Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945

by Frederick Taylor
Reviewed by Paul S. Mardus

Since the end of the Second World War, the Allied bombing of the city of Dresden has been perceived as a black spot on the otherwise generally noble Anglo-American war effort. Indeed, the destruction of this highly cultured city, along with thousands of its inhabitants, is approached with scorn in many publications documenting the attack. However, when one examines these publications, two disconcerting features are noted. First, the most popular literary work regarding the bombing of Dresden is, in fact, a novel – namely Kurt Vonnegut’s sharply critical, psychedelic masterpiece, Slaughterhouse-Five. Although Vonnegut’s novel graphically portrays the horror of the event, it is largely a work of fiction. Second, related publications that were widely propagated from behind the Iron Curtain during the Soviet domination of East Germany became available in large numbers in the West. However, the Soviets have been accused of grossly exaggerating the facts regarding the bombing in an attempt to smear the credentials of their Cold War enemies. Indeed, more than 60 years after the firebombing, the historian is hard-pressed to find new information that is not built upon the shoulders of myth or fiction. Fortunately, a fresh approach is found in Frederick Taylor’s Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945, a book that not only contains facts, interviews and documents rarely cited in preceding accounts, but also uses this information to construct a hypothesis that runs counter to previously-held theories regarding both the city and the event. In Dresden, Taylor maintains that this historic German city was not the innocent, purely-china-manufacturing metropolis as it has been extensively portrayed. Rather, it was a major German industrial and military centre and an enthusiastic participant in the Nazi war effort.

Frederick Taylor is highly familiar with the topic of National Socialism in Germany, having specialized in the history of the extreme right of German politics during his studies at Oxford University. He is also responsible for the translation of The Goebbels Diaries, 1939-1941 from German to English. In Dresden, his most recent publication, Taylor combines his knowledge of Nazism with extensive research of primary historical records concerning the city itself. He reveals that Dresden was one of Hitler’s most valued military and industrial centres, and home to dozens of weapons and munitions factories. As well, Taylor cites Dresden city records – made more readily available since the fall of the Berlin Wall – that estimate the total number of human dead from the series of raids as being between 25,000 and 40,000, as opposed to figures in excess of 100,000, as suggested by the Nazi Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels and subsequently perpetuated by Soviet leaders, amongst others.

While Dresden provides a highly detailed and fresh perspective on the city’s most tragic night, it should be noted that this book in no way implies that Dresden and its citizens ‘deserved’ to be annihilated. Rather, Taylor’s aim is to view the bombings from the perspective of Allied generals and air marshals, and to show why they had chosen Dresden to face the wrath of more than 1100 British and American heavy bombers dropping all more than 4500 tons of bombs and incendiary devices on the city and environs. Taylor by no means brushes off the resulting civilian casualties as ‘collateral damage.’ However, he does point out that both Germany and the Allies widely engaged in the targeting of highly populated civilian centres before February 1945, and that such high civilian casualties were simply another repulsive feature of the horrific nature of total war. Far from being dismissive of the human cost of the event, Taylor dedicates large portions of Dresden to those who had witnessed the event from...
The allied bombing of Dresden created a massive fire that swept the city center, killing thousands of people and destroying its medieval heart. Debate began almost immediately: Was the destruction of this seemingly civilian city necessary militarily, or was it, some asked, equivalent to a war crime? Not just another in an endless parade of books on Dresden, Taylor's account may go a long way toward putting such questions to rest. It opens with the start, by British bombers, of the nighttime attack, and immediately turns to the past, meandering through several centuries of Dresden history.

While some historians are not necessarily above writing countering myths as a means of merely gaining attention, Taylor's thoroughly researched Dresden clearly proves its worth amongst the large body of literature addressing the bombing. Indeed, with three lengthy appendices and more than 450 meticulous endnotes, Dresden is perhaps best used as an academic counterweight against the mythical and fictional accounts. While one might argue that the absolute truth regarding the notorious attack and its aftermath can never be wholly known, Taylor's book nonetheless takes the reader extraordinarily close to the heart of a firestorm which, after more than 60 years, continues to burn in infamy.

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