Firestorms in Hamburg, 1943, and Dresden, 1945: Death counts, damage maps and neo-Nazi propaganda

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A recent article in Deutsche Welle (Rayna 2025) highlighted continuing attempts to exploit World War II air raids for political purposes. Right-wing extremists claim that hundreds of thousands of "innocent people" were killed in the air raids on Dresden in February 1945, while an in-depth study by a Commission of independent historians put the number of victims at less than 25,000. The article demonstrates that 80 years after the war, the importance of historical study and remembrance has not diminished.

The Commission used various approaches to estimate the number of victims, examining various archival documents from both the Allied Forces and the Nazi administration (Müller et al. 2010). One sub-project attempted to use lists and reports to locate the places where people died in the flames, but this was abandoned because of inconsistencies in the sources. What the researchers were able to do with accurate lists was to locate burial sites in cemeterieros.

The paper critically evaluates the Commission's appach to examining historical statistical textual sources. It places bomb damage maps and lists in the context of the statistical analysis of the catastrophic situation during the Nazi regime. Diefendorf (1985) explains the role of leading architects in Hamburg in air defence and the provision of emergency housing for the homeless. Dresden and Hamburg both experienced devastating air raids. Following on from the Commission's report and Diefendorf's study of Hamburg, this paper compares maps and plans and asks why damage to buildings was shown on maps but not the location of people's deaths. It also asks whether the findings of the Commission would have been more accurate as to the location of deaths in the city if they had used bomb damage maps for their study.

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Diefendorf, Jeffry M. ‘Konstanty Gutschow and the Reconstruction of Hamburg’. *Central European History* 18, no. 2 (June 1985): 143–69. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938900016976.

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