



CHALLENGING THE POLITICS OF GERMAN VICTIMHOOD: MEMORY ACTIVISM AND THE CONTESTED ANNIVERSARY OF THE DRESDEN BOMBINGS SINCE 2005

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ABSTRACT

The anniversaries of the bombings of Dresden on 13 and 14 February 1945 have become key events in Germany's memory calendar. This article examines the role that local civil society agents have played in shaping, and changing, local memory culture in Dresden after 2005. It will explore how different memory agents interpreted the Dresden bombings, what significance for the present they attributed to them, what memory practices they adopted, and how these led to a significant transformation of local memory culture. I will argue that the years 2005 to 2016 saw two important shifts in local memory culture. First, the initiatives of local civil society activists, who aimed to resurrect 'forgotten' memories and advocated alternative memory practices, resulted in a more diverse and pluralist local memory landscape. A key dimension of this was the diversification of the meaning of victimhood that included, crucially, victims of Nazi persecution. Secondly, these years witnessed a reassessment of the meaning of the Dresden bombings and of the inherently political character of the annual commemoration, linking the legacy of the bombings unambiguously to the fight for tolerance and against right-wing extremism.

Der Jahrestag der Bombardierung Dresdens am 13. und 14. Februar 1945 ist seit langer Zeit ein wichtiges Datum der deutschen Erinnerungskultur. Im vorliegenden Artikel wird die Bedeutung zivilgesellschaftlicher Akteure für die Gestaltung und Veränderung der lokalen Erinnerungskultur in Dresden untersucht. Dabei liegt der Schwerpunkt einerseits darauf, wie verschiedene erinnerungskulturelle Akteure die Bombenangriffe interpretierten und welche Bedeutung sie diesen für die Gegenwart beimessen als andererseits auch darauf, mit welchen Praktiken sie die Erinnerung formen und dadurch zu einem bedeutenden Wandel der lokalen Erinnerungskultur beitrugen. Das Hauptargument des Artikels zeigt einen solchen Wandel in den Jahren von 2005 bis 2016 in zweierlei Hinsicht auf. Zum ersten kam es zu einer Diversifizierung und Pluralisierung der Erinnerungskultur durch die größere Berücksichtigung 'vergessener' Erinnerungen und die Verbreitung vielfältigerer Erinnerungspraktiken. Dies beinhaltete auch eine Veränderung des Opferbegriffs, der nun stärker den Opfern nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen Rechnung trägt. Zum zweiten fand in diesen Jahren eine Neubeurteilung der Erinnerungskultur selbst statt, infolge derer ihre politische Funktion anerkannt und unmittelbar mit dem Kampf gegen Rassismus und Rechtsextremismus verknüpft wurde.

This article examines the changes in how the anniversaries of the Dresden bombings have been remembered and made sense of in the

last fifteen years. By focusing on the interventions of local political and memory activists, I will shed light on the wider political significance of the anniversary, not only for local memory culture but also for wider debates in German political culture. One of the main reasons why the anniversaries have gained national significance is precisely because participants attribute wider political meaning to the events of the past and present-day commemorative practices. The debate, in Dresden and beyond, over appropriate commemorative practices touches upon a set of fundamental political values and issues which include tolerance and anti-racism, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, the understanding of democracy, the legitimacy of civil disobedience, and the boundaries of police intervention. It is precisely because such central political issues are deemed to be at stake that activists from across the political spectrum furnish the anniversaries with meaning in and relevance for the present, rendering the anniversaries an important moment not only in Germany's memory culture but also in its political culture. For the decade between 2005 and 2015, Dresden's anniversary capital very much rested on the anniversary's status as an important political event in which Germans negotiated the appropriateness and effectiveness of different means to confront the far right not just at local and regional levels, but also at the national level.

Dresden has long been a national site of memory.¹ The anniversaries of the bombings of the city on 13 and 14 February 1945 have become key events in Germany's memory calendar. As Gilad Margalit argues, the anniversaries are 'not just local affairs' but have a 'nationwide impact'.² Dresden has become the symbolic German 'Opferstadt' and, in David Crew's words, 'a supersite of national memory and commemoration'.³ Since 1990, Dresden has also become an international site of memory. The German TV film *Dresden* (2006), repeatedly broadcast in the UK on Channel 4, and the *Daily Mail's* attempt to turn the participation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, in the 2015 commemoration into a scandal,⁴ are but two examples of Dresden's status as an international *lieu de mémoire*.

¹ Olaf B. Rader, 'Dresden', in *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, 3 vols, ed. Etienne François and Hagen Schulze, Munich 2001, III, pp. 451–70. Anne Fuchs, 'World War II in German Cultural Memory: Dresden as Lieu de Memoire', in *The Routledge Handbook of German Politics and Culture*, ed. Sarah Colvin, London 2015, pp. 48–70.

² Gilad Margalit, *Guilt, Suffering, and Memory. Germany Remembers Its Dead of World War II*, Indiana 2010, p. 266.

³ David Crew, *Bodies and Ruins. Imagining the Bombing of Germany, 1945 to the Present*, Ann Arbor, MI 2017, p. 168.

⁴ Larisa Brown and Steve Doughty, 'Archbishop says sorry for bombing the Nazis: ... as BBC insults RAF heroes over Dresden', *Daily Mail*, 14 February 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2952945/amp/Archbishop-says-sorry-bombing-Nazis-Justin-Welby-attacked-bizarre-apology-Dresden-raids-makes-no-reference-RAF-heroes-killed-> (accessed 7 June 2020).

Many aspects of how Dresden has been remembered have received academic interest, in particular architecture, art, literature, film, and politics in the GDR.⁵ Remarkably little attention has been paid to local memory culture after 2000. Tony Joel's detailed discussion of the multifaceted memory events of 2005, terming them a 'memory battleground', did not explore the local tensions and controversies over commemorative practices, and largely ignores civil society agents.⁶ Thomas Fache's survey of local memory discourses since 1945 ends with the observation that, by 2008, 'eine Neujustierung des Gedenkens' was under way.⁷ Similarly, Claudia Jerzak's study of how local civil society groups interpret the bombings and approach their commemoration between 1990 and 2008 identifies a shift in local memory culture that had been set in motion by 2008.⁸ More recently, Mathias Berek has developed a useful classification of five different local collective memories, together

⁵ Susanne Veas-Gulani, 'The Politics of New Beginnings: The Continued Exclusion of the Nazi Past in Dresden's Cityscape', in *Beyond Berlin: German Cities Confront the Nazi Past*, ed. Gavriel David Rosenfeld, Ann Arbor, MI 2008; Susanne Veas-Gulani, 'From Frankfurt's Goethehaus to Dresden's Frauenkirche: Architecture, German Identity, and Historical Memory after 1945', *The Germanic Review*, 80/2 (2005), 143–63; Anne Fuchs, *After the Dresden Bombing: Pathways of Memory, 1945 to the Present*, Basingstoke 2011; Karl-Siebert Rehberg and Matthias Neutzner, 'The Dresden Frauenkirche as a Contested Symbol: The Architecture of Remembrance After the War', in *War and Cultural Heritage: Biographies of Place*, ed. Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Dacia Viejo-Rose, Cambridge 2015, pp. 98–127; Bill Niven, 'The GDR and Memory of the Bombing of Dresden', in *Germans as Victims. Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany*, ed. Bill Niven, Basingstoke 2006, pp. 109–29; *Die Zerstörung Dresdens. Antworten der Künste*, ed. Walter Schmitz, Dresden 2005; Susanne Veas-Gulani, *Trauma and Guilt. Literature of Wartime Bombing in Germany*, Berlin 2003; Thomas Fox, 'Writing Dresden Across the Generations', in *Victims and Perpetrators: 1933–1945. (Re)Presenting the Past in Post-Unification Culture*, ed. Laurel Cohen-Pfister and Dagmar Wienroeder-Skinner, Berlin 2006; David F. Crew, 'Sleeping with the Enemy? A Fiction Film for German Television about the Bombing of Dresden', *Central European History*, 40/1 (2007), 117–32; Susanne Veas-Gulani, 'The Ruined Picture Postcard: Dresden's Visually Encoded History and the Television Drama *Dresden*', *New German Critique*, 38/1 (2011), 85–113; Gilad Margalit, 'Der Luftangriff auf Dresden. Seine Bedeutung für die Erinnerungspolitik der DDR und für die Herauskristallisierung einer historischen Kriegerinnerung im Westen', in *Narrative der Shoah: Repräsentationen der Vergangenheit in Historiographie, Kunst und Politik*, ed. Susanne Düwell, Paderborn 2002, pp. 189–207; Margalit, *Guilt, Suffering, and Memory* (note 2); Tony Joel, *The Dresden Firebombing: Memory and the Politics of Commemorating Destruction*, London 2013; Thomas Widera, 'Gefangene Erinnerung. Die politische Instrumentalisierung der Bombardierung Dresdens', in *Alliiertes Bombenkrieg. Das Beispiel Dresden*, ed. Lothar Fritze and Thomas Widera, Göttingen 2005, pp. 109–34; Matthias Neutzner, 'Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern: die Erzählung vom 13. Februar', in *Das Rote Leuchten. Dresden und der Bombenkrieg*, ed. Oliver Reinhard, Matthias Neutzner, and Wolfgang Hesse, Dresden 2005, pp. 128–63; Crew, *Bodies and Ruins* (note 3).

⁶ Joel, *The Dresden Firebombing* (note 5).

⁷ Thomas Fache, 'Gegenwartsbewältigungen. Dresdens Gedenken an die Alliierten Luftangriffe vor und nach 1989', in *Luftkrieg in Erinnerungen in Deutschland und Europa*, ed. Jörg Arnold, Dietmar Süß, and Malte Thießen, Göttingen 2009, pp. 221–38 (p. 238).

⁸ Claudia Jerzak, 'Gedenken an den 13. Februar 1945. Perspektiven Dresdner AkteurInnen auf die Entwicklung von Erinnerungskultur und kollektivem Gedächtnis seit 1990', Diplomarbeit, Dresden 2009.

with the aims of the local groups and organisations championing them.⁹ While these studies provide valuable insights into the discourses among local memory activists and the intersection of local and national memory cultures, the development of local memory after 2005 and the dynamics of change as a renegotiation between local activists and city officials remain unexplored.

This article traces these significant changes in Dresden's memory culture between 2005 and 2016 through the lens of local civil society activists and evaluates their influence on commemorative discourses and practices. In doing so, it heeds Jenny Wüstenberg's recent call to give more credit to how grass-roots initiatives have shaped German memory culture.¹⁰ Her study has broken important ground in demonstrating the significant impact of civil society agents and in conceptualising the link between civil society and state democracy in the realm of memory. She argues that the dominant focus on official and elite discourses in German memory studies 'mask[s] a more complex history of bottom-up initiatives and social movements that – more often than not – do the real work of making memory'.¹¹ The article will first explore the dominant meanings and practices of Dresden's memory culture in the 1990s and early 2000s and examine how Neo-Nazi groups increasingly sought to appropriate them. The second and third parts analyse the interventions by a range of civil society groups and the dynamics of renegotiating commemorative practices between activists and city officials.

I will argue that civil society memory activists had a profound impact on local memory culture because they challenged the once hegemonic practice of 'stilles Gedenken' and played a vital role in establishing a more pluralistic and democratic memoryscape. This change had three main dimensions. First, it moved from a practice that was once largely officially sanctioned as a top-down process to one in which grass-roots initiatives led the way to change by establishing alternative memory practices and rituals that shaped the make-up of Dresden's memory culture. Secondly, due to the interventions by activists, the meaning of 'victimhood' and of Dresden as a symbolic city of victimhood became more diverse and self-reflective. Finally, it changed from a culture whose main commemorative practice was originally imagined by its proponents as unpolitical towards a culture that explicitly acknowledged the inherently political nature of commemoration.

⁹ Mathias Berek, 'Transfer Zones: German and Global Suffering in Dresden', in *Local Memories in a Nationalizing and Globalizing World*, ed. Marnix Beyen, Basingstoke 2015, pp. 72–93.

¹⁰ Jenny Wüstenberg, *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany*, Cambridge 2017.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

DOMINANT LOCAL PRACTICES OF COMMEMORATION AND THEIR APPROPRIATION
BY THE FAR RIGHT

In the 1990s, the main ritual for many Dresdeners became the practice of 'stilles Gedenken'. This practice emerged out of an amalgamation of two separate commemorative practices that were established in the GDR. The first is the official commemorative ceremony at the memorial to the victims at Heidefriedhof cemetery on the morning of the anniversary. Inaugurated in 1948, the memorial emphasised the enormous suffering and anonymity of countless victims of the bombings while also pointing out that it was a man-made catastrophe: 'Wie viele starben? / Wer kennt die Zahl? / An Deinen Wunden sieht man die Qual / Der Namenlosen die hier verbrannt / Im Hoellenfeuer aus Menschenhand'. In the 1960s, local politicians as well as religious and civic groups attended a wreath-laying service at the site which was followed by short speeches. As the SED regime's interest in using the Dresden anniversaries decreased in the 1970s and early 1980s, official commemorative involvement dwindled until it was re-established for the fortieth anniversary in 1985.¹² At this time, the second commemorative practice emerged: the gathering of locals in the city centre to attend church services and to light candles by the Frauenkirche collectively and silently while the city's church bells rang to mark the time the bombings began. This practice emerged first in the early 1980s and was organised by the nascent GDR peace movement and Christian groups, who also sought to challenge the overly ritualistic and politicised ceremonies of the official commemoration at Heidefriedhof.

After 1990, the two practices became part of 'stilles Gedenken', which Fache termed a 'neues normatives Erinnerungsmodell'.¹³ Ironically, the official commemorative practice of the SED regime was fused with what had originally been designed as a counter-memory, grass-roots initiative that emerged out of opposition to the top-down anti-fascist myth of the GDR. The official ceremony had long been embedded as the cornerstone of local memory culture and allowed greater prominence for government officials than the grass-roots gathering in the city centre. With its origins in Protestant church groups and opposition to the GDR, the practice of a candlelit congregation was a powerful resource of symbolic capital in a reunified Germany and was quickly appropriated as part of the officially sanctioned memory culture. It was institutionalised as the 'ursprünglichste, authentischste erinnerungskulturelle Ritual'.¹⁴ By integrating what was originally a grass-roots initiative, the practice also allowed the post-1990

¹² Joel, *The Dresden Firebombing* (note 5), p. 142.

¹³ Fache, 'Gegenwartsbewältigungen' (note 7), p. 234.

¹⁴ Claudia Jerzak, 'Der 13. Februar in Dresden', in 'Sachsens Demokratie? Demokratische Kultur und Erinnerung, Medienlandschaft und Überwachungs politik in Sachsen. Erweiterter Tagungsband zur Tagung am 20. Januar 2012 in Dresden', ed. Weiterdenken – Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Sachsen and Kulturbüro Sachsen, Dresden 2012, pp. 35–47 (p. 41).

official commemoration to be imagined as a commemorative tradition with roots in the GDR opposition and therefore served to give legitimacy to CDU-dominated local, regional, and national politics.

Although both practices lost some of their original meaning and character, the ritualised practices themselves largely remained in place and were filled with new meanings that suited the political objectives of the new time. Both practices, for different reasons, concentrated on the victims of the bombings and represented the air raids as brutal and unjustifiable acts that were thus decontextualised from the wider history of the war and the Third Reich. Dresden continued to be imagined as Germany's foremost 'Opferstadt'. Such decontextualised remembrance also aided the consolidation of commemorative discourses in which the suffering in Dresden was increasingly equated to suffering in war more generally, thus universalising German suffering.¹⁵ This decontextualisation was symbolised in the widespread use of the term '13. Februar' to refer to the anniversary, signifying a single historical event on a specific date that was separated from its historical context. The dominant narratives about the bombings were based on the myth of an innocent 'Kunst- und Kulturstadt' that, more than any other city, was unnecessarily and unjustifiably destroyed. This myth had been established by Nazi propaganda in the immediate aftermath of the bombings and its core was maintained in official memory discourses in the GDR, through which it became deeply embedded in historical consciousness.¹⁶

'Stilles Gedenken' was widely deemed the appropriate practice of a 'dignified commemoration'. Commemoration was seen as an individual act of remembering individuals who died in the bombings. Because of its focus on the suffering of individuals, further accentuated by the increasing prominence of eyewitnesses in the rituals as well as media representations, the practice was conceived of as an unpolitical act. It was unthinkable for advocates of 'stilles Gedenken' to ponder the political motivations underlying the commemoration of the victims or the political meaning and symbolism it created. The appropriateness of 'stilles Gedenken' was taken for granted and had become an unspoken and uncontroversial assumption. In 2006, the local daily newspaper, *Sächsische Zeitung*, demonstrated how much the practice had been internalised as unquestionable: 'Die Ruhe, die Erinnerung, das Gedenken und das stille Mahnen tragen die Dresdner auf gemeinsamen Veranstaltungen in sich, nicht plakativ vor sich her.'¹⁷ In this view, commemoration was a deeply personal, introspective, and silent act that Dresdeners instinctively understood and knew how to

¹⁵ Henning Fischer, *'Erinnerung' an und für Deutschland: Dresden und der 13. Februar 1945 im Gedächtnis der Berliner Republik*, Münster 2011, p. 134.

¹⁶ Margalit, 'Der Luftangriff auf Dresden' (note 5); Neutzner, 'Vom Anklagen zum Erinnern' (note 5).

¹⁷ (No author), 'Gedenken', *Sächsische Zeitung*, 10 February 2006.

carry out in a dignified manner. Any 'Politisierung' was rejected as a 'Vereinnahmung' or 'Missbrauch' of the act of remembrance, and one that would undermine a dignified commemoration. In 2003, the *Sächsische Zeitung* went as far as to say, '[d]as politische Gedenken entehrt die Opfer',¹⁸ not only separating commemoration from politics but attributing to politics a harmful influence on commemoration.

The two quotations from the *Sächsische Zeitung* of 2003 and 2006 indicate that something had changed insofar as 'stilles Gedenken' was no longer an unquestioned given but a concept that had to be explained and defended. This was because the hegemonic discourse became increasingly challenged in these years, largely in response to a growing and more visible presence of Neo-Nazis at commemorative events and Neo-Nazi activities in the city and in the state of Saxony. In 1998, local far-right groups initiated a 'Trauermarsch' as their own commemorative practice, mobilising an ever-increasing number of participants, with 1,000 and 2,700 Neo-Nazis attending marches in 2003 and 2004 respectively.¹⁹ Through the 'Trauermarsch', far-right groups sought to appropriate the commemoration of the victims for their own political aims. However, Neo-Nazis also increasingly joined 'stilles Gedenken' practices by participating in both the official commemorative ceremony at Heidefriedhof and the candlelit congregations in the city centre. Mingling with mainstream participants at events of 'stilles Gedenken' created the impression that mainstream and Neo-Nazi mourners shared the same commemorative space and the same practices, with the effect of legitimising the presence of Neo-Nazis and thus normalising National Socialist ideas more generally. Most participants in 'stilles Gedenken' activities tolerated the presence of Neo-Nazis, not least because the self-image of the commemoration as *unpolitical* and *silent* did not permit the expression of political views.

While some had begun to feel uncomfortable with the presence of the far right, the reluctance to take a political stance and to demarcate the commemoration politically was thrown into the spotlight in September 2004 when the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) achieved 9.2% in Saxon regional elections and was represented in a German regional parliament for the first time in over three decades. This came as a particular shock in Saxony, as the state's long-serving Minister President Kurt Biedenkopf had claimed in 2000 that 'die Sachsen sind immun gegen Rechtsextremismus', a claim he has repeated in recent years.²⁰ The Neo-Nazi party gaining almost one out of ten votes fundamentally called this projection and self-image into question, alongside the appropriateness of

¹⁸ *Sächsische Zeitung*, 13 February 2003, cited in Fischer, 'Erinnerung' an und für Deutschland (note 15), p. 144.

¹⁹ Martin Clemens Winter, 'Luftkrieg: Akteure und Deutungen des Gedenkens seit 1945', in *Erinnerungsorte der Extremen Rechten*, ed. Martin Langebach and Michael Sturm, Wiesbaden 2015, pp. 197–212.

²⁰ 'Kurt, dir wäre das nicht passiert!', interview with Martin Machowicz, *Die Zeit*, 5 October 2017.

Dresden's commemorative practices. The NPD's success provided a crucial catalyst for rethinking commemorative practices, which became a matter of urgency with the approaching sixtieth anniversary of the bombings in 2005. In late 2004, representatives from a range of civil society groups agreed on a 'Rahmen für das Erinnern'. The framework, endorsed by the mayor, called for a questioning of 'unsere[s] Umgang[s] mit diesem Teil unserer Geschichte', but also warned against 'einen möglichen Missbrauch' of the commemoration.²¹ The notion of misuse primarily targeted right-wing extremist ideas but also referred to 'jede Verhöhnung der Opfer', which was directed at the practices that had been adopted by antifascist groups.

CHALLENGING THE VICTIMHOOD NARRATIVE: LOCAL ACTIVISM AND THE CONTROVERSIAL POLITICS OF MEMORY 2004–10

This dominant narrative about the Dresden bombings never went entirely unchallenged. From the 1990s, antifascist groups continuously criticised the victimhood myth and historical revisionism and justified, even welcomed, the air raids on Dresden. Local antifascist groups became more visible in the commemoration after 2000.²² Their approach was to provocatively and radically disrupt the hegemonic narratives and commemorative practices. They had a clear political agenda and sought to highlight the political nature of commemorative activities.

On a discursive level, they aimed to challenge the notion of Dresden as an innocent 'Opferstadt'. In particular, they criticised the fact that local narratives disconnected the bombings from the history of the Third Reich and the earlier stages of the Second World War. Typical slogans included: 'Den deutschen Opfermythos im Visier' (2004), 'No tears for Krauts' (2005), and 'Deutsche TäterInnen sind keine Opfer' (2006–10).²³ Through such interventions, antifascist activists challenged the decontextualised 'stilles Gedenken' and aimed to draw greater attention to Dresden's history of complicity in Nazi crimes and their perpetration. Antifascist activism gained momentum in 2003 and 2004, when narratives of German victimhood gained new prominence in the wider discursive shifts in German memory culture following the debates over Günter Grass's *Im Krebsgang* and Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand*. In 2004, the Dresden antifascist group *venceremos* criticised the 'grassierende Opferdiskurs', in which Dresden played 'eine Vorreiterrolle [...] durch die konsensuale öffentliche

²¹ 'Rahmen für das Erinnern' (2004), https://www.dresden.de/media/pdf/13.februar_text_erinnerung.pdf (accessed 20 August 2018).

²² Teile der sogenannten Gruppe *venceremos*, 'Provokation als Mittel: "Wir danken den Alliierten für die Zerschlagung Nazideutschlands"', in *Gedenken Abschaffen. Kritik am Diskurs zur Bombardierung Dresdens 1945*, ed. Autor_innenkollektiv Dissonanz, Berlin 2013, pp. 217–22.

²³ Autor_innenkollektiv Dissonanz, *Gedenken Abschaffen* (note 22), p. 321.

Darstellung der Opferhaltung am zum Symbol gemachten 13. Februar'.²⁴ They denounced what they perceived as the 'Dresdner Opferkonsens' in which German responsibility for the war and the Holocaust were pushed aside.²⁵

Antifascist interventions also aimed to problematise the political dimension of the anniversary and draw attention to the Neo-Nazi 'Trauermarsch'. The trivialisation of German perpetration as a result of universalising suffering and victimhood made it possible to portray Germany 'als historisch geläutert'.²⁶ Such a position would go hand in hand with the desire for a more assertive articulation of German national identity, which antifascist campaigners sought to undermine and which the slogan 'Keine Versöhnung mit Deutschland', used in the 2009 and 2010 Dresden campaigns, made explicit.²⁷ Antifascists politicised the presence of the far right at mainstream commemorative rituals, accusing city officials and citizens of wallowing in mourning and self-pity, and of failing to sufficiently demarcate commemorative rituals from Neo-Nazi activities. They intended to unmask the ignorance and naivety of the mainstream that would allow the far right to portray themselves as part of the mainstream, thereby exploiting the events as their political and anniversary capital.²⁸

While antifascist slogans and their linking of the commemoration to political agendas already had the potential for controversy, their counter-commemorative practices proved even more provocative. In the early 2000s, adopted practices served primarily as 'Gedenkkritik' and aimed to disrupt and ridicule the silent and solemn mourning rituals of 'stilles Gedenken'. Such practices included a commemorative rally for Bomber Harris, a Britpop party, and offering English breakfast as celebrations of the military and cultural achievements of the Allied powers to express their anti-German sentiments. Other practices such as champagne receptions, carnival parties, and vociferous disruptions of 'stilles Gedenken' rituals were playful performative acts designed to mark the very antithesis to the mainstream commemoration. As a 2003 leaflet stated, 'wir [...] lassen uns nicht die Laune verderben von

²⁴ 'Den deutschen Opfermythos im Visier: Gegen jeden Geschichtsrevisionismus', <https://web.archive.org/web/20041227034639/http://www.venceremos.antifa.net/13februar/2004/demonstration.html> (accessed 20 August 2018).

²⁵ 'Keine Träne für Dresden: Aufruf der autonomen antifa Dresden', February 2005, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060106022226/http://venceremos.antifa.net/13februar/2005/aufruf.pdf> (accessed 12 June 2019).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Posters reprinted in Autor_innenkollektiv Dissonanz, *Gedenken Abschaffen* (note 22), pp. 331 and 333.

²⁸ 'Wir danken den Alliierten für die militärische Zerschlagung Nazideutschlands', February 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20041130230847/http://www.venceremos.antifa.net/13februar/2002/wirdankentext.html> (accessed 12 June 2019).

kerzenschwingenden Betroffenenheits-Deutschen'.²⁹ From 2004 onwards, the focus of antifascist practices gradually moved from humorous performative disruptions of 'stilles Gedenken' to organising political demonstrations against the Neo-Nazi 'Trauermarsch'. It therefore shifted from provocatively criticising mainstream commemorative practices to disturbing and ultimately frustrating Neo-Nazi activities. This shift was significant as it made these forms of protest potentially more acceptable to the more left-leaning parts of the mainstream.³⁰

Among the majority of local politicians and citizens, however, their interventions were widely deemed radical, inappropriate, and undignified, with regard to both content and form. In 2005, an exchange between locals and a group of antifascist protesters holding a banner reading '60 Jahre Trauer um Dresden – 60 Jahre Trauer um den Nationalsozialismus' is revealing: a local challenged the protesters, saying, 'Schämt ihr euch nicht, uns in den Dreck zu ziehen?', to which a protester responded, 'Dort drüben marschieren die Nazis! Die zerren euch vor aller Welt in den Dreck!'.³¹ This exchange shows that more was at stake in the memory contest than simply the appropriateness of commemorative practices. It was also about the weight attributed to the wider historical context in which the bombings should be placed and questions of historical responsibility for the bombings. These antifascist interventions, while having little immediate impact on commemorative practices, were nonetheless important in formulating a counter-discourse that problematised Dresden as an 'Opferstadt'. By contextualising the bombings in the wider history of the Second World War and the Nazi regime, they regarded the bombings as a direct and necessary consequence of German support for the Nazi regime and justified, even glorified, the bombings.

While the annual anniversaries of the bombings between 1995 and 2005 were mostly a local affair, the sixtieth anniversary in 2005 turned the commemorative events into a nation-wide memory contest. National and international attention had already been focused on Dresden a month before the anniversary during a commemorative event in the Saxon parliament on the occasion of Holocaust Memorial Day. The leader of the NPD parliamentary group, Holger Apfel, spoke of the 'Opfer des alliierten Bombenterrors' and claimed that the bombings of Dresden represented a 'kaltblütig geplanter industrieller Massenmord' that was ignored in

²⁹ Antifa Dresden, 'Aufruf zum Karneval: Gute Laune gegen schlechte Angewohnheiten', January 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050106185325/http://venceremos.antifa.net/13februar/2003/tx01.html> (accessed 12 June 2019).

³⁰ Venceremos, 'Provokation als Mittel' (note 22), p. 219.

³¹ Cited in Harald Lachmann, 'Die Stadt Dresden lebt in ihrem Schmerz', *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 14 February 2005.

Germany's 'Sühnekultur' and 'nationale[r] Selbstvergessenheit'.³² Drawing on a well-established trope frequently used in GDR propaganda, Apfel referred to the bombings as an act of terrorism, but also equated the bombings with the Holocaust by speaking of planned industrial mass murder. His fellow NPD parliamentarian Jürgen Gansel made this even more explicit by using the term 'Bomben-Holocaust' in the same parliamentary debate.³³ The NPD's calculated provocation caused an outcry in the national and international media³⁴ and heightened the expectations for the sixtieth anniversary of the Dresden bombings just three weeks later.

Following the NPD's provocation, the German public debated the renaissance of Neo-Nazi ideology. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* stated, '[d]er Konsens des "Nie wieder" ist durchlöchert', the *Spiegel* spoke of an 'Aufstand der Unanständigen', and the *Welt* deemed the 'Ehre der Nation' to be threatened.³⁵ Following the NPD's intervention, the anniversary became explicitly framed as a *political* event of national significance – what was at stake was nothing less than the defence of German democracy against the challenge from the anti-democratic far right. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* called on democratic forces to stand united by identifying and defending the 'Standort der Demokraten', while the *Welt am Sonntag* raised the spectre of Weimar when it asked Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, 'Haben wir Weimarer Verhältnisse?',³⁶ implying there was the threat of a takeover by the far right. In the interview, Schröder argued in relation to the bombings that: '[m]an darf die Verantwortlichkeiten nicht verwischen. [...] Wir werden auch nicht zulassen, daß Ursache und Wirkung vertauscht werden'.³⁷ The very occurrence of the German head of government intervening in a local memory contest demonstrated the importance attributed to the anniversary and the political issues – and capital – at stake. Such framing in national media and political discourse endowed the anniversary with political significance. Dresden's anniversary capital in 2005 derived precisely from linking the memory of the bombings to the

³² Sächsischer Landtag, Plenarprotokoll 4/8, 21 January 2005, pp. 460, 461, http://edas.landtag.sachsen.de/viewer.aspx?dok_nr=8&dok_art=PIPr&leg_per=4&pos.dok=201&dok_id=undefined (accessed 10 April 2019).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

³⁴ E.g. Sven Heitkamp, 'Der kalkulierte Skandal', *Die Welt*, 25 January 2005; Ian Traynor, 'Dresden parliament in uproar at neo-Nazi outburst', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jan/22/secondworldwar.thefarright> (accessed 7 June 2020).

³⁵ Stephan Hebel, 'Standort der Demokraten', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 25 January 2005; Roland Nelles and Gabor Steingard, *Der Spiegel*, 31 January 2005; Eckhard Fuhr, 'Die Ehre der Nation', *Die Welt*, 11 February 2005.

³⁶ Günther Lachmann, Christoph Keese, and Christian Reiermann, 'Haben wir Weimarer Verhältnisse, Herr Bundeskanzler?', *Die Welt am Sonntag*, 13 February 2005, <https://www.welt.de/print-wams/article123096/Haben-wir-Weimarer-Verhaeltnisse-Herr-Bundeskanzler.html> (accessed 7 June 2020).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

confrontation with a resurgent far right. While Schröder's intervention was primarily directed at the Neo-Nazi 'Trauermarsch', it also addressed the historical narrative and political silence advocated by the supporters of 'stilles Gedenken', which had increasingly become problematic.

More than 5,000 Neo-Nazis joined the 2005 'Trauermarsch', rendering the rally the largest of the European far right since 1945. With only 100 or 150 antifascist protesters, who aimed to block the Neo-Nazi rally, and about 50,000 participants in 'stilles Gedenken' activities, the framing of the anniversary in the national media as an important political contest appears to have left no mark on official local commemorative practices.³⁸ However, local memory activists increasingly deployed this framing of the anniversary as a politically significant event and challenged the dominant commemorative practices by establishing alternative grass-roots practices in two main ways. First, they campaigned for a greater recognition of Jewish suffering, thereby changing the conception of victimhood in the anniversary commemoration. Secondly, local civil society groups also fought for a more politically outspoken commemoration that turned the anniversary into a public statement against the far right.

The greater recognition of Jewish victimhood in commemorative activities and the city's memory culture more generally occurred through two initiatives. 'GeDenken', a network of mainly religious groups, trade unions, and left-wing political parties, aimed to integrate the historical context into the narrative about the bombings in order to accentuate the wider historical causes of the bombings.³⁹ The annual event organised by the network between 2001 and 2007 included a sharing of stories by eyewitnesses of the bombings. On two occasions, the life stories of Jewish survivors were included, for whom the bombings ensured their escape from deportation and thus survival. In 2004, the organisers invited the Holocaust survivor and Israeli peace activist Reuven Moskowitz to speak at the event.⁴⁰ Although 'GeDenken' was criticised for lacking a more explicit political position, it established a counter-commemorative practice that was envisaged as an alternative to 'stilles Gedenken' and marked a first, if only hesitant, challenge to the discursive construction of victimhood by writing the hitherto omitted suffering of Dresden's Jews into the narrative.

This writing-in of Jewish life into Dresden's memoryscape increased further during the second half of the first decade of the 2000s through the initiative 'Denkzeichen'. Conceptualised by the Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit (CJ) in 2006, it aims to recover and make visible 'jüdische[s] Leben und Leiden in der Zeit der nationalsozialistischen

³⁸ (No author), 'Dresden trotz den Neo-Nazis', *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 14 February 2005.

³⁹ Jerzak, 'Gedenken' (note 8), p. 124.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Herrschaft'⁴¹ through the installation of information panels at sites of Jewish life and persecution across the city. The initiative's desire, formulated in the mission statement, 'die Erinnerungskultur der Stadt [zu] bereichern' suggests it was intended as a deliberate intervention to diversify local memory culture. Through developing a more complex and diverse understanding of victimhood, both 'GeDenken' and 'Denkzeichen' represent counter-memorials that seek to challenge the dominant narrative of air-raid victimhood.

The local Jewish community also exposed the inherently problematic nature of silent and apolitical commemorative practices. The absence of an unambiguous political position of 'GeDenken' was the reason for the withdrawal of Jewish activists. The most significant intervention occurred in 2008 when the Jewish community decided to no longer participate in the official commemoration ceremony at Heidefriedhof. Nora Goldenbogen, the community's leader, found it 'nicht mehr erträglich' to take part alongside Neo-Nazis, whose presence at the ceremony had increased over the years.⁴² The withdrawal of the Jewish community was of high symbolic significance. It intensified the call for a clear political message to be articulated at commemorative rituals but also for the widening of discursive space to consider alternative practices. Matthias Neutzner, an important local grass-roots memory activist, also criticised the official ceremony for being devoid of a clear political position, quipping that the dominant commemorative practice was not 'ein stilles, sondern [...] ein sprachloses Gedenken'.⁴³ The response by Dresden's acting mayor Lutz Vogel revealed how deeply embedded the idea of the apolitical nature of the 'stilles Gedenken' was: 'Ich kann mir leider nicht aussuchen, mit wem ich gedenke'.⁴⁴

The second main development in the second half of the decade was the greater politicisation of the anniversary by left-leaning activists who devised new commemorative events that explicitly linked the anniversary of the bombings to the fight against right-wing extremism. After the first anti-Neo-Nazi demonstration on the anniversary in 2004, organised by the Bündnis Dresden gegen Rechts and supported by the mayor, a wider range of local activists initiated 'GehDenken'. Although many of the same local groups who were involved in 'GeDenken' supported 'GehDenken', the initiatives differed significantly, mainly with regard to the outspoken political position of 'GehDenken'. The play on the word 'Gedenken' appeals not only to critical thought ('denken'), it also adds an activist dimension ('Geh') to

⁴¹ CJ-Dresden, 'Denkzeichen zur Erinnerung an jüdisches Leben und Leiden im Nationalsozialismus', <https://web.archive.org/web/20160417151315/http://www.cj-dresden.de/index.php?id=164> (accessed 20 August 2018).

⁴² Cited in Hendrik Lasch, 'Das "sprachlose Gedenken" hat ausgedient', *Neues Deutschland*, 13 February 2008.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Cited in dpa, 'Dresdner Kritik am Gedenken', *Berliner Zeitung*, 14 February 2008.

the commemoration of the anniversaries. From 2005 to 2009, 'GehDenken' organised political demonstrations and rallies against the 'Trauermarsch' and the presence of right-wing extremism in the city more generally. It was supported by the SPD, the Greens, Die Linke.PDS, trade unions, and a wide range of religious, political, educational, and environmental groups.

'GehDenken' intervened in local memory culture by challenging the narratives, self-image, and practices of the hegemonic 'stilles Gedenken'. The group campaigned for a historical contextualisation of the bombings, which included a clear statement on historical responsibility, and emphasised the racial dimension of the Second World War and the Holocaust. The 2007 appeal, for example, stated that citizens, 'erinnern damit gleichzeitig an die Ursachen des Krieges, der von der Gewaltherrschaft der deutschen Nationalsozialisten ausging und Europa mit Rassismus und Rassenmord insbesondere an den europäischen Juden überzog'.⁴⁵ In 2009, 'GehDenken' activists also criticised the tendency to universalise German victimhood through equating the victims of Allied air raids to victims of either German military campaigns or of Nazi persecution and genocide.⁴⁶

The more obvious and more important contribution that 'GehDenken' made was, however, the appropriation of the anniversary for the fight against the far right. In doing so, the organisers called into question the self-image of advocates of 'stilles Gedenken'. The 2007 appeal established a direct connection between the memory of the past and the politics of the present: 'Gedenken heißt auch, gegen Nazis aktiv Stellung zu beziehen'.⁴⁷ The positioning against the Neo-Nazi march was also clear through the practice of lighting thousands of candles to spell the slogan 'Diese Stadt hat Nazis satt' as the culmination of the protest, often against the backdrop of the historic city centre. It represented an attempt to appropriate the practice of lighting candles, used in 'stilles Gedenken', to communicate a clear political message. While it remained a grass-roots initiative by local activists, it attracted increasing levels of support from national political and anti-racist organisations and artists. In 2009, the former President Richard von Weizsäcker and the President of the Bundestag, Wolfgang Thierse, as well as national party leaders Franz Müntefering (SPD), Claudia Roth (Greens), and Gregor Gysi (Linke) joined the demonstration. The support lent by leading national political and cultural figures demonstrated the political significance attributed to the anniversary, likely increased due to European, federal, and regional elections taking place later in the year. Substantial anniversary capital could be mobilised on this occasion because

⁴⁵ 'Geh Denken! Für Demokratie und gegen Rechtsextremismus am 13. Februar 2007', appeal 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070911103837/http://www.kulturbuero-sachsen.de/dokumente/Gehdenken2.pdf> (accessed 15 August 2018).

⁴⁶ 'Aufruf', December 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081227050559/http://www.geh-denken.de/aufruf.htm> (accessed 12 June 2019).

⁴⁷ 'Für Demokratie und gegen Rechtsextremismus' (note 45).

civil society groups succeeded in framing the anniversary as a political event of national relevance by establishing meaningful connections between the anniversary and wider political agendas at the national level and even at an international level, as the support from several MEPs and European human rights campaigners demonstrated.⁴⁸

It was precisely this effective politicisation which caused controversy at the local level. The local branches of the CDU and FDP felt unable to support 'GehDenken' because they had reservations about the appropriateness of its commemorative practices. Lars Rohwer, chair of the local CDU branch, equated 'GehDenken' with the 'Trauermarsch' because both represented a disruption of the commemoration 'in Stille und Würde'.⁴⁹ Rohwer's disagreement went deeper than merely accusing the left of exploiting the anniversary for political purposes. He felt that any vocal political demonstration on the anniversary was distasteful and disrespectful of the victims of the bombings: 'Wir Dresdner brauchen an diesem Tag keine zu Rockmusik tanzenden Linken auf dem Opernplatz! Das ist eine Verhöhnung der Opfer.'⁵⁰ Until 2009, the anniversaries remained a divisive local memory contest because political groups disagreed over the appropriateness of commemorative practices and the extent of political positioning that was deemed necessary to counter Neo-Nazi mobilisation.

Nevertheless, 2009 marked an important shift in the meaning and practice of the anniversary. The debate moved increasingly towards questioning the suitability of 'stilles Gedenken' in the face of the increasing numbers of Neo-Nazi marchers. Parts of the political right became more open-minded about other forms of commemoration. Rohwer's fellow CDU politician Patrick Schreiber, for example, welcomed the high level of participation in counter-protests, which sent 'ein deutliches Signal gegen den braunen Sumpf und dessen Geschichtsverfälschung'.⁵¹ The *Sächsische Zeitung*, a keen defender of 'stilles Gedenken' in previous years, now reflected differently on the effectiveness of other commemorative practices in fighting right-wing extremism, and concluded that 'Ruhe und Besinnung' had become inadequate.⁵² The paper also ran a feature on how other cities had dealt with far-right rallies, with all cited examples succeeding in stopping such rallies through creative forms of civil

⁴⁸ See the statements collected on the organisation's website, 'Ein klares Stopp zum Rechtsextremismus-Geh Denken Dresden', Aufruf 2009; <https://web.archive.org/web/20090403002258/http://geh-denken.de/joomla/statements.html> (accessed 20 June 2019).

⁴⁹ 'Dresdner Union zum Gedenken am 13. Februar und den Aktionen am 14. Februar 2009', CDU Dresden, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090221094029/http://www.cdu-dresden.de/de/presse/pressemeldungen/?iso=e5f4e> (accessed 20 June 2019).

⁵⁰ Thilo Alexe, 'CDU-Chef kritisiert linke Demonstration', *Sächsische Zeitung*, 16 February 2009.

⁵¹ Oliver Reinhard, 'Was brauchen "wir Dresdner" im Februar 2010?', *Sächsische Zeitung*, 18 February 2009.

⁵² *Ibid.*

disobedience and blockades.⁵³ Ultimately, national media attention made the anniversary an even more important and visible memory event. By 2009, the meaning of '13. Februar' had shifted from a site of national memory to a site in which the political debate over how to confront right-wing extremism was fought out.

CHANGING THE POLITICS OF VICTIMHOOD: DRESDEN MEMORY AND THE FIGHT
AGAINST RACISM AND NEO-NAZISM AFTER 2010

While events in the years before 2010 indicated some important shifts in commemorative discourses and practices, it was only in the following decade that these changed more fundamentally. 2010 and 2011 saw the emergence of four new commemorative practices which built on the discursive shifts that had taken place in previous years. All four were initiated by, or at least linked to, civil society groups, all left their mark on the historical narratives, and all explicitly linked the commemoration of the bombings to political agendas in the present. These initiatives and the dynamics of renegotiation between civil society groups and city officials effected significant changes that would ultimately translate into a comprehensive overhaul of local memory culture.

Two of the new practices were characterised by their predominant objective of taking a stand against far-right extremism, although they adopted radically different means. First, the 'Menschenkette' was an officially sponsored human chain around the city centre and represented a highly symbolic commemorative practice. It resulted from a joint initiative by city officials, represented by the mayor, and a large network of civil society groups, including political parties, trade unions, anti-racist activists, and higher education organisations. The 'Menschenkette' soon became a highly effective means of demonstrating the unity of city officials and many civil society groups, and created a powerful symbolic practice. In an era of increasing visualisation of memory culture, it achieves its potential, and mobilises its capital, precisely because it is set against the backdrop of Dresden's historic city centre, and the iconic skyline at night creates arresting visual material for use by both traditional and social media. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* remarked that the 'Menschenkette' produced 'prächtige Fernsehbilder', even though it did not stop the Neo-Nazi 'Trauermarsch'.⁵⁴

What ultimately prevented the 'Trauermarsch' in 2010 was the second new commemorative practice: the active blockade of the Neo-Nazi rally by Dresden Nazifrei activists. The initiative defined its objective as: '[uns]

⁵³ Claudia Parton, 'Wie andere Städte mit großen Neonazi-Demos fertig werden', *Sächsische Zeitung*, 18 February 2009.

⁵⁴ Bernhard Honnigfort, 'Dresdner Dilemma', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 26 January 2011.

durch Aktionen des zivilen Ungehorsam mit Massenblockaden den Nazis entgegen stellen und sie blockieren',⁵⁵ and was supported by a range of antifascist groups and political parties on the left. For the *Tagesspiegel*, the blockade represented a 'schwere Niederlage des Rechtsextremismus in Deutschland', and it congratulated activists on their 'großen Erfolg für die [...] Demokratie im Osten' that marked a 'historische[s] Signal'.⁵⁶ After 2010, the blockade attracted wider popular support from a growing number of civil society groups, leading politicians, and other religious and cultural figures. Although the blockades remained a controversial practice on legal and political grounds, they have largely found a positive reception. 73% of local citizens surveyed in 2012 thought that blockades against Neo-Nazi marches were justified and Dresden Nazifrei won the 2012 Sächsische Förderpreis für Demokratie awarded by the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung.

The two other new commemorative practices represent more specifically counter-memory initiatives that aimed to challenge the narratives about the bombings. The first is 'Vergessene Erinnerung', an event designed by Jewish and anti-racism groups as well as by the CJ. The event, a commemorative ceremony at Neustadt railway station from which Dresden's Jewish population was deported, aims to resurrect the forgotten memory of Jewish suffering. In particular, the initiative seeks to remember the fact that air raids on the city prevented the last deportations, which were scheduled for 16 February 1945,⁵⁷ thus saving the lives of the remaining Dresden Jews, including Victor Klemperer. The annual appeals lament the marginalisation of the memory of Jewish life and persecution in the city's memoryscape. The organisers' aim is for key sites of Jewish suffering to become 'stärker in der Dresdner Erinnerungskultur verankert'.⁵⁸ This new commemorative practice represented an important step for activists to improve the visibility of Jewish perspectives in local memory discourses.

The final new practice is the guided tour 'Täterspuren', which was first conceived in 2011 by Dresden Nazifrei activists and takes place on the day of the anniversary. It aims to make hitherto invisible traces of Nazi perpetration visible by visiting local sites of political, administrative, judicial, cultural, military, financial, or religious institutions that were key to the functioning of the Nazi dictatorship or demonstrated popular support for Nazi policies. By highlighting sites of perpetration, the group seeks to undermine the dominant commemoration of Dresden as a city of universal victimhood: 'Wir wollen den Blickwinkel auf diesen Tag ändern. Vor der Momentaufnahme des 13.2. verblasst die jahrelange

⁵⁵ Aufruf des Bündnisses Dresden Nazifrei (2010), https://web.archive.org/web/20100127140431/http://www.dresden-nazifrei.com/?page_id=590 (accessed 15 August 2018).

⁵⁶ Frank Jansen, 'Dresden: Wo Bürger gegen Nazis siegen', *Tagesspiegel*, 15 February 2010.

⁵⁷ Jerzak, '13. Februar' (note 14), pp. 43–4.

⁵⁸ 'Vergessene Erinnerung: Veranstaltung zum Gedenken an die ermordeten Dresdner Juden und Jüdinnen' (2011), <http://www.pressebuero-naumann.de/13.Februar/Kulturbuero.HTM> (accessed 2 May 2019).

NS-Geschichte von Dresden [...] Wir wollen die Spuren der Täterinnen und Täter aufnehmen und dabei einen Teil zu einer Sichtbarwerdung dieser Dresdner Geschichte leisten.⁵⁹ Its main focus is the establishment of a counter-narrative to contextualise the bombings in a historical trajectory of perpetrators and perpetration. Since 2014, 'Täterspuren' has been included in the official commemorative calendar for the anniversary, thereby achieving an enhanced status that provides activists with officially allocated anniversary capital.

Both 'Vergessene Erinnerung' and 'Täterspuren' were important counter-memory interventions which propagated a widening of historical narratives on the bombings to include marginalised victim groups and create greater awareness of perpetration. This growing ambiguity and diversity of victimhood can also be observed in other commemorative practices. Dresden Nazifrei's mission statement accused the 'Trauermarsch' of denying Nazi crimes and portraying Germans as the 'eigentlichen Opfer' of the war, to conclude emphatically: 'Wir aber wissen: der verbrecherische Krieg ging von Nazi-Deutschland aus und kehrte 1945 nach Dresden zurück'.⁶⁰ For Dresden Nazifrei activists, the historical responsibility for the bombings rested firmly with Nazi Germany. In some interesting respects, the 2011 joint appeal by the mayor and civil society groups went further than the Dresden Nazifrei statement. It argued: 'Wir schließen in unser Gedenken die Millionen Opfer der nationalsozialistischen Verbrechen und des Zweiten Weltkriegs ein. Wir erinnern an die historische Verantwortung, die auch unsere Stadt für diese Verbrechen und diesen Krieg trägt.'⁶¹ This represented a significant shift in tone and emphasis compared to the wording of the 2010 appeal, which said that the commemoration of the bombings should include 'das Verbrechen des von Deutschland ausgehenden Krieges'.⁶² The 2010 wording included a vague expression of unspecified crimes during the war and diluted the question of responsibility through the ambiguous phrasing of the war emanating from Germany. The 2011 appeal tackled these issues more explicitly and in more detail.

Alongside the changing meaning of victimhood and the historical narratives of the bombings, the anniversaries witnessed a more conscious politicisation after 2010. The blockades of Neo-Nazi marches remained a controversial issue and were fiercely debated by the Saxon regional

⁵⁹ Täterspuren leaflet 2013, <https://archiv.dresden-nazifrei.com/images/stories/material/2013/flyer-mahngang-2013.pdf> (accessed 12 May 2020).

⁶⁰ Aufruf des Bündnisses Dresden Nazifrei (note 55).

⁶¹ 'Gemeinsamer Aufruf zum 13. Februar 2011', press release 15 December 2010, https://www.dresden.de/de/rathaus/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/archiv/2010/12/pm_071.php (accessed 15 August 2018).

⁶² 'Erinnern und Handeln. Für mein Dresden', press release, 11 February 2010, https://www.dresden.de/de/rathaus/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/archiv/2010/02/pm_034.php (accessed 15 August 2018).

parliament on several occasions in 2011. On one side of the argument, CDU and FDP representatives condemned the use of violence by left-wing extremists and defended the intervention by the police force to contain violence and safeguard the constitutional right of Neo-Nazi organisations to march. Volker Bandmann of the CDU argued that '[d]er Rechtsstaat gilt eben nicht nur für die Guten, [er] gilt auch für die Schlechten. Er gilt sogar für Nazis, und er gilt auch für Linksradikale'.⁶³ On the other side of the argument, the parties on the political left complained about the criminalisation and undue obstruction of left-wing activists by politicians and the police and defended the right to civil disobedience, which included the peaceful protest against Neo-Nazi marches. The Green MP Johannes Lichdi accused the governing parties: 'Sie wollen den Widerstand gegen die Nazis delegitimieren und abwürgen'.⁶⁴ As in previous years, the sticking points were the appropriateness of commemorative practices and acceptable forms of protest. What Saxon parliamentarians, and the wider public, negotiated in these debates was the boundary between the space of legal and justifiable civil society protest on the one hand and the legal duties and interference by state authorities on the other. Stakeholders of different political persuasions projected competing political agendas onto the anniversary, mobilising political and anniversary capital. As a result, the political nature of the anniversaries became evident.

At a local level, activists and, more importantly, city officials also acknowledged the politics of memory and attributed political significance to the commemoration. From 2011, the anniversaries were increasingly linked explicitly to the defence of fundamental political values. The slogan adopted for the 'Menschenkette' in the first two years, 'Erinnern und handeln. Für eine weltoffene Stadt. Gegen Gewalt und Fremdenfeindlichkeit' indicates how much the meaning of the anniversary and the contemporary relevance attributed to the bombings in particular had shifted. It marks a powerful statement that remembrance is not solely focused on the past but inherently interlinked with action in the present, thus conceiving of commemoration in similar terms as 'GehDenken' did before 2010. Furthermore, the slogan clarifies what the contemporary relevance for action in the present constitutes: cosmopolitanism and anti-racism. The past is invoked and made usable as a reminder of specific values in the present. The 2011 joint appeal also calls for a 'verantwortliches Erinnern' compared to the peaceful, silent, or dignified commemoration of previous years.⁶⁵ The discursive frame of silent commemoration gave way to *responsible* remembering by 2011 – an important semantic shift which indicated the decline of the once dominant commemorative practice.

⁶³ Sächsischer Landtag, Plenarprotokoll 5/32, 23 March 2011, p. 3032.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3036.

⁶⁵ 'Gemeinsamer Aufruf' (note 61).

In the following years, and in consultation with relevant civil society groups, city officials deliberated over changes to Dresden's memory culture. A key player in this process was the 'Arbeitsgruppe (AG) 13. Februar', installed by the mayor in 2009, which gathered representatives from local political parties and activist organisations. The AG developed a 'Grundkonsens' in 2011 and a city council committee on memory culture proposed a new 'Gedenkkonzept' in 2014, eventually ushering in a decentralisation of the city's commemorative practices in 2016. In February 2016, the city began to pluralise commemorative practices. The heavily ritualised and problematic ceremony at Heidefriedhof was no longer the main official commemorative event. Instead, the city aimed to decentralise the commemorative culture. Alongside the traditional ritual at Heidefriedhof, four other commemorative sites were integrated, with a different leading politician attending one of each: the memorial to the children of forced labourers at the St Pauli cemetery, the Neustadt railway station from which Dresden Jews were deported, the memorial to the victims of euthanasia at the Tolkewitz cemetery, and the memorial to the victims of the Allied air raids and the graves of Soviet POWs at the Matthäus cemetery. This transformation in 2016 was facilitated by changing political circumstances, such as the election of the new mayor Dirk Hilbert (FDP) in 2015 and a new left-wing majority in the city council in the same year. The changing practices adopted in 2016 were, by and large, a combination and culmination of the three main trends and shifts that this article identified in the preceding decade and, arguably, represented their institutionalisation.

First, grass-roots activists have been recognised as crucial and indispensable stakeholders in Dresden's memory culture. Civil society activists from a range of religious, political, and anti-racist organisations served as members of the AG and contributed to the conceptualisation of commemorative activities and the drafting of appeals for the 'Menschenkette'. The 2014 'Gedenkkonzept' acknowledged the contribution and significance of civil society agents: 'Der Stadtrat und die Stadtverwaltung entwickeln *gemeinsam* mit zivilgesellschaftlichen Akteuren die städtischen Gedenkformen weiter'.⁶⁶ It accepts that civil society activists and groups have a role to play in the city's memory culture and that their role is on a par with the input of city officials. A key characteristic of the decentralised memory culture is that the city invited civil society groups to take ownership for the organisation of individual events. Hilbert's justification for the change is remarkable: 'Wir brauchen dort [Heidefriedhof] aber keine Rituale mehr, in denen die "Obrigkeit"

⁶⁶ "Erinnerung vielfältig gestalten" – Erinnerungskulturelle Grundlagen der Landeshauptstadt Dresden', Anlage zur Stadtratssitzung 19 June 2014, <http://ratsinfo.dresden.de/getfile.php?id=165087&type=do&> (accessed 10 June 2019), my emphasis.

den Dresdnern das Gedenken erklärt'.⁶⁷ Hilbert rejects the patronising top-down commemorative practices of previous years. While city officials continue to participate in commemoration events, they, importantly, yielded ground to non-official agents.

Secondly, a plurality of voices and narratives has been accepted, perhaps even celebrated. An important part of the AG's 'Grundkonsens' of 2011 was the commitment not to evaluate the views or practices of other members as 'moralisch höherwertiger' than one's own.⁶⁸ The plurality of positions was tolerated at least. The city's 'Gedenkkonzept' of 2014 went beyond the tolerance of diverging views and instead celebrated such diversity and embraced the potential they might unlock: 'Unterschiedliche Auffassungen von Geschichte werden als Chance verstanden. Sie sollen den Blick für andere Sichtweisen öffnen und dazu beitragen, diese zu respektieren.'⁶⁹ This represented nothing less than an official recognition of a legitimate plurality of voices and narratives, and a revocation of the hegemonic commemorative monoculture of the 1990s and early 2000s. This acknowledgment of the complexity and ambiguity of historical narratives was enshrined through the decentralisation of commemoration. Hilbert paid tribute to the diversification that needed to reflect adequately who is included in the commemoration by arguing '[w]enn man zeigen will, wie vielschichtig das historische Ereignis ist, muss man auch andere, teils vergessene oder unbequeme Gedenkort einbeziehen'.⁷⁰ While there had already been a gradual shift in previous years to include victims of Nazi persecution, these moves remained rhetorical. The inclusion of multiple memorial sites, most of which were dedicated specifically to victims of persecution, marks an important symbolic shift through the change of commemorative practice as it removes the hierarchy between different victim groups.

The third and perhaps most radical shift was a rethinking of the fundamental assumptions that inform commemorative practice, and a move from a merely imagined apolitical understanding towards a politically conscious memory culture. This had already been more widely accepted through the pro-tolerance and anti-racist political message endorsed by the 'Menschenkette'. The 2014 'Gedenkkonzept' called into question the appropriateness of ritualised commemorations and encouraged the exploration of more discursive formats. The significance of such a shift lay in making transparent the inherently political motivations that underpin any commemoration: 'Statt einer bloß historisierten Rückschau soll nach

⁶⁷ Cited in 'Dresden am 13. Februar', Stadt Dresden press release, 10 February 2016, https://www.dresden.de/de/rathaus/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/archiv/2016/02/pm_029.php (accessed 12 June 2019).

⁶⁸ Frank Richter, 'Come together', *Journal der Sächsischen Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung*, 1 (2013), 8.

⁶⁹ "Erinnerung vielfältig gestalten" (note 66).

⁷⁰ Cited in 'Dresden am 13. Februar' (note 67).

Möglichkeit ein deutlicher Bezug zur Gegenwart hergestellt werden'.⁷¹ Not only does this recognise the limitations of symbolic and ritualised practices such as the Heidefriedhof ceremony or the 'Menschenkette', but it understands the need for more interactive and less official practices. Through its reference to the present, the 'Gedenkkonzept' accepts that the past is shaped by, and serves a purpose in, the present. Hilbert has since repeatedly adopted such a stance in his own commemorative contributions. In 2016, he argued that the bombings do not represent merely a responsibility to remember, but also a call 'im Sinne derjenigen zu handeln, die heute unsere Hilfe brauchen. [...] wer sein Herz gegenüber denjenigen verschließt, die bei uns Schutz suchen, der hat die Botschaft des 13. Februars nicht verstanden'.⁷² This statement, made a year after Germany opened its borders to thousands of refugees, gives yet another contemporary meaning and political message to the anniversary and the historical event that it perpetuates.

CONCLUSION

The decade between the sixtieth and seventieth anniversaries of the Dresden bombings witnessed a profound change in local memory culture. It resulted in a growing ambiguity of the meaning of victimhood that acknowledged the complexity of experiences during the war, and included previously marginalised victim groups, primarily victims of Nazi persecution and genocide. This was rendered possible through breaking up the narrowly conceived narrative that isolated the bombings from their historical context, embedding the bombings in the longer historical trajectory of the Nazi dictatorship and therefore integrating perpetration as an important element of historical consciousness.

The changing interpretation of the bombings was interlinked with a changing landscape of commemorative practices and rituals. By establishing and reaffirming alternative practices that were politically unambiguous, the memoryscape of the anniversaries was profoundly transformed. This article demonstrates how the meaning of anniversaries is closely tied to the practices which create and recreate that meaning. The growing ambiguity of the meaning of victimhood and the plurality of voices and historical narratives were enabled by a pluralisation of commemorative practices. This pluralisation also marked a shift not only in local memory culture but also in political culture. Over the years, the anniversaries have become increasingly politicised, or rather their political character has been rendered more transparent. The anniversaries were more explicitly

⁷¹ "Erinnerung vielfältig gestalten" (note 66).

⁷² 'Rede von Oberbürgermeister Dirk Hilbert zum Auftakt der Menschenkette', 13 February 2016, <https://www.dresden.de/de/rathaus/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/archiv/2016/02/pm.038.php> (accessed 12 June 2019).

linked to the fight against Neo-Nazism, thereby changing the historical lessons that the bombings represent. Initially endorsed by the political left, the anti-racist and anti-far-right agenda was eventually adopted by the city's centre-right political establishment and became official policy.

None of the changes would have been possible without the interventions and campaigns by various local groups of civil society activists from different backgrounds. While these local groups were not isolated from wider discursive constellations and developments at the national or international levels, local groups translated and adapted these into local contexts. The dynamics of interacting and negotiating local memory narratives and practices with city officials shed light on the enormous influence that civil society activists can have, but also on how both civil society agents and state officials occupy hybrid commemorative spaces.