-sided way in which German historians wrote about this subject and especially on those authors who have used the Allied bombings to downplay the significance of the Genocide that was carried out by Nazi Germany. However, this does not mean that I feel that the bombing of German cities is not problematic from a moral point of view or that I am not affected by the horrible stories of suffering I have encountered while reading these accounts.

While the reader might readjust or nuance his or her moral view on the Allied bombings and the way they were discussed after the war by reading about the debates and conflicting perspectives, this is not my primary aim. The present study is motivated by a strong interest in the way Germans and especially historians have attempted to come to terms with Nazism and the Second World War. I see this historiography as an important case to cast a new light on this ongoing and complex process.

This book is based on my PhD project, which I started in October 2005 at the University of Amsterdam. The result would not have been possible

without the many inspiring exchanges of thought and comments on my research I received from numerous colleagues and friends. Among the many, I especially want to thank Frits Boterman, who has been an inspiring supervisor. Annemarie van Lith made the index to this book, for which I am very grateful.

While this study is mainly based on the analysis of published material – history books –, it also draws on selected archival study and therefore would not have been completed in this form without the support of the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte*, the *Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, the *Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* and the *Bundesarchiv und Militärarchiv* in Koblenz and Freiburg.

For their hospitality, time and the interesting conversations I thank Horst Boog and Matthias Neutzner, the latter also for giving me the valuable access to his personal archive. I am also grateful to the family of Olaf Groehler, especially his son Kersten Groehler, who granted me access to Olaf Groehler's personal archive.

I would not have been able to write this book without the loving care, humor, and the serious and less serious comments on my work by my loved ones: my mother and brother, and in particular Lies and my two daughters Alma and Roos, who are always there to remind me what I do this for. Finally, my thoughts go out to my father Franz, who passed away in 2013. His critical and sharp sense of observation has always been a strong inspiration for me. Having to miss him makes me realize how strongly he influenced my interests and fascination with the issues that are the subject of this book.

Introduction

German historians and the Allied bombings

For decades, historians from all over the world have studied the strategic bombing campaign during the Second World War, leading to a rich historiography on the strategic premise, military effects, and moral legitimacy of the modern bombing war. Though in many ways this is an international academic debate, there are good reasons to look more closely into the work of German historians. In many ways Germany experienced the effects of the modern bombing war more severely than other European countries. Moreover, with approximately 380,000 civilian victims, the *Luftkrieg* ('air war') or *Bombenkrieg* ('bombing war') as it became known in Germany was one of the most direct horrors of war with which Germans were confronted in their own country.¹

The attacks brought loss, suffering and trauma for those who experienced the long nights in the air shelters, who lost friends, families and homes and who witnessed the horrific images of mass death and burning cities. In addition to the mass expulsions from parts of Eastern Europe, especially Silesia, Sudetenland, and Eastern Prussia, and the large-scale rape of German women by Soviet soldiers, the bombing of German cities brought the atrocities of total warfare to the German 'home front', leaving a lasting impression.

Especially since the late 1990s, not only the air war itself but also the question of whether the German victims of the air war had been commemorated in an appropriate way has become the subject of an extensive discussion. Locating the place of the air war in German collective memory has been the topic of academic publications, commemoration ceremonies, press articles, and TV documentaries. The increased interest in the air war followed the publication of two controversial books. In 1999, German writer and literary critic Winfried Sebald stated in his essay *Luftkrieg und Literatur* that there was a complete 'lack of memory' about the air war in Germany. According to Sebald, the memory of the horrors of the air war had become a 'taboo' because Germans had been primarily concerned with the restoration of their destroyed land and reputation. Therefore they did not

¹ On the estimates of the number of civilian victims see: Helmut Schnatz, 'Die Zerstörung der deutschen Städte und die Opfer', in *Der Bombenkrieg und seine Opfer*, ed. Bernd Heidenreich and Sönke Neitzel, *Polis* 39 (Wiesbaden: 2004) 30-46.

confront the deep trauma of the bombing experience that had had such a devastating impact. The air war, in Sebald's words, 'hardly left a painful trace in German collective consciousness' and was ignored by literary writers as well as by historians.²

Three years later Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand* (2002) attempted to fill this gap in German collective memory, with a vivid description of Germans suffering under the Allied bombings. The strong public response to his book and the discussion it provoked seemed to confirm Sebald's conviction that until this moment the air war had been a generally accepted public taboo.³ In the following years, in all sections of the German press and media, from popular historical books to television series, two related questions were passionately discussed. While the moral implications and effectiveness of the Allied air war were debated, the question 'whether or not the Germans should regard themselves as victims' became a central issue.⁴ This debate coincided with an increased interest in other forms of 'German suffering' like the mass rape of German women by Russian soldiers and the mass expulsions.⁵

Reflecting on this increased public interest in German suffering, academic studies have sought an explanation for this apparent shift in German historical culture.⁶ To put this shift into perspective scholars started to search for longer continuities in the way the expulsion and the air war had been remembered, commemorated, and interpreted. In the light of the great number of contributions to the study of German memory of the air war, it is striking how little attention has been given to the study of historiography.

2 Winfried G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (München: 1999) 17-18, 76.

3 Ibid; Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg, 1940-1945* (Berlin: 2002).

4 Especially see: Lothar Kettenacker, ed. *Ein Volk von Opfern. Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (Berlin: 2003) and the special issue of German magazine *Der Spiegel* later printed as a volume: Stephan Burgdorff and Wolfgang Bayer, eds., *Als Feuer vom Himmel fiel. Der Bombenkrieg in Deutschland* (München: 2003).

5 In his novel *Im Krebsgang* Günter Grass brought the expulsion of Germans from East Europe to a broad public. Günter Grass, *Im Krebsgang: eine Novelle* (Göttingen: 2002). Also, in the German parliament and in the press, the question was debated whether the expulsions should be nationally commemorated by a central monument in Berlin. On 3 September 2008, the German government officially approved the founding of a permanent exhibition on the expulsion within the context of the national historical museum. For the debates see: Phillip Ther, 'Erinnern oder Aufklären. Zur Konzeption eines Zentrums gegen Vertreibungen', in *Flucht und Vertreibung in europäischer Perspektive*, ed. Jürgen Danyel and Phillip Ther, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (2003) 36-41. Also see the book and film: Anonymia, *Eine Frau in Berlin* (Frankfurt am Main: 2002).

6 Especially see: Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: 2006).

The study of local memory cultures by Thiessen and Arnold has shown that local historiography played an important role in a broader discourse on how the local past was to be remembered and interpreted.⁷ These local studies indicate that historians of the Allied bombings were heavily involved in a broader discourse on the past. However, the interplay between historical research and a broader public memory of the bombings has only become subject of serious study in local contexts.⁸ Consequently, general historical accounts on the Allied bombings have largely been neglected as a subject of research. But more importantly, since most local histories have been written by amateur historians, the role of professional academic historiography has largely been left out of this discussion.

This is a remarkable lacuna compared to the historiography of the German expulsions. Robert Moeller and Matthias Beer have shown that in the 1950s, historical research on the expulsions was influenced by identity politics and a broader public debate on history.⁹ By contrast, studies on the reception of the Allied bombings have mainly focused on the recent public debate, on literary works and local memory cultures. The German historiography of the air war has been part of this discussion only indirectly and has led to different assumptions.

For example, some contributions to the recent debate conclude that since the 1990s academic historians have approached the Allied bombings in

7 Malte Thiessen, *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis. Hamburgs Gedenken an Luftkrieg und Kriegsende 1943 bis 2005*, Forum Zeitgeschichte (Hamburg: 2007); Jörg Arnold, "In Quiet Remembrance"? *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory Cultures in Kassel and Magdeburg, 1940-1995*, Faculty of Law, Arts and Social Sciences. School of Humanities (Southampton: University of Southampton 2006). Later published as *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory. The Legacy of Strategic Bombing in Germany* (Oxford: 2011). Neil Gregor, *Haunted City: Nuremberg and the Nazi Past* (New Haven: 2008).

8 Thiessen, *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis* 214-235; 399-428.

9 Moeller, *War stories*; Mathias Beer, 'Verschlussache, Raubdruck, autorisierte Fassung. Aspekte der politischen Auseinandersetzung mit Flucht und Vertreibung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (1949-1989)', in *Diktatur – Krieg – Vertreibung: Erinnerungskulturen in Tschechien, der Slowakei und Deutschland seit 1945* ed. Christoph Cornelißen, Roman Holec, and Jiří Pesek, *Veröffentlichungen der Deutsch-Tschechischen und Deutsch-Slowakischen Historikerkommission; Bd. 13; Veröffentlichungen zur Kultur und Geschichte im östlichen Europa; Bd. 26* (Essen: 2005) 369-401; Mathias Beer, "'Ein der wissenschaftlichen Forschung sich aufräugerender historischer Zusammenhang". Von den Schwierigkeiten, "Flucht und Vertreibung" zu kontextualisieren', in *Flucht und Vertreibung in europäischer Perspektive*, ed. Jürgen Danyel and Phillip Ther, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (2003) 59-64; Mathias Beer, 'Die Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa – Hintergründe – Entstehung – Ergebnis – Wirkung', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 50, no. 2 (1999) 99-117; Mathias Beer, 'Im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Zeitgeschichte: Das Großforschungsprojekt "Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa"', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 46, no. 3 (1998) 345-389.

a radically different manner than popular accounts. For example, Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz both have argued that the recent discourse of German suffering was primarily located in the field of popular memory culture.¹⁰

In their discussion on the recent interest in German suffering, Berger and Lorenz make a strong distinction between the popular debate and a guild of professional historians, which had supposedly freed itself from the victim-centered discourse of the 1950s. According to Berger, the recent focus on German victimhood is a discourse that was carried by non-academic publicists like Jörg Friedrich and not by professional historians, who were 'not concerned with somehow offsetting German suffering against German guilt'.¹¹

What is missing in the few accounts that have addressed the German historiography of the Allied bombings, is a more detailed analysis of these historical accounts, and of the question to what extent both before and after 1990, these accounts were concerned with balancing the suffering of Germans under the Allied bombings with the suffering of the victims of Nazism.

In this book I look for patterns in the way German historiography explained, interpreted, and narrated the Allied bombings, and locate the conditions under which certain interpretations and narratives became dominant. This approach exceeds traditional historiography in the sense that it does not focus on monographs by academic historians alone. It regards historiography as part of a wider discourse, in which different groups and actors take part. Also, it takes into account the degree to which general debates over identity, memory and coming to terms with the Nazi past in Germany influenced the representations of the Second World War in the works of German historians.¹²

This means that I will also look beyond the historical works, and look into other levels at which this discourse took place. My analysis will therefore include correspondence, lectures, reviews, press articles, and interviews with historians and an examination of their personal, political, and institutional backgrounds. In the case of East German historians it will also include

10 For example see: Stefan Berger, 'On Taboos, Traumas and other Myths: Why the Debate about German Victims of the Second World War is not a Historians Controversy', in *Germans as Victims. Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany*, ed. Bill Niven (New York: 2006) 210-224, here: 220-221; Chris Lorenz, 'Twee soorten catastrofe. Over de verwevenheid van dader- en slachtofferrollen in de Duitse geschiedschrijving', in *Duitsers als slachtoffers. Het einde van een taboe?* ed. Patrick Dassen, Ton Nijhuis, and Krijn Thijs (Amsterdam: 2006) 173-216, here: 200-202.

11 Berger, 'On Taboos' 218. Also see: Lorenz, 'Twee soorten catastrofe' 199.

12 Nicholas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen: 2003) 7-46.

reports written for the East German secret police, the *Stasi*, which sometimes directly reflected the political significance of historical disputes. Both published and unpublished texts will be used to analyze the way German historians provided the history of the air war with contemporary meaning.

Such an approach to historiography includes the work of non-academic historians and acknowledges that amateurs took part in the same historical discourse as professionals. When regarding the historiography of the air war, it becomes clear that this was the work not only of professionally trained and academically based historians but also of 'laymen'. As especially Götz Bergander's *Dresden im Luftkrieg* (1977) and Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand* (2002) illustrate, many German studies were written by historians who did not hold academic positions, but who nevertheless strongly influenced and interacted with the work of academic historians.¹³ Moreover, by discussing non-academic historians like Bergander and Friedrich, the often suggested difference between academic and non-academic approaches can be re-examined.

I do not treat this historiography as a linear process of historical research which gradually develops a higher degree of historical knowledge and insight but pose the following question: To what extent is the representation of history also influenced by a memory-discourse, which looks for the meaning of the past in the present? I intend to show how the effort to reconstruct the past was influenced by a consideration of what aspects of the past should be remembered and in what ways this past was thought to be meaningful for the present. How did these historians integrate their views on current political and identity-related issues into their historical works on the Allied bombings?

Analyzing the way German accounts have explained the Allied bombings also means asking how they have judged the air war morally. The Allied bombings were a highly controversial form of warfare in which many civilians were killed and even during the war they inspired considerable controversy over their morality and legitimacy. Consequently, the question of their moral and legal status has never been absent from the way they have been historically explained and contextualized. On the contrary, the morality of the strategic and political considerations of the Allied leaders has been a central trope in this historiography. I will therefore also look into the question of how these historical works judged the morality of the Allied bombings. To what extent was there a general consensus that the

13 Götz Bergander, *Dresden im Luftkrieg* (Köln: 1977); Friedrich, *Der Brand*. Both Bergander and Friedrich operate as freelance historians and journalists.

Allied bombings were illegitimate and immoral and which arguments and narrative structures supported this point?

Master narratives

To be able to locate the extent to which these accounts were influenced by identity issues, this analysis also looks at the way the bombings were integrated into different overarching *master narratives* of German history. Since the end of the 1990s, the term master narrative has often been used to illustrate the interplay of competing versions of German national history, mainly referring to the relationship between historical perspectives and political legitimacy. In particular, the work of Konrad Jarausch, Martin Sabrow, and Michael Geyer has shown that German historical culture can be regarded as a discursive field in which various overarching narratives on German history compete with one another.¹⁴

In several volumes on German historical culture Jarausch and Sabrow have applied the terms master narrative and counter-narrative to illuminate general trends in German historical culture and to define the relationship between academic historiography and popular memory culture. Sabrow and Jarausch see master narratives as coherent versions of the past, with a clearly defined perspective, which do not only serve as a starting point for professional historians but are also accepted as a dominant interpretation in the public sphere.¹⁵

In *Shattered Past*, Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer more comprehensively locate different competing narratives of German history. Their study shows that there are different competing versions of the German past and different 'counter-narratives', which actively challenge dominant

14 This does not mean that a master narrative only refers to a *national* history. Other categories such as class, gender, and regional or supra-national territorial spaces can also form the basis of a master narrative. However, the nation as the dominant political entity often serves as the most important starting point for a master narrative. For an analysis of the alternatives to national historical identity see: Chris Lorenz, 'Representations of identity: ethnicity, race, class, gender and religion. An introduction to conceptual history', in *The contested nation. Ethnicity, class, religion and gender in national histories*, ed. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, *Writing the nation series* (Basingstoke: 2008) 24-59.

15 Konrad H. Jarausch and Martin Sabrow, "Meistererzählung" – Zur Karriere eines Begriffs', in *Die historische Meistererzählung. Deutungslinien der deutschen Nationalgeschichte nach 1945* ed. Konrad H. Jarausch and Martin Sabrow (Göttingen: 2002) 9-32.

interpretations.¹⁶ In their efforts to define a set of elements that are at play in the formation of such master narratives, Jarausch, Geyer, and Sabrow look for the different discursive and narrative patterns from which a meaningful story is constructed. In studying the *dominance* of certain narratives, Sabrow and Jarausch also point at the political function and social power of a specific version of the past.

It is only through materialization, institutionalization, and the conveying through symbols and media that a version of the past gains social and political influence. Dominant perspectives therefore also become part of official 'memory politics', in which a certain version of the past is connected to current political issues and utilized by political elites for the purpose of identity construction in the present.¹⁷

Also, interpretations always have to compete with other versions, and need to be defended and propagated against other narratives. Even though master narratives are defined by their dominance over other versions, often referred to as *counter*-narratives, they rarely have a monopoly on the past.¹⁸

This means that there is always an interrelationship between different and competing versions of the national past, seeking dominance over earlier or other existing versions. In the case of the divided postwar German states, this also means that a narrative of German history had to deal with the postwar political reality in which the German nation was divided into two new German states with two competing political systems.

Due to the political division and the discrediting of German nationalism after the war and the Holocaust, East and West German perspectives on the national past not only had a problematic relationship towards earlier historiography that had dominated German historical culture before 1945. It also meant that now two ideologically competing states defined their master narratives in opposition to each other, each claiming to be the 'better' Germany.¹⁹ But also within East and West Germany a monopoly on the past was never fully reached, and in different degrees master

16 Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered past. Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, N.J.: 2003).

17 On 'memory politics' see: Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik: die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (München: 1996); Helmut Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte. Die nationalsozialistische Herrschaft in den Debatten des deutschen Bundestages* (München/Wien: 1999).

18 Jarausch and Sabrow, 'Meistererzählung', 21.

19 Ibid. For a comparative approach to the construction of postwar identity in relation to the national past in East and West Germany see: Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Malden: 1999); Jeffrey Herf, *Divided memory: the Nazi past in the two Germanys* (Cambridge MA: 1997).

narratives were always contested by counter-narratives, challenging dominant perspectives.

Master narratives can be regarded as dominant frames or models. The discursive dominance of master narratives manifests itself not only in historical overviews of national histories but also in historical accounts on specific themes, in the sense that these 'smaller' histories confirm or contest dominant versions of the national past.²⁰ Historical narratives dealing with specific themes and subjects within German history can be seen as case studies in which broader frames of (national) history are represented.

This book therefore intends to identify different competing historical perspectives on the Allied bombings, and examines them in relation to different master narratives or counter-narratives of German history. It analyzes to what extent discussions on the air war within the Federal Republic, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and post-unification Germany reflected the more general internal disputes on German historical identity, which to a strong degree dominated German public debate. Is it possible to locate distinct patterns in the ways in which East and West German historical accounts explained and described the history of the strategic bombing against Germany? And what does this tell us about the way the history of the air war was provided with meaning for the present?

While trying to locate the different perspectives on the Allied bombings I will also look for continuities and parallels. While seen from the perspective of these historians the conflicts and debates may have seemed insurmountable, it is interesting to see what parallels can be found in East and West German interpretations. Was there, in spite of all the fierce debates, a basic coherent model from which German historians have explained, narrated, and valued the history of the Allied bombings as a narrative of German victimhood? And if so, what was the function of this narrative in relation to the way the three postwar German states have tried to 'come to terms' with the Nazi past?

The first chapter of this book deals with the early popular historical accounts in the Federal Republic and analyzes how the Allied bombings were related to a broader discussion of German guilt. The second chapter concentrates on East-West debates on the bombing of Dresden and explores how authors from the GDR and the Federal Republic perceived the bombing of Dresden from the perspective of the Cold War conflict. The third chapter

20 Krijn Thijs, 'The metaphor of the master: "narrative hierarchy" in national historical cultures of Europe,' in *The contested nation. Ethnicity, class, religion and gender in national histories*, ed. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, *Writing the nation series* (Basingstoke: 2008) 60-74.

concentrates on the professionalization of the East and West German historiography of the Allied bombings since the 1970s. Taking the fierce debate between West German historian Horst Boog and East German historian Olaf Groehler as a starting point, this chapter looks at continuities of earlier narratives in professional military historiography and the interrelation between popular and academic accounts. In the final chapter I analyze the recent work of Jörg Friedrich and its impact on German memory culture and historiography. Here, I also explore the recent attempts of historians to break with earlier narratives and integrate the bombings into a history of Nazism in a different way.