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Morality, the Bomb and Far-Right Empathy for the Refugee

A.K.M. Skarpelis

The Second World War is a frequent site for historical revisionism. In the case of the traumatic Dresden aerial bombings of 13–15 February 1945, the German far-right has been trying to rehabilitate the aggressor nation in a twisted variation on #metoo, in which the suffering of German victims is invoked to assert the moral equivalence of all war victims, all the while casting aside questions of agency and their governments’ war responsibility. Somewhat surprisingly, since 2000 the group managed to mobilise a highly cosmopolitan alliance around a rhetoric of compassion for civilians harmed in armed conflicts. In this opportunistic coat-tailing on the purportedly morally unproblematic memorialisation of innocent civilians, a disconcerting rhetorical overlap between the left and the far-right emerged around the trope of the refugee-victim.

Here, I draw on contemporary memorialisations of the Dresden bombings as one instance of this attempted reclaiming of war casualties and compare it to the fate of the victims of the Japanese atomic bombings. When the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the city’s residents occupied a similar moral position to that of victims in other aerial bombings. However, Hiroshima has since the bombing become an international symbol for peace and the abolition of nuclear weapons. In addition to this symbolic transition for the city itself, those who perished in the bombings were anointed as morally innocent, while the casualties of the Dresden bombings did not. Hiroshima’s transformation from perpetrator-nation city to symbol of world peace is extraordinary, and one that Dresden could not emulate in spite of continued rehabilitation attempts.

The chapter sets aside the question of the bombings’ moral permissibility. Drawing on social anthropology and practical ethics, I reconstruct successes and failures in the construction of moral innocence of the casualty and argue that while both populations had similar moral status prior to and during the bombings, their subsequent divergence can be explained through a combination of geopolitical interests and changing interpretations of the character and impact of the bombings. As collective
memory is built around moral judgement, contesting the moral status of casualties becomes one of the primary levers in political projects of commemoration.

Rehabilitation, Repetition and Redemption

Historically, the aerial bombings of the Second World War in Germany and Japan have been morally evaluated in distinct ways. While the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings are globally condemned, and their cities have become symbols of world peace, Hamburg and Dresden received a less empathetic response. The transition for Hiroshima happened around the time that the city forged a successful civil society alliance with Auschwitz in the 1960s, as parts of its peace movement. Through the efforts of the Hiroshima-Auschwitz committee that organised the 1963 Hiroshima-Auschwitz Peace March, Hiroshima found common moral ground with Auschwitz around the figure of the survivor-witness and in calls for peace around the slogan of ‘Never Again’. That the survivor emerged as spectator and eye-witness to a violent incident of unspeakable horrors and suffered for decades after the actual event would become a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for collectively recalling the event as traumatic and marking it as a symbol for peace and reconciliation. Hiroshima more than Nagasaki would achieve world historical rehabilitation and become seen as one of the casualties of the Second World War, a status that Dresden the city actively solicited but was never granted in spite of having ample survivor-witnesses itself.

While Dresden in its various guises—as memory site in the German Democratic Republic, as a city government post-reunification, as a collective of civil society and government organisations intent on rehabilitating the city’s reputation—made similar moves in the hopes of achieving a victim status in third place, after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, attempts at situating its war dead among the canon of other aerial bombing victims failed and it was only in the 1990s, and after the end of the Cold War, that the Dresden dead were recognised as civilian victims and the aerial bombardment was widely judged to be morally problematic. Significantly, the argument made in favour of recognising Dresden as a victim city was that tens of thousands of the civilians who perished had been displaced ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe as well as forced labourers. This question of who precisely made up the dead was meaningful, as it was their moral status that would shape the assessment of the morality of the aerial bombing (or its condemnation).

Part of the process of rehabilitating a perpetrator nation’s bombed city’s status is turning the bombing into a grievable event in which the dead can be mourned, all without decimating the nation’s war guilt. Cultural historian Anne Fuchs referred to Dresden as an ‘impact event’, characterised by excessive ruptures that are non-representable on account
of the sheer degree of horrors that characterise them. Despite their non-representability, these events call forth ever-new narratives ‘from the perspective of the present’.6 Taken together, this irrepresentability and continuous attempts at capturing the event bring about a variable and dissonant tapestry of collective memory. If endless repetition is a constituent fact of impact events, the fact of repetition itself ceases to be a point of significance: What becomes sociologically interesting instead are the event’s specific re-interpretations and re-emploments, that is to say, the arranging of historical events into a narrative with plot.

Robin Wagner-Pacifici describes events as ‘restless by nature as historical subjects attempt alternately to bind them or set them free’ and suggests the interpretive framework of political semiosis to help understand the ‘machinery of history-in-the-making’7 in which events and historical subject identities are formed. Historians share this interest in untangling the event by tracing processes of collective memory construction: Pierre Nora offered the concept of memory site (lieu de mémoire) to describe an ‘entity (…) that has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community’.8 Scrutinising these memory sites means untangling the practices of generating history, means tracing what of the historical record gets kept and what gets discarded, in short: understanding the ‘structuring of forgetfulness’.9 In Dresden, changing commemorations of the bombing actively contribute to the rewriting of history against a backdrop of relative stability in how the Holocaust specifically, and the Second World War more generally, is read as a unique event. It is in this tension between continuous commemorative metamorphosis and overall interpretive stability that the moral status of aerial bombing victims is assembled. In a game of historical revisionism, the German far-right has been leveraging the language of enlightened cosmopolitanism and invoked a shared global humanity in their reactionary denial of war guilt.

An Extraordinary, Ordinary Bombing

For all intents and purposes, the bombing of Dresden employed techniques standard for Second World War aerial bombing. However, a confluence of factors—the bombing’s extraordinary effectiveness, its timing and the demographic composition of its victims—made the bombing anything but ordinary. If mid-twentieth-century aerial bombing was a notoriously blunt tool incapable of much precision, the Dresden bombing was unexpectedly lethal because of favourable weather conditions and error-free collaboration between Blind Illuminator aircraft, Mosquitos, Master Bomber and the Lancaster, the different airplanes tasked with marking the area for bomb drop and then discharging their lethal cargo.10 What made aerial bombings morally more controversial than other forms of warfare was that they blurred the boundary between soldier and civilian; combined with the technology’s historical limitations,
this meant the tacit acceptance of large numbers of civilian casualties. While aerial bombings were not legally considered a war crime, the German bombing of Guernica in Spain had drawn transnational public ire about the unrepentant killing of civilians, seen as a violation of the just war norm of non-combatant immunity.

By February 1945, it appeared certain that Germany would lose the war; even Auschwitz had been liberated in January 1945 by Soviet forces. To bomb a city so close to almost certain defeat struck contemporary commentators as morally reprehensible. Thus, compared to other strategic aerial bombings in Germany that had cost more victims—like Operation Gomorrah that unleashed a firestorm over the city of Hamburg in July 1943, by some estimates killing twice as many Germans as in Dresden and wounding close to 37,000, Dresden seemed to defy the consequentialist normative ethical argument that holds an act to be morally permissible if the ends justify the means. Most notably among the critics of the Dresden bombing, political theorist Michael Walzer judged it to have been an act of terrorism, whereas the Hiroshima bombing was deemed justifiable on account of its impact on surrender and ought to be classified merely as war crime.11

Considering the timing of the bombing, most young German men had already been deployed, leaving the city’s population disproportionately skewed towards women, young children and the elderly. In addition, as the war progressed, the advancing Red Army displaced ethnic Germans from the cities and villages they had occupied or settled ever further west, including to the city of Dresden. Much has been made of this demographic composition. Rather than consider the Dresden population as civilians who were a substantial and responsible part of a perpetrator state, this kind of narrative, by removing perpetrators geographically into combat zones removed from the city, was intended to inoculate the remaining population and prompt a kinder treatment of the survivors. In this narrative, although they were part of the perpetrator nation and many of the children and teenagers belonged to the Hitler Youth, they were ultimately not responsible for the wrongdoings of their government. In this, a dividing line of moral worth was drawn between civilians within a perpetrator nation more generally, and a subset of civilians within a perpetrator nation that on account of their demographic characteristics were unlikely to have engaged in significant amounts of wrongful action.

In narrating the peculiar demographics of the city, full of refugees and those who could not be conscripted, Dresden emerged as distinct from the rest of Germany, its National Socialist dictatorship and the generic Nazi perpetrator and party member. In addition to the demographics of its victims, the destruction of Dresden took on further valence based on its status as cultural heritage city. Nicknamed the ‘Florence of the river Elbe’ [Elbflorenz], Dresden was considered a significant European cultural capital. It was no longer only humans who were seen as victims, but
also the city itself. This combination of morally innocent victims and a city of global cultural importance would allow some stakeholders to attempt using the Dresden bombings, rather than Hamburg, as site for the nostalgic memorialisation of the war, something that Germany on account of the Holocaust had little occasion to do otherwise.

Concern and conflict about the total number of casualties—Holocaust denier David Irving wrongly guesstimated between one hundred thousand and a quarter million victims—opened up the possibility for the far-right to contest Germany’s war guilt by suggesting that a large number of disproportionately innocent persons had been impacted by the event. By the time the total number of casualties had been revised by Historians’ Commission to well below one hundred thousand, the far-right had already made use of the opening provided by contestation around casualty numbers and rallied collective protest. Contestation around numbers provided an opening for the rewriting of history and collective mobilisation around the trope of the morally innocent aerial bombing victim. The same opportunity was not afforded to victims in more severe aerial bombings—like Hamburg—because there was nothing to contest and subsequently organise against.

Commemoration and Counter-Movements

It took little time for the bombing to become mobilised for political purposes. In the early years of the Cold War, the bombing became part of socialist anti-American propaganda and was framed in the then-East-German city of Dresden as a symbol for US-American imperialist aggression; in the early 1980s, the peace movement used the bombing to call for demilitarisation and the abolition of nuclear arms, similar to the Japanese peace movements some decades prior. By the time of German reunification, Holocaust denier David Irving was invited to speak at a neo-Nazi rally in 1990, where he compared the victims of the aerial bombings to those who had been murdered at Auschwitz. In 2000, the neo-Nazi organisation Junge Landsmannschaft Ostdeutschland (JLO) started commemorating the bombing in Dresden. In these ‘funeral marches’ [Trauermarsch], held annually on the night of 13 February, the organisers reframed the air raids as a ‘bombing Holocaust’ and drew larger and larger numbers of participants each year. Although memory around the Dresden bombings had long been used for political ends, the JLO commemorations bore a marked transition in focus on the war casualties themselves, and within this group, that of the victims who had been displaced from Eastern Europe. As the JLO is a neo-Nazi organisation whose members derive their primary identity as descendants of the Vertriebenen, the ethnic Germans displaced from Eastern Europe after Germany’s defeat, it is fitting that one of their arguments for re-memorialising the bombing was their mistaken understanding that a majority of those who perished in Dresden in February had been displaced persons.
In the far right’s re-employment, some victims of the Dresden bombing were depicted as doubly displaced, by having to flee from the Eastern Front on account of the advancing Red Army, and the bombing displacing them once more from a city in which they had finally found refuge. Drawing on this double displacement narrative, the right-wing activists semantically subverted the concept of the refugee and the displaced person: They generated parallels and rendered morally comparable civilians of a war-faring aggressor nation that was by February 1945 in the middle of one of Europe’s worst twentieth-century ethnic cleansing projects, with those displaced and turned into refugees as result of National Socialist aggression. By characterising those who perished as displaced persons, an attempt was made to morally recast the event of the bombing as a war crime. Moreover, even though many of the child victims of the bombing had been members of the Hitler Youth, the right attempted their moral inoculation by foregrounding the fate of a minority of refugee casualties.

By narrowing the set of victims to those defenceless, and through the omission of National Socialist war crimes, the far-right was able to construct the residents of Dresden not only as morally innocent and not liable to harm, but also postulated moral equivalence of all aerial bombing victims, past and present. This reframing placed the event of Dresden among a roster of other war crimes and made the suffering of its victims comparable, and by extension alike, to other events suffered by the victims of the National Socialist dictatorship, ultimately opening up the door to relativising statements of Germany’s war guilt. It is through creating this false equivalence on the backs of ethnic German migrants and through strategically mobilising their tragic suffering for their own political ends that the right sought to create grounds for re-commemorating Dresden as war atrocity.

The Junge Nationalisten, the youth organisation of the political far-right organisation National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), describes Dresden on the eve of the bombing as a city ‘overcrowded with refugees from the Eastern Territories as well as numerous civilians’.12 Invoking the language of pacifism, they denounced the bombing as ‘irrelevant for the war’ and similar in nature to the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia. In their attempts at locating the bombings through comparison to events internationally considered to be war crimes, German right-wing political groups were supported by a cosmopolitan alliance of European right-wing movements. In a video documenting the Action Against Forgetting’s [Aktionsbündnis gegen das Vergessen] annual night-time torch march, Maik Müller, regional party leader of the youth arm of the NPD, invited European ‘comrades’ from several countries to speak on their perspective on the Dresden bombings. In their speeches, often held in the speaker’s original language, the political activists compared the Dresden bombing to less controversial war crimes in order to recast the Dresden victims as morally comparable to the victims of other
historical and contemporary bombings. Rather than disdain Eastern European activists along Second World War lines, German neo-Nazis and members of the Identitäre movement embraced other nationalities, as long as they too advocate closed borders, national protectionism and islamophobia. That the speakers delivered their missives in languages other than German, resulting in the audience having to stand through lengthy translations following the original speech, did not seem to faze the nativist and often monolingual audience. The public parading of foreign languages, the interpreters’ multilingualism and the additional waiting time imposed on the audience standing in the February cold all became acceptable because they served ultra nationalist projects.

Reacting to these popular and novel forms of right-wing organising, the city of Dresden alongside various civil rights organisations decided to counter-mobilise. In 2009, a civil society organisation called Working Group February 13 [AG 13. Februar] began formally calling for civil society groups, the city and local governments, to jointly organise an annual memorialisation of the air raid to counteract the monopoly that neo-Nazis held up until that time. In 2010, the city of Dresden decided to award the Dresden Prize, an annual international peace prize. Along with the annual peace prize, the city of Dresden mobilised financial resources to fund artworks by local and international artists on the themes of peace, conciliation and reconstruction. Dresden eventually became a symbol for ‘a unifying collective and cultural memory’, in which divisions could be overcome by mapping ‘local identity onto global citizenship’. The city had come full circle and began to brand itself as a site for peace and reconciliation, albeit about 30 years later than Hiroshima, and mostly in response to right-wing attempts at monopolising historical memory through false victim demographics that sought to place the bombing of Dresden as tragedy comparable to that of Auschwitz.

The ruined city of Dresden became a symbol of resilience in the face of total destruction, a symbol for moving on from what emerged in collective memory as a supra-historical event of ungraspable horrors. Dresden-the-city becomes both victim and primary protagonist, while the horrors of the NS regime recede into the background of the tragedy. While not blameless, Dresden emerges as actor without agency—a city of people who died, were injured or survived—but not one where people voted Hitler into power, sold out their Jewish neighbours or were fascists. Dresden after the aerial bombings relinquished most other roles and fully inhabits the role of the destroyed city whose physical reconstruction serves as a beacon for peace, hope and reconciliation. It managed to rise from the ashes of perpetrator city and occupy an uneasy status as symbol for reconciliation. However, its victims would never accede to the level of innocence, pity and veneration of those of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. It is this ambiguous status accorded to the victims that would become the pivot for much of the contention between left and right over how to interpret the Dresden bombings in Germany in the twenty-first century.
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Who Is an Innocent Victim? On the Morality of Harming Civilians in War

While the question of legality is central to determining whether a bombing was an act of terrorism, a war crime or legally permissible, the question of the bombing’s morality raises more complicated issues about group membership and culpability that help explain political uses of commemoration among the far-right. Political activists are not the only ones trying to ascertain the moral status of those who perish in aerial bombing; the field of practical ethics in particular asks whether it is moral, rather than merely legal, to kill civilians in war. In posing this question, philosophers make distinctions between combatants and civilians on the assumption that civilians deserve a degree of protection that combatants are not entitled to. Rather than a set of merely abstract and theoretical concerns, these questions matter for legitimation moves within commemorative politics, because the crux of the far-right’s argument is premised on the moral innocence of the Dresden victims, a group status that they see as untouched by the German National Socialist government’s actions.

Orthodox Just War Theories apply what they call the principle of discrimination to adjudicate the permissibility of harming civilians. The argument is one of ‘noncombatant immunity’, a principle by which no civilian, irrespective of the despicability of their actions, is liable to harm (ethicist Jeff McMahan defines ‘liability to harm’ as occasions in which civilians can become targets of defensive violent action). Conversely, every combatant, no matter how impeccable their moral compass as private person, is liable to harm on the basis of their group membership as combatant. In this mode of thinking, liability for and immunity to harm are functions of group membership rather than of individual actions. A distinct set of positions maintain that civilian immunity can be moot under certain, rare, circumstances. In one of those scenarios, liability to harm is contingent on the actions of the civilian in question. In a partially overlapping consequentialist scenario in which the harming of civilians leads to a larger good like deterrence or surrender, non-combatants may become a legitimate target of military attack. Liability in this context is instrumental and based on the impact of an action.

Both sets of positions—orthodox theories of just war, and consequentialist theories of liability to harm—presume different understandings of groupness. Civilian immunity in orthodox theories of just war is collective, while liability to harm can be either collective or individual in consequentialist theories because it depends on the impact that this harm will have beyond the individual. If harming civilians has the power to bring about positive changes, perhaps even the end of the war, it can under certain circumstances be justified. Civilian immunity in consequentialist theories then is contingent and not absolute; it is neither solely membership-based or group-based, nor is it uniquely anchored in
individual rights. However, the bar for violating civilian immunity is set high. From McMahan’s perspective, one ought to judge both the residents of Hiroshima and Dresden, whatever their individual moral failings (joining the Hitler Youth, being deployed abroad to pursue colonial exploitation), as free from the liability to harm principle. And that while legally it may not have been a war crime to bomb the cities, it was a morally impermissible act in both instances.

This question of how to distinguish between civilians of two different perpetrator nations harmed in war becomes the crux of victim subjectification, and of who becomes a morally innocent victim. A subset of questions within this scenario further distinguishes between different types of civilians: Those whose governments fare just wars, and those whose governments fare unjust wars. If it is not morally permissible to harm civilians of a nation faring an unjust war under any circumstance, then the Dresden victims ought to attain similar moral status to the victims of Hiroshima and perhaps also Auschwitz, on account of their group membership as non-combatants.

This would also mean that the civilian populations of Dresden and Hiroshima ought to be considered as morally equivalent, which raises the question of why only one population achieved moral rehabilitation. Such a line of argument sits rather uncomfortably with the historiographical record and opens up the possibility for historical revisionism of German war guilt and the peculiar brutality of the Holocaust in German twentieth-century history. If there is a distinction between civilians of a nation attacked in war on the one hand, and between civilians in a nation faring war on the other hand, then the Dresden victims may have to collectively take on responsibility for their nation’s aggression and fall into a moral category distinct from those who perished in the concentration camps. This would not open space for historical revisionism.

In their attempts at garnering a specific kind of sympathy for the Dresden bombings, German far-right protesters subscribe to a strict version of non-combatant immunity untethered from justness of war arguments that reject consequentialist justifications for aerial bombings. That is to say, they make the moral argument that no aerial bombing is morally permissible, no matter the causal impact of the bombing on the unfolding of the war. On that basis, they ask to be allowed to commemorate the aerial bombing victims in whatever way they wish. At the same time, they operate in a parallel and distinct lane to the German state’s coming to terms with the National Socialist Dictatorship [Vergangenheitsbewältigung], in that they omit other questions practical ethicists might raise about contextualising an individual aerial bombing within the larger context of wars of aggression and genocide. The far-right, whether wittingly or not, employs moral justifications paralleling those developed in practical ethics, and yet remain tied to a subset of moral concerns that fails to consider the full implications of their argument. This allows
them to appear empathetic about the plight of aerial bombing victims, all the while pushing ahead an agenda of historical revisionism in which the moral innocence of the aerial bombing victims offsets the atrocities the German state committed during the Second World War.

The Bomb, Suspicious Testimony and Biological Citizenship

While practical ethics asks questions about the liability to be harmed, social anthropology engages with the epistemic politics of suffering and victimhood. Similar to moral innocence in ethics, trauma is a moral and not a psychological category that is built around forms of social and moral recognition. As such, it is deeply political and produced jointly through the mobilisation of social actors (politicians, medical professionals, artists and social activists of all political orientations) and the restructuring of moral principles.\textsuperscript{22} Victims do not emerge as a natural category at the point of the event; they are made after the event. Who becomes a morally innocent victim is deeply contextual and mediated by time and political, economic and social context.

When the atomic bombs were dropped in Nagasaki and Hiroshima and when B-52s left Dresden in mere cinders, all three cities’ populations had been established as permissible civilian targets. Aerial bombing, while not technically a war crime, had become an accepted if morally condemned means of warfare by the Second World War because of its presumed potential of accelerating surrender by stoking civilian discontent and demoralising the home front. The principle of discrimination was temporarily repealed, and non-combatant innocence came to collectively no longer matter. Whether the civilians bombed were innocent in their actions or not mattered little; what mattered was their group membership in a nation engaged in an unjust war that made them liable to harm. Far-Right mobilisation by the Young Nationalists (JN), the NPD and Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident ( Pegida) on the other hand would continuously attempt to reframe the question of liability to harm and innocence around action, rather than membership. By framing the specific demographics of Dresden in February 1945 as consisting mainly of women, children, the elderly and the displaced, they argued that the victims deserved large-scale commemorative events.

In public memory however, civilian survivors have not fared well. While survivor testimonies taken together usually produce narratives of collective fate, this spectacularly failed in Dresden. Eyewitness memory is notoriously unreliable, and victims of natural catastrophes and other traumatic events are usually treated generously when misremembering details of their suffering. Dresden eyewitness survivors recalled British airplanes engaging in strafing the city, attacking ground targets explicitly
with airplane-mounted and low-flying aircraft. This claim was repeated variously in National Socialist propaganda publications but was later found to be unwarranted by historians. Some survivors also recalled the peculiar colouring of the fires, which they took to mean that the British had dropped particularly devastating phosphor bombs. This claim, too, was found unwarranted by the Dresden Historians’ Commission. On the basis of two refutable claims, German eyewitness testimony became suspicious and lost credibility.

In spite of real suffering, Dresden failed to produce a parallel narrative of collective innocence that could match that of Hiroshima. Arguably, the afterlives of the survivors in both nations were different on several counts. While cities in both countries sustained severe damage to their structures, survivors in Dresden fared better than their Hiroshima counterparts who had been irradiated. In the period between Germany and Japan’s loss of the Second World War and German reunification then, a binary of victimhood emerged—on the one hand, that of the innocent survivors of the atomic bombs, and that of the survivors of questionable moral worth in the case of the Dresden aerial bombing.

While the main form of reconstruction in Dresden was infrastructural, survivors of the bombings in Japan faced a discrete process of corporeal reconstruction. Survivors of the two atomic bombings successfully leveraged biological citizenship as cultural resource in order to make claims on the state and were given legal recognition as ‘hibakusha’, a status entitling about 650,000 persons to free medical care from the Japanese government. The long-term nature of bodily injury created by radiation poisoning produced a ‘morally legitimate suffering body’, visible over decades, and through its interactions with the public medical system remaining lodged in the public eye. Korean residents of both cities, most of whom had been conscripted to work in Japan as colonial subjects on their end, faced multiple hurdles while trying to claim the same designation. Both Japanese cities and their residents could become morally rehabilitated through the construction of biological citizenship. Dresden, on the other hand, only succeeded in rehabilitating the status of the city itself; its harmed residents had to recede into the background. In that, they resembled the victims of ‘Operation Meetinghouse’, the Tokyo firebombing of 9 and 10 March 1945.

These divergent fates can be partially explained through the character of the bomb and its post-drop re-emploitments. Michael Gordin suggested that the status of nuclear bombs was historically contingent and not intrinsic to the bomb itself. Analogously, neither the atomic bomb’s effectiveness, nor its pernicious radioactivity, was fully recognised at the moment when the decision to use the bomb in the war was taken. It was the post-drop reevaluation of the bomb’s impact—mistakenly understood in collective memory to have hastened Japanese surrender—that would provide the instrumental outcome necessary for
its moral justification. The victims could be collectively exonerated as martyrs for the allied cause, as the (erroneous) narrative was one that the atomic bomb prevented more American deaths and accelerated the end of the war. In the tricky Auschwitz-Hiroshima social movement alliance around the motto Never Again, the role of the United States in developing and deploying the bomb receded into the background. In parts, postulating symmetry between Auschwitz and Hiroshima could only work on the basis of a shared trauma of innocent victims; questioning agency would involuntarily lead to an unthinkable comparison between American forces and the National Socialists. In the German case, the impact of Dresden on Germany’s surrender was less clear, and its survivors were not declared innocent victims. This is because they could not invoke biological citizenship of the sort available to survivors of the atomic bomb, in which they resembled the victims of the Tokyo firebombing, but also because the impact of Dresden on the outcome of the Second World War was never narrated in the same way that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were.

In addition to this specific configuration of agency between victims and those who dropped the bomb(s), and amplified by the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation, the atomic bomb itself became the nemesis, with questions of Japan’s war guilt or the Allied Forces’ agency in deciding to drop the atomic bomb brushed aside. The status of perpetrator in this scenario is glitchy and uneasily jitters between the victims of the bombing and those who dropped the bombs (fittingly, Harris and his Bomber Command never received any recognition or formal state honours from Churchill at the time). Ian Buruma went so far to suggest that ‘the bomb’ became a deus ex machina, with neither America’s role in dropping it, nor Japan’s wartime atrocities preceding it, ever receiving specific mention. Negative emotions could be directed at the bomb, rather than the Americans, and postwar mobilisation could take on the form of anti-nuclear war activism. The Japanese government would cleverly market a dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ nuclear, between nuclear power plants and the atomic bomb. This symbolic chasm would allow the wholehearted symbolic pursuit of an anti-nuclear (bomb) future; the little regulated and rapid expansion of nuclear power plants collapsed with the nuclear incident on 11 March 2011.

After the atomic bomb became ‘special’, so did its victims. Initially part of the vast and uneasy global population of civilian non-combatants who were made to suffer for their governments’ transgression, those impacted by the nuclear blast had their innocence restored and saw their cities become symbols for a non-atomic future and world peace. Although the bomb did not lead to Japanese surrender it became a distinctive historical artefact, not through its essence, but because of the peculiarity of its use in 1945 and its disuse after 1945. Dresden on the other hand successfully rehabilitated the reputation of its city but
could never garner the same type of sympathy for the survivors of the bombing. If both populations were considered permissible targets, the Japanese emerged anointed through multiple re-employments, whereas the Germans did not. The misunderstanding that the bomb ended the war, coupled with the newfound biological citizenship of the irradiated in a context of the Cold War, led to the victims becoming innocent—their past status was determined by a situation that unfolded after the traumatic event. The role of individual action and responsibility of the victims receded to the background, and it would instead be the moral valuation of the bombs and the afterlives of the newly constructed victim subject possessing a biological form of citizenship that shaped collective forms of memorialisation.

Peculiar Alignments around the Displaced and Refugees

Returning to Dresden, the far-right based several of their alternative historical arguments legitimating night-time commemorative marches on a deliberate misreading of history, specifically a stubborn overstatement of casualty numbers and the distortion of victim demographics skewing towards overcounting refugees. While about 100,000 displaced persons had fled the Eastern Front and were in Dresden by January and February 1945, it is uncertain how many would become casualties of the bombing.27 Given the constant that refugees’ relocation preferences are rarely taken into consideration, and that they are accorded primacy of place in even fewer instances, their geographic placement in shabby quarters on the outskirts of the city rather than in desirable inner-city apartments suggests that it is unlikely that a large number of them perished in a bombing impacting mostly the centre of the city.

The far-right was not alone in this particular misreading of history. In spite of the city’s historians’ commission finding that the number of German refugees and displaced persons had been comparatively low when Dresden was struck, both the left and the far-right convened around the narrative of the vulnerable refugee. In that, both sides misread history for their own purposes; the far-right to relativise German war guilt, and the left to garner support for Syrian refugees. In 2017, a peculiar clash formed between the right and the liberal left who had mobilised in counter-protest to the annual funeral marches organised by the far right. The altercation was not around the question of how many persons perished in the bombing spree—the city’s Historians’ Commission had found the number to hover somewhere around a maximum of 25,000—but around the question of refugees. Both the left and the right misread history by attaching themselves to ‘wrong’ information about number of refugees and displaced persons killed during the bombing and used this misinformation to make diametrically opposed points. While the right-wing insisted that the presumed deaths of displaced Germans
were sufficient moral justification for re-memorialising a previously non-memorialised event, the German-Syrian artist Manaf Halbouni created a large-scale sculpture of battered, upturned buses to call attention to the fate of contemporary Syrian refugees. His goal was to generate empathy by drawing a parallel between what he understood to have been the fate of East European ethnic German refugees fleeing from the Red Army in 1945 with Syrians in 2018 fleeing civil war.

Halbouni created his sculpture, *Monument*, and installed it in front of the Frauenkirche, the Lutheran church destroyed during the Dresden bombing and left in ruins by East German leadership as symbol of American aggression. After German reunification, the church was rebuilt and became a symbol for peace and post-Communist reconstruction. The sculpture comprises three disused public transportation buses turned onto their nose that resemble eerie industrial towers. On the internet, Halbouni had seen photos of similarly upturned buses placed in the Syrian city of Aleppo and intended to use the disorientingly positioned buses as a symbol for those displaced by the Syrian civil war. In his understanding of the photographs, the buses had been placed as physical obstacles to protect the civilian population from sharpshooters, and were a barrier behind which public urban life, interrupted by civil war and deliberate shootings, could once more resume (if at a different pace). In Halbouni’s words, the installation refers to the current situation in Syria. With the image of the upturned buses in front of the Frauenkirche, a relationship is created between the situation of the people in the Near East and in Europe: The suffering and the unutterable losses, but also the hope for reconstruction and peace.

He further proclaimed that

a small symbolism shall arise and remind us that the Frauenkirche has not always been intact as it is now. I wanted to create a counterimage [Gegenbild] of this square that has been completely newly erected. I can remember when I was a child and when the Frauenkirche stood here as a ruin.28

The German far-right engaged in a different reading to Halbouni’s likening of the Syrian civil war and the displaced Syrians (many of whom had sought asylum in countries like Germany) to those Germans displaced around the end of the Second World War. Pegida in particular took offense at the comparison, as it appeared to belittle the suffering the city of Dresden experienced. Beyond bristling at the comparison between the citizens of Aleppo and Dresden, the far-right accused Halbouni of missing the implications posed by a flag placed on top of one of the upturned
buses in the photo that served as inspiration for the installation. The flag belonged to the anti-government rebel group Ahrar al-Sham and it emerged that the group may have used the buses for cover from sharpshooters of the government. Rather than a symbol for peace and resilience of a population under attack, the buses could now be interpreted as a shield for a rebel group—or, in the eyes of the far-right, a terrorist group whose activities were being implicitly sanctioned by Halbouni’s installation. Rather than a symbol for peace and the shared collective fate of those displaced by armed conflict, they read the sculpture as endorsing terrorism. By the time that Ammar Abdullah, the photographer who had taken the original photo for Reuters in the city of Aleppo, remarked that the bus blockade was erected by the provincial government of Aleppo for purposes of civilian protection, the symbolic damage had been achieved by that point.29

Oddly, it was precisely the rendering-comparable of contemporary Syrian refugees and the victims of the Dresden bombing by Halbouni that ignited the ire of the far-right—Halbouni engaged the wrong comparison. While drawing on the abstract humanitarian concept of the displaced, the right remained wedded to the historical particularities of the Second World War and refused to engage diachronically and compassionately with the plight of refugees overall; the specific moral valuation of the bombing victims as displaced made sense only as long as this would purposefully lead to a recasting the bombing as a historically comparable disaster. By using refugees as abstract concept,30 the far-right recast the bombing as comparable, all the while retaining ownership over the specific historicity of the refugee. Empathy works historically backward, but fails to extend into the present. Halbouni on the other hand focused on and compared the plight of the displaced, without postulating equivalency of the event itself.

Conclusion: Eventual Re-Emplotments and a Special Bomb

Neither the status of the event nor that of the victim is constant, as events and historical subjects achieve meaning through political semiosis.31 In the case of Dresden versus the atomic bomb, geopolitical interests, the character of the bomb and its perceived impact after the drop all re-emplotted the event, with the consequence of altering the moral status of the bombing victim after the fact. The victims of the Dresden aerial bombings lacked the cachet of a ‘special’ bomb, and ultimately could not sway their meagre cultural resources into a form of biological citizenship rehabilitating their moral status. In parts, this is connected to the perceived impact of the bomb. A misreading of history consisting of the perception that the atomic bomb sped up Japan’s surrender contributed to the painful and cumbersome anointing of the victims; the lack
of impact of the Dresden bombings on German surrender on the other hand carried over onto how the German victims were perceived. While the city of Dresden became a beacon of peace and solidarity, the victims never could, especially not after the far-right strategically deployed their suffering for political ends.

Having exploited uncertainty around the number of casualties in the 1990s to make the case for a rehabilitation of the victims within a larger argument relativising Germany’s war guilt, the far-right concocted a remarkably cosmopolitan European alliance of right-wing movements. The inherent contradiction of coalitions consisting of Germans and activists from countries Germany had occupied, exploited and decimated during the Second World War was surmounted by an alliance based on ethnonationalism and efforts to rehabilitate war-period Germany in a historically revisionist project. As part of this project, the far-right engaged in creative forms of misanthropic and xenophobic conceptual stretching around ‘the refugee’ and ‘empathy’ for morally innocent victims of aerial bombings. This empathy, in turn, allowed them to create false equivalencies between the victims of aerial bombings on the one hand, and casualties who perished in the Second World War more generally.

Rhetorically, the far-right drew on arguments about non-combatant immunity mirroring those within just war theories in the field of practical ethics. They apply a consequentialist criterion in their assessment of the bombing—was it worth it on account of its consequences for the war? —and find that the Dresden bombing was unwarranted, and hence its victims mournable. The parallels between practical ethicists and the far-right come to a halt at this point, as the far-right treats the victims of the Dresden bombing as morally distinct from the overall regime. It does this by suggesting that the Dresden victims were composed of a demographic separate from that of the overall population in such a way that the group was inoculated from political participation on account of age or gender. In the very same distancing move however, the far right also attempts to transfer and extend the collective innocence of the Dresden victims, once established, to the National Socialist regime more generally. While misreadings of history are not the partisan prerogative of one side or the other, the German far right continued to attempt leveraging the collective innocence of a presumed victim demographic for purposes of relativising Germany’s war guilt.

In their emulation of the language of the left—that of garnering sympathy for casualties of war by calling for solidarity on grounds of a shared humanity—the far-right stretched the concept of empathy in order to engage in a deeply misanthropic and xenophobic project that borrowed language from the left to rehabilitate the right. If both sides of the spectrum misinterpreted history for their own purposes and were fast to point out the other side’s misreading of history, it was only the left that came to formally correct their errors. The far right, in spite of drawing on fairly sophisticated arguments from the realm of ethics and pointing...
out historical misreadings on the part of the left, would prove incapable of providing a corrective for their own misinterpretations.

Notes

1 Acknowledgements: Thank you to Louie Dean Valencia-García, Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Thomas Blake for comments on an earlier version of this paper, and to Paige Sweet and Regina Rini for literature suggestions on trauma and the morality of wars.

2 The #metoo movement, brainchild of activist Tarana Burke, was created in 2006 to help survivors of sexual violence heal through empathy and community-based action. The movement generates solidarity and comfort by having survivors share their stories of abuse and empathising with others by recognising the ubiquity of sexual trauma through the slogan ‘me too’. The German far-right, although not explicitly drawing on Tarana Burke’s expression, employs a similar move in which the testimonials of German war victims are invoked to create a solidarity global community of civilian victims of all wars. This is twisted because the far-right’s motivation is not a pacifist one, but a revisionist one in which civilian deaths are strategically used to contest German war guilt.

3 Anglophone witnesses to the bombings, often prisoners of war, like Kurt Vonnegut and Victor Gregg, condemned the bombings, while on the academic side most famously Walzer suggested that bombing Dresden was defensible as a just intervention in a time of supreme emergency; Hiroshima was an indefensible act of terrorism that could not be justified by virtue of having sped up surrender.


5 Ibid.


7 Robin Wagner-Pacifici, What Is an Event? (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017): 154. The framework has three operational logics that conjoinently produce events—the performative, the demonstrative and the representational. While not explicitly discussed, her logic of inquiry, that of taking apart events as defined by agents’ semiotic acts and their uptake, forms the epistemological backbone of this chapter.


Practical ethics as a field presumes that philosophical principles cannot be applied in a straightforward way to pressing political problems and thus seeks to bridge theory and practice by taking seriously constraints actors face in the real world when trying to make moral decisions. Although in aftermath of the Second World War aerial bombings were not considered war crimes, with the experiences of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War and the fire bombings of London, Hamburg and Tokyo during the Second World War, such practices of warfare became widely condemned in spite of being technically legal. Practical ethics grapples with the question of whether it is ever morally defensible (rather than simply ‘legal’) to bomb civilians in wartime. Frances Myrna Kamm, *Ethics for Enemies Terror, Torture, and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); ibid.; Seyla Benhabib, “Unholy Wars,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 9, no. 1 (2002).

McMahan goes further to argue that the ‘moral basis of liability to defensive violence is moral responsibility for a threat of wrongful harm and claims that on this criterion virtually all who fight in wars that lack a just cause are liable to military attack’ McMahan, *Killing in War*: 155.

Both sides also consider the severity of harm imposed on civilians, and suggest that it is morally more defensible to impose financial harm—like reparations imposed after the termination of war—rather than physical harm, like the loss of life in an aerial bombing.

Any intervention comes up against four limitations: (1) The civilians’ responsibility for the war that their country is waging is often limited, and as such not proportional to the harms that they would face; (2) it is opportune to use people as mere means; (3) the causal effectiveness of harming civilians on the status of war is highly uncertain; (4) responsible civilians are often intermingled with innocent ones, and as such it is hard to separate out the truly innocent from civilians liable to harm. The novelist George Orwell on the other hand did not subscribe to any of these arguments—neither the discrimination principle that relies on group-based membership, nor the severely circumscribed liability of harm argument of McMahan. Instead, he proposed a radically egalitarian argument that eschews any group distinction and works on an outcome-based principle of shared casualties: If young men can be involuntarily conscripted into the armed forces and are exposed to death, then civilians should also share in the likelihood of being killed. Making any kind of group-based distinction based on membership, rather than action, between combatants and civilians in this view was indefensible. See McMahan, *Killing in War*: 231 ff.

This moral argument is not based on a distinction between combatants and civilians, but rather rests on the argument that it is extremely hard to justify harming civilians under any circumstance.

23 Biological citizenship is defined as ‘a complex bureaucratic process by which a population attempts to secure a status as harmfully exposed and deserving of compensation. It entailed populations demanding social welfare based on strict criteria that might acknowledge biological injury and compensate for it’. Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl; with a New Introduction by the Author* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2013): 21; ibid. *Hibakusha* (被爆者) literally translates as person who has been the target of a bomb, but in Japan it is used solely to refer to atomic bomb victims. See also *Kyōgikai Nihon Gensoibaku Higaisha Dantai, Hibakusha: Hiroshima, Nagasaki* (東京: 日本被団協; Tōkyō: Nihon Hidankyō, 1982). And Gerald F. O’Malley, “The Grave Is Wide: The Hibakusha of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Legacy of the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission and the Radiation Effects Research Foundation,” *Clinical Toxicology* (15563650) 54, no. 6 (2016).


27 Including cremations, there were 21,271 registered funerals immediately after the attacks and Hans Voigt, a local official in the city the time, had reported 35,000 dead to the authorities. Some years later, Georg Feydt in 1953 reported 39,773 in 1953 while the *New York Times* estimated between 20,000 and 35,000 casualties (Davis Biddle 2008). Joseph Goebbels quickly inflated the numbers for his own propaganda aims.


31 Wagner-Pacifici, *What Is an Event?*

References


Figure 11.1 Young African father with daughter in arms during an anti-fascist parade organised in Savona, Italy on 15 October 2017. Brothers Art/Shutterstock.com.