

## THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

### ***Friday Film Fest Series***



## **Dresden**

**Director:** Roland Suso Richter

**Screenplay:** Stefan Kolditz

**Producer:** Nico Hofmann; Nikolaus Kraemer

**Cinematography:** Holly Fink

**Spieldauer:** 180 Min. – 2 parts (German with English subtitles)

**Cast:** Felicitas Woll (Anna Mauth); Benjamin Sadler (Alexander Wenninger); John Light (Robert Newman); Heiner Lauterbach (Karl Mauth); Katharina Meinecke (Magda Mauth); Marie Bäumer (Maria Goldberg); Kai Wiesinger (Simon Goldberg); Christian Rodska (Arthur Harris)

Undigested History ...  
Allen Krumm

*Ein Stück unbewältigter Vergangenheit* can be rendered in English as “a piece of undigested history.” Historians are said to have only two tasks: to determine what the facts are and to determine what the facts mean. Historical indigestion can flare up when there is a lack of consensus in either the objective or subjective spheres.

The campaign of area bombing conducted by the allies throughout the Second World War suffers from indigestion in the subjective sphere. No one really disputes the facts. The main argument has focused on the meaning of that awful project, and the crux of the argument is this: was area bombing a justifiable act of war, or simply a form of vengeance one would more readily expect from the Nazi leadership?

The purpose of area bombing, despite the sometimes rather tortured rationalizations of conformist historians, was to kill civilians. Churchill had once remarked that Britain would “pay our way by bombing Germany.” The debits and credits balance out as follows: while losing approximately 55,000 men and 9,000 planes, they killed somewhere between 650,000 and 800,000 Germans. Whatever accounting principle one applies (profit/loss, return on investment, etc), the endeavor was very successful. Albert Speer called the air war “... the greatest lost battle.”

Arthur Harris, head of Bomber Command, made sure the payments were made in full. In his memoirs, Speer had noted that Hitler had stated in 1940 that he did not have the slightest sympathy for British civilians. Arthur Harris seemed to share Hitler’s lack of sympathy, except his emotional deficit was at the expense of German civilians. He once commented: “It would have taken Bomber Command much longer to learn how to attack Germany if it had not been for the lessons of the German attack on Britain.” Under Harris, Bomber Command inflicted a huge strain on the German war machine.

Harris regarded the destruction wreaked by the campaign as the "shattering strokes of just retribution." Thus undistracted by doubts, he plunged into his task with complete dedication and became an innovative killer of first rank, not least because he was a steely technocrat who focused on tools and techniques. His tools were his Lancaster bombers and his air crews, along with a slightly enormous amount of help from the US Eighth Air Force.

Among the techniques implemented and refined by Bomber Command was the practice of a two stage fire bombing. A first wave of bombers would come in and drop a combination of high explosives and incendiaries. The target city would in short order become a very well lighted target, with water lines and firefighting resources and infrastructure severely damaged. As the inhabitants struggled to fight the effects of the first attack, a second wave of bombers would attack an hour or so later, dropping mostly incendiary bombs.

The combined attacks, if things went as planned, would result in a firestorm of incredible intensity, with temperatures capable of reaching 800 – 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. The heat would suck air from the ground upwards, creating a vacuum, causing the fire above the vacuum to rush forward. Many of the victims killed in such attacks were not burned but had their lungs seared. Many others died of carbon monoxide poisoning. A large percentage of the remaining victims consisted of those who were reduced to ashes.

A prime example of this technique was Operation Gomorrah, the attack on Hamburg in July of 1943. The United States Bombing Survey later euphemistically suggested that 40,000 victims might not be a high enough number for the toll of Operation Gomorrah. It is hard to know for sure, given the difficulty of counting ashes.

In February of 1945 it was Dresden's turn. Between 10 pm and 10:30 pm on the night of February 13<sup>th</sup>, 235 Lancasters dropped over 880 tons of bombs. By 11 pm

the force of 1000 Dresden firefighters could no longer control the raging fires in the Altstadt. This was the first wave. Between 1:15 am and 1:45 am on February 14<sup>th</sup> a second wave of 550 British bombers began dropping their payloads.

The conflagration eventually became so great that the bombardiers could no longer really aim at any designated quarters of the city. They were simply told to aim for "the middle of the fires." British bomber crews reported that after turning homeward, they could see the fires from 100 miles away. A little after noon on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 311 B-17s of the US Eighth Air Force dropped their bombs on Dresden. February 14<sup>th</sup> was Ash Wednesday.

In slightly over twelve hours, Dresden had been subjected to three massive attacks. Historians have debated the death toll since the end of the war. Niall Ferguson, a mainstream but not necessarily conformist historian, says that "at the very least" 35,000 people were killed in those twelve hours. Other historians say only 25,000 were killed. In any case, Kurt Vonnegut, a prisoner of war, had to help collect the dead who could be identified as human beings. He called it "corpse mining."

According to W. G. Sebald in his famous essay *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, during the war there was little condemnation of the campaign of firebombing in Germany other than from the Nazi propaganda machine. It was as if many Germans, Sebald theorized "*die riesigen Feuerbrände ... als eine gerechte Strafe, wo nicht gar als Vergeltungsakt einer höheren Instanz empfanden, mit der nicht zu rechten war.*" Perhaps this is true...or perhaps most of those subject to the attacks believed the allies had embarked on their own war of annihilation and that there was nothing to do but strive to endure by repeating the motions of life while life was available.

The campaign waged by Harris and Bomber Command has always had an ample number of apologists, both during and after the war, most of whom embrace in one form or another the sentiments of Lord Macaulay, who said: "The essence of war is violence. Moderation in war

is imbecility." He may have a point, yet such an outlook raises disturbing questions, perhaps best summarized by the British historian Max Hastings: "The cost in life, treasure, and moral superiority over the enemy tragically outstripped the results it achieved."

There were many in Britain during the war who opposed Churchill's form of payment. Chief among them was George Bell, Bishop of Chichester. He said "To bomb cities as cities, deliberately to attack civilians....is a wrong deed, whether done by the Nazis or by ourselves." Bell repeatedly condemned area bombing in written works and in speeches in the House of Lords.

The debate over area bombing will probably never end and Dresden will always symbolize Macauley's grim observation about war. Every year on February 13<sup>th</sup> people gather in that city to commemorate the firebombing. In 1992, a statue of Harris was erected in London. In 2005 the rebuilt *Frauenkirche* was dedicated. The latter event would have pleased Bishop Bell immensely.