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Art and the Air Campaigns of 1940/41 and 1945: Visual Representations of the London and Dresden Bombing Raids

This essay uses the debate surrounding the responses of German authors to the Second World War bombing campaigns, in order to demonstrate the extent to which the conclusions of W.G. Sebald and others are true of painting, drawing and photography. Firstly, visual representations of the Blitz on London are discussed, as the Blitz, like the attack on Dresden, may be said to have had such an impact, that a distorted perspective has been propagated of the experience. However, there are works of art which tell a different story to the one of the unconquerable Londoner. The majority of art works from Dresden also say little, in Sebald’s terms, about the effect of the bombing on the city and the people who lived there, with many artists choosing instead to focus on the reconstruction of Dresden. The works of Graham Sutherland and Wilhelm Rudolph are highlighted, however, as examples of the search for understanding of the bombing, through art, as a way of breaking free of the obfuscation surrounding the devastation.

W.G. Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur (1999) highlighted the responses of German authors to the bombing campaigns during the Second World War; a little-researched area of German literature that has led to prolonged debate. A further dimension will be added to that discussion in this essay: the part played by the visual arts in representing not only the bombing of German cities, but also of London during the Blitz. Both the Blitz and the bombing of Dresden are shrouded in myth, arguably based, at least to some extent, on both propaganda from the British and German regimes and on a popular distortion of the experience. This has considerable implications for the interpretation of the pictures, and it is for this reason that a British and a German city have been chosen as examples.

Following the Dresden raid in February 1945, Goebbels was unsure how to pitch the propaganda about the bombing, as news of heavy civilian casualties would very likely undermine morale. Public announcements were therefore not particularly explicit.¹ One can expect, then, that artists were either careful, in order to not fall foul of the propaganda officials, or were working from hearsay evidence, which is rarely particularly reliable. Works from the Blitz are no less free of pitfalls, again due to a distorted perspective of the experience, or more specifically to the “spirit of the Blitz”, which can best be described as the now celebrated ability of the Londoner to endure the harshest suffering and still go about life as normal.

In order to establish the “truth” of the pictures from London and Dresden, this essay will concentrate on depictions which actually date from the 1940s, which would, admittedly, have been subject to or influenced by wartime propaganda. Later depictions, however, are frequently aimed at conveying contemporary political issues, particularly in regard to nuclear weapons, and therefore lose something of the actual relevance to the Second World War. Erich Kästner emphasizes the importance of understanding and learning from the events of the war in his essay, “… Und dann fuhr ich nach Dresden” (1946): “Gerade wir müßten heute wie nie vorher und wie kein anderes Volk die Wahrheit und die Lüge, den Wert und den Unfug unterscheiden können”. While discussing the way in which the German nation could move forward, the sentiment also applies to the way in which the war could be depicted by artists of both sides.

Issues of Interpretation: The ‘Spirit of the Blitz’ and the Visual Arts

The background knowledge necessary for an understanding of works of art from the war is far more extensive when considering pictures from London than those from Dresden. What may or may not be a distortion of the truth from the Dresden raid stems from the fact that it was sudden, and extremely severe, as was the case in every German city that was attacked. The Blitz on London, however, occurred over a much longer period, from September 1940 until May 1941, and this allowed time for the “spirit of the Blitz” to develop, which in turn led to the discussion of the “myth of the Blitz”, that is, whether or not Londoners really did cheerfully go about their daily lives in spite of the bombing.

Eyewitness accounts frequently tell very different stories. Jean McWilliam writes of the “memories of the friendliness and togetherness of hard times”. While this description clearly gives a rose-tinted view of life in London during the Blitz, Edna Beeson provides a far more explicit version of the unpleasantness of life at that time.

We were robbed of six years of our lives. The rationing, the black-out, the fire-watching of our places of work (many must have been killed whilst guarding the premises of absent landlords), and the deaths of friends and former colleagues in the forces are all contrary to the idiotic singing we occasionally hear of “We’ll hang out our washing on the Siegfried line, have you any dirty washing, Mother, dear”. I never heard anyone singing it.

Certainly at the beginning of the Blitz, the overall view held by Londoners of the situation was relatively dark, based on a feeling of vulnerability due to the

4 Wicks: Waiting for the All Clear. P. 208.