

Dresden – Tuesday 13 February 1945 by Frederick Taylor. Bloomsbury 2004.

Two city bombings during the Second World War have assumed iconic value since: that of Coventry in 1940 by the Luftwaffe and that of Dresden in 1945 by the Royal and United States Air Forces.

Frederick Taylor's book on Dresden sets this attack in a very broad context: first, that of the development of air power as an arm of military activity, then the ideological shift from the concept that military aims could be achieved by beating enemy soldiery to killing enemy civilians, then to the refining of methods and practices to make aerial bombing as lethal as possible.

Taylor also tells the story of Dresden the city, which is fascinating, before focussing on its role during the days of the Third Reich, when it was fervently supportive of the aims of the Nazi Party and a hive of industry dedicated to the German war effort. Finally we get the details of the bombing raids of February 13th 1945, from both a German and an Allied perspective, in all their horror and awesome power.

By way of conclusion, Taylor demonstrates the ways in which the attacks on Dresden were mythologized: first, by the Nazis themselves, then by the Soviet Union and its fellow travellers, and finally by the modern Far Right. The perversions of the truth practised by these groupings make a salutary ending of a superb book which is a most valuable addition to the literature on the Second World War; it is also hugely to the author's credit that, while maintaining an admirable dispassion, he nevertheless makes it impossible for any fair-minded reader to feel other than compassion for those on whom the fires of hell were unleashed nearly sixty years ago.

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