

Schnatz, Helmut: *Tiefflieger ueber Dresden? Legenden und Wirklichkeit (Strafing Planes over Dresden? Legends and Truth)*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag Köln 2000. ISBN: 3-412-13699-9; 204 + X pages

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One of the most controversial issues when discussing the role of airpower during the Second World War is that of strategic bombing, or more exactly: that of the area bombing campaign against centres of population. Not only from the strictly military point of view, but especially from the moral and legal perspective, these attacks are often disputed as useless and barbaric. The whole debate is tightly connected with the names of some cities, serving as symbols for the devastating effects of area bombings against the civilian population: As Hiroshima stands for the catastrophe initiated by the drop of the atomic bomb, Guernica, Coventry and - most of all - Dresden are the names used to remind us of the fact that in our contemporary highly-mechanized warfare it is the civilian population which has to take the largest share in the suffering.

Strangely enough, it is less than clear why especially the bombing of Dresden, which was executed by bombers of the RAF Bomber Command during the night of 13th/14th of February, 1945, and the 8th USAAF Flying Fortresses on February 14th, has developed such a power as a symbol until today. But it is a fact that even in recent books Dresden is mentioned more often than the devastating fire raid on Tokyo which claimed more than twice as much casualties. A reason for this strange situation might be that the raid on Dresden is connected with some tough legends even today. One of these legends repeated over and over again is that the attacking planes deliberately machine-gunned the people fleeing from the firestorm onto the spacious areas along the Elbe river banks. It was claimed that British bombers descended to low level after dropping their bombs in order to use their defensive gun armament against the inhabitants of Dresden. And worse still, after the American bombers had

turned away from their destructive daytime attack their escort fighters allegedly dived to tree-top height and persistently strafed the shocked and panicked people crowding the Elbe banks. Up to 10,000 people - so it was and still is claimed - have been killed that way.

On each anniversary of the Dresden bombing dozens of letters reach the offices of German newspapers, describing what their authors claim to have personally witnessed: The „Mustangs“ made several firing passes, spreading bloodshed and destruction among the civilians, not sparing wounded, nurses, children, not even POWs of their own nationality, which by coincidence had been in the town. These authors are absolutely convinced about the authenticity of their written memories. This event is repeatedly described as the point where the air war against civilians reached a new and most ruthless quality; the official Allied claim that not the people, but their homes are the bombing target, could not be upheld any longer, because it was clear that the civilians themselves were targeted.

So may we consider something as historical truth if it is repeated over and over again? When Goetz Bergander, himself a survivor of the attacks on Dresden, published his book on the attacks in 1977¹, he used oral history sources only as far as they could be confirmed by documental proof in the archives. At that point he found out that not a single document of British or American origin supported the stories about low-level strafing attacks in Dresden. When he wrote this, he was at once fiercely attacked by many people in Germany and even some politicians, accusing him of being ignorant to „facts“. In subsequent editions Bergander elaborated his research and claimed that in fact the infamous attacks had never taken place. Instead he located low-level attacks on that day at least one hundred kilometres away from Dresden. But the result of Bergander's writing was nil, as the same stories about the machine-gunning „Mustangs“ circulated again, being quoted in TV shows and newspaper articles.

Now Helmut Schnatz, who as a boy witnessed the bombing campaign against German cities in Koblenz, tries to shed light on

¹ Dresden im Luftkrieg. Vorgeschichte - Zerstörung - Folgen, 3rd ed. 1998, Flechsig Würzburg.

the apparent contradictions between Bergander's research and the many eyewitness accounts subjecting every source to an in-depth analysis and critical examination. His book starts with a chronology of written treatments of the low-level attacks in the literature, and, most interestingly, he finds out that the German propaganda did not use these attacks, which by themselves would have proven formidable propaganda ammunition against the „inhuman and ruthless Anglo-American way of warfare“. The first stories about strafing attacks - sometimes claimed to have taken place at night, sometimes at daylight - appeared during the Fifties. But while most of these accounts were published in trivial books and magazines, it has to be credited to the British historian David Irving to supply the story with a scientific outfit. Seemingly based on British and American documents he gave a detailed account on the American strafing attacks, quietly ignoring the often-published rumour of British low-level attacks at night, well aware of their technical impossibility. Nearly at once Irving's writings were accepted as scientifically proved facts and adopted in nearly all later publications, including his figure of 135,000 bombing victims. Moreover, its scientific appearance made it a seemingly valid base for all later claims about the authenticity of the low-level attacks. And in spite of his later reputation as a historian with a unique view of documental proof, nobody - except the above-mentioned Bergander - questioned Irving's statements until today.

Schnatz continues with an in-depth description of the tactics of low-level attacks and the technology of the planes and their armament, transferring this information onto the particular conditions at Dresden during and shortly after the massive bombing raids. He concludes that any low-level strafing attack during the night bombings would have meant to fly directly into the firestorm (one has to consider that during the Tokyo raid the massive B-29 bombers had serious problems to keep their course in 6,000 ft height due to the turbulences caused by the firestorm), through smoke and temperatures hot enough to melt parts of the plane, with virtually no sight on any obstacles, let alone individual people in the street. Therefore Schnatz states that night-

time strafing attacks in Dresden were technically impossible. The situation was somewhat different the next day, since the firestorm had calmed down. But here also technical reasons made strafing attacks in the allegedly observed scale impossible: smoke, strong winds, limited manoeuvring space and above all the critical fuel situation over a target so far in Germany's east.

But in spite of the technical implications, Schnatz also painstakingly analysed all documents available and found that there is no proof whatever supporting the low-level attack claims. There exists no order and no mission report indicating that strafing attacks over Dresden had taken place, and - the most important proof for his claim - even some recently discovered German official documents recording all attacks in the area confirmed that all enemy planes had left the Dresden area when the Fortresses had turned homeward. So no fighters descended for subsequent strafing attacks, especially not for the hours necessary to kill those 10,000 victims insisted on in some articles. But instead Schnatz can prove that the low-level attacks on that day indeed occurred far more westward from the town. And he confirms Bergander's earlier discovery that the one squadron which was cited by Irving with allegedly documentary proof as being responsible for the fiercest strafing attacks in Dresden had in fact missed its target altogether and mistakenly attacked Prague.

So if there were no low-level attacks against Dresden on these days, what did the people see? Schnatz offers some explanations: Shortly before the nightly bombing took place some Mosquito pathfinders flew over Dresden at low height, they might have been the low-level attackers observed. But strafing would have been an impossibility for them, since they were all unarmed bomber versions. And the next day there was some defence action by German fighters, several of them were shot down around Dresden. It is rather logical to assume that at least one of them tried to escape the Mustangs by flying at low level over the Elbe banks in eastward direction, trying to let the American pilots reach a critical fuel status. American planes chasing a German one while firing on it, this could have been

the alleged attackers. And the acoustic impression of low flying planes might have been created by the changing engine sound of the planes turning and suddenly lightened from their bomb burden.

Finally, Schnatz reaches the most difficult and challenging part of his book: the explanation of the people's insistence of having seen the impossible. While maintaining the respect that the survivors of the catastrophe deserve, he points out all those inconsistencies and contradictions in their observations, and, comparing them to similar ones made at other places and other times, he reaches the result that those people must have been massively traumatized by the shocking and devastating events around them. The inability to overcome the mental shock together with the things heard and read of, leads to the strong believe to have seen something that never happened. This psychological phenomenon is well known and not uncommon with people subjected to massive emotional and physical stress, and Schnatz presents examples for other legends from the air war, which are similarly persistent and upheld even today.

When the reviewer held a lecture about the raid on Dresden and its legal implications a year ago he was accused very emotionally of denying the strafing attacks - in spite of the facts he brought forward. „My grandmother has observed these attacks. Do you call her a liar?“, this was but one of the accusations against him. Therefore he is pessimistic that the detailed and well researched book by Helmut Schnatz will change the public opinion shaped by authors like David Irving for so long. But he hopes that at least the scientific literature will stop using wrong sources without any examination and that a little bit of the truth may be added to a dark chapter.

Marcus Hanke über Schnatz, Helmut: *Tiefflieger ueber Dresden? Legenden und Wirklichkeit (Strafing Planes over Dresden? Legends and Truth)*. Köln 2000, in: H-Soz-Kult 20.05.2001.