Thomas C. Fox

East Germany and the Bombing War

In East Germany, far more so than in the West, memories of the bombing war remained public and omnipresent. This applied especially to Dresden, the “German Hiroshima”. The essay examines East German reactions to the destruction of Dresden, both in propaganda and in literature. East German discourse allowed for a German popular response to the bombing campaign. Elements of that discourse have now entered the mainstream in post-unification Germany, where observers often mistakenly characterize them as new.

When the British Queen visited Germany in late 2004, the German newspaper with the highest circulation, the tabloid Bild, demanded she apologize for the bombing of Dresden in February 1945. That demand, which caused considerable furor in Germany and Great Britain, provides a particularly public example of the discourse of victimization current in Germany. With the term discourse of victimization I refer to the phenomenon that since 1989, Germans have been characterizing themselves with increasing frequency as victims of World War II.

The discourse of victimization has assumed various forms in Germany, and can signify variously or simultaneously Germans as victims of the Soviets (referring to the rapes and other crimes committed before and after the conquest of Germany and the resulting Stalinist dictatorship), as victims of the Poles and Czechs (referring to the mass expulsions after WW II), as victims of international conspiracies, especially Jewish ones, and as victims of the Allied air war. Some post-1989 publications, all best-sellers in Germany, that deal with those respective issues include Günter Grass’s Im Krebsgang, Norman Finkelstein’s The Holocaust Industry, and Jörg Friedrich’s Der Brand. Observers disagree as to the reasons for this phenomenon. Some attribute it to a natural progression within the “memory boom” that started in West Germany in the 1980s. After directing significant attention to victims of Germans, Germans may now, according to this line of thought, appropriately memorialize their own tragedies. Other German or international observers see a resurgence of the tu quoque tradition (in other words, you did it too), and an effort by the newly unified and independent Germany to incorporate the notion of offsetting guilt into its evolving and still elusive sense of national identity. What is significant in the marketing and reception of these works is the repetition of the term “taboo-breaking”, as though in the new Germany one can “finally” speak of that which, for whatever reason, was long suppressed.

A further striking aspect of this discussion is the historical amnesia, or perhaps mere ignorance, regarding East Germany. In the former German Democratic Republic the discourse of victimization functioned on several different and
sometimes contradictory levels. Unofficially, of course, the East Germans perceived themselves as victims of the Soviets; officially, they participated in an official discourse that portrayed Germans as victims of fascism and then of the western allies. It is that latter aspect that I wish to underscore in this essay, for the bombing war and its results were ever-present in East Germany. In the following I will first investigate the East German discussion of the bombing war as evidenced in selected examples from film, newspapers, speeches, and scholarship; I follow that with an examination of the bombing campaign as portrayed in East German literature. I propose that we take seriously the East German propaganda effort, which does not mean that we accept its claims at face value, but which also rules out the equally simplistic strategy of contemptuous dismissal. Propaganda may create a fantasy world, but if it is to be at all effective, that world must somehow connect with the fantasies of the intended audience. In its populism, “leftist” East German propaganda proved at times not so far removed from the “right-wing” discourse of the West German Stammtisch. I will argue that East German propaganda provided an outlet, a public sphere for a genuine, if coded, popular German discourse, aspects of which have now entered the German mainstream. Ignoring this part of East German culture will lead to misapprehension of contemporary Germany. Put in another way, there is a direct and logical line between East German discourse regarding the Allied bombing campaign and the demands of Bild for an apology regarding Dresden.

The Ideological Framework

Let me begin by citing three intellectuals who, to my mind, draw incorrect conclusions about contemporary Germany precisely because they omit the East German context. In his now famous Zurich lectures later published as Luftkrieg und Literatur, W. G. Sebald alleges a paucity of discussion in post-war “German” literature concerning the Allied bombing of Germany, and speaks of a taboo. When alerted by a reader to the fact that East Germany had commemorated the bombing of Dresden every year, Sebald dismissed those efforts as a propagandistic instrumentalization of suffering by the state.1 Volker Hage adds some East German titles to Sebald’s list, but does not investigate the East German context in any detail; ultimately he affirms the essential truth of Sebald’s thesis: “Alles in allem haben die Luftangriffe auf Deutschland in der deutschen Literatur bisher keine nennenswerte Rolle gespielt – erstaunlich, in der Tat … ”.2 In his essay “Air War Legacies: From Dresden to Baghdad”,