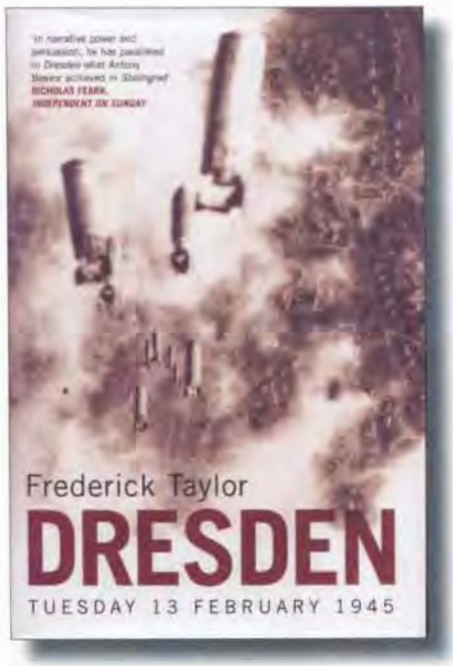
Books



Dresden:

Tuesday 13 February 1945

By Frederick Taylor

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Reviewed by Gp Capt Neville Parton

This is, appropriately enough, a big book to cover a big subject. Even 50 years after the event just the name of Dresden is enough to conjure up high emotions, and there can be few individuals with any interest in air power history who are not aware of both the raid and some of its outcomes. This book, however, contains within its pages a great deal more than simply an exposition of the details of the raid on Dresden and its terrible consequences. Instead, the reader is treated to a number of different, intertwined histories: that of the development of area or 'terror' bombing, the history of Dresden itself, and, after an in-depth consideration of the raid, a clear examination of the various post-war 'revisions' of the Dresden story.

The book is divided up into 3 major sections, roughly corresponding to events leading up to the attack of February 1945, the actual raid itself, and the aftermath, in both the short and longer-term. The first part examines the history of Dresden from its transformation under King Augustus II of Poland through to the Nazi party's coming to power in the early 1930s, before examining the conduct and practice of war from the air — from theoretical considerations through to applied experience of the Luftwaffe and the RAF – before considering the actual status and condition of Dresden in early 1945. The next section considers the raid in all aspects: British and American attacks and the consequent results on the ground, laid out in an hour-by-hour account of the city's destruction. A detailed analysis of the consequences follows in the last part, covering the actual destruction wrought and numbers of casualties caused, and tracking the ways in which the latter developed as part of firstly Nazi, and then later Soviet, propaganda exercises.

This is not a simply a grand historical treatise though. The human dimension is brought into sharp focus throughout, with the interspersal of survivors' stories — both from the air and the ground — between the largely unemotional official reports. Some of the most fascinating are those from certain of the few remaining Jewish individuals in Dresden, most of whom were employed on work in the secret or hidden armaments factories. Perhaps the most horrifying realisation is that the Dresden raid really was not particularly special: the course of the war had lead to the strategic bombing campaign as being one of the few ways in which the Allies could strike back, and Dresden stands

out mainly because of the way in which a whole sweep of contributory factors — the lack of any effective German anti-aircraft units, the weather, and so on — led to the conditions that enabled the firestorm to be created.

In terms of compressing so much history, and laying bare so many myths, this is without doubt a tour de force. But perhaps its greatest strength is that no one with any sense of morality can read it and remain unmoved. Dresden was without doubt a beautiful city, possessed of a proud history, but at the time of the raid it was also considered a perfectly legitimate military target. And Bomber Command, as the instrument of the British people, had been carefully developed to the point where it could produce destruction on a truly industrial scale. The point made by the author throughout is of the inevitability of the event occurring — and if it had not been at Dresden it would have occurred somewhere else. Indeed arguably there were far worse raids in terms of percentage of the population being killed, but for a number of reasons, including both Nazi and later Soviet propaganda, Dresden has come to stand out. This work is, both as a debunker of myths and an exploration of the tragedy of war, a book that should be widely read by RAF personnel of all ranks.

In this case it is without doubt best to leave the final word to the author:

'The bombing of Dresden was not irrational, or pointless — or at least not to those who ordered and carried it out, who were immersed deep in a war that had already cost tens of millions of lives, might still cost millions more, and who could not read the future. Whether it was wrong — morally wrong — is another question. When we think of Dresden, we wrestle with the limits of what is permissible, even in the best of causes.'