Expressions of Memory in Pforzheim, a City hit by Air War

Far from ever having been a taboo, the air war has always been part of the public memory in Pforzheim and elsewhere. There is a lively and locally well-known and debated memorial culture that is living proof against the idea of a taboo of the air war in the post-war period. This chapter traces the history of this local memorial culture and the way that the depiction of the air war in literature, exhibitions, newspapers and speeches made it possible for many Germans to see themselves as victims.

‘Dürfen Täter sich als Opfer fühlen, wenn die militärischen Machtverhältnisse sich umkehren und die Angegriffenen mit furchtbarer Vergeltung zurückschlagen?’ This is the question Romain Leick asks in his epilogue to the re-edition of one of the most successful books on German history in the past years: Jörg Friedrich’s Der Brand. After the first edition in 2002, in which the author according to the epilogue had lifted the veil of forgetting and for the very first time had written ‘eine umfassende, packende, glänzend geschriebene Darstellung der Bombardierung deutscher Städte durch die Alliierten’, a host of books, articles and special editions were published which, according to what the publishing houses told us, lifted a taboo of silence on the air war.

Before attempting to give an answer to the moral question whether the perpetrators of the Second World War may be entitled to feel as victims one should ask whether they really did feel as victims. Are there any expressions of grief in the German population? Has there been a discourse on the strategic air war at all? Or has the topic really been hidden behind a veil of forgetting?

Contrary to what the media – eager to sell their products – tell us, there had been publications and a public discourse on the air war since the end of the war. Studies by social scientists as well as literary writings from the 1950s can be quoted as evidence. The Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte published a Dokumentation deutscher Kriegsschäden in 1958. Besides this there is a vast body of local history. Memorials and articles in local newspapers may be cited as further evidence. In the respective
cities the citizens held commemorations. Monuments were erected to remember the dead, streets and places were renamed.

Pforzheim, one of the most severely hit cities during the bombing campaign, laid in ruins ten days after the bombing of Dresden, has 21 sites and memorials with reference to the years 1933 to 1945. Fifteen of these, that is more than two thirds, recall the bombing of the city. Given this evidence, the supposed taboo can easily be unmasked as a ‘modern legend’. One reason why this legend has been so successful may be the fact that the discourse about the air war was restricted to private, small half-public, and local circles. Not before 1995, when Federal President Roman Herzog attended a memorial service in Dresden, was the air war a central element of federal memorial politics. One has to go down to the local level in order to ascertain the ways in which Germans talked, felt, and thought about the air war.

In the early evening hours of 23 February 1945, 368 bombers of the Royal Air Force had dropped their lethal load of almost 1,600 tons of bombs on Pforzheim. The city centre was completely destroyed and more than 17,000 people died. Pforzheim shared its fate with most German industrial cities and bigger towns. In relation to its size, however, it was second in the line of most damaged cities after Dresden. Alfred Döblin, who visited Germany as officer in the French army wrote in a letter: ‘Das Tollste ist Pforzheim; vom Erdboden verschwunden, rasiert, komplett kurz und klein geschlagen. Keine Menschenseele mehr vorhanden. Pforzheim kannst Du vom Atlas streichen.’

Indeed, the old city had vanished, but it has not ceased to exist as Döblin had stated. However, the reconstruction radically altered the city’s appearance. City planners designed an urban space to suit modern individual traffic with all the commodities for shoppers and all the disadvantages this entails for the residents. The new and modern face of the city led to feelings of alienation among the inhabitants. The local paper wrote about one of the first exhibitions of the ‘old Pforzheim before the war’: ‘Eine modern gewordene Stadt auf der Suche nach ihrer Seele.’

For months, even years after February 1945, life was marked by the consequences of the air raid: removal of the ruins and rubble, burial of human remains, shortage of housing, debates about the reconstruction etc. Nearly every measure taken by the French and then the American military government and by the city officials in the first