“Death from the skies.” Photographs in museums of the aerial bombing of civilians during World War Two

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The presence or absence of photographs in museums of dead and injured civilians, victims of aerial bombing by both Allies and the Axis powers during the Second World War, reflect both historical conventions and current political concerns, telling us as much about national identity today as they do about events in this period. Drawing on case studies in Germany, England and Scotland, this paper will consider how and why images of death (and indeed the incidents that brought them about in some cases), are excised from some museums but foregrounded in others. In so doing it will consider such photographs within the context of the overarching display techniques of individual museums, in particular the text that accompanies them, and set these against the background of the development of historical narratives of bombing campaigns in the Second World War, including contemporary official attitudes to these events. At the same time it will reflect on the ethics of such exhibits and the ways in which photographs of death during wartime have been used in the past. This is not, however, a chapter about the rights or wrongs of strategic bombing of civilians during the Second World War, a topic which has been covered in detail elsewhere, (for example, Grayling 2007), but more about how images of civilian deaths during bombing raids are used or avoided in the twenty first century to promote national identity.

It has been estimated that in World War II at least 60 million people were killed of which 35 million were civilians (Crawford and Foster 2007, 11). Until recently these losses were rarely referred to in the museum setting. Museums tended to follow the style set by military
historians and narrate stories of battles punctuated with maps, information about key military leaders, weapons and uniforms. Stories of bombing and death of civilians were either omitted in museums or told, as in the Imperial War Museum, London, as part of a narrative of the fortitude of the survivors, an illustration of national character.

**Photographs of war dead in museums**

Our case study museums the National War Museum, Scotland, the Imperial War Museum, London, the Deutches Historiches Museum and the Deutches Technikmuseum, Berlin, use photographs of dead civilians sparingly or not at all. The British ones tend to regard the national victims of German bombing as examples of British fortitude or ignore them. Photographs of the dead are omitted; indeed the suffering caused by bombing is glossed over. In the German museums allied bombing of German civilians and German bombing of Poland are shown with images of dead bodies and mourners and are used as to elicit pity for the victims.

In the West it is unusual to display photographs of dead combatants in museums, even in those dedicated to war and its consequences. If they are shown they are often discreet background images indistinguishable from one another, barely visible as bodies (as in the moving images in the Imperial War Museum North’s story of Trench Warfare). Photographs of civilians who have suffered unnatural deaths by enemy action are rarely shown at all and, if present, are nearly always of foreign civilians not one’s ‘own’ dead, despite the fact that it has been estimated that over 600,000 European civilians died in bombing raids and over a million were seriously injured (Overy 2013, xxiii). To a certain extent such absence is a result of cultural norms, the sense that images of the dead in a public place, unless displayed by relatives as a form of mourning, are generally disrespectful (O’Neill 2011, 3). For “culture constrains all narrative. Audiences set limits on what is acceptable and what is unacceptable,
and by their response they select which narratives get repeated and which fall away” (Abbott 2013, 125). The fact that children visit history museums in large numbers also acts as a form of self-censorship.

Thus discretion or amnesia, particularly in Britain, is partly to do with the notion of what is acceptable to show in public. Mainstream Western media, such as still photographs, news film, and official digital media, avoids showing many images of the dead, preferring images of covered bodies or pictures of those about to die rather than the corpse itself (Zelizer 2010). In this museums are no different from mainstream television and digital news channels. There are some exceptional iconic images such as those of Holocaust victims, for example those of Belsen when first liberated (Paton 1991, Kushner 2002, 22), repeated time and time again as illustrations of Nazi evil, so that familiarity can blunt shock while still eliciting disgust (Sontag 2004, 73), but images of death are generally omitted from museums whatever the context of the theatre of war. In part this may be a result of ethical considerations, a sensitivity towards relatives or friends of the victims, or fear lest we enjoy such sights as Plato thought we did (Sontag 2004, 86). It has been suggested that a focus on death and suffering may, in whatever context, result in a form of collusion with the perpetrators, those who were responsible for such acts in the first place, by which we “participate in the dehumanization process at the core of the perpetrators' project” (Kushner 2002, 18).

**The nature of Photographs**

Once disseminated, photographs lose their original frames of reference (Sontag 2004, 35; Butler 2010, ix - x). Nevertheless, however they are used subsequently, we often credit photographs with authenticity (Preußer 2007, 145). They cannot be viewed, however, without a cultural lens in which the viewer places images in contexts which may distort a form of authenticity, the historic context of the photograph itself or the original intention of the
photographer. As Preußer points out photographs of piles of dead German civilians, victims of Allied bombing, “cannot be regarded without denoting the emblem of industrial mass killing, the destruction of European Jewry. ... As a German, when looking at the piles of bodies to be burnt in Dresden, one simultaneously recognises Auschwitz” (Preußer 2007, 146). Thus Germans become, by implication, innocent victims too. Of course, we just do not know how those who see such photographs in museums respond, though Preußer suggests German responses will be conflated with Holocaust narratives, and we could speculate that non-German viewers might also make such a connection if they understand this specific form of visual rhetoric (Foss 2004).

Sontag, writing about contemporary images of war generally, suggests that “[I]t has become a cliche of the cosmopolitan discussion of images of atrocity to assume that they have little effect, and that there is something innately cynical about their diffusion”, and that the intentions of those who disseminate them may have political or commercial motives (Sontag 2004, 99). She comments that “[T]he feeling persists that the appetite for such images a vulgar or low appetite; that it is commercial ghouliness, an attempt by the presenter of the image to focus deliberately on death and suffering for financial gain” (Ibid, 100). In a similar way one can assume that historical photographs of wars’ atrocities of civilian dead, might also be so regarded. However, the context and the method of display along with individual experiences will all affect the response to the photographic image and, until more research is undertaken, we cannot accept without question the notion that such images necessarily pander to the ghoul in us all. Moreover, Azoulay argues that such images can be understood more positively, particularly if those whose suffering is represented are marginalised politically and are otherwise absent from public consciousness. Here the image of suffering “manufacture[s] the new conditions of visibility of catastrophe” (Azoulay 2012, 83). While
we might question Azoulay’s main thesis that such images help develop a universal sense of citizenship through photography (McCracken 2010) we can, nevertheless, acknowledge that photographs of death can draw attention to a commonality of human suffering.

**Historical antecedents**

In the West photographs of death during wartime have well established conventions which have been reproduced in museums. During the First World War reporters, newspapers and newsreels adopted various attitudes to the death of their own soldiers that on the whole tended to suppress the photographic image, unless it could be understood within the context of a glorious, romantic and heroic sacrifice for the nation (Beurier 2004). Later during the Spanish Civil War photographs of deaths of civilians by Robert Capa, amongst others, developed the notion of the validity of such an image if it exposed not just the evil of war but also the ruthlessness of the perpetrators. With the liberation of the concentration camps in Germany, images of civilian dead and dying were circulated across the globe. Germany itself was “deluged with photographs of corpses” (Wachsmann 2015, 614) along with narratives that implicated all Germans in war crimes. This exceptional distribution of photographs of civilian victims of war was designed to demonstrate the evils of the Nazi regime (Hart 2011) and was part of an attempt to re-educate German civilians and make them accept responsibility for supporting the Nazi party. Yet, as Wachsmann concludes, many Germans, as a measure of defence against such accusations, argued they had suffered too, perpetuating “the myth of German victimhood” and denying knowledge of the camps (Wachsmann 2015, 615).

Later, photographs of dead and dying civilians in the Vietnam War, distributed by journalists and those who opposed the war, followed this convention of displaying dead civilians as innocent victims. War itself was on trial but then so were certain soldiers, generals and
politicians (Lewinski 1984). Thus exhibiting civilian dead has become a means of depicting, if only by implication, the guilt of the regimes of those nations in whose name the deeds are done.

However, despite these developments, the taking and exhibiting of the images of the dead, whether of the enemy or of the civilian, can be seen as an act of aggression. Spring (2013, 109) suggests that this is a form “of symbolic violence, a violation of the integrity of the individual.” Sontag makes a similar point that photographs “turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed”, a form of possession that may involve a form of violence towards the dead (Sontag 2004, 72). There is a sense that a photograph of a dead person violates that person who has been unable to give permission for the image to be made and who may also be shown in a pose that makes graphic pain, suffering, fear and the intimate moment of death. Moreover there is a kind of violation of viewers who may find such images so disturbing that they suffer from feelings of disgust and fear long after they have ceased to gaze on the photograph. However, if photographs of the enemy are shocking, and can be used to symbolise death itself, how much more distasteful and literally disgusting are images of ‘our own’ dead, particularly those of innocent victims? Thus mainstream cultural institutions and the mass media on the whole do not show images of their own dead civilians, particularly those in past Second World War bombing campaigns. If such images are shown in museums they have a strong political purpose as we shall see in our case study, Germany. They arrest the visitor’s attention by their rarity and unpleasantness and mediate our attitudes to war as represented in that museum, encouraging us to see those who carry out bombing as evil and those who suffer as innocent victims, through an “affective and empathetic function” (Roberts 2014, 5). In so doing they “play a constitutive role within the production and mediation of the political” (ibid). Their absence in exhibitions about the Home Front in the
UK works in a similar way. In a pro-independence Scotland they silence a history of shared Britishness while in England a similar absence indicates a celebration of national character; people who could survive such atrocities and carry on.

**Tradition and ethics**

In the UK images of the victims of bombing raids in places such as London were censored, at first and then voluntarily omitted from publication by newspapers and newsreels because depressing images and news did not sell newspapers or attract paying customers to cinemas (Watson 1984, McLaine 1979). In a similar way civilian enemy dead were rarely shown during the Second World War as this suggested not only the enemy’s humanity but also posed questions about the ethics and morality of killing enemy non-combatants and their children. While bombing of the enemy was accepted by most members of the public as a necessary evil to ensure victory, the media focussed instead on the numbers of Bomber Command who died and their bravery.

**British and German photographs of civilian bombing casualties – then and now.**

If one tries to find still photographs of mutilated British bodies, children burnt alive in German bombing raids or dead babies suffocated in London shelters, whether one looks at online sites such as the Imperial War Museum’s (IWM) archive or popular British printed histories of the bombing campaigns, one will not find them easily if at all. Images of the injured are easier to find, but these have been carefully edited, often by the Ministry of Information which controlled such images during the war and commissioned them for propaganda purposes as examples of the fortitude of the public under fire (Watson 1984). Photographs of dead people in the IWM public digital archive are of mainly Nazi concentration camp victims, presumably because these images were more readily circulated
during and after the war. For example, there are some particularly harrowing photographs of
the dead and dying under the generic heading of “The liberation of Bergen-Belsen
concentration camp, April 1945” taken by the No 5 Army Film and Photographic unit. This
caption gives an indication of the sorts of images they are. “German SS guards toss the
body of a dead girl into a mass grave.”1 Thus the dead are shown as examples of the evil
against which the Allies were fighting.

However, images of victims of the firestorms of Hamburg and Dresden are more easily
found. For example an internet search for strategic bombing in the Second World War led to
the popular Wikipedia site 2 in which there were several harrowing images of German,
Chinese and Japanese dead, but none of British casualties, though the devastation of British
cities was illustrated with photographs of burning city centres. German suffering was
personalised with images of piles of bodies and photographs with captions such as “In death a
German mother stares at her twins in a pram” or “An elderly lady in front of the bodies of
school children in Cologne, Germany, after a bombing raid.” Bombed British school children
are shown alive and well or, at the very least, smiling happily as they are bandaged, their
injuries not fatal nor, it would appear, too traumatic once they were in hospital, playing to the
notion of British grit under fire. German archives, on the other hand, give ready access to
images of dead bodies during the Allied bombing of Germany. The Ullstein Bild archive has
several images of close ups of corpses and mounds of bodies after raids on Dresden.3

Thus all that follows must be placed within this context. Images of death, widely circulated
at the time for whatever reason, (or their excision from the media in the past), and their public
availability today, affect what images museums use and how they use them.

Germany

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Deutches Technikmuseum, Berlin

The Deutsches Technikmuseum (German Museum of Technology)’s website welcomes visitors thus. “We would like to invite you to join us for an eventful and enjoyable journey of discovery through the cultural history of technology.” Its section on aviation states “Along the way, exhibits large and small, spectacular and unique, document the colourful story of civil and military aviation in Germany. A section on aircraft engineering on the third floor supplements the chronological tour.” Areas covering air and space technology were opened in 2005.

In one section on air warfare the visitor (in 2012) confronts the horrors of the Allied bombing campaign in images of Hamburg in flames. On a dark wall, a video shows the dreadful and devastating impact of the Allied bombing raids. The images cannot be lingered over – the film moves from inferno to bodies and back to destruction. (INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE. Caption: Dead bodies in Hamburg in the Deutches Technikmuseum Berlin. From the film "Hamburg im Feuersturm" Reproduced by kind permission of the Deutches Technikmuseum Berlin and the Landesinstitut für Lehrerbildung und Schulentwicklung. Photograph copyright Andy Sawyer.) In a museum celebrating German technological achievements, a narrative (through images) of the Allied air superiority towards the end of the war and the violence inflicted on civilians appears strangely out of place.

Such public and official reminders of the horrors of the air war against Germany by the Allies were rare in Cold War West Germany and, for several years after re-unification, collective forgetting was the norm. In 1999 W. G. Sebald commented on the willing forgetfulness of the Federal Republic, suggesting that perhaps those whose nation had sent millions to their deaths in concentration camps felt they could not complain about their own destruction (Sebald 2004, 13-14). Even as late as 2007 Zehfuss commented that “until recently one had
to consult the English language literature to find any discussion on the ethicality of strategic bombing” (Zehfuss 2007, 78, fn. 13), although in 2010 Von Benda-Beckmann argued that after 1945 “in both the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as well as the Federal Republic the air war became a topic of public and political interest as well as the subject of many popular and academic historical accounts” (2010, 340). However more recently the story has moved into the museum space. Why did this happen?

Both East and West Germany saw bombing at first as the inevitable consequence of Hitler’s policies, ones with which they had colluded, and for which they were subsequently to suffer (Margalit 2007). After 1949 the communist authorities in the East used the bombing raids as a means of drawing attention to the perceived immoral actions of former allies, now enemies. These bombing attacks were no longer the consequence of Germany’s war with its allies but a cruel and unjustifiable revenge on the German people by the former Western allies - an example of imperialist capitalism in action. In 1949 the SED Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands), which governed the German Democratic Republic (GDR) until re-unification, on the fourth anniversary of the bombing of Dresden, published images of dead bodies piled up in the city in its newspaper and devoted half of its Sunday supplement to this story. The British and Americans were accused of bombing Dresden for no legitimate reason. In contrast the Soviets were held up as models of restraint and civilized behaviour, for they did not bomb the Germans, despite the fact that the German invasion of the Soviet Union had caused millions of innocent civilian lives (Margalit 2007, 130). Such memories ‘forgot’ the rape and destruction the Russian army brought in its wake, a story which has only relatively recently reached mainstream history and public popular narrative (Stabins 2012).
Margalit traced the adoption by many in West Germany of this view of allied bombings of Germany over the coming decades. However, with the fall of the Berlin wall and the unification of Germany, there developed a much stronger public interest in German suffering at the hands of all the Allied forces. This aroused great controversy, not least because for many there this move was an attempt to remember perpetrators as victims. However, it proved a useful way of providing the inhabitants of the newly united Germany with a common history – a history of victimhood and suffering. It enabled historians and politicians in Germany to present what had hitherto, particularly up until the 1970s, been seen as “a moral … impossibility” (Schneider 2003, 159, cited Kettenacker 2010, 212) and was encouraged by books such as Jörg Friedrich’s 2002 Der Brand or The Fire: The bombing of Germany 1940 – 1945, a book describing in words and images the horrors of the air war, and Brandstatten Fire Sites with graphic illustrations of the incinerated dead, burnt in many cases beyond recognition as human beings. Friedrich argues that the Germans were victims of an Allied regime that sought to destroy the civilian population regardless of whether or not this hastened the end of the war. Post publication Der Brand has attracted a great deal of critical attention, in particular the way in which Friedrich’s use of language suggests a parallel to the mass extermination of the Holocaust (Preußer 2007, 146). Although Friedrich has attracted criticism, nevertheless his arguments that the Allied bombing campaign against Germany was morally wrong, along with television programmes that have discussed German suffering, have caught the German imagination. The story of the bombing war, along with photographs of piles of bodies in the streets, have become ways by which the re-united German nation can find a common history in a war Germans on the whole prefer to forget. The Deutsches Technikmuseum’s images of the dead in Hamburg can be seen as part of a new collective memory, a memory that understands the Germans as victims not aggressors and an attempt to create a unified European memory of the war that moves beyond perpetrators and sees all as
victims (Kaiser et al 2014, 146). However, presenting all people involved in the war as victims avoids issues such as agency and presents a history of Europe in which hapless groups of people all found themselves as victims regardless of their original participation in, and responsibility for, armed conflict.

**Deutches Historiches Museum, Berlin**

The Deutches Historiches Museum, Berlin, in its present form, was opened on 2006 by the Federal Chancellor, Angela Merkel, and is a post-unification project, designed to record the struggles of the German peoples throughout history and to celebrate the unification of the two Germanys at the end of the twentieth century. Unlike the Deutches Technikmuseum it does not show images of the dead in bombed German cities. However, it juxtaposes the area devoted to Allied bombing raids on Germany next to the section on the Holocaust and treats British and Polish bombing victims differently. In so doing this museum offers a story that would have been understood by most East Germans before unification – the suffering and victimhood of German civilians which outweighed any German aggression towards Britain.

The Second World War section begins with arresting images of three black and white photographs of dead civilians, following a bombing raid on Poland, mounted as though they are in a photograph album, with small pieces of text below them. On the top left civilians pick their way through wreckage described thus “The air-raids on Warsaw were the first area bombings of a city in World War II. Such bombings cost thousands of civilian lives.” Immediately below this image two women bend over civilian corpses lying on the ground with the text “Victims from the Premienie Panskie hospital after an air raid.” The most striking image is on the right hand side, slightly larger than the other two. It shows a woman grieving above the corpse of another woman. The former is kneeling over the body. Her right hand is lifted as though about to touch the face of the dead person. Her own face is grief
stricken. The text includes the following: “Polish girl next to her dead sister after a Strafer attack. …The air raids on Warsaw were the first aerial bombings of a city in World War II. Such bombings cost thousands of civilian lives. Warsaw surrendered on 27 September 1939.”

Another larger text panel makes the point clearly “From the very beginning the war in Poland was pursued with the utmost cruelty…”7 (INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE. Title: A Polish victim of a German Strafer attack. Reproduced by kind permission of the Deutches Historiches Museum and Sam Bryan. Original 1939 photograph by Julian Bryan).

Here, like the moving images in the Museum of Technology, the photograph is used as a form of ‘immediate testimony’ which supports the word (Berger [1978] 2013, 49). One need not read the text to understand the message. However, it is the image which arrests the viewer and evokes pity and horror. Nevertheless, as Berger points out, a photograph is not a memory of an event (Berger [1978] 2013, 52) – it is a moment fixed in time and it has different meanings depending on the context in which it is placed and the people who are viewing it. Here the words contextualise the images and provide interpretation (Berger [1982] 2013, 66) – without them these suffering civilians could be anywhere in wartime Europe but they are specifically allocated a national identity. The Poles have long understood their national history as one of disappointment, betrayal, defeat and death and their national identity is bound up with this narrative (Kochanski 2013) and this photograph acknowledges this.

Near the section on Poland is a display on the Blitz on Britain 1940. Here are few photographs and none of bodies although the text refers to civilian deaths:

“To prepare for the invasion the Battle of Britain was launched in August 1940 with aerial attack on British supply and armament factories. Yet the German raids also cause increasing numbers of civilian casualties as in the case of the complete destruction of Coventry.”
This text panel conflates two different military campaigns in order to mitigate German responsibility for the loss of civilian lives. The Battle of Britain and the Blitz are often confused as they overlap. The bombing of British civilians (the Blitz) was designed to destroy British morale while reducing British manufacturing capacity, so that the British would sue for peace. It took place after plans for invasion were abandoned. It was understood that raids at night would bring confusion, panic and “special terrors” thus undermining British morale (Mosley 2004, 142). In so far as this was the Germans’ aim they failed. Despite the fact that during September and November 1940 18,261 people died in German raids in London and elsewhere (Overy 2013, 94) there was no public demand for the end of the war. However, positioning the raids in the context of preparation for invasion in this text panel justifies the deaths of civilians in military terms and avoids acknowledging that Germany instigated a terror campaign of bombing against the British civilian population, designed to break morale though mass destruction and slaughter of civilians.

Coventry was just one example of this campaign which combined bombing of military targets with attacks on civilian ones. The small Midlands city was devastated by the attack on 14 November 1940 but it was not completely destroyed. The casualties were mainly civilians 568 dead and 1,256 injured (Gardiner 2011, 148). Despite widespread disruption of everyday life factory production was restored within a week.

The museum also has a small silent black and white film from the Imperial War Museum Archives showing destruction of cities in Britain by Nazi aeroplanes. There are no dead bodies or signs of civilian suffering. In part this is because the British have not themselves shown such images until relatively recently. The lack of images of death in Britain is not, however, because of reluctance in the Deutches Historiches Museum to show photographs of the dead. Nearby a section called the “The Murders of the Mobile Killing Units” shows
photographs of hangings and the execution by a pistol to the head of an individual kneeling above a mass grave of murdered victims. Once again we are brought face to face with violent death inflicted by the Nazis on their victims but these are not British casualties of bombing raids.

Why should this matter? After all the text says it all – it presents a narrative of complete destruction. However, the absence of the photograph of dead civilians in Coventry and elsewhere in the UK means that the impact of the event is muted. Photographs are, as Sontag points out, designed in the context of war to “arrest attention, startle, surprise” (Sontag 2004, 20). The image of a dead sister being mourned viscerally by another in Poland remains in the mind long after the text has disappeared from the memory. Such a photograph provides the viewer with a sense of the immediacy of sorrow and suffering in a way dispassionate historical descriptions of events that eschew emotion rarely do. The lack of an image of death and destruction, grief and sorrow in the British section makes “empathetic grief” more difficult to engender amongst visitors. Hogan, looking at scientific research into the responses of the brain has drawn a distinction between the empathy we show when we imagine something and the empathy we experience when we have a concrete example of others’ emotions such as grief or joy. “...S[s]tatistics do not, most often, frighten or sadden us. A concrete experience of someone’s terror or grief, however, does” (Hogan 2009, 98).

Without photographs of the dead and grieving survivors the city of Coventry is presented as distant military target, an example of the power of the Luftwaffe, whose citizens were legitimate targets. To re-enforce the notion that the British victims of the Blitz do not deserve pity the museum has included in the display Nazi propaganda images of the British as imperialist aggressors. (INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE: Title: Section of World War 2 Exhibition showing the position of the England’s Guilt poster immediately above the Imperial War
Museum’s film of the bombing of British cities. Reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London and by kind permission of the Deutches Historiches Museum, Berlin.) One of them, immediately above the video, shows an Englishman riding on a throne carried by enslaved men from the colonies. The man in uniform wields a whip, smokes a pipe and with his hooked nose references his Jewish ancestry. The words “England’s Schuld” England’s Guilt, refers not only to the exploitation of Empire but to the words originally accompanying this front cover of the Illustrierter Beobachter, The Illustrated Observer, a Nazi magazine, which blamed England for provoking the war (Garden 2012, plate facing page 192). Popular views in Germany upheld by Friedrich hold that British bombing was far worse than American bombing (Moeller 2009, 54) despite the fact that they often targeted the same cities in the same way. This image, taken out of context, with the words England’s Guilt, implies whatever the sufferings of the British during the bombing war they deserved their fate.

The museum also dedicates a large area to the bombing of German cities by the allies after the war. It follows immediately from the Holocaust section. In a long text panel entitled “Germany Bombed” allied guilt and German victimhood are made explicit.

“With systematic carpet bombing of residential areas far from military and industrial facilities, the British and the Americans wanted to break the Germans’ morale…

The bombing of Hamburg in July 1943 claimed over 35,000 lives. Berlin suffered the harshest of attacks in February 1945 with thousands of deaths. On 13/14 February 1945 over 35,000 died in the militarily meaningless bombing of Dresden. Altogether, between 500,000 and 600,000 Germans lost their lives in Allied air raids.”
Note the words “military meaningless.” This text positions the Allies as war criminals. Such bombing undoubtedly killed many civilians but it was not, as suggested here, without its military and strategic objectives. Dresden is perhaps the most controversial of all the bombing raids by the allies and is often seen to be without military meaning commentators arguing that its military status was “doubtful” and that it was a “cultural centre, with very little industry or military significance”’ (Lambourne 2001, 148). However, by 1944 -5 the difference between military and civilian targets had been eroded. British and American governments planned these raids to be an attack on all aspects of Germany, civilian, military and industrial alike, in part to aid the Russian advance and hinder Germany’s resistance to the Red Army (Crawford and Foster 2007, 50 – 1). The Combined Chiefs of Staff Directive for the Bomber Offensive of 21 January 1943, known as the Casablanca Directive, outlined the morale-destroying function of air raids. The lowering of German morale and the destruction of cities as a whole was the overall aim. Both German and British industrial production had, on the whole, hitherto recovered from bombing raids in a relatively short period of time. It was only through the killing of large numbers of people, the bombing of the infrastructures through which they lived their lives, along with damage and destruction to industrial units, could either side reckon on making an impact on war production and thus on the war at the front (Lambourne 2001, 140). This is abhorrent; a “calculated frightfulness” (ibid: 137), but it is not meaningless. It is in fact entirely logical within the parameters of total war. Nor was it a “revenge attack” for British casualties for, although the British Press sometimes appeared to suggest that some raids were “tit for tat” they were always carefully managed within strategic objectives, unlike some of the Luftwaffe’s where it was made very clear to the German populace and the British that the raids were in retaliation and in revenge for attacks on Germany.
Dresden and Hamburg, in particular, have become icons of suffering through which many German people express their victimhood during the Second World War. This victimhood is, as we will see, a form of interpretation and collective memory that extends “across the generations” (Hewer and Roberts 2012, 170) and has taken on for some Germans at least, “the appearance of unequivocal truth,” much as Hitler is considered to be synonymous with evil (ibid). However, some of the symbolism and juxtaposition of material culture will only be immediately obvious to members of the German nation who now share a cultural background. For example the positioning of the Allied air raids next to the model of the concentration camp and the images of Warsaw ghetto victims in this museum might suggest that the sufferings of so called Aryan Germans and European Jews was similar if not equal, an equation criticised by several commentators (Preußer 2007) but encouraged by others (Friedrich 2002).

**Britain and the Blitz**

Unlike the Germans the British celebrate their role in the Second World War, including their ability to withstand the bombing of civilians. Writing about the fiftieth anniversary of the war Martin Woollacott commented that “Second World War celebrations have a meaning in Britain that they do not have in any other former allied country. The war, for some Britons at least, is an icon of our inner superiority” (Woollacott 1994, 2 cited Cesarini 1997, 27). It was also a people’s war or The People’s War (Rose, 2004). For Britain the Second World War was and remains a just war in which the British suffered the bombing of their cities and, under Churchill’s leadership, rallied, endured and eventually fought back and won. Well known photographs of the Blitz in the media are of wrecked and burning buildings, people in shelters and air raid wardens, policemen offering support – rarely if ever of body parts or people grieving over corpses mutilated by fire or bomb blasts. These things happened but
they are not mentioned. Museums in London, such as the Imperial War Museum (in its 1989 construction of the Blitz experience), present bombing as a test of national character, something in which people can take pride. The more recent Museum of London displays (2010) show photographs of covered bodies but still mainly focuses on the survival and bravery of the victims.

In contrast the bombing of Scotland in the National War Museum of Scotland in the Second World War is barely mentioned at all. Indeed the exhibition appears to play it down. There is one painting of Air raid shelters Dundee which has a text panel stating that “In Dundee, concern was expressed at the slowness with which the authorities provided shelters. In the event the feared mass attacks did not materialise and, with a total of 38 bombs dropped on the city, Dundee escaped relatively lightly.” Little is made of the fact that other areas in Scotland suffered badly. For example Clydebank, was a ‘legitimate’ industrial target with its docks, ship building yards and factories on Clydeside, and was attacked on two consecutive nights in March 1941. Despite the first raid of 13/14 March the docks continued to function. The following night the Luftwaffe came back and, guided by the still burning docks and factory areas, bombed the residential districts surrounding them. 55,000 people lost their homes, only seven out of the 12,000 tenements were reported to have escaped damage (Gardiner 2004, caption opposite 590), over a thousand were killed outright and 1,600 were seriously injured. Bodies were buried in mass graves without coffins. On 7 April the Germans returned again and bombed civilian areas as well as the docks (Gardiner 2004, 416 – 7). The absence of detail about this raid, except in a brief textual mention, is a kind of national amnesia and contrast sharply with the way the Blitz is dealt with in England. A similar amnesia can be found in the National Museum of Scotland where there is a reference to the bombing in Clydebank. Here a reference to bombing can be found in the second paragraph about
Scotland’s contribution to the war effort. “On the night of the 13 and 14 March 1941, 581 people were killed in the worst series of Luftwaffe air raids on Clydebank. But its distance from Germany meant Scotland escaped the worst effects of the war.” The use of 581 as the number of dead is interesting. Official announcements at the time estimated the dead to be about 500; though this was soon revised upwards to over a thousand, and those who survived the bombing were incredulous at the initial low figure given out (Gardiner 2011, 290). The use of the lower number by the Museum gives the impression of being deliberate as there are well documented sources to prove the higher number. At a time when Scotland debated independence we can interpret this as a distancing from the events of the past that symbolise a united Britain, unconcerned about different national interests within it. The Blitz is a British myth for people were bombed in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales as well as England. For some Scots, intent on pursuing a nationalist agenda, this story is irrelevant and is downplayed to reduce emotional attachment to the Union and what it stood for in the past.

Conclusion

We have seen that photographs of the dead in the bombing wars that marked the Second World War are rare in museums in Britain and Germany. Cultural norms and the lack of the ready availability of certain images, help to explain this absence. However, their absence and occasional presence denote the ways these nations understand their histories in the twenty first century. Germany uses the story of victimhood as a means of uniting itself and a way of coming to terms with its past. Britain’s Blitz story promotes a story of common suffering and unity in adversity. In a time of Scottish dissatisfaction with the Union the Blitz narrative almost disappears in Edinburgh, while museums in England tend to present it as something of which British people can be proud and which defined the nation in the past. The presence or
absence of the dead tells us more about ourselves than it does about the events that brought about the sorrow and the suffering.

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5. [http://www.sdtb.de/Panoramas.1164.0.html](http://www.sdtb.de/Panoramas.1164.0.html) accessed 21 April 2014.

7. The German air force bombed civilians in the opening days of its attack on Poland despite the fact that its military strategy officially targeted military sites and operations (Hastings 2011, 6-7). Overy considers it unlikely that civilian deaths were intentional but, whatever the official purpose of the air raids, the Poles and their allies understood bombing of women and children to be part of an official war of terror. He argues that there is no evidence that civilian deaths reached 40,000 as has been claimed but suggests instead approximately 7,000 died (Overy 2012, 61 – 63).
8. The Battle of Britain in the summer and autumn of 1940 was a duel between fighter aircraft for the control of the skies during daylight hours, with some bombing of British airfields and ports (Pelling 1970, 96- 7). The Blitz, which followed afterwards and continued throughout the winter and spring of 1940 – 41 was a deliberate
attempt to bomb British cities into submission by night-time bombing, after Hitler postponed his plans to invade on 17 September 1940. Coventry was bombed on 14 November 1940.

9 The word Blitz is shorthand for Blitzkrieg, a German word to describe a military tactic of ‘lightning war’ which was designed to hit the enemy fast and hard in order to secure surrender. In Britain it was shortened to the word Blitz and came to stand for German bombing raids.