

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Bd. 36

2014

Nr. 1

Copyright

Das Digitalisat wird Ihnen von perspectivia.net, der Online-Publikationsplattform der Max Weber Stiftung – Stiftung Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland, zur Verfügung gestellt. Bitte beachten Sie, dass das Digitalisat urheberrechtlich geschützt ist. Erlaubt ist aber das Lesen, das Ausdrucken des Textes, das Herunterladen, das Speichern der Daten auf einem eigenen Datenträger soweit die vorgenannten Handlungen ausschließlich zu privaten und nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken erfolgen. Eine darüber hinausgehende unerlaubte Verwendung, Reproduktion oder Weitergabe einzelner Inhalte oder Bilder können sowohl zivil- als auch strafrechtlich verfolgt werden.

ANNE FUCHS, *After the Dresden Bombing: Pathways of Memory, 1945 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xiii + 275 pp. ISBN 978 0 230 28581 1. £55.00

This is not the first book about the bombing of Dresden in the Second World War. Nor is it the first study of the memorial culture that this cataclysmic event has spawned. But *After the Dresden Bombing* is a perceptive monograph that interweaves cultural history with literary criticism in order to analyse with great sensitivity the ways in which the destruction of the city on 13–14 February 1945 has found expression in photography, architecture, fiction, and film from the end of the war to the present. Anne Fuchs is Professor of German at the University of Warwick, and has published widely on the contested memory of the Second World War in contemporary Germany. Her familiarity with the general terrain and current trends in literary and cultural theory shows up strongly in the book. Fuchs's objectives are twofold. At one level, she is interested in the process by which the destruction of a German city at the end of the Second World War—one among dozens of others, in a country that for years had unleashed unprecedented violence upon the world—became a powerful symbol of the destructiveness of war in general, locally, nationally, and internationally. At another level, her aims are far broader: 'Dresden' is treated as a case study for what the author claims may well be a 'new mode of doing cultural history'.

To this end, Fuchs develops the twin concepts of 'impact event' and 'impact narrative'. 'Impact events' are defined as 'historical occurrences that are perceived to spectacularly shatter the material and symbolic worlds we inhabit' (p. 10). Because of their extreme violence, they defy easy integration into received cultural patterns and idioms. As Fuchs makes clear, however, 'impact events depend on impact narratives for their power to unfold' (p. 11), narratives which, just like myths, have the ability to adapt to changing circumstances while at the same time remaining stable at the level of their most basic meanings.

The study is organized in seven chapters, which form four thematic blocks, concerned with the visual, architecture, fiction, and film. Most attention is paid to the decade or so following the end of the war, when the memorial culture took shape, and the two decades after German unification in 1990, when Dresden managed to reinvent

itself as a city defined by both destruction and architectural splendour. The chapters on 'literary voices' in particular, however, also offer observations on developments in the 1960s and 1970s. As Fuchs demonstrates, it was above all writer Kurt Vonnegut's 'Vietnamization' of the bombing in his counter-cultural novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), which helped to lift 'Dresden' out of a local context and turn it into a global icon.

For a theoretical framework that seeks to link narratives to events, Fuchs passes over immediate responses to the air raids of 13–14 February 1945 surprisingly lightly. She claims that the 'contemporary target audience' was taken by surprise by the bombing, and that the attack was perceived by the 'popular imagination' as an 'icon of gratuitous and excessive violence' (p. 6). Here, Fuchs may well be right, but the problem is that we cannot know unless we engage seriously with contemporary voices and develop some kind of typology. 'Popular imagination' and 'contemporary target audience', at any rate, are far too general terms to carry much explanatory power. Perhaps immediate responses were more varied than the idea of an impact event as 'excessive rupture' allows? (p. 13) For a committed National Socialist, for example, it is well possible that the world was not turned upside down by the bombing of Dresden, but rather that the event served to strengthen a view of the world which held that 'International Jewry' was bent on a war of annihilation against the German people as a whole.

These concerns notwithstanding, I think the concept is heuristically useful. It allows for the author to explore continuity alongside change in the memorial culture of the Dresden bombing. The widespread lament over the destruction of the city's architectural heritage, for example, could draw on a readily available 'template' that had long represented Dresden as a peaceful city of culture and architectural splendour that rivalled Florence in Italy (p. 5). At the same time, the concept puts emphasis on the very inadequacy of these templates in giving expression to events whose excessive nature in many ways defied the imagination (p. 13). Finally, the approach fully acknowledges that different genres tend to follow 'pathways' of their own, that is, that it will not do to treat the inscription on a monument as if it was an academic essay on cause and effect. In adopting the framework of 'impact event' and 'impact narrative', Fuchs manages to re-centre the scholarly debate on the memory of the Dresden bombing

Book Reviews

from the 'presentist' concern with politics that has come to dominate much of the current literature. This is an important achievement.

Yet, at the same time, the study betrays the limits of an approach that is very well-versed in the latest (and not so latest) theory, be this collective memory, trauma theory, the spatial turn, or reception theory, but appears to be rather dismissive of what the author calls 'traditional historical research' (p. xiii). While Fuchs is right to point out that military history as traditionally understood cannot account for the 'global iconicity' that the bombing of Dresden has gained in the 'post-war imagination', her own 'cultural-historical study' surely presents its own problems. It seems to me that Fuchs tends to analyse cultural artefacts without engaging closely enough, on the basis of archival evidence, with the circumstances in which they were produced, by whom and to what purpose. This is quite apart from the fact that there does exist, Fuchs' claim notwithstanding, a sizeable body of historical work not just on the conduct of the air war, but about the post-war memorialization as well.¹

To give two examples: early on in her study, Fuchs introduces a statement by Gerhart Hauptmann as a 'first version of the Dresden impact narrative'. In it, the writer famously claimed that 'those who have forgotten how to weep will learn it again on the annihilation of Dresden'. While the text is quoted in full and interpreted as the expression of a 'double movement of expression and erasure', that is, as an attempt to put into words an experience that is, in fact, beyond verbalization, the specific circumstances in which it was produced and first used are referred to only in passing. We learn that Hauptmann's statement was broadcast on German radio on 29 March 1945 and that, despite its 'exploitation' for German propaganda, the text remained popular after the defeat of Nazi Germany, and has, indeed, continued to be so until the present day (p. 14).

But this begs as many questions as it answers. After all, the text was broadcast (and apparently written) six weeks after the bombing of Dresden, in circumstances that, arguably, were rather different from mid February. By late March, the Western Allies were crossing the Rhine while, for a brief interlude, it appeared as if the advance of

¹ See e.g. the important study of Hamburg by Malte Thießen, *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis: Hamburgs Gedenken an Luftkrieg und Kriegsende 1943 bis 2005* (Munich, 2007). See also Jörg Arnold, Dietmar Süß, and Malte Thießen (eds.), *Luftkrieg: Erinnerungen in Deutschland und Europa* (Göttingen, 2009).

the Red Army on the Eastern front had been slowed down. Why did Hauptmann make his voice heard at this point in time? Who prompted him? Did he need to be prompted? Furthermore, Fuchs gives only one version of the text, although there were, in fact, at least two. As an annotation in volume 11 of Hauptmann's Collected Works makes clear, the printed version, which was published in early April in three German newspapers, was abridged in such a way as to obfuscate Hauptmann's important caveat that there were 'good souls in England and America' who felt just as deeply about the destruction of the 'Florence on the river Elbe' as did the old writer himself.²

The same tension between theoretically informed analysis and a certain empirical looseness is evident in Fuchs's discussion of the second defining artefact of the Dresden bombing, Richard Peter's photo book, *Eine Kamera klagt an*, which contained, among other well-known photographs, the famous panoramic view of the devastated city with the allegorical figure of *Bonitas* in the foreground. I agree with Fuchs's assessment that the book transcends the Cold War context in which it was produced and that the central images defy the Socialist teleology into whose service the photographer and/or the publisher sought to press them. I also find the suggestion stimulating that the book's power derives in large part from an 'alliance between the beautiful and the melancholic', which draws on modes of representation and ways of seeing that ultimately hark back to early nineteenth-century Romanticism.

Yet, at the same time, the 'traditional' historian feels some unease when, in the section that opens the discussion of Peter's book, two factual statements are open to question. Fuchs writes: 'In 1949 . . . Richard Peter published . . . *Eine Kamera klagt an* with a print-run of 50,000 copies which quickly sold out' (p. 32). In fact, the book was not published in 1949, but in 1950, in the context of the first elections to the People's Chamber (*Volkskammer*) in the GDR, which were held on 15 October on the basis of a single list of candidates.³ Nor did the initial print-run of 50,000 copies sell out 'quickly', as Fuchs claims.

² Gerhart Hauptmann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Hans-Egon Hass, continued by Martin Machatzke, vol. xi: *Nachgelassene Werke / Fragmente* (Munich, 1974), 1205–6.

³ Sylvia Ziegner, 'Der Bildband *Dresden – eine Kamera klagt an* von Richard Peter senior: Teil der Erinnerungskultur Dresdens' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Marburg, 2010), 73–87.

Book Reviews

Indeed, in January 1952, one year after publication, the publisher decided to reduce the retail price from DM 8.50 to DM 6.50, an indication, perhaps, that actual sales had not met the high expectations, or alternatively, of a change of course in the memory politics of the SED state.⁴ Does this matter? I think it does, both with regard to our understanding of the cultural reverberations of the Dresden bombing and to our ideas about 'doing cultural history'. It seems to suggest that in the timing as well as the marketing of *Eine Kamera klagt an*, politics loomed even larger than has commonly been assumed.

As *After the Dresden Bombing* demonstrates, a theoretically informed approach can yield rich insights into the workings of the cultural memory of the bombing and restore complexity to a subject that too often has been treated in reductionist terms, as a mere expression of Cold War antagonisms or of exculpatory tendencies. At the same time, there is a danger of prioritizing theory over empirical research when, in fact, both are needed in order to burst open new 'pathways' in the study of cultural memory.

⁴ Ibid. 149.

JÖRG ARNOLD is Lecturer in Contemporary History at the University of Nottingham. In 2011/12 he spent six months at the GHIL as a Post-Doctoral Fellow. He is the author of *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory: The Legacy of Strategic Bombing in Germany* (2011) and, with Dietmar Süß and Malte Thießen, has edited *Luftkrieg: Erinnerungen in Deutschland und Europa* (2009).