Memorialising the Second World War

The Bomber Command Memorial in London

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SUMMARY

The Second World War occupies a prominent place in British popular memory. From annual ceremonies commemorating both world wars to political rhetoric referencing events such as the successful defence against attacks by the German Luftwaffe in 1940–41, the narratives around Britain's role in World War Two have played a significant part in shaping British identity. To this day, the country's memory of the Second World War is dominated by stories of heroism, unity, resilience and sacrifice. This paper explores the Royal Air Force Bomber Command Memorial in London as a recent expression of this. Yet British post-war perspectives on the Allied air offensive, specifically the controversial carpet bombing of German cities, illustrate the difficulty of incorporating the memory of Bomber Command into the positive British narrative of the Second World War. After tracing post-war attitudes towards Bomber Command in Britain based on existing scholarship, this paper investigates the campaign for a memorial in central London, its planning, funding and reception. It studies the motivation behind the initiative for a monument to the airmen of Bomber Command about 65 years after the end of the war. It looks at the promoters of the memorial and considers the message conveyed by its architecture, as well as discussing the positive and negative reactions it evoked in the British press and from architectural commentators.

The Debate Surrounding the Memory of RAF Bomber Command in Britain

In June 2012 the Bomber Command Memorial was inaugurated in central London (Fig. 1). Prominently located on the edge of Green Park next to Hyde Park Corner, it commemorates the 55,573 airmen from the United Kingdom, British Commonwealth and occupied European countries who died while serving in the Royal Air Force (hereafter RAF) Bomber Command during World War Two. It is the largest of a recent series of London war memorials dedicated to Second World War remembrance. Considered long overdue by the memorial's supporters, the five-year campaign for its erection had been driven by a desire to finally give recognition to the aircrew members of RAF Bomber Command, whose death rate of approximately 45 percent had been the highest among British military units fighting in World War Two.[1] By the early 2000s many of the surviving veterans felt overlooked and slighted, citing the later controversy surrounding the British bombing campaign as responsible for their lack of recognition.[2]

Both during and immediately after the war, the RAF's bombing offensive, specifically the area bombing of German cities under the command of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, was considered controversial, notwithstanding the argument that Hitler's Luftwaffe had started the bombing of civilians.[3] In 1940–41, during the German aerial campaign against Britain, Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave his full support to the retaliatory bombing of German cities, which was seen as critical for taking the war back to Germany and breaking morale.[4] While the legal and moral difficulties of the indiscriminate bombing of civilians were understood at the time, civilian bombing was publicly justified on both sides as retaliation against what were seen as enemy violations of accepted norms of warfare and a consequence of total war.[5] However, following the Allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945, Churchill tried to distance himself from this area bombing strategy, privately questioning what

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Fig. 1: The central pavilion of the London Bomber Command Memorial as viewed from Green Park (Foto Tim Rademacher, 2013).

he called the terror bombing of German cities.[6] Not only did the American and British bombing surveys of 1945–46 conclude that the RAF's area offensive had, for the most part, failed to significantly impact German war production and break morale.[7] Allied bombing had also led to several hundred thousand civilian casualties.[8] Yet it has to be said that during the war, the large majority of the British public approved of the RAF's bombing campaign, assisted by the media's ambiguous reporting of the British air offensive. It was seen by many as just retribution, even before the atrocities committed by Germans in concentration camps and elsewhere became widely known.[9]

Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath of the war, successive British governments attempted to distance themselves from the strategic bombing offensive. Bomber Command was not mentioned in Churchill's victory broadcast and no dedicated campaign medal was issued. In particular, the latter was regarded as a slight by Arthur Harris who, rightly or wrongly, became increasingly associated with the decision-making behind the controversial city bombing in the last months of the war, not least because of his staunchly unapologetic attitude towards it.[10] In 2013, in the wake of the opening of the Bomber Command Memorial and after campaigning by veterans, the government belatedly issued a campaign clasp to former aircrew, highlighting how sensitive this subject had become for the surviving airmen.[11]

In the decades following the Second World War, the RAF's area bombing policy proved difficult to incorporate into a British war narrative that emphasised heroism and moral superiority in the fight against Nazi evil. In the 1950s the celebration of wartime aerial achievements focused instead on the uncontroversial precision bombing raids and the contribution of RAF Fighter Command, involved in defending southern England against German aerial attacks in the Battle of Britain in 1940.[12] This battle was, and still largely is, recorded in public memory as a heroic David versus Goliath moment in British history, despite recent scholarship seeking to temper this myth.[13]

In contrast, the 1960s and 1970s were marked by a greater awareness of the failings of the strategic bombing campaign among the British public. Following the publication of the official history of the air offensive in 1961, which largely challenged the efficacy of area bombing, historians also began to consider its morality. Dresden now became a symbol of the moral failure of the Allied bombing strategy. This view gained wider publicity in Britain in 1963 through a book by the later discredited author and Holocaust denier, David Irving. This may seem surprising considering that this stance had also been part of the official Cold War rhetoric of the GDR since its formation, though remembrance of the Dresden raid varied there too over time.[14] In addition, the rise of the British peace movement from the late 1950s, led by the Campaign for Nu-

clear Disarmament, and the Vietnam War, all contributed to a more critical attitude towards Britain's wartime bombing policy until the early 1980s. Nevertheless, increasing scepticism towards the bombing offensive among Britons never resulted in a universal and stable post-war consensus on the RAF's area campaign. During the 1980s, in part prompted by Harris's death and earlier popular histories and documentaries detailing the wartime experiences of both the airmen and the bombed, the debate surrounding the memory of Bomber Command gathered new momentum.[15]

This trend continued after the fall of the Iron Curtain, stimulated by the fiftieth anniversary cycle of World War Two. In 1992 a memorial to Sir Arthur Harris was erected outside the RAF Church of St Clement Danes in London. The bronze statue, which also commemorates the bomber aircrews on its plinth, had been commissioned by the Bomber Command Association following a public appeal for donations. Founded in 1985, one of the Association's main activities was to lobby for better recognition of the wartime contribution of its veteran members.[16] However, the public controversy surrounding the erection of the Harris statue and its vandalism shortly after its unveiling by the Queen Mother indicate that the memory of Bomber Command was still fiercely disputed in Britain, with views ranging from rejection to acceptance. There was now a further aspect to the debate – the fear that the reunited Germany would attempt to rid itself of some of its war guilt by focusing on the memory of the victims of the Allied bombing campaign. In fact, in the early 2000s when public interest in the remembrance of the bombing victims grew in Germany, it was met with considerable criticism internationally.[17]

Since the 1990s British remembrance of the Second World War has ranged between contributions to projects of European reconciliation and a focus on national narratives of heroism, resilience and sacrifice. One such reconciliatory project was the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, which was assisted by the fundraising efforts of the British Dresden Trust. In contrast, a string of new war memorials erected in London since the turn of the millennium have promoted positive national memories of the Second World War as well as recognising the contributions of former colonial and Commonwealth countries.[18] The Bomber Command Memorial is an example of this. It focuses on the heroism and sacrifice of the RAF bomber crews and mostly avoids dealing with the moral ambivalence surrounding the British bombing policy. It is clear that its promoters sought to redress the sense of neglect felt by many bomber veterans in Britain for much of the post-war period. As such, the memorial's narrative stands in sharp contrast to recent academic literature on the subject, with historians providing complex and nuanced accounts of the bombing war from a British perspective as well as discussing the morality of the Allied bombing campaign.[19] The contrast between the two illustrates the abiding tension between history and commemoration – the former making the past more complicated, the latter making it simpler, as the late Tzvetan Todorov put it.[20]

The Bomber Command Memorial

The companion book to the London Bomber Command Memorial records the campaign for its erection as being sparked by a comment made in 2007 by the then secretary of the Bomber Command Association (hereafter BCA) to the then chairman of the Heritage Foundation, an entertainment industry charity operating in England. When discussing the recent Animals in War Memorial in London's Hyde Park, the former remarked: "[W]here's our memorial? […] We never got one."[21] The book describes this as the beginning of an alliance between the bomber veterans and members of this showbusiness charity for the purpose of campaigning for a memorial in central London. While this anecdote highlights a longstanding grievance of the veterans as well as identifying the main drivers behind the memorial campaign, it does not fully reflect the reality of memorialisation of RAF Bomber Command in the postwar decades.

From early on after the war, commemoration had occurred locally and regionally. In the 1950s commemorative stained-glass windows were installed in churches near former bomber bases, while a larger national memorial at Runnymede in Surrey was dedicated to the air forces as a whole. In London, St Clement Danes, heavily damaged by German bombing in 1941, was restored as the RAF memorial church. Further small-scale monuments erected by local community groups and RAF associations followed from the late 1970s to the 1990s.[22] And in 2006, not long before the start of the London memorial campaign, a modest plaque was unveiled at Lincoln Cathedral which, like the earlier Harris

statue, remembers the over 55,000 Bomber Command dead. A city surrounded by former bomber airfields, Lincoln is also the site of the International Bomber Command Centre, which opened six years after the London memorial in 2018. In contrast to the latter, it provides a more balanced view of the RAF's bombing offensive and its civilian victims, and aims at reconciliation.

Therefore, the motivation behind the London memorial campaign was not that Bomber Command had not been commemorated, but rather that this had not yet happened in a conspicuous manner at a national level. Indeed, the unveiling of the Battle of Britain Monument on London's Victoria Embankment, which accompanied the annual celebration of the wartime efforts of RAF Fighter Command in 2005, clearly increased an awareness of the imbalance in recognition among bomber veterans.[23] Likewise, two widely noticed publications, one by the British moral philosopher Anthony Grayling of 2006, the other by the German author Jörg Friedrich of 2002, may have heightened a sense of injustice. While Grayling argued in his book *Among the Dead Cities* that the saturation bombing of German cities had been a moral crime, Friedrich's *Der Brand*, published in English in 2006, went even further when describing the experience of Allied bombing with terms associated with the Holocaust, leading to a controversial reception in Germany and abroad.[24] What is clear is that the ongoing boom in war commemoration in the early 2000s and the disputed memory of Bomber Command provided an impetus for the memorial campaign. Arguably, they also helped shape the memorial's narrative.

War memorials express the views of the groups that erect them. The campaign for London's Bomber Command Memorial started as a private initiative of a veteran association and its showbusiness ally, though they received assistance from the RAF. In early 2008 a memorial committee was set up, consisting of representatives of the BCA and the Heritage Foundation. This was spearheaded by the Bee Gees singer Robin Gibb and another former pop singer, Jim Dooley, whose connections and presence in the media helped with the fundraising for the memorial. The large majority of the funding for it came from donations by members of the public, including some wealthy individual donors. A media campaign was started in 2008 when *The Daily Telegraph*, a conservative national newspaper, launched its "Forgotten Heroes" funding appeal with a story about one of the bomber veterans, which elicited an enthusiastic response from its readers. This was followed by TV interviews with Robin Gibb and, in 2010, a fundraising campaign run by *The Daily Express*, a right-wing tabloid newspaper, which headlined it as a "crusade to […] ensure that the brave servicemen of Bomber Command are given the fitting monument that they have so far been denied".[25]

The largest individual contributions to the £9.5 million total costs for building, unveiling and endowing a maintenance fund for the memorial came from three private donors – the former mobile phone entrepreneur John Caudwell, the Conservative Party donor Lord Michael Ashcroft, and the then owner of *The Daily Express*, Richard Desmond. Furthermore, the coalition government under David Cameron provided a £1 million grant to help meet the VAT costs associated with the construction of the memorial, and contributed to the costs of the opening ceremony. Previously, VAT costs could be recovered under a tax rebate scheme for memorials introduced by the former Labour government.[26] While the memorial campaign attracted the largest donations from three individuals with conservative to right-wing political views, public statements in support of the memorial came from across the political spectrum, including from Gordon Brown, Labour prime minister from 2007 to 2010.[27] This illustrates that interest in the commemoration of the RAF bomber crews as such was more widespread, though the historian Bruce Scates notes that the support from the three main party leaders in 2010 may have been partly owing to it being a general election year with British armed forces in Afghanistan.[28]

In 2009, when some of the funds had been raised, the memorial committee appointed Liam O'Connor as their architect, whose first task was to explore potential sites for the memorial in the Hyde Park Corner area of Westminster. O'Connor, who had taught at what was formerly the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, belongs to a group of classicising architects practicing in Britain. In 1992 he had co-organised the first *A Vision of Europe* exhibition in Bologna, opened by Prince Charles, which promoted traditional architecture and design principles for urban revitalisation projects.[29] He was chosen by the memorial committee because of his recent war memorial designs and experience in navigating such projects through the planning process.[30] In 2002 he had completed the Commonwealth Memorial Gates on London's

Constitution Hill adjoining Green Park. This memorial is broadly designed in the classical tradition, though it also references the more original and imaginative classicism of Edwin Lutyens and other Imperial War Graves Commission architects of the 1920s.[31]

Following discussions with the Royal Parks Agency who until 2017 managed the royal parkland in London on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, a site for the memorial was chosen on the edge of Green Park in Westminster, on land owned by the Crown and close to several other war memorials at Hyde Park Corner.[32] This despite the fact that Westminster City Council had a policy against new memorials in this area that only allowed approval “by exception”.[33] Liam O’Connor’s proposed scheme for this site, which is noted as having been well received by Gibb, Dooley and the BCA secretary, is designed in the classical idiom. It consists of two colonnades with Doric columns flanking a central open pavilion that houses a sculpture of a bomber crew (Fig. 2). An earlier design prepared by O’Connor for a different location, which included an abstract sculpture, was rejected by the memorial committee who wanted a “traditional, realistic representation” of a crew of seven airmen. Bordering the public footpath of Piccadilly, the final memorial is 84 metres long and 10 metres deep. When some of the bomber veterans questioned the proposed size of the memorial, preferring a more modest structure, O’Connor strongly argued that it should not be “an apology” and should echo the scale of nearby monuments, such as the Wellington Arch. He also intended it to complement the nineteenth-century Ionic screen by Decimus Burton which forms the entrance to Hyde Park.[34]

In early 2010 when the final scheme for the memorial was submitted for planning permission to Westminster City Council and opened for public consultation, it met with strong objections from local interest groups and residents’ associations. While all of them were sympathetic to the general aim of remembering the Bomber Command dead, they criticised the proposed location, scale, design and narrative of the memorial. One major criticism focused on its impact on the character of Green Park, then a mostly undisturbed green space within the inner city. The London Society, along with several others, reminded that the proposals were against the local policy of permitting no new memorials in this area. The Thorney Island Society thought the design was of “totally disproportionate monumentality, yet absent of feeling”, while the Westminster Society considered it “a poor piece of urbanism” and asked whether the memorial was “intended to condone the outcomes of the Command’s operations?” The council’s Public Art Advisory Panel, on the other hand, considered “the

Fig. 2: The Bomber Command Memorial from Piccadilly, showing the eastern colonnade and aluminium ceiling of the pavilion (2019).

choice of a stripped classical monumental style to be particularly unfortunate" and likely to "exacerbate the potential for controversy".[35] It was joined by the council's planning officer, who recommended that the planning application be rejected. However, by then the scheme already had the approval in principle of the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport as well as supporting statements from the main political party leaders.[36] It was granted conditional planning permission by a majority vote of the council's planning committee on 13 May 2010.

Construction started more than a year later in 2011, once one of the main planning conditions had been discharged by putting in place financial and legal arrangements for the long-term upkeep of the memorial. The Portland stone cladding for the pavilion and colonnades was prefabricated by a firm of masons in Northern Ireland and then shipped and assembled on site in London. Moreover, keen to include contributions from Commonwealth and other nations which had supplied approximately 30 percent of RAF Bomber Command aircrew during the Second World War, the memorial committee accepted aluminium ingots obtained from a recovered Halifax bomber which had been shot down in 1944 with the loss of the mostly Canadian crew on board. These were smelted and turned into the aluminium ceiling of the partially open pavilion roof, supported by a geodetic lattice structure resembling the airframe of a Wellington bomber (Fig. 2).[37]

The architecture of the central pavilion provides the backdrop for a 2.75-metre-high bronze sculpture by the British sculptor Philip Jackson (Fig. 3). Jackson had already executed a number of high-profile commissions in Britain, including two realistic statues of servicemen for the Falklands War Sculpture in Portsmouth and the Gurkha Monument in London which instantly appealed to the veterans. According to the companion book to the memorial, his brief for the Bomber Command sculpture was that it should be "non-triumphal, non-jingoistic, just a piece of quiet remembrance", with Liam O'Connor adding "that it had to be the greatest memorial to the Second World War in this country." In line with the memorial committee's wishes, Jackson produced a realistic but idealised group of seven heavy-bomber airmen. They are shown in full winter kit to make them look more dramatic, after returning from an operation, with tired postures and strained facial expressions, as he wanted to portray them as "quietly heroic".[38] The brief for the sculpture, like the disagreement about size, suggests some conflicting views about the tone of the memorial among its promoters, which Jackson sought to reconcile. Yet, set on a raised granite plinth inscribed on its north face with a quotation from Pericles' funeral speech in Thucydides,

Fig. 3: The Bomber Command sculpture by Philip Jackson.

the sculpture, too, becomes part of the overriding narrative of victorious heroism.[39]

On 28 June 2012 the Bomber Command Memorial was unveiled by the Queen. The inauguration ceremony was attended by members of the royal family, the fundraisers and principal donors to the memorial, as well as 6,500 veterans and families of former Bomber Command airmen who had died.[40] A dedication service was led by the RAF Chaplain-in-Chief and several addresses were given by RAF and BCA representatives, not one making a reference to the civilian casualties of the British area bombing offensive. The entire focus of the speeches was on the heroism and sacrifice of the bomber crews, with Churchill's endorsement of the strategic air campaign being cited as well as the fight of good versus evil.[41]

The British press reactions to the memorial were mainly positive. Most tabloid newspapers, a number of which had supported the fundraising campaign, welcomed the new memorial as an overdue and fitting tribute to the Bomber Command aircrews. In contrast to the dedication ceremony, the controversy surrounding the British bombing campaign was mentioned by the tabloid papers, albeit cursorily and outweighed by stories of airmen's wartime bravery. Among the main serious national newspapers, positive news reports of the unveiling were interspersed with several critical opinion pieces. Notably, the art and architecture reviewers for *The Guardian* and its sister *The Observer*, two leading centre-left papers, found the memorial problematic.[42] Their view was shared by several other architectural critics, whose solely negative comments centred on the architecture and the message conveyed by it.

Echoing some of the earlier objections of local interest groups, the author of an essay in *The Architectural Review* in 2014 considered the Bomber Command Memorial "clumsy in design, oppressive in scale, and deeply questionable in its subject."[43] The late architectural historian Gavin Stamp, while not opposing the use of classicism per se, thought it an "embarrassingly triumphalist and mediocre structure" and deplored the "painful pedantry of the [classical] design". He wrote: "I do hope it is possible to suggest, without in any way denigrating the memory of those ill-used young men of Bomber Command in the Second World War, that their […] memorial is too big, too pompous, and in the wrong place."[44] None of the critics objected in principle to the idea of remembering the dead Bomber Command airmen. But they criticised the memorial's encroachment on Green Park and the overbearing expression of its architecture, which due to its scale and rigidity in the application of the classical language suggested triumph rather than reflection or nuance.[45]

This is largely confirmed by the inscriptions on the memorial which, for the most part, tell a story of victorious courage and heroic sacrifice. A quotation from a Churchill speech of September 1940, prominently carved into the west wall inside the pavilion, reads: "The fighters are our salvation but the bombers alone provide the means of victory". This inscription is clearly an attempt to integrate the memory of Bomber Command into the positive British narrative of World War Two by alluding to the Battle of Britain, a conflict lodged and celebrated in popular memory as a moment of British moral pre-eminence. Moreover, the pointing to Churchill's original support of the RAF's bombing offensive, unattenuated by his later reservations, should be read as a response to the controversial post-war reception of Bomber Command in Britain.

In contrast, an inscription on the architrave of the pavilion behind the sculpture states: "This memorial also commemorates those of all nations who lost their lives in the bombing of 1939–1945". This was an afterthought, which had only been included after the Mayor of Dresden had criticised the plans for the memorial, and was kept general and broad.[46] The result is a memorial that mostly ignores the moral complexity of the subject it commemorates.[47] At its heart, it represents a delayed reaction to the contested post-war reputation of Bomber Command. It is a monument that overcompensates in size, architectural expression and narrative to make amends to the bomber veterans, a small number of whom had participated in the decision-making that shaped the memorial's design. Yet its existence also raises some wider questions about the remembrance of the Second World War in Britain.

Concluding Remarks

Beyond their basic function as sites for remembering the dead, war memorials also act as statements about the present. The London Bomber Command Memorial is primarily the result of decisions made by a relatively small group of people – the memorial committee, the architect and sculptor. Yet the support it received from parts of the media, their

audiences and from senior politicians indicates that its general message of commemorating wartime bravery and sacrifice resonated with a significant portion of the British public. As the remembrance of war is a means through which collective identities can be constructed and affirmed, it is worth asking what the recent growth of war memorials in London, of which the one to Bomber Command is the most striking example, signifies.

In his book of 2013, Gavin Stamp asked polemically whether this demand for more monuments in the capital was an "attempt at national self-justification by a former imperial power in decline, looking back to the Second World War both nostalgically and assertively as our last independent heroic moment?"[48] While it is not possible to address this question within the scope of this paper, it is clear that the Second World War occupies a prominent position in British collective memory. The significance of the positive national memories of this war for generating and maintaining collective identity is illustrated by the fact that references to this conflict, in particular the events of 1940–41, are frequently made by politicians and in the media.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the principal donors and newspapers that backed the fundraising effort for the Bomber Command Memorial later supported the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. Indeed, the memorial may have been erected several years before the country's EU referendum in 2016, but the attitudes it embodied foreshadowed some of the British particularism which was to end a decade later in Brexit. It promotes a narrow national narrative that recognises Commonwealth and European contributions to the British air offensive but largely excludes transnational European memories from the perspective of the bombed. This is not unusual. As Aleida Assmann notes, traditionally, most national memories are "constructed around heroic deeds and heroic suffering", and are "composed in such a way that they are identity-enhancing and self-celebrating."[49] If nothing else, the London monument to Bomber Command serves as a reminder that war memorials such as this, because they express a particular group's view of the past, often present a simplified and reductive version of history, which must be confronted by detailed historical scholarship.

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46 https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/controversial-memorial-to-british-wwii-bombers-to-open-a-840858.html (20.02.2021).

47 Ehland, Christoph: London Remembers. The Bomber Command Memorial and Recent Memories of War in the British Capital, in: London post-2010 in British Literature and Culture, ed. by Oliver von Knebel Doeberitz and Ralf Schneider, Spatial Practices, vol. 24, 2017, pp. 151–152.

48 Stamp, Anti-Ugly, 2013 (as in n. 31), p. 169.

49 Assmann, Aleida: Transnational Memories, in: European Review, vol. 22, no. 4, 2014, p. 553.