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Inclusivity and the Difficult Heritage of War

Two decades after the First World War, the one hundredth anniversary of which was the occasion for this conference, there was yet another world conflagration – or possibly a continuation of the 1914–1918 conflict, as some historians have suggested.¹ This contribution to the conference slam describes a project related to the intense conflict between 1939 and 1945.²

All war-related heritage ought to be treated as “difficult”, as the many and diverse papers offered at the conference reveal. However, there are some aspects of war heritage that are more difficult than others. One that is still capable of causing strong and divided reactions is the bombing of urban areas and civilians during the Second World War.³ Even on the “victor” side, there is deep sensitivity about the way that veterans of RAF Bomber Command were sidelined post-war, not least because the losses in Bomber Command were higher than in any other Allied service. Again, there is an extreme reluctance to consider the human cost of the area bombing initiative over Germany and Occupied Europe. Rather, when bombing is discussed, the immediate

1 See for example the discussion in Mosse, G. (1986) *The Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience*. *Journal of Contemporary History* 21(4), pp. 491–513.

2 I am extremely grateful to Prof. Monika Hagedorn-Saupe for the opportunity to participate in the conference and discuss our work in Lincoln.

3 See for example Knapp, A. (2016) *The Horror and the Glory: Bomber Command in British Memories Since 1945*. [Online]. Available at: www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-mas-sacre-resistance/en/document/horror-and-glory-bomber-command-british-memories-1945 [Accessed: 20 May 2019].



Fig. 1: International Bomber Command Centre in Lincoln. ©IBCC, 2018

reference points tend to be the so-called “Dams Raids” – the precision bombing of the Eder and Möhne Dams in May 1943⁴ – or the Blitz: in other words, what British people themselves experienced at the hands of the Luftwaffe.

A new site whose focus is RAF Bomber Command and the European bombing war recently opened in Lincoln, UK. Funded in part by a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the International Bomber Command Centre (IBCC; see fig. 1) is a partnership between the Lincolnshire Bomber Command Memorial Trust, a charitable trust, and the University of Lincoln.

The IBCC has used the theme of inclusivity to present the heritage of the bombing war. What has this meant in practice? First, it meant that as many perspectives as possible on the bombing war would be presented: military, civilian, young, old, black, white and from both sides of the conflict. We called this our “orchestra of voices”. Accordingly, one gallery in the exhibition tells

4 Witness the continued popularity, for example, of the 1955 film *The Dam Busters*, starring Richard Todd and Michael Redgrave, and based on Paul Brickhill’s book of the same name.



Fig. 2: Still from the video data visualisation of the bombing war, IBCC exhibition. ©IBCC, 2018

military stories, one tells civilian stories and one looks at the aftermath of the bombing war. Second, we decided to focus on the stories of ordinary individuals coping with total war, revealing their shared suffering and common humanity. We tried to present as many untold stories as we could from eyewitnesses themselves: those who flew on operations, who were pulled from the rubble of German cities, who volunteered from all over the Commonwealth and British Empire as aircrew as well as ground personnel, who operated “flak” battery defences, and so on. Third, we adopted as values the “three Rs” of Remembrance, Recognition and Reconciliation, projecting an attitude of reflection and respect for all those caught up in such terrible times.⁵

This is not a museum – a small number of personal objects is on display, but mostly we have relied on digital interactives, data visualisation (fig. 2), graphic panels and audio recordings. Content for these has mostly

⁵ These issues are explored in greater detail in a series of blog posts relating to the IBCC Digital Archive. Available at: <http://ibccdigitalarchive.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/2017/09> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

been drawn from the IBCC Digital Archive, which started collecting material in 2015. Over 1000 interviews with eyewitnesses have so far been recorded. Hundreds of individuals have come forward with personal collections of photographs, letters, diaries and so on. The result has been a vast resource of very personal accounts, at the heart of which are the same principles of inclusivity. The archive is freely available at <https://ibccdigitalarchive.lincoln.ac.uk>.

We are aware that being inclusive and promoting reconciliation may be somewhat less problematic in the UK than in many other European countries, where the legacy of the bombing war is far more divided: the Allies were, after all, liberators as well as tormentors. We are currently working with several institutions in Italy to investigate how this approach might be adapted; we have much to learn from them.