

'THE SKY WAS ON FIRE'

SIXTY YEARS AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF DRESDEN, QUESTIONS STILL LINGER

Dresden:

Tuesday, February 13, 1945

Frederick Taylor

New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004

\$26.95

521 pp.

Apocalypse 1945:

The Destruction of Dresden

David Irving

Focal Point Publications: London, 2005

40.00 £

320 pp.

Reviewed by Peter B. Gemma

I imported Dresden into the vocabulary of horror...people now say Dresden in the same breadth as they say Auschwitz and Hiroshima. That's my small contribution to the vernacular.

—David Irving¹

What happened to Dresden sixty years ago is relevant to warfare and foreign policy today — whether analyzing U.S. military strategy in Iraq or debating the political ramifications of Israel's occupation of Palestine — the question of what price victory is fundamental.

Just about any student of history should know something about the bombing of Dresden: the literature can range from Kurt Vonnegut's popular novel *Slaughterhouse Five* to historian F.J.P. Veale's seminal work *Advance to Barbarism*. Historian Paul Johnson summed-up the air raid as "the greatest Anglo American moral disaster of the war against Germany."² Matthias Gretzschel, author of the book *When Dresden Was Obliterated by Fire*, says that: "For Dresdeners, February 13 is what 9/11 is to the New Yorkers."³

According to essayist Mark Greif, the prevalent analysis is this: "Most historians agree that the bombing of Dresden on February 13, 1945, was one of the darkest chapters in the Allied struggle to liberate Europe from Nazism. On that day, as many as 135,000 civilians may have been killed, and a city with an irreplaceable architectural heritage was utterly destroyed — all at a point so late in the war that the justification for the carnage seemed painfully lacking."⁴

In assessing the legacy of Dresden's devastation, Frederick Taylor extends a caveat: "The final moral judgment about the city's fate... remains, as it must, to the readers." Good reason to read Taylor's book as well as Irving's revised reissue of his ground-breaking look at the same subject.

Historians and military strategists have long debated whether the 750-year-old metropolis known as "Florence on the Elbe" was a legitimate enemy target, and if the number of non-combatant casualties resulting from the attack can be justified. The city of some 650,000 inhabitants (Dresden's Jewish population was deported to work camps about a year before the infamous Allied raid) served as a magnet for war refugees as well as a holding pen for hundreds of POWs.

Antony Beevor, author of *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945*, defends the decimation of Dresden because the Nazis "literally obliterated whole cities and that certainly preceded what the British did," while Jörg Friedrich, author of *The Fire: Germany under Bombardment 1940-45*, maintains that Dresden "appeared to me to be a just answer to the crimes of the Third Reich, but I've since changed my mind. Until the Second World War there was a common consensus that the massacre of civilian populations was illegal."⁵ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once lamented:

[H]ow shall we name those who, with victory fully in hand, dispatched a two-day wave of fighter bombers to reduce to ashes beautiful Dresden, a civilian city teeming with refugees?⁶

Frederick Taylor writes that the bombing raid was necessary because Dresden was a "vital site of manufacturing, communications and services of great importance to [Germany's] war effort." On the other hand, David Irving asserts, "At the time of the air attack in 1945, the city's military significance was minimal."

This much is certain: from 10 p.m. February 13, 1945 (ironically, Ash Wednesday) until about noon the next day, 1,200 British and American bombers dropped 4,500 tons of explosives and incendiary bombs on Dresden, creating a horrific fire storm with the power of a tornado — strong enough to suck in victims off the street and into its hellfire. Tens of thousands of civilians were incinerated in just fourteen hours and ten minutes. Taylor remarks, "Most German cities died a death of a thousand cuts, only a handful suffered swift execution."

Taylor devotes five extraordinary chapters of his book to describe the attack, mixing dramatic first-person anecdotes of the bombers with those of the bombed: A British airman recalls "we had no qualms about the raid"; a Canadian veteran recalls "The sky lit-up [from] the horrendous inferno on the ground.... There [was] no jubilation from the crew. Not even a slight hurrah." One Dresden survivor states: "I went outside and the sky was on fire."

The exclusive color photographs David Irving reproduces in his book provide the most graphic portrayal of what happened. "The horses blink and look away" is a caption he attaches to some grim photos of carts used to collect the dead. Each searing picture is worth a thousand words of shock and awe.

On February 13, 1945, the Third Reich was in its death throes (seventy-two hours earlier, at Yalta, the Allies decided to dismember postwar Germany; eighty-four days later, the Nazis unconditionally surrendered). Yet Taylor offers new findings indicating Dresden still housed "the cutting edge apparatus of modern war 1940s style," particularly as a manufacturer of radar components, guidance equipment, and even gas masks. Taylor believes that Dresden, as a transportation and communications center, enhanced Hitler's end-game resistance – placing it rightfully in the crosshairs of the Allies. Irving concedes that "Dresden had become a key point in the German postal and telegraph system, and there is little doubt that the obliteration of the postal installations in the city would hamper communications with the eastern front," but he cautions, "At the time of the attack, however, the city's strategic significance was less than marginal...."

Taylor and Irving both regard Winston Churchill as chief protagonist in Dresden's drama. Irving is forthright: "Churchill took a robust view of the expendability of German non-combatants." Taylor waffles about the culpability of Britain's prime minister (there was "a mix of motives") for terror bombing Dresden and other German cities – "The material so far available is open to differing interpretations and is in any case circumstantial."

Historian Ralph Raico shares Irving's take on Sir Winston in writing succinctly about a particular incident that Taylor and Irving cover in detail:

The British Prime Minister "was shaken by the outcry that followed [the raid]... He sent a memorandum to the Chiefs of Staff: '... the destruction of Dresden remains a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing....' The military chiefs saw through Churchill's contemptible ploy. Realizing they were being set up, they refused to accept the memorandum. After the war, Churchill casually disclaimed any knowledge of the Dresden bombing, saying 'I thought the Americans did it.'"⁷

How many died in the destruction of Dresden? Reich propaganda minister Josef Goebbels, in what Taylor brands his "last and grimmest creation," furiously spewed out civilian death estimates of 250,000, a figure which curiously survived the test of time. Later, for its own peculiar purposes, communist East Germany accused the Western Allies of killing 320,000 noncombatants.

In his book *Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinderbox*, Alexander McKee states that casualties could be estimated as high as "70,000 without much fear of exaggeration."⁸ Taylor says "The fairest estimate" of the victims is "between twenty-five thousand and forty thousand," but Irving counters with a count of "Sixty thousand or more; perhaps a hundred thousand – certainly the largest single air raid massacre of the War in Europe."

Both the Irving and Taylor books should be read as a set; there is indeed complementary overlap — confirmation of controversial facts and observations — but very sharp differences on some crucial details as well. Taylor claims that Irving's work, "with its dramatic casualty estimates, conditioned the English speaking world's view of the city's destruction for an entire generation." Although Taylor calls *Apocalypse 1945* "vividly told, well written, and based on what seemed like exhaustive, thoroughly checked research," he spends more than a dozen pages intensely scrutinizing and debunking Irving's sources, conclusions, and even his motivations.

David Irving, journaling in his website's diary (www.fpp.co.uk/ online, February 11, 2004), had this reaction to the publication of Taylor's book:

Frederick Taylor sends me a copy of his book *Dresden....* I riffle through the book's pages, and write him: 'Thank you for showing me the book. You have in fact lifted a very great deal of material from my book...which was first published forty-two years ago.... The route maps in the front are from my book, the damage map is based on it, the transcripts of the radio traffic are from my book, etc., etc.... It would therefore have been courteous to include my name and pioneering work on this subject in the Acknowledgments; no doubt you had reasons not to. They cannot have been very honorable ones. It is not the way that I do things, I am glad to say.'

Sparks still fly over Dresden sixty years after its firebombing — as well they should.

*Peter B. Gemma was awarded the George Washington Honors Medal for Individual Achievement from the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge for "the ability to communicate patriotic ideas and ideals." His articles have appeared in **USA Today**, **Military History**, **Human Events**, and the **New American**.*

ENDNOTES

1. D.D. Guttenplan, *The Holocaust on Trial* (New York W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 43.
2. Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: from the Twenties to the Nineties* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 404.
3. "Neo-Nazis Vow to Stage Anti-British Protests on 60th Anniversary of Dresden Raids," *London Sunday Telegraph*, February 6, 2005.
4. "Devil in the Details," *The American Prospect*, December 6, 1999.
5. "Germans Call Churchill a War Criminal," *Daily Telegraph*, November 19, 2002.
6. "The March of the Hypocrites," *London Times*, August 21, 1997.
7. "Rethinking Churchill," *The Costs of War: America's Pyrrhic Victories*, John V. Denison, editor (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. 287.
8. Alexander McKee, *Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinderbox* (London: Souvenir Press, 1982), as quoted in Taylor, *Dresden*, p. 446.