

# Dresden (1965)

*By Ulrike Meinhof*

Twenty years ago, during the night between Fat Tuesday and Ash Wednesday, February 13 and 14, 1945, the largest air attack by allied bomber squadrons ever flown in the Second World War was unleashed against a German city. It was the attack on Dresden. The city was bombed three times within fourteen hours. The first attack lasted from 10:13 pm to 10:21 pm. When the English bombers flew off, they left behind them a sea of fire that set the sky ablaze over eighty kilometers. The second attack took place between 1:30 am and 1:50 am. When the bombers departed they could see Dresden on fire from a distance of three hundred kilometers. The third attack was flown by an American squadron of bombers from 12:12 pm to 12:23 pm.

More than 200,000 people lost their lives. In his book *The Fall of Dresden*, David Irving, an Englishman, wrote that it was the first time in the history of the war that an air raid had so destroyed its target that there were not enough uninjured survivors to bury the dead.

Dresden had a population of 630,000. On the day of its destruction, over a million people were in the city (estimates range from 1.2 to 1.4 million): refugees from Silesia, Pomerania, and East Prussia, evacuees from Berlin and the Rhineland, transported children, prisoners of war, and foreign workers. Dresden was a collection point for wounded and recovering soldiers. Dresden had no armaments industry. Dresden was a city without defenses, without Flak or anti-aircraft capacities. In all of Germany, Dresden was considered a city that would never be bombed. There were rumors that the British would spare Dresden if Oxford were not attacked, or that after the war, the Allies would make Dresden the capital of Germany and would therefore not destroy it. There were other rumors too, but basically, no one could imagine that a city that was setting up new civilian and military hospitals every day, a city that was receiving hundreds of thousands of new refugees every day, refugees that were mainly women and children, would be bombed.

The only point of military interest in Dresden was a large train yard used to transfer goods and troops. But in the three attacks-the first that dropped mainly highly-explosive bombs to burst windows and break down roofs so that trusses and apartments would have that much less protection against the next load of fire bombs; as all these attacks ran according to plan and with the greatest precision-this train yard was hardly hit. A few days later, when heaps of dead bodies were stacked in the halls of the train yard, the rail lines had already been repaired. But Dresden burned for seven days and eight nights.

The English soldiers who flew the raids were not told the truth. They were told that their fleet would be attacking the head military command post of the army, located in Dresden. They were told that Dresden was an important center for supplies to the eastern front. They were told that the target was a Gestapo headquarters in the center of the city, an important munitions factory, a large poison gas plant. As early as 1943 there had been public protest in Britain against the bombing of the German civilian population. The Bishop of Chichester, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the President of the Church of Scotland had protested. They and a Labour member of Parliament were told there was no truth to claims that an order had gone out to destroy residential rather than military centers. Until the end of the war, until March 1945, the British government and its Prime Minister Winston Churchill managed to conceal the truth about the actual, deliberate, and planned attacks by British bombers on German cities. Dresden was the climax of this policy. Dresden was reduced to ruins two

years after the outcome of the Second World War had already been decided in Stalingrad. When Dresden was bombed, the Soviet troops were already at the Oder and Neisse rivers, and the Rhine had become the western front. One year later, on February 13, 1946, Sir Arthur Harris<sup>1</sup>, the commander-in-chief of the Royal Air Force who led the attack on Dresden, boarded a ship in Southampton to leave the country that was no longer willing to credit his achievements. At the same time as the German people learnt the truth about Auschwitz, the British learnt the truth about Dresden. The perpetrators were refused the honors they had been promised by those in power. Here, as well as over there.

In Dresden, the fight against Hitler degenerated into the same thing that it professed to be fighting, and had probably fought: it became barbarous and inhumane, and there can be no justification.

If we needed proof that there is no such thing as a just war, then Dresden is that proof. If we needed proof that the defensive position must always turn into an aggressive position, then Dresden is that proof. If we needed proof that the people are always abused by the governments that enter into war, and are degraded into being both the pretext and the victims of applied barbarity, then Dresden is that proof. The fact that Dresden was not mentioned at the grave of Sir Winston Churchill raises suspicions that Dresden is still to be blamed on the people who were themselves deceived. This is the same tone that the federal government uses when it refuses to annul the period of limitation set for crimes committed during the Nazi period. When the perpetrators of crimes are let off the people become the criminals.

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Arthur Harris (1892-1984) was known by the nickname Bomber, or the more dubious Butcher Harris.