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The Bombing of Germany 1940 - 1945

Allied air-strikes and civil mood in Germany



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In World War II approximately 410,000 German civilians were killed by Allied air raids. From July 1944 to January 1945, an average of 13,536 people were killed every month. In Hamburg alone about 49,000 civilians were killed by Allied bombing, and in Berlin about 35,000. During a single attack carried out at night from February 1st to 14th 1945, more than 20,000 civilians were killed in Dresden. But not only cities had fallen victim to the Allies' strategic bombing.

The medium-sized town of Nordhausen lost about 20% of its population in one night attack in May 1945, Pfortzheim lost 22%. Numerous cities, medium-sized towns and small towns had been the target of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the US-Air Force (USAAF), amongst them Karlsruhe, Stuttgart, Essen, Bremen, Wilhelmshaven, Emden, Duisburg, Hamburg, Saarbrücken, Düsseldorf, Osnabrück, Mainz, Lübeck, Münster, Kassel, Cologne, Schweinfurt, Jena, Darmstadt, Krefeld, Leipzig,

Dresden, Brunswick, Munich, Magdeburg, Aschersleben, Halberstadt, Chemnitz, Halle, Plauen, Dessau, Potsdam, Erfurt, but also towns like Cailsheim, Freudenstadt and Hildesheim.

Even small villages had no reason to feel safe. They were attacked too, either by accident, as substitutes for another target, or because of local industry, as in the case of the "Deutsche Gasolin AG", an oil refinery in the village of Dollbergen, situated about 30 kilometers east of Hanover, with only about 1,400 inhabitants.

In Hanover nearly 250,000 people lost their apartment in the night-attack from October 8th to 9th 1943. During that time Berlin counted approximately 400,000 homeless, and only a few months later, in March 1944, they counted almost 1.5 million. Furthermore a large number of people had been indirectly affected by Allied air-assaults. Allied bomber squadrons crossed a number of cities and towns on their way to the target, causing air-alarms and people getting up in the middle of the night, heading to the bunker or cellar. In some cases people could watch the attack of another city or town nearby. Other towns and villages served as lodging for the evacuees. At the end of war, in West Germany alone, about 4 to 5 million people were still living in evacuation lodgings.



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One is inclined to think that such a comprehensive bombing campaign was likely to have a most devastating effect on the enemy's civil population. Eventually a significant effect on industrial production could be achieved, either by destruction of the production plants or by a negative physical and psychological effect on its labour. Civil devastation would result in civil unrest and public uprising against the Nazi regime. At least that was what the Allies were hoping for.

And yet Allied assaults had no significant effect on German production until the last year of the war. German industry unexpectedly counterbalanced the destruction of a number of their plants by a further increase in productivity. All the same, German workers suffered under the bombing, but were attracted by special food and luxury rations.

Nevertheless it is inconceivable that Allied air raids did not have an effect on the population's attitude to war and the Nazi regime. In practice, aside from the diminution of industrial production, the declared goal of the Allied raids was to weaken the population's morale and to shake the very foundations of the regime. Even though the German leaders were likewise expecting public unrest and rebellion caused by air-war, it never occurred.

Jörg Friedrich claims that the emergency situation tied Volk and regime to each other. There are, however, some cogent reasons against this thesis. Although no general rejection of National Socialism occurred, latest research suggests a decrease in positive public statements in favour of the regime. But the absence of greater effects on social and public order asks for



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Cultural history perceives war as a social process, stretching over the boundaries of a pure military context. Therefore a change of research perspective is necessary, from considering the pure course of historical event, process and structure, to a concrete form of experienced, perceived reality. This section of the project "Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe (1940-1945)" will investigate how the course of war, especially the air-war, influenced the attitude and political outlook of the German civil population. For this purpose, the specific conditions of general social life and the protagonists' individual circumstances which structure war experience and that are themselves modified by war will be reconstructed. The experience of war by the civil population, the question of perception and interpretation, the patterns of reference and given options to act are important correctives to history from above.

As part of this, the individual feelings and perceptions, collective mentalities, social consciousness and "Lebenswelten" (lived-in worlds) will be investigated. Although the reports of the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) on the mood of the population are of incalculable importance for the examination of attitude in the Third Reich, one has to assume that delicate matters, such as private political opinions, were likely to be kept out of the public domain. Living under a totalitarian regime one had to be aware of the constant presence of the secret service, the Gestapo or their potential

informants, who were only too ready to denounce their fellow citizens. This is confirmed by the assessments of the SD and the observers of the Wehrmacht employed at the home-front during the last year of the war.

It may be assumed then that criticism often did not leave the immediate family, or in a process of internalization has been entrusted to a diary only. The analysis of ego-documents such as letters, diaries and private reports should therefore fill the gaps in secret service-reports. These sources give an insight into the everyday wartime experience. The close-up perspective of non-combatants directly or indirectly involved in war events can be examined. Just as the understanding of contemporary experience has been determined by existing patterns of interpretation, those patterns themselves have been shaped by established figures of personal experience. Every new experience, however, offers the possibility of checking pre-existing patterns of interpretation. The sources indicate that observations on the home front, experiences under the bombs and information on strategic bombing from all parts of Germany, influenced people's evaluation of the regime. The fact that Allied bomber squadrons succeeded in bombing German cities indicated military incompetence on behalf of the Wehrmacht. A shortage or delay in supply, caused by a destroyed infrastructure or the special additional needs of those who had lost their homes and property as a result of bombing caused doubts concerning the ability of the regime to take care of its people. The situation of crisis on the home front seemed to have put the Nazi regime to the test. So Niklas Luhmann's meaning when he expressed experience as the "ongoing reconstruction of sense-like constituted reality that is worked off by disappointments" becomes clear. The process of collecting experiences simultaneously reflects remembered past, the interpretation of the contemporary and concepts and expectations for the future.



Image obtained from private collection

Even though there are numerous existing reports on single Allied air assaults in Germany, the Allies' objectives concerning public morale, their effect or the reasons for their possible failure have never been closely examined. The project aims to fill this gap in World War historiography.