



# Rituals of Outrage: Bomber Command, Dresden and the Digital Afterlife of Britain's Wartime Myth

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## Abstract

Britain's memory of the Second World War continues to function as a powerful hegemonic narrative, or 'sacred story', that affirms moral clarity, heroic sacrifice, and an unpayable debt to the wartime generation. Yet in the digital age this narrative circulates within an environment shaped by algorithmic visibility, affective polarisation, and the commercial pressures of online news. This thesis examines how that sacred story is negotiated, challenged, and reshaped when authoritative figures put forward interpretations of the war that depart from the dominant script. It argues that digital platforms now serve not simply as repositories of public opinion but as performative spaces in which national memory is curated, policed, and weaponised.

Drawing on cultural memory theory, discourse analysis, and wider social sciences (including media studies, political sociology, and social psychology), and focusing on the period 2010-20, the research investigates three moments of contention regarding remembrance of the 1945 Dresden bombing, an episode long associated with moral ambiguity and contested memory. Each case investigates a distinctive form of authority: the experiential voice of a veteran, the moral voice of a religious leader, and the epistemic voice of a journalist turned popular historian. The thesis traces how their respective calls for repentance, reconciliation and reflection moved through a discursive chain from articulation (in speeches, interviews, and television appearances) to mediation (media circulation across print and online news outlets), to reception and contestation (within reader comment sections and social-media threads). Using a mixed-methods approach, it reveals how these interventions were reframed by the press and subjected to intense scrutiny in online communities structured by outrage and competitive displays of patriotic authenticity.

Overall, the thesis demonstrates that Britain's wartime sacred story is not a settled consensus, but a dynamic symbolic resource deployed across the political spectrum to regulate belonging, assign blame, and sustain affective engagement.

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## Introduction:

### Dresden and Britain's Sanctified 'Good War': Memory, Myth and Digital Contestation

'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.'<sup>1</sup> On 20 August 1940, during the height of the Battle of Britain, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, speaking in the House of Commons, used this line to pay tribute to the RAF airmen who were defending the island from invasion. In modern Britain that debt remains forever present, a promise of remembrance repeated at every ceremony, a refrain in speeches, a moral ledger kept open. As Boris Johnson declared on Remembrance Sunday in 2021, it is a 'sacred ceremony... because we know the unpayable debt we owe those brave servicemen and women'.<sup>2</sup> This reverence transcends political divides. More recently, on the eightieth anniversary of VE Day, Sir Keir Starmer reaffirmed that the nation's debt to 'those who achieved victory in Europe can never fully be repaid'.<sup>3</sup>

This bipartisan consensus is anchored by the ubiquitous red poppy, an emblem that has come to represent a 'hyper-commemorative spectacle' and a 'highly scripted' performance of national identity.<sup>4</sup> While the poppy and the solemn rites of Remembrance Sunday originated in, and remain enmeshed with, the devastation of the First World War (as highlighted during the 2018 centenary), they are not merely static artifacts.<sup>5</sup> Rather than acting as a simple,

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<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Few*, House of Commons, 20 August 1940, transcript available at Parliament.uk, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/collections/churchillexhibition/churchill-the-orator/human-conflict/> [accessed 31 October 2025].

<sup>2</sup> Boris Johnson, 'Two-Minute Silence as the Nation Remembers', 14 Nov. 2021, available online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/two-minute-silence-as-the-nation-remembers> [accessed 31 October 2025].

<sup>3</sup> Keir Starmer, 'On Behalf of a Proud and Grateful Nation: Thank You for Your Service', open letter marking VE Day 80, 4 May 2025, <https://www.forcesnews.com/ve-day-80/behalf-proud-and-grateful-nation-thank-you-your-service-says-starmer> [accessed 31 October 2025].

<sup>4</sup> See Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, 'A Pacifist Critique of the Red Poppy: Reflections on British War Commemorations' Increasingly Hegemonic Militarism', *Critical Military Studies*, (2021), p. 6., and Victoria M. Basham, 'Gender, Race, Militarism and Remembrance: The Everyday Geopolitics of the Poppy', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23.6 (2016), p. 888.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the centenary commemorations, see Helena Power, 'A Different Way of Remembering? Cultural Memory, Continuity, and Change in the First World War Centenary' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent, 2024).

timeless vessel for national grief, Nicholas J. Saunders observes that the poppy has taken on ‘new and contorted meanings in our modern commercial age’.<sup>6</sup> The flower has become ‘inseparable from our experience of countless conflicts, from the Great War through the Second World War to Iraq,’ operating not as a fading bloom of the past, but as a ‘reality that is perpetually rejuvenated by continuing sacrifice’.<sup>7</sup>

Buttressed by this symbolic conflation, the memory of the 1939–1945 conflict has been elevated into the nation’s ‘sacred story’ of moral clarity and heroic sacrifice, the unassailable foundation of what Britain was, is, and should be.<sup>8</sup> Participation in the remembrance ritual acts as a test of ‘how truly and wholeheartedly you belong and can be trusted’.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the very attempt to make this story immutable and unquestionable also renders it uniquely vulnerable. By demanding total consensus, the ‘sacred’ narrative creates a rigid target for dissent. This thesis explores how that narrative is challenged, defended, and reshaped in the digital age, investigating how authoritative interventions that complicate this history are mediated by the press and negotiated within the volatile arena of online comment sections.

As Samuel notes, digital culture invites us to ‘connect, to collate and to create memories’, meaning that to understand the modern contours of Britain’s foundational myth, one must examine how it is ‘archived and curated’ by the algorithmic logics of the present.<sup>10</sup> Focusing on the bombing of Dresden in 1945 as a particularly fraught aspect of Britain’s wartime legacy, the thesis examines how, over the last decade, figures from military, religious,

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas J. Saunders, *The Poppy: A Cultural History from Ancient Egypt to the Present Day* (London: Newworld Publications, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3, p. x.

<sup>8</sup> Alec Ryrie, ‘Our Sacred Story’ (documentary, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast 7 Nov. 2020), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000p60n> [accessed 31 Oct. 2025].

<sup>9</sup> Christoyannopoulos, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Samuel, ‘Finest Hour 2.0: Digital Nostalgic Popular Culture and COVID-19’, in Joanne Pettitt ed., *COVID-19, the Second World War, and the Idea of Britishness*, (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2021), p. 321.

and historical spheres have engaged with a commemorative culture shaped by emotional resonance, political pressure, and the demands of visibility within a digital 'like' economy.

The strategic bombing of Dresden on 13–15 February 1945 holds a variety of meanings, historical, moral, and symbolic, that help explain its enduring prominence in British and German commemorative culture. Conducted in support of the Soviet advance and intended to paralyse German communications, the raid destroyed thirteen square miles of the historic city centre and killed tens of thousands of civilians.<sup>11</sup> Although Dresden contained war industries, administrative offices and a major railway nexus, it was also celebrated as the 'Florence on the Elbe', a cultural jewel whose destruction resonated far beyond its military significance.<sup>12</sup> Two RAF night waves and a USAAF daylight strike delivered a mix of high explosives and incendiaries that sparked a firestorm, overpowered Dresden's minimal civil defences, and trapped thousands in cellars where oxygen disappeared in minutes. German survivors described scenes of asphyxiation, heat so intense it reduced bodies to ash, and streets lined with the dead.<sup>13</sup>

Dresden's symbolic afterlife, however, has proved similarly combustible. The city's cultural status, the timing of the attack so late in the war, and the rapid exploitation of the raid by both Nazi and later GDR propaganda ensured that the image of an 'innocent city' (or Opferstadt) annihilated for no legitimate purpose became firmly embedded in public consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Churchill himself expressed discomfort in a famous March 1945 memorandum questioning whether Allied bombing had descended into mere acts of 'terror'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang 'Preface' in Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang eds., *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden* (London: Pimlico, 2006), p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, 13 February 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Crang, 'Victor Klemperer's Dresden', in Addison and Crang (eds.), *Firestorm*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> Stephan Petzold, 'Challenging the Politics of German Victimhood: Memory Activism and the Contested Anniversary of the Dresden Bombings Since 2005', *German Life and Letters*, 73.3 (2020), p. 442.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher C. Harmon, 'Are We Beasts?' Churchill and the Moral Question of World War II 'Area Bombing', *Newport Papers #1, December* (Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College, 1991), p. 4.

In subsequent decades, the raid became a touchstone for moral critique: appropriated by revisionist writers, invoked by pacifists, and mobilised in Cold War rhetoric. Yet historians have long contested these narratives, emphasising the city's genuine military and logistical functions and the strategic context of February 1945. Modern scholarship continues to debate not only the raid's justification but the deeper ethical question of whether its scale and method constituted a war crime.

This combination of cultural loss, propagandistic distortion, moral complexity and enduring historiographical contention that makes Dresden a uniquely volatile site of memory. More than any other Allied raid, it forces confrontation with the dissonance between Britain's cherished narrative of a 'good war' and the brutal realities of area bombing. In the digital age, this volatility is amplified: the resonance of the raid has ensured it has become a moral touchstone through which contemporary Britons negotiate identity, express outrage, and defend or contest the boundaries of the wartime sacred story.

While the three case studies examined in this thesis all fall within a relatively narrow ten-year span, from 2011 to 2020, this temporal concentration is not incidental. Rather, it reflects a period of acute political, cultural, and mnemonic dislocation in Britain, during which previously stable consensus points surrounding national identity, authority, and the meaning of the Second World War came under sustained pressure. The 2010s were marked by profound disruptions: the Brexit referendum to leave the European Union, the rise of anti-establishment and populist politics, declining trust in traditional institutions and media, accelerating secularisation, and the rapid expansion of digital media as a primary arena for public debate.

Within this context, previously sacralised assumptions about the Second World War, long treated as stable points of moral consensus, became newly exposed to challenge, reinterpretation, and emotional contestation. By focusing on interventions clustered within this

decade, the thesis captures not a timeless pattern but a revealing conjuncture, in which Britain's wartime sacred story was both vigorously defended and anxiously renegotiated under the conditions of heightened visibility, polarisation, and affect that characterise the digital public sphere.

The following chapters are designed to build cumulatively. To begin, Chapter One details the research design. It explains the method of tracing discourse from articulation (by authority figures) through mediation (by online news outlets) to reception and contestation (in public comment threads). It outlines the ethical considerations of using 'naturally occurring data' from online sources such as *MailOnline*, the *Guardian*, and their associated social media pages, and details the analytical approach used to interpret this data.

Chapter Two then establishes the core theoretical framework for the thesis. It begins by exploring the mechanisms of collective memory (Halbwachs) and cultural memory (Assmann), arguing that a nation's identity is not a fixed inheritance but a 'mythscape' (Bell) built from shared, emotionally resonant narratives. From this foundation, it defines the Second World War as Britain's foundational sacred story, a hegemonic narrative (Laclau & Mouffe) that provides ontological security in a post-imperial age. It explores the dual myths of 'Little England' (the insular, resilient island) and 'Greater Britain' (the assertive, global power). Using concepts of securitisation (Broecker) and dislocation, it argues that this myth is fiercely policed against perceived threats, making it a central component of contemporary British political and cultural identity.

Chapter Three provides the crucial historical context for my chosen case studies. It traces the complex public memory of RAF Bomber Command, arguing that it has evolved from post-war ambivalence and marginalisation to a modern 'sanctification'. The chapter documents how the campaign has become increasingly accepted as part of the sacred story. It argues that

in the digital ‘age of outrage’, any moral critique of the bombing is no longer treated as historical debate but as sacrilege, making it the most volatile flashpoint in Britain’s war memory.

We then turn to the case study analysis. Chapter Four analyses the reception of Victor Gregg, a British veteran and Dresden bombing survivor. As a decorated ‘insider’ who publicly labelled the raid a ‘war crime’, Gregg represented a profound challenge to the sacred story. This chapter explores the ‘Black Sheep Effect’, tracing how online discourse simultaneously revered his experiential authority (‘he was there’) while ‘ritually expelling’ his moral conclusions as ignorant, senile, or traitorous. It demonstrates how his testimony was appropriated by different media outlets to serve conflicting narratives.

Chapter Five examines the 2015 media firestorm surrounding Archbishop Justin Welby’s reconciliatory speech in Dresden during the commemorations of the seventieth anniversary of the raids on the city. It analyses the Church of England’s complex role as both a historic architect and a modern critic of Britain’s civil religion. It argues that the *Daily Mail* and its online readership reframed Welby’s pastoral act of ‘profound regret’ as a political apology, enacting a ritual of expulsion. This case study exposes the populist affective feedback loop between media framing and audience outrage, and the deep-seated suspicion of ‘elite’ figures who challenge national myths.

Chapter Six investigates the 2020 reception of historian Sinclair McKay’s book, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*. It explores the ‘death of expertise’ in the populist online sphere, arguing that McKay’s nuanced, reconciliatory history was ignored.<sup>16</sup> Instead, media headlines and comment threads reduced his work to the binary question, ‘Was it a war crime?’ The analysis shows how commenters constructed their own populist epistemology, rejecting

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<sup>16</sup> Term used by Tom Nichols in his book *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

professional historical methods in favour of mythopoetic legitimation, where anecdote, postmemory (the inherited, affective memory of events not personally lived), and algorithmically affirmed 'common sense' were used to aggressively defend the sacred story.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, the outcome of this thesis represents the culmination of an intellectual journey that began as a study of how modern Britain views Germany's past and became a study of how Britain views itself. By dissecting these case studies, this research moves beyond simply stating that the war still matters. The thesis makes a significant theoretical and methodological contribution to the field of Memory Studies by charting the collision between established memory cultures and digital participatory spaces. Methodologically, it demonstrates the rich potential of applying rigorous historical analysis to a 'new' and often overlooked data source: online comments. Just as the Mass Observation project has been robustly defended by historians for its ability to capture the subjective, fragmented, and everyday dimensions of public sentiment, this thesis argues that digital comment sections serve as a vital, contemporary archive for the historian of memory.<sup>18</sup> By engaging with this material, the thesis provides a critical analysis of the precise mechanisms by which Britain's most sacred historical narrative is maintained, negotiated and algorithmically policed in a fragmented and insecure digital age.

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<sup>17</sup> Samuel Bennett, 'Mythopoetic Legitimation and the Recontextualisation of Europe's Foundational Myth', *Journal of Language and Politics*, 21.2 (2022), pp. 370–89; Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> See Annabella Pollen, 'Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: "Scientifically, about as valuable as a chimpanzee's tea party at the zoo"?'', *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (2013), pp. 213–35.

## **Chapter One: Methodology, Ethics and Limitations**

This thesis proposes that moments of historical controversy, when widely circulated via online news and social media, offer a valuable window into the boundaries and logics of national memory. The research traces how memory moves from articulation (by authorities) to mediation (by news outlets), to reception and contestation (by online audiences). This chapter explains the rationale for adopting a case study approach, specifies the primary online news sources and platforms examined (predominantly the *MailOnline*, the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph* and *The Times* websites, and their associated Facebook pages), and outlines the thought process guiding the selection of three distinct examples of authoritative challenges to Britain's dominant memory of the Second World War.

In addition, drawing on prominent media scholar Michael Skey's assertion that the digital public sphere now offers 'a range of naturally occurring data' for scholars to utilise, this research suggests that online comment sections, beyond their pragmatic availability, constitute an unprecedented historical source for examining how the past is publicly felt, contested, and performed.<sup>1</sup> Unlike surveys, interviews, or retrospective memoirs, comment threads capture naturally occurring, time-specific reactions to historical controversy as it unfolds, preserving the emotional texture of public engagement at moments of heightened visibility. As de Smale argues, comment sections function as sites of vernacular memory, where micro-narratives of belonging, grievance, and identification emerge through interaction rather than formal commemoration.<sup>2</sup> These exchanges reveal how historical meaning is not merely received but actively negotiated and reworked in everyday digital encounters.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Skey, 'Nationalism and Media', *Nationalities Papers*, 50.5 (2022), p. 846.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie de Smale, 'Memory in the Margins: The Connecting and Colliding of Vernacular War Memories', *Media, War & Conflict*, 13.2 (2020), pp. 188-212.

Recent interdisciplinary research further demonstrates the analytical value of such data. Studies of online nostalgia show that comment sections provide access to spontaneous expressions of affect that differ significantly from responses elicited through experimental or survey-based methods. As Areni and Todres note, analysing comments in a ‘naturalistic setting’ (in their case YouTube comment threads) allows researchers to observe how engagements with the past emerge in everyday digital environments, rather than being shaped by the prompts or constraints of the research process itself.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the performative and sometimes orchestrated nature of online participation does not diminish its historical relevance. On the contrary, as Logunova and Lebedev show, digitally mediated crowds actively shape the appearance of consensus, outrage, and authenticity, influencing how historical narratives are staged as popular, sacred, or under threat.<sup>4</sup> For historians of memory, these dynamics are not methodological noise but part of the phenomenon under investigation.

Read in this way, comment sections do not simply reflect public opinion; they document the live social life of memory in a fragmented and algorithmically amplified public sphere. They offer a rare archive of how historical narratives are defended, policed, and emotionally inhabited at specific moments in time, a form of evidence that has only become available in the digital age. Accordingly, this chapter will also explain the methods used to analyse the online media coverage and user comments, as well as the ethical considerations guiding the research. Finally, the chapter reflects on the limitations of both the chosen research design, and the notwithstanding perils of using online data as a key primary source. The discussion shall

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<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Areni and Mathew Todres, 'How Long Ago were the "Good Old Days"?: Comparing the Prevalence of Nostalgia in YouTube Comments on Music Videos from Recent Versus Distant Decades', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 37.6 (2023), p. 1456.

<sup>4</sup> Olga Logunova and Pavel Lebedev, 'Orchestrated Crowds: Rethinking Inauthentic Participation in Digital Memory Wars', *King's College London* (14 July 2025) <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/orchestrated-crowds-rethinking-inauthentic-participation-in-digital-memory-wars> [accessed 15 December 2025].

cover concerns about representativeness, anonymity, and platform bias, before reaffirming the interpretive value of online sources for scholars of cultural memory.

### **The Adoption of a Case Study Approach**

Underpinning this methodology is a theoretical framework, informed by discourse theory and memory studies, which regards collective memory as inherently fluid and subject to continuous negotiation. Britain's dominant Second World War narrative functions as a powerful hegemonic discourse, embodying a cultural myth that emphasises national virtue, heroism, and moral clarity. Referred to as Britain's sacred story, this narrative reinforces national identity by sharply contrasting British heroism with Nazi evil.<sup>5</sup>

Several scholars have examined how hegemonic narratives respond to disruption, particularly through the lens of securitisation and identity formation. Susanne Szkola has explored how moments of narrative challenge or crisis can be understood as dislocations of hegemonic identity narratives.<sup>6</sup> She describes how political actors often turn to emotionally charged memories of the past to restabilise identity. Szkola refers to this process as affective ontological security seeking, where memory is used not just to tell coherent stories, but to recalibrate collective emotions by reinforcing feelings of pride, grievance, or historical trauma.<sup>7</sup> Maria Mälksoo further elaborates upon these dynamics, indicating that efforts to securitise historical memory, though intended to stabilise narratives, can often inadvertently exacerbate existing historical anxieties, perpetuating insecurity rather than alleviating it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 'Our sacred story', *Archive on 4*, BBC Radio 4, 7 November 2020

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000p60n> [accessed 18 April 2025].

<sup>6</sup> Susanne Szkola, 'Trauma or Nostalgia? "The Past" as Affective Ontological Security Seeking Playground in the South Caucasus', *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*, 6.1 (2020), pp. 51–112.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Maria Mälksoo, 'Memory Must Be Defended': Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security', *Security Dialogue*, 46.3 (2015), pp. 221–237

Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory helps explain why this occurs: rather than existing in isolation, memories interact across cultural and historical boundaries.<sup>9</sup> Memory is not a zero-sum game, but dynamically entangled. Memories sometimes reinforce one another but often generate friction or alternative perspectives. This entanglement means that attempts to fix historical meaning through securitisation are frequently undermined by the emergence of competing narratives. Hannah Broecker extends this further by showing how hegemonic memory discourse relies on empty signifiers, terms like 'We Will Remember Them' in the context of wartime memory, which can temporarily unify diverse positions but grow unstable as they absorb contradictory meanings.<sup>10</sup> As such, securitisation is not a one-off act of narrative closure but an ongoing and precarious process of discursive boundary-drawing. Together, Rothberg and Broecker's theories illuminate how commemorative discourse must constantly adapt to contestation. These dynamics are central to understanding the public reception of challenges to Britain's wartime narrative, such as those examined in the case studies.

Additionally, research by Krawatzek and Soroka highlights the significant role of speaker identity and contextual framing in public engagements with contested historical narratives.<sup>11</sup> Their study reveals that public reception of controversial historical statements can be heavily influenced by the perceived authority and legitimacy of the speaker, as well as by the specific historical and political contexts in which these interventions occur. This underscores the importance of examining not only the content of contested narratives but also the positional and symbolic power of those articulating them. This research directly informs

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Broecker, *Securitisation as Hegemonic Discourse Formation: An Integrative Model* (Cham: Springer, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Félix Krawatzek and George Soroka, 'Defending History? The Impact of Context and Speaker in Russia', *Perspectives on Politics*, 22.1 (2024), pp. 1–17.

my own approach, which analyses how the identity of the authority figures (veteran, cleric, historian) shapes the mediation and reception of their interventions regarding Dresden.

While existing research offers valuable insights into how narrative disruptions are created and managed, much of it remains focused on specific geopolitical contexts. Szkola, for example, explores affective memory politics in the South Caucasus.<sup>12</sup> Krawatzek and Soroka in turn look at contemporary Russian memory of the Second World War.<sup>13</sup> Yet the dynamics they investigate are equally relevant to studies of British cultural memory. My own research thus applies their theoretical insights to the UK context, examining how disruptions to Britain's wartime narrative are navigated in public discourse.

The three case studies chosen for my project were selected based on several key factors: firstly, the incidents generated significant media coverage and public discussion, reflecting their impact on collective memory; secondly, the figures invoked Britain's war memory in ways that complicated or challenged the dominant narrative; and finally, the figures represented distinct forms of societal authority (direct wartime experience, institutional moral leadership and historical expertise) allowing exploration of how the speaker's identity influences public reception.

Accordingly, this study explores how Britain's sacred wartime story is negotiated at the intersection of three forces. An authority figure, such as a journalist/popular historian, veteran, or religious leader, makes a public intervention that engages with or complicates the dominant Second World War narrative. This intervention is taken up, framed, and refracted through media coverage; in headlines, broadcast excerpts, and news commentary. In turn the public responds, often in highly visible online comment threads attached to the coverage, endorsing, rejecting,

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<sup>12</sup> Szkola, 'Trauma or Nostalgia?'

<sup>13</sup> Krawatzek and Soroka, 'Defending History?'

or reinterpreting both the figure's message, the media's framing of it, and potentially the historical event itself.

In this way, each case study examines a discursive sequence, tracing how memory moves from articulation to media mediation, to vernacular reception. This process explores how public understandings of the Second World War are shaped not only by what is said, but by who is engaging with the memory, how it is reported, and how audiences react.

### **Data Collection Process**

The data collection for this research combined a structured web and discourse-tracing method (following how the same story is retold and reframed across different texts and platforms over time), informed in part by the approach developed by Mathias Scheicher in his study of how digital memory of the Holocaust unfolds on social media platforms.<sup>14</sup> Scheicher's research similarly begins by identifying digitally mediated acts of remembrance that either trigger significant public discourse or generate significant attention on a platform due to factors such as algorithmic promotion (when platform software automatically pushes certain posts to more users based on predicted interest), hashtag usage (attaching searchable labels such as #Dresden to posts so they can be grouped and found more easily), or adherence to visual-aesthetic conventions (recurring styles of images, layouts, or colour schemes that signal 'this is a commemorative post').<sup>15</sup> While his empirical scope includes both high-profile and lesser noticed commemorative expressions, visibility and interaction remain central analytical lenses. My own approach adapts this framework to the context of British memory politics and Second World War commemorations, particularly those linked to the bombing of Dresden.

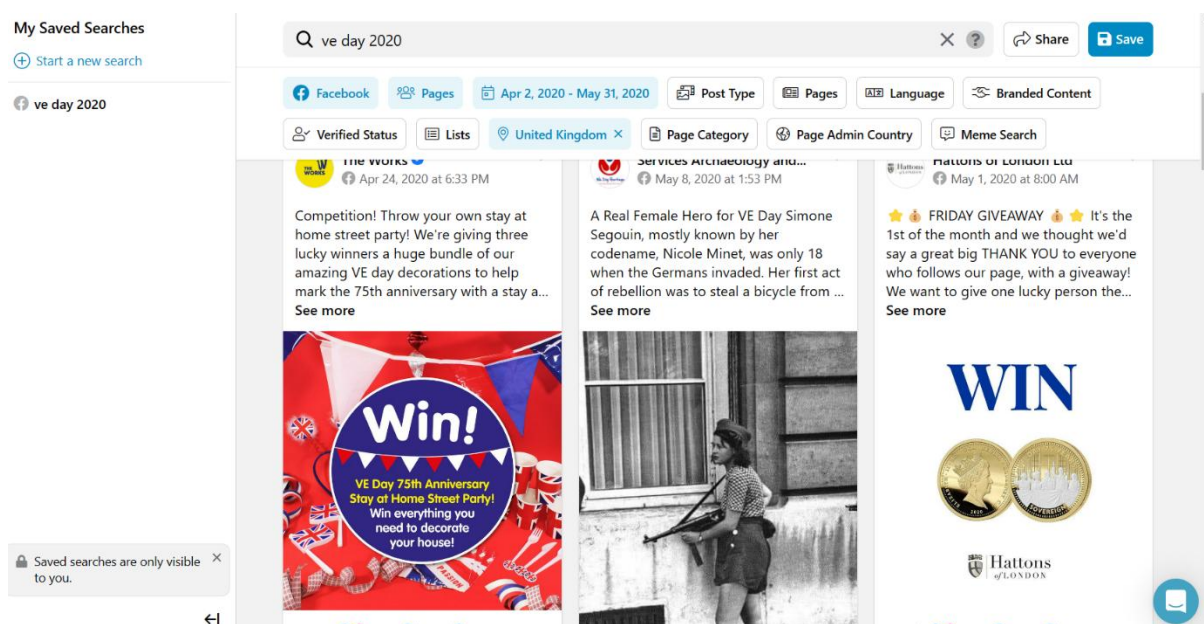
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<sup>14</sup> Mathias Scheicher, *'Like=Remember': Online-Erinnerungskulturen an die Shoah* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

To identify relevant commemorative interventions, I conducted a series of structured web and digital archive searches (systematic keyword searches using fixed time and source filters) focused on British media coverage of the Dresden bombing from 2010 onwards.<sup>16</sup> During the earlier phases of the project, I also made use of Facebook's now discontinued CrowdTangle service (a tool for tracking how public posts spread and how much engagement they receive) to detect posts and articles with high user engagement relating to Dresden commemorations. These steps helped identify a set of potential case studies based on their resonance across mainstream and social media channels.

**Figure 1.1: Screenshot of 2022 CrowdTangle Interface (Discontinued)**



After identifying the key events and the core news articles covering them, I mapped how each event's narrative spread across different discursive domains – news reports, comment threads on the previously specified news sites, and discussions on their associated social media pages (primarily Facebook). This discourse-tracing ensured that for each case I captured

<sup>16</sup> This included the use of search engines such as Google, as well as the use of time and region-filtered queries on the LexisNexis database (a subscription database of news articles and legal documents) to trace reporting patterns around key anniversaries.

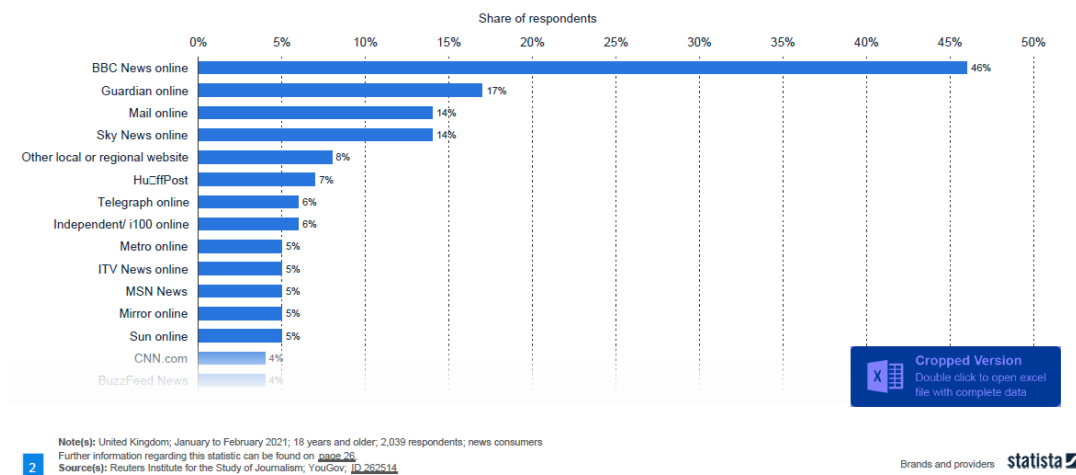
multiple layers of public dialogue around the commemorative intervention. I focused on cases that garnered wide visibility (e.g. numerous headlines or viral sharing) and substantial audience interaction (lengthy comment threads, significant sharing or replies).

To facilitate this process, I followed the precedent set by Woods et al., who investigated public moral (dis)engagement with climate change by analysing comments on prominent British news platforms.<sup>17</sup> Their study focused on the most-read newspapers across ideological lines and prioritised articles that had both high visibility and extensive comment sections. I adopted a similar logic, using *Ofcom*, *Reuters* and *PressGazette* data to prioritise the UK news sources with the largest audiences (see Figures 1.2–4), ensuring my dataset reflected a significant proportion of public online engagement with commemorative discourse in widely consumed media environments.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 1.2: Leading Online News Brands Accessed in the UK (February 2021)<sup>19</sup>**

### Leading online news brands accessed in the United Kingdom as of February 2021

Leading online news brands accessed UK 2021

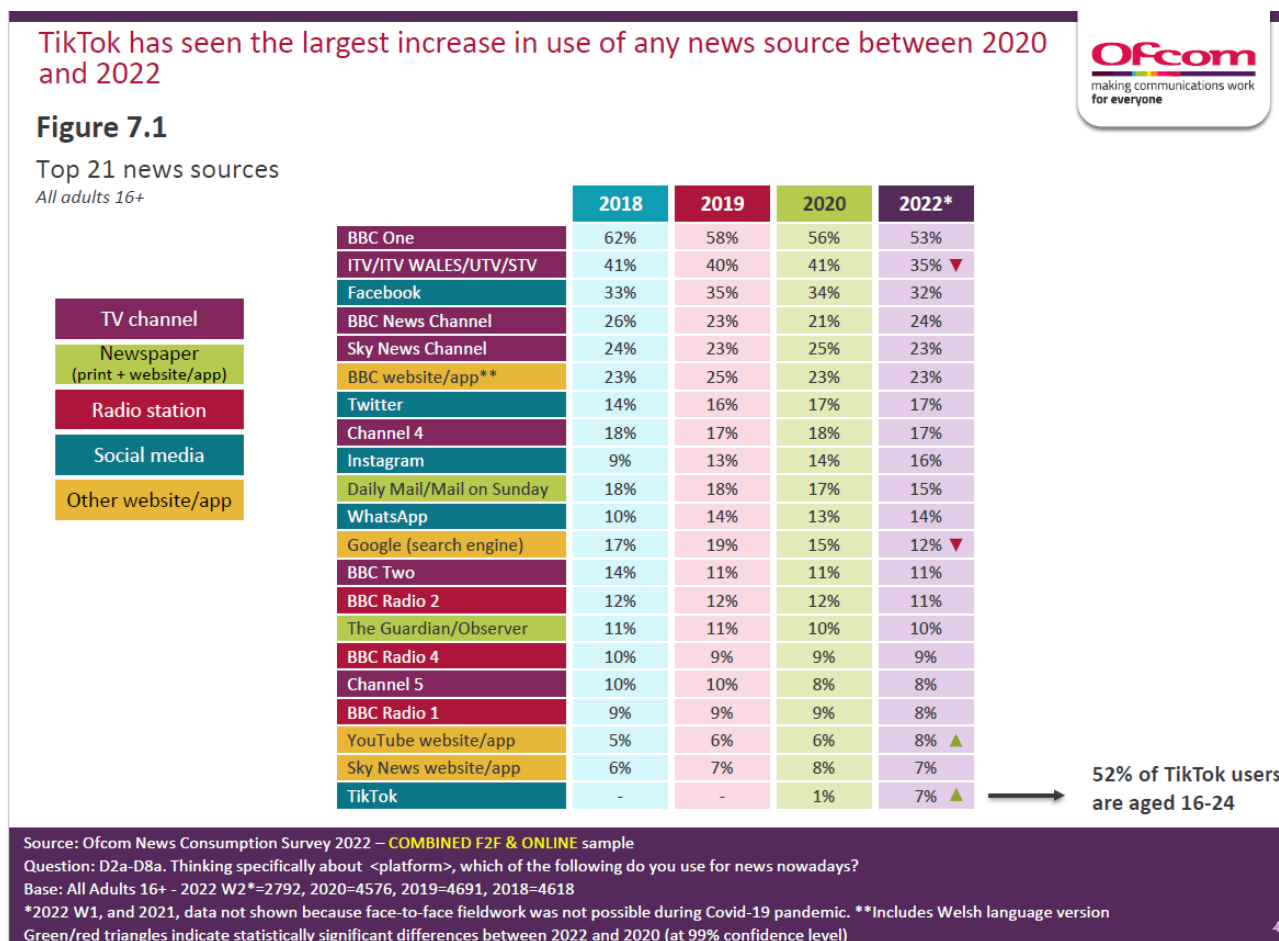


<sup>17</sup> Ruth Woods, Sharon Coen, and Ana Fernández, 'Moral (Dis)Engagement with Anthropogenic Climate Change in Online Comments on Newspaper Articles', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 28.4 (2018), pp. 244–257.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Nic Newman and others, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and YouGov, *Leading Online News Brands accessed in the United Kingdom as of February 2021*, Statista <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262514/leading-online-news-brands-accessed-in-the-uk/> [accessed 18 April 2025].

Figure 1.3: Top UK News Sources Across Platforms (2018–2022)<sup>20</sup>



<sup>20</sup> Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK: 2022* (London: Ofcom, 2022), p. 42.

**Figure 1.4: UK Online News Platform Audience Reach (February 2023)<sup>21</sup>**

	Newsbrand	Audience	MoM % change	YoY % change	Audience reach (%)
1	BBC	38.6m	-1.5	2.7	77%
2	Mail Online	20.8m	-3.2	-2.9	41%
3	The Sun	20.1m	0.8	-14.2	40%
4	The Guardian	19.9m	-6.2	-3	40%
5	Mirror	18.2m	-7.3	-14.5	36%
6	The Independent	18.2m	-5.4	-6.2	36%
7	Yahoo!	16.9m	-5.6	11.6	34%
8	Sky News	16.4m	-8	-7.2	33%
9	Daily Express	15.7m	-8.4	34.5	31%
10	ITV	14.6m	-2.8	1.3	29%
11	The Telegraph	14.4m	-7.4	0.1	29%
12	Metro	14m	-7.5	3.1	28%
13	Money Saving Expert	13.9m	-2.6	2.5	28%
14	Manchester Evening News	12.1m	-3.8	24.4	24%
15	Good Food	11.6m	-8.6	-20.1	23%
16	Times & Sunday Times	10.3m	2.7	-14.7	21%
17	The Evening Standard	9.9m	-1.6	-8.8	20%
18	Birmingham Live	8.4m	0.4	-23.8	17%
19	GB News	8.3m	-10.9	-7.5	17%
20	Radio Times	7.8m	-12.9	1.2	16%
21	New York Times	7.6m	-6.2	6	15%
22	Hello! Magazine	7.5m	-3.7	10.9	15%
23	Daily Record	7.3m	-1.7	-9.9	14%
24	Healthline Media	7m	-18.1	-26.7	14%
25	Liverpool Echo	6.6m	4.3	-4.7	13%

There may regularly be digital market factors outside of the control of Ipsos iris that can impact the data for digital publishing brands.

Source: Ipsos iris, 1-28 February, Adults 15+. Ipsos iris is endorsed by UKOM. Press Gazette custom list • Created with Datawrapper

PressGazette

[Note: MoM = Month-on-Month change; YoY = Year-on-Year change]

Once the relevant news articles and posts were identified, I collected the accompanying user comments to analyse how audiences received and negotiated the memory narratives. Collection of this data combined manual and automated techniques, tailored to each platform's technical constraints. Many news sites posed challenges to automated 'scraping' (the process of using a script to download and save text from a webpage), because comments were loaded dynamically, hidden behind 'load more' buttons (rather than being immediately visible on the webpage), or protected by CAPTCHAs (tests designed to block non-human access) or

<sup>21</sup> Press Gazette, 'Most Popular Websites for News in the UK: Monthly Top 50 Listing', *Press Gazette*, 26 March 2025 [https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/media\\_metrics/most-popular-websites-news-uk-monthly-2/](https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/media_metrics/most-popular-websites-news-uk-monthly-2/) [accessed 23 April 2025].

restricted APIs (programming interfaces that limit how external tools can connect to the site). As a result, a considerable portion of the comment data had to be gathered manually.

For several outlets, including *MailOnline*, the *Telegraph*, *The Times*, and the *Guardian*, I manually copied comment threads into text documents when scraping tools failed. These raw comment files were then processed using simple custom Python scripts (short computer programmes). The scripts cleaned the text and converted it into a structured format by separating out basic information such as the commenter's chosen name, the time and date of posting, the number of 'upvotes' and 'downvotes' (visible indicators of peer approval or disapproval), and whether a comment was a direct reply to another. The output was a series of standardised tables of comments stored in spreadsheet form. This approach ensured that even comments originally displayed in an interactive web interface could be converted into a consistent format (see Figure 1.5 for an example). Meanwhile, Facebook comments were retrieved using a commercial export tool (ExportComments.com). This tool provided complete threads from public Facebook posts, including commenter names, timestamps, and reactions, which I then formatted consistently with the news site data.

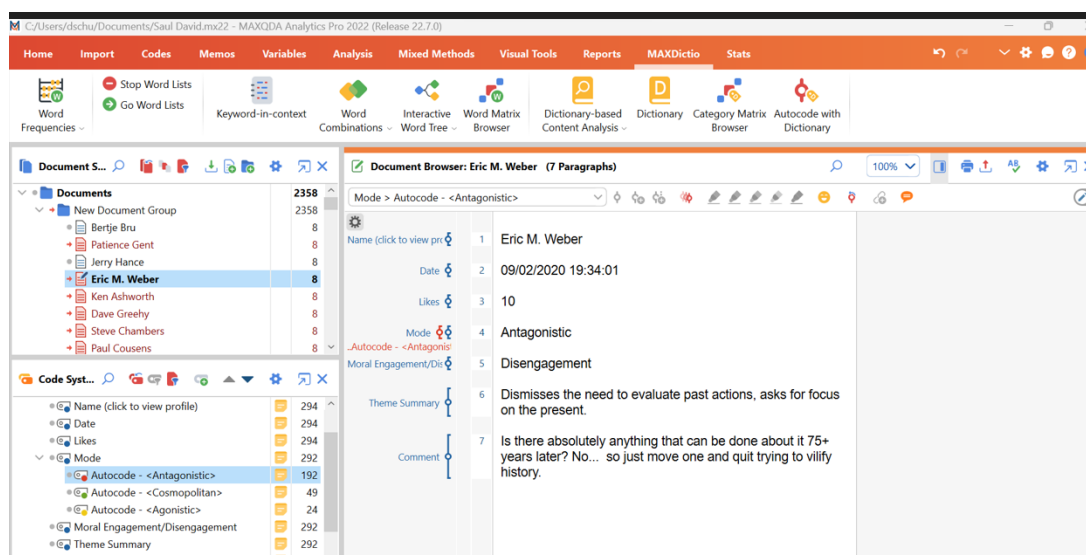
**Figure 1.5: Example Spreadsheet Format for Collected Comment Data**

	A	B	C	D	E	F	
1	username	comment_date	comment	likes	dislikes	vote_ratio	reply
2	Robert Ho	24 NOVEMBER 202	Every so often the DT produces an obituary which is an abso	67	0		67
3	Robert Sle	24 NOVEMBER 202	It was a miserable day and had been thinking about my prok	65	0		65
4	Time for a	24 NOVEMBER 202	That's one of the most interesting, brave and utterly bonker	52	0		52
5	NJ Ratniek	24 NOVEMBER 202	I have been waiting for this obituary for a while and now it h	45	0		45
6	Glyn Jone	24 NOVEMBER 202	After reading this obituary, it makes you think: "What a bori	39	0		39
7	Tim Parry.	24 NOVEMBER 202	Extraordinary and to live such a long life. There are likely sir	32	0		32
8	Paul Smit	24 NOVEMBER 202	what a man, what a life, I had to read the obit twice as it wa:	30	0		30
9	Steve Gar	24 NOVEMBER 202	A phenomenal story that should be dramatised. Knowing m	29	0		29
10	Christoph	24 NOVEMBER 202	It's bloody-minded square pegs like him that armies cannot	25	0		25
11	Fred Ner	24 NOVEMBER 202	True old school Brit. God bless him.	25	0		25
12	Del Inque	24 NOVEMBER 202	Tough times make tough people. What a life.	24	0		24
13	P Yates.	24 NOVEMBER 202	Just the sort of guy Popski and Stirling wanted. Not "good" s	24	0		24
14	Keith We	24 NOVEMBER 202	Don't talk such rubbish. This country was involved in what th	23	0		23 Robin
15	peter rob	24 NOVEMBER 202	Read his autobiography. Rifleman I think was the one. It smi	23	0		23 Bernar
16	Paul Mah	24 NOVEMBER 202	It wasn't, and neither was it the fault of Harris. It was also a	22	0		22 Robin

Once all datasets had been prepared and standardised, either as Excel or CSV files, they were imported into the MaxQDA software environment (see Figure 1.6). MaxQDA is a

qualitative data analysis programme designed for working with large volumes of text. The decision to use MaxQDA was informed by Matthias J. Becker's work on antisemitism in online reader comments.<sup>22</sup> In his study, Becker conducted a linguistic analysis of thousands of anonymised comments from the online editions of *Die Zeit* and the *Guardian*. Becker's work, like this study, treated comment sections of mainstream news sites as important sites of contested public discourse. His methodology, which balanced thematic coding with careful anonymisation and iterative refinement, informed the development of my own data handling procedures and eventual analytical method, which combined both traditional historical analysis with visual and quantitative tools.

**Figure 1.6: Screenshot of MaxQDA Analysis Interface**



## Analytical Method

Overall, my data collection process compiled a corpus of 13,963 individual comments across 21 distinct digital events (see Table 1.1). Spanning prominent news platforms (predominantly *MailOnline*, the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph*, and *The Times*) and their associated Facebook pages, this scale was necessary not to map a statistically 'true' representation of public opinion, but to

<sup>22</sup> Matthias J. Becker, *Antisemitism in Reader Comments: Analogies for Reckoning with the Past* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

capture the richness, affective intensity, and tonal diversity of online reactions to historical interventions.

The sheer volume of available data reflects the immense affective investment the British public retains in these historical narratives. To highlight just a few examples from this corpus, the media coverage surrounding Victor Gregg's centenary and his characterisation of the Dresden bombing as a 'war crime' generated a vast amount of interaction over an eight-year period; the comments on a single *Guardian* article alone constituted a corpus of close to 90,000 words. Similarly, the backlash to Archbishop Justin Welby's 2015 Dresden speech demonstrated a profound affective feedback loop, yielding a highly concentrated dataset of exactly 3,700 comments extracted from *MailOnline* articles published over just a one-week period. Finally, the analysis of Sinclair McKay's *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* incorporated an additional 1,394 comments to examine the populist rejection of historical expertise across broadsheet and periodical reviews.



	Tabloid Retrospectives (Feb 2020)		
	Posthumous Broadsheet Obituaries (Oct 2021)	<i>The Times &amp; The Telegraph</i> (Websites)	165
<b>CS2: Justin Welby</b>  <i>(Total: 3,700)</i>	Welby's Dresden Reconciliation Speech & Tabloid Framing (Feb 2015)	<i>MailOnline</i>	2,577
	Prime Minister David Cameron's 'No Apology' Rebuttal (Feb 2015)	<i>MailOnline</i>	485
	<i>MailOnline</i> Editorial & Ideological Condemnation (Feb 2015)	<i>MailOnline</i>	638

<b>CS3: Sinclair McKay</b>  <i>(Total: 1,394)</i>	Saul David's Review of <i>Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness</i> (Feb 2020)	<i>The Telegraph</i> Facebook Page	971
	Conservative Periodical Review in <i>The Spectator</i> (Feb 2020)	<i>The Spectator</i> Facebook Page	182
	Max Hastings & Gerard DeGroot Reviews (Feb 2020)	<i>The Times</i> (Website)	241
<b>Total Corpus</b>	<b>21 Unique Datasets</b>	<b>8 Distinct Platforms/Pages</b>	<b>13,963 comments</b>

When considering how to analyse this data, I initially considered implementing a structured, deductive coding schema and machine-learning approaches.<sup>23</sup> However,

<sup>23</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the variety of methods, see *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, ed. by Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017), which includes specific chapters on 'Sentiment Analysis' (Ch. 32) and 'Theme Detection in Social Media' (Ch. 31). The growing number of frameworks is also captured in literature reviews such as Eric W.T. Ngai, Spencer S.C. Tao, and Karen K.L. Moon, 'Social media research: Theories, Constructs, and Conceptual Frameworks', *International Journal of Information Management*, 35 (2015), pp. 33–44. Specific coding schemas range from

preliminary tests revealed that computational methods lacked the interpretive nuance required to detect the sarcasm, irony, and complex emotional registers inherent in memory debates. Furthermore, manually applying a rigid, multi-layered coding schema across thousands of comments as a solo researcher raised concerns regarding cognitive fatigue, subjective drift, and unreliable categorisation. Attempting to resolve this by drastically subsampling the data risked omitting the crucial outlier discourses that make online comment sections analytically valuable.<sup>24</sup> I was also wary of imposing normative frameworks that might reify moral hierarchies the participants themselves reject.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, I abandoned strict ‘top-down’ deductive coding in favour of an abductive, discourse-led thematic analysis. This strategy prioritises interpretive flexibility, mandating that codes emerge from the data to provide ‘thick description’ of the discursive terrain.<sup>26</sup> The process unfolded in five iterative stages:

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linguistic frameworks for sentiment analysis, such as the ‘Appraisal framework’ (see Luca Cavasso and Maite Taboada, ‘A Corpus Analysis of Online News Comments Using the Appraisal framework’, *Journal of Corpora and Discourse Studies*, 4 (2021), pp. 1–38 ), to ‘stance and voice type’ analysis (see Laura McCambridge, ‘Describing the Voice of Online Bullying: An Analysis of Stance and Voice Type in YouTube Comments’, *Discourse, Context & Media*, 45 (2022), 100552). Methodological approaches also explicitly combine ‘content analysis and critical discourse analysis’ to examine Facebook comments (see Daniel Cardoso, Ana Rosa, and Marisa Torres da Silva, ‘(De) Politicizing Polyamory: Social Media Comments on Media Representations of Consensual Non-Monogamies’, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50 (2021), pp. 1325–1340) or use content analysis to establish thematic codebooks (e.g., Dominik Wawrzuta and others, ‘What Arguments against COVID-19 Vaccines Run on Facebook in Poland: Content Analysis of Comments’, *Vaccines*, 9 (2021), 481, pp. 1–12).

<sup>23</sup> This approach aligns with inductive methodologies that prioritize emergent codes. For example, Allan B. de Guzman, John Christopher B. Mesana, and Jonas Airon M. Roman, ‘Age Knows No Bounds: A Latent Content Analysis of Social Media Comments Toward Older Adults’ Engagement in Sports Activities’, *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 40.12 (2021), pp. 1856–64, explicitly subjected YouTube comments to ‘inductive analytic procedures of content analysis’. This interpretive goal is also central to mixed-methods frameworks designed to blend computational analysis with ‘qualitative (thematic analysis) techniques’ to capture ‘broader social context and meaning’, as detailed in Matthew Andreotta and others, ‘Analysing Social Media Data: A Mixed-Methods Framework Combining Computational and Qualitative Text Analysis’, *Behavior Research Methods*, 51 (2019), pp. 1766–81. Such methods provide the ‘detailed, contextualized description’ advocated by Guillaume Latzko-Toth, Claudine Bonneau, and Mélanie Millette (Ch. 13, ‘Small Data, Thick Data’) and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (Ch. 17, ‘Small Stories Research’) in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, ed. by Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Matthew Andreotta and others, ‘Analysing Social Media Data: A Mixed-Methods Framework Combining Computational and Qualitative Text Analysis’, *Behavior Research Methods*, 51 (2019), pp. 1766–81 (p. 1768). As Dhiraj Murthy cautions, ‘very large generalisations are made from Twitter data’, arguing instead for mixed methods to balance scale with interpretive depth. See Dhiraj Murthy, ‘Mixed-Method Approaches to the Study of Twitter’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, p. 570.

<sup>25</sup> See Lea David, *The Past Can’t Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> This approach aligns with inductive methodologies that prioritize emergent codes to provide the ‘detailed, contextualized description’ advocated by Guillaume Latzko-Toth, Claudine Bonneau, and Mélanie Millette (Ch. 13, ‘Small Data, Thick Data’) in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*.

1. **Data Processing and Exploratory Reading:** Data was imported into MaxQDA for an exploratory, low-inference reading of the respective comment sections, tagging segments with descriptive coded labels based on surface content or rhetorical intent (e.g., 'heroic past invoked' or 'ironic Churchill reference').
2. **Thematic Clustering:** Related codes were grouped into higher-level themes, which clarified the vital distinction between narrative content (what is being said) and interactional positioning (how it is said and to/by whom), identifying rhetorical patterns such as 'Delegitimising the Opponent'.
3. **Computational Supplementation:** MaxQDA's computational visualisations were deployed not merely as illustrative graphics, but as primary heuristic devices to manage the scale of the text. These tools surfaced broad patterns and tonal shifts (e.g., recurring references to the 'BBC' as a purveyor of revisionism) and validated the inductive coding. Crucially, they allowed for the human contextualisation of ambiguity that machine learning or large-language models (LLMs, advanced AI systems designed to predict and generate human-like text from large datasets) frequently misinterpret.

For example, 'Word Clouds' were utilised initially as a form of 'distant reading'. By rendering the most frequently used terms in varying sizes, where the largest words correspond directly to the highest volume of mentions, these clouds provided an immediate visual snapshot of a dataset's dominant vocabulary (see Figure 1.7). This macroscopic view was particularly valuable for identifying linguistic anomalies, such as the prevalence of contemporary political terminology within what were ostensibly debates about 1945.



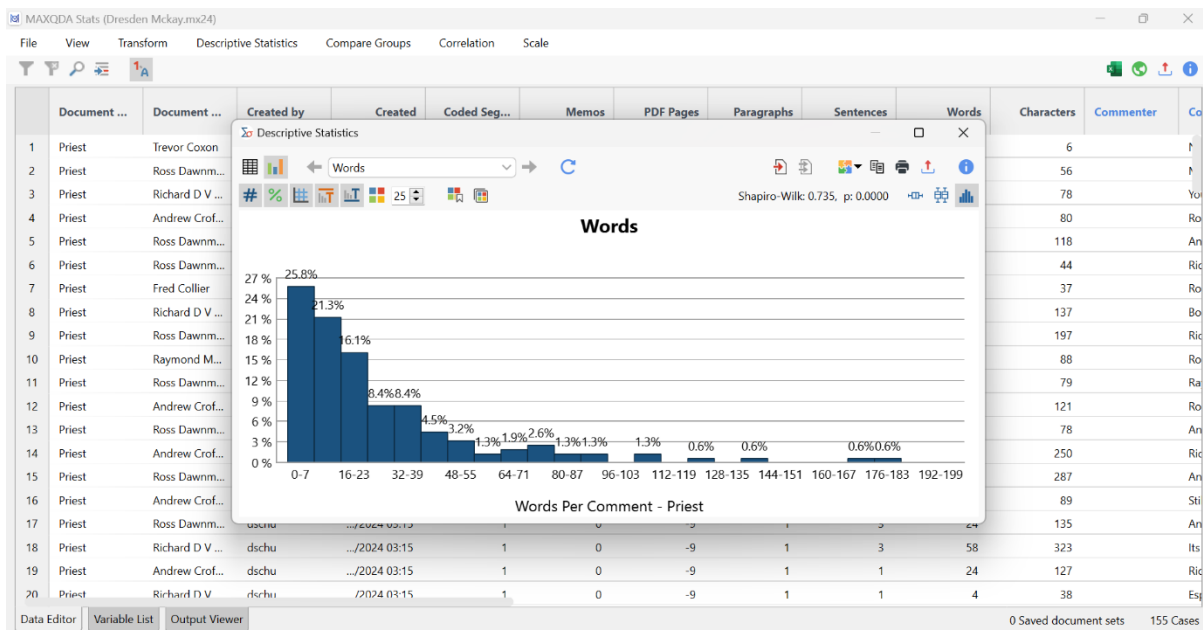
contextualising the event against the 'crimes of the Nazis'. Crucially, the software also mapped recurring temporal qualifiers, branching prominently from the node 'when the' to expose highly conditional arguments (e.g., asserting the bombing was unjustified *when the* 'result was no longer at issue' or *when the* 'Luftwaffe was devastated').

**Figure 1.8: Word Tree Example**



4. **Exemplar Identification:** Upon completing the above steps, representative comments were selected to capture the core dynamics and tonal range of each theme, ensuring the analysis remained grounded in authentic online voices. Here, I also used MaxQDA to generate descriptive statistics, such as the average word count per comment on specific articles (see Figure 1.9). This assisted in comparing the overall tone of responses across cases and in identifying unusually detailed comments that warranted closer interpretive analysis. By cross-comparing metadata, the analysis could isolate high-engagement flashpoints, such as a single defensive comment in the second case study dataset that received a staggering 2,317 'likes'. Identifying these peaks of communal validation allowed the research to pinpoint exactly where the 'sacred story' was being most fiercely policed by the digital community.

Figure 1.9 Example Quantitative Analysis Output in MaxQDA



5. **Theoretical Reintegration:** Finally, both historiographical and theoretical frameworks were reintroduced as interpretive lenses to examine the inductively established themes. For example, the antagonistic versus cosmopolitan memory modes proposed by Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen helped interpret the polarisation between heroic and critical narratives (see Figure 1.10).<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Ruth Woods and colleagues' adaptation of Albert Bandura's moral disengagement theory illuminated recurring rhetorical strategies, such as advantageous comparison or denial of harm (see Figure 1.11).<sup>28</sup> This dynamic interplay between grounded analysis and conceptual depth also allowed for the incorporation of supplementary frameworks as new themes emerged. For example, subsequent research on the discursive construction of expertise (see

<sup>27</sup> Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen, 'On Agonistic Memory', *Memory Studies*, 9.4 (2016), p. 400.

<sup>28</sup> Woods et al, p. 246.

Figure 1.12) informed my understanding of how users established authority through technical language or 'common sense' without formal credentials.<sup>29</sup>

By following these iterative steps, the resulting thematic analysis is systematic yet sensitive, capable of capturing both broad discursive patterns and the nuanced ways individuals perform cultural memory in digital spaces. By capturing the diverse, reactive nature of this discourse, the ensuing chapters are able to present complex conceptual findings, such as 'conditional reverence' (Chapter Four), 'affective ontological security' (Chapter Five), and 'populist epistemology' (Chapter Six), not as abstract theories imposed from above, but as observable, verifiable phenomena forged in the crucible of the comment section.

**Figure 1.10: Bull and Hansen's (2016) Modes of Remembering**

**Table 1.** The defining characteristics of modes of remembering.

	Antagonistic Mode	Cosmopolitan Mode	Agonistic Mode
Nature of conflict	Good vs evil Good and evil as moral categories Us = good Them = evil	Good vs evil Good and evil as abstract categories Democracy/HR = good Totalitarianism = evil	Nature of conflict and violence depend on social circumstances, context and agency
Perpetrator/victim perspectives	Perpetrator perspective presented as victim Us = victims Them = perpetrators	Emphasis on victims' perspective on all sides	Learning from the memories/perspectives of victims, perpetrators and third party witnesses
Historical context	Manipulated, historical events turned into myths	Transcended, universalized	Remembering historical context and socio-political struggles
Reflexivity and dialogue	Self-consciously unreflexive, monologic	Reflexive, dialogic Exposing the constructed nature of memory Consensually dialogic (Habermas)	Reflexive, dialogic, multi-perspectivist Exposing the constructed nature of memory Open-endedly dialogic (Bakhtin)
Empathy and emotions	Empathy with <i>our</i> past sufferings, passion of belonging, demonizing the evil Other(s)	Compassion for human suffering	Passions oriented towards collective solidarity, preparing emotions for democratic institutions

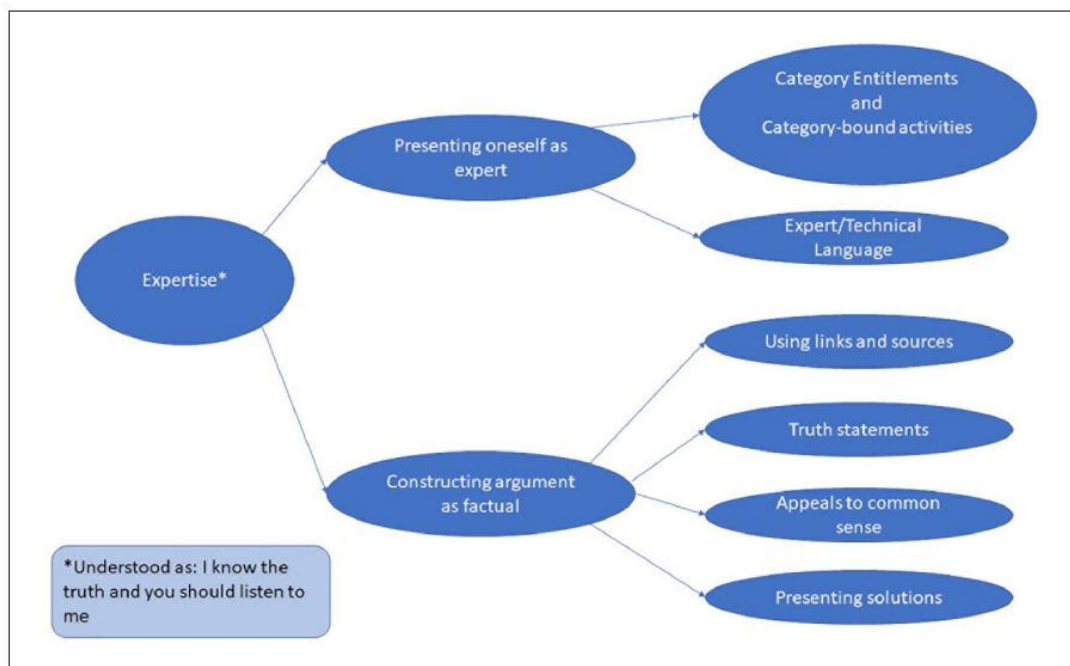
<sup>29</sup> Sharon Coen, Joanne Meredith, Ruth Woods and Ana Fernandez, 'Talk like an Expert: The Construction of Expertise in News Comments Concerning Climate Change', *Public Understanding of Science*, 30.4 (2021), p. 405.

**Figure 1.11: Woods et al.'s (2018) Moral (Dis)Engagement Framework: Theoretical Lens for Analysing Rhetorical Strategies in Comments**

**TABLE 1** An extension of Bandura et al.'s (1996) framework for moral engagement and disengagement

Locus	Moral disengagement	Moral engagement
(1) Behaviour	Transform harmful practices (or inaction) into acceptable ones, via moral justification, palliative comparison with other issues or practices or euphemistic labelling	Emphasise moral significance of harmful act/inaction
(2) Agency	Diffusion or displacement of responsibility	Assert agency and accountability of individuals or groups
(3) Outcomes	Disregard, minimise, or dispute harmful effects	Foreground harmful effects
(4) Recipient	Dehumanisation or blaming of victims	Value victims, encourage empathy and equality

**Figure 1.12: Coen et al.'s (2021) Model for Constructing Expertise in Online Comments<sup>30</sup>**



<sup>30</sup> Sharon Coen, Joanne Meredith, Ruth Woods and Ana Fernandez, 'Talk like an Expert', p. 405.

## Is Lurking Listening? Navigating Ethics in Comment Research

Ensuring the credibility of this research demanded careful attention to ethics, particularly in how online comment data was accessed, interpreted, and presented. The study involved non-interactive observation of user-generated content on public platforms (news sites and Facebook pages). I did not engage in or influence any discussions; rather, I analysed posts retrospectively. This approach aligns with what some digital ethnographers describe as observational ‘lurking’.<sup>31</sup> While traditionally viewed as passive, recent scholarship argues that we should reframe such non-interactive engagement as ‘listening’.<sup>32</sup> Winter and Lavis suggest that listening is a valid mode of participating in online spaces, allowing the researcher to engage with the ‘polyphonic’ nature of digital culture without disrupting it.<sup>33</sup>

Although Costello et al. observe that the analysis of archived online textual data is ‘perhaps more appropriately categorised as archival research,’ adopting a framework of ‘active listening’ ensures that even retrospective analysis remains sensitive to the emotional and interactional contexts of the data.<sup>34</sup> Active listening required tracing the ‘looping’ of conversations, attending to the ‘affective contexts’ signalled by emojis, punctuation, and interactional cues, and interpreting comments within the ‘tangle of conversations’ rather than as isolated utterances.<sup>35</sup>

Complementing this, the diversity of data sources—spanning both news sites and Facebook—necessitated what Winter and Lavis term ‘adaptive listening’.<sup>36</sup> This mode of engagement recognizes the ‘heterogeneity’ of online spaces, treating different platforms not as

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the merits and limitations of active and passive ‘lurker’ approaches to digital ethnography see Leesa Costello, Marie-Louise McDermott and Ruth Wallace, ‘Netnography: Range of Practices, Misperceptions, and Missed Opportunities’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16 (2017), pp. 1–12.

<sup>32</sup> Rachel Winter and Anna Lavis, ‘Looking, But Not Listening? Theorizing the Practice and Ethics of Online Ethnography’, *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 15.1–2 (2020), pp. 55–62.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> Costello, McDermott and Wallace, ‘Netnography’, p. 7; Winter and Lavis, p. 57.

<sup>35</sup> Winter and Lavis, pp. 57–58.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

a monolith but as distinct cultural entities with their own communication styles.<sup>37</sup> This necessitated a flexible analytical approach that would recognise the shift between the often-pseudonymous, text-heavy debates on news sites and the more identity-linked, visually reactive environment of Facebook, ensuring that the distinct ethical and interactional norms of each space were respected.

Nevertheless, the use of public online comments in research naturally raises questions around privacy and consent. However, guidelines issued by organisations such as the British Sociological Association and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) indicate that informed consent may be waived, legally at least, when research draws on genuinely public data published openly on the internet without access restrictions.<sup>38</sup> All comments analysed in this thesis were sourced from publicly viewable forums where users knew, or should reasonably have known, that their contributions were visible to any member of the public. These forums did not offer the kind of privacy expected of closed groups or private messages. Accordingly, from a procedural standpoint, there was no requirement to seek individual consent from commenters.<sup>39</sup>

However, as netnographer Kozinets cautions, ‘just because a site is public... does not mean that using data from it is ethically unproblematic’.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, King notes that much online communication occupies a grey zone between public and private, where participants

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See Lisa Sugiura, *Researching Online Forums* (British Sociological Association, 2016) [https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24834/j000208\\_researching\\_online\\_forums\\_-cs1-\\_v3.pdf](https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24834/j000208_researching_online_forums_-cs1-_v3.pdf) [accessed 21 April 2025] and Aline Shakti Franzke, Anja Bechmann, Michael Zimmer, Charles Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers, *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0* (AoIR, 2020) <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf> [accessed 21 April 2025].

<sup>39</sup> In any case, obtaining such consent would have been logistically unfeasible, given that many accounts were pseudonymous, inactive, or otherwise untraceable. Moreover, given the age of some of the threads, it is plausible that certain commenters, particularly those referring to personal or inherited memories of the Second World War, may no longer be alive.

<sup>40</sup> A ‘netnographer’ is a qualitative researcher who investigates online cultural experiences by collecting, analysing, and interpreting social media traces through a reflexive and ethically grounded methodological framework. See Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*, 3rd edn (London: SAGE, 2020), p. 197.

may not view their contributions as part of a searchable or researchable archive, even if, technically, anyone can read them.<sup>41</sup> In his case, where he observed the dialogue of an online chat room, he was largely successful in approaching ‘all of the 1,332 participants in the corpus and get[ting] their permission for their words to be included’.<sup>42</sup>

This is where the concept of contextual integrity, developed by Helen Nissenbaum and highlighted by both AoIR and the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH), becomes especially useful.<sup>43</sup> Contextual integrity recognises that privacy is not merely about secrecy or access, but about the appropriateness of information flows relative to the setting in which the data was produced. In line with NESH’s emphasis on reasonable expectations of publicity, I considered not only the technical accessibility of the data but also the contextual norms of the platforms where it appeared.<sup>44</sup>

Users engaging in political commentary on news sites or responding to public posts by media organisations on Facebook (or notoriously Twitter, now ‘X’), can be said to operate with a general awareness of public visibility. On news sites, comment sections tend to be understood as public or semi-public arenas of expression (comparable to letters to the editor), and users often post under pseudonyms with that expectation in mind. On Facebook, commenters more commonly use their real names, but when responding to posts on public news pages, they too are generally aware of the visibility of their comments.

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<sup>41</sup> Brian W. King, ‘Investigating Digital Sex Talk Practices: A Reflection on Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis’, in *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age*, ed. by Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik, and Christoph A. Hafner (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 130–143.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>43</sup> See Helen Nissenbaum, ‘Privacy as Contextual Integrity’, *Washington Law Review*, 79 (2004), pp. 119–158 <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/wlr/vol79/iss1/10> [accessed 12 April 2025]; Franzke et al, and Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, *A Guide to Internet Research Ethics* (8 June 2019) <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-and-humanities/a-guide-to-internet-research-ethics/> [accessed 21 April 2025].

<sup>44</sup> Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees.

Still, I recognised that not all users may have shared the same understanding of this visibility. Their expectation was likely one of public visibility but contextual specificity: they posted in a public forum, perhaps hoping to influence peers or be seen by readers of that news source, but most likely did not expect scholarly citation. Context collapse is a common phenomenon online, where communication crosses audiences in ways users may not foresee. To address this, I adopted an analytical approach grounded in the principle of minimising harm.<sup>45</sup>

This involved managing the presentation of data to avoid unnecessary exposure. Practically, this meant applying anonymity and confidentiality measures. Real names and usernames of private individuals are not disclosed in this thesis. When quoting comments, I predominantly refer to contributors using general descriptors (e.g., ‘one commenter’). In a few instances, however, I found that a commenter’s username itself conveyed a sentiment or identity relevant to interpretation. In such cases I have preserved the pseudonym (for example, ‘*TrueBrit1944*’) when quoting that comment, since it provides context (here, invoking wartime patriotism) that would be lost if fully anonymised. Importantly, these handles are self-chosen screen names with no direct link to an actual person, and they are included only when necessary for understanding the comment’s tone or perspective. All comment data was stored and analysed in anonymised form (using pseudonymous identifiers) in line with data protection requirements.

Throughout the project, I remained mindful of these responsibilities, ensuring my approach was not static but adaptive. This included re-evaluating what constituted sensitive content, assessing how quotes would be contextualised, and reflecting on whether anonymised

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<sup>45</sup> The British Psychological Society, *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research* (2021), p. 18 [https://cms.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research\\_0.pdf](https://cms.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research_0.pdf) [accessed 21 April 2025].

data could still be re-identified in rare cases. By putting myself ‘in the shoes of the other’ and considering how I would feel if my public comments were studied, I tried to handle the data in a way that participants would find fair and respectful.<sup>46</sup> I approached each comment with interpretive care, neither moralising nor dismissive. Where xenophobic or bigoted views appeared, I analysed them as rhetorical strategies within public discourse, rather than as grounds for character judgments about individual users. My critical focus remained on the ideological work performed by language, the dynamics of hegemonic memory, and the boundaries of acceptable discourse, not on inferring motives or assigning blame. However, several methodological limitations remain, which the next section will address directly.

### **Research Constraints and Challenges**

While incorporating online user commentary offers rich insights into public memory discourse, it also presents specific methodological and interpretive challenges that must be openly acknowledged. This section critically examines the key limitations of using online media, particularly comment threads, as data. The goal is to be transparent about the data’s constraints and the precautions taken in interpretation, so that the study’s conclusions are appropriately qualified.

To begin with, we must deal with the (lack of) representativeness of online data when developing ideas about wider cultural memory. Recent studies have consistently highlighted that online comment threads are not representative of broader public opinion. The *Reuters 2023 Digital News Report* found that only 22 per cent of people across 46 markets actively engage with news online through posting or commenting, with the UK exhibiting even lower engagement levels.<sup>47</sup> Such statistics of course vary by platform. *The Times* recently reported

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<sup>46</sup> Kozinets, p. 185.

<sup>47</sup> Kirsten Eddy, ‘Unpacking News Participation and Online Engagement over Time’, in *Digital News Report 2023*, ed. by Nic Newman and others (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023), pp. 36–39

that approximately 86 per cent of its readers view the comments section, and nearly half of these readers proceed to post comments themselves.<sup>48</sup> This higher engagement rate is attributed to the publication's efforts to foster a respectful and accountable commenting environment, including the cessation of anonymous comments in December 2022 (a separate issue addressed below).<sup>49</sup>

In most cases though it is still clear that while a significant number of readers consume news content, only a much smaller fraction actively participates by posting comments. Furthermore, the participation that does take place often follows a 'power-law' distribution: a small number of prolific users contribute a large proportion of the content.<sup>50</sup> In the datasets analysed in this study, it was common to see the same usernames posting dozens of times in one thread. These 'power commenters' can steer discussions toward their own obsessions or simply overwhelm other contributors by sheer volume. For example, certain recurring commenters would reply to nearly everyone who disagreed with them, heavily shaping the tone and direction of the thread. What might look like a broad-based debate could in reality be a handful of individuals driving it.

This self-selection creates a classic participation bias: discourse in comment sections skews toward more extreme viewpoints simply because people with lukewarm or neutral

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<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/unpacking-news-participation-online%20engagement-over-time> [accessed 21 April 2025].

<sup>48</sup> Mike Wade, 'What Happened When *The Times* Scotland's Most Ardent Readers Met the Editor?', *The Times*, 12 October 2024 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/what-happened-when-the-times-scotlands-most-ardent-readers-met-the-editor-lv8x9fzhr> [accessed 21 April 2025].

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> In the United States, *National Public Radio* (NPR) observed in 2016 that a mere 0.06 per cent of its 33 million monthly website users contributed comments, with just 2,600 users responsible for over half of all comments during a three-month period. See Scott Montgomery, 'Beyond Comments: Finding Better Ways to Connect With You', *NPR*, 17 August 2016 <https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-extra/2016/08/17/490208179/beyond-comments-finding-better-ways-to-connect-with-you/> [accessed 21 April 2025]. Similarly, a 2019 analysis of comments from the *New York Times* website revealed that 9.67 per cent of all comments were found to be attributable to just 0.1 per cent of commenters, and 17.2 per cent of comments could be traced to the top 0.49 per cent most frequent contributors (with 300 commenters producing 76,594 comments in the corpus). See John R. Gallagher, Yinyin Chen, Kyle Wagner, Xuan Wang, Jingyi Zeng, and Alyssa Lingyi Kong, 'Peering into the Internet Abyss: Using Big Data Audience Analysis to Understand Online Comments', *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 29.2 (2020), pp. 155–173

reactions rarely take the trouble to weigh in or continue a brewing argument. Researchers have termed this dynamic the ‘spiral of silence’, by which individuals who sense their view is in the minority or would be socially disapproved tend to refrain from speaking out, which allows the louder voices (who either believe their view is popular or simply don’t fear backlash) to dominate the floor.<sup>51</sup> For instance, in a heated national memory debate, one might observe an overabundance of fervently patriotic posts on one hand and intensely critical posts on the other, while more nuanced or ambivalent perspectives remain underrepresented (not necessarily because such middle-ground views are uncommon among readers, but because those holding them feel less inclination to write).

The demographics of commenters can further compound these issues. A 2017 study of UK Facebook and Twitter (now ‘X’) users for example found them to be younger, better educated and more liberal than the general population, whilst Facebook users were more likely to be female and Twitter users more male.<sup>52</sup> Meyer and Carey have also showed that men are significantly more likely to post comments than women on news articles, which can result in certain perspectives (more commonly voiced by men) being amplified while others (more commonly voiced by women) are marginalised.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, a cross-national study by Kalogeropoulos et al. revealed that whilst women are more likely than men to comment and share on social media, men are more likely to engage through traditional news websites, suggesting that platform-specific gender dynamics shape whose voices are most visible in

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<sup>51</sup> See for example Thomas Zerback and Nayla Fawzi, ‘Can Online Exemplars Trigger a Spiral of Silence? Examining the Effects of Exemplar Opinions on Perceptions of Public Opinion and Speaking Out’, *New Media & Society*, 19.7 (2017), pp. 1034–51.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Mellon and Christopher Prosser, ‘Twitter and Facebook Are Not Representative of the General Population: Political Attitudes and Demographics of British Social Media Users’, *Research & Politics*, 4.3 (2017), pp. 1–9.

<sup>53</sup> Hans K. Meyer and Michael Clay Carey, ‘Men More Likely to Post Online Newspaper Comments’, *Newspaper Research Journal*, 36.4 (2015), pp. 469–481

different online spaces.<sup>54</sup> They also found that those who comment on or share news online tend to be politically polarised, highly interested in hard news, and frequent users of multiple social media platforms, factors that align closely with patterns of ideological engagement.<sup>55</sup>

In the context of the memory of strategic bombing campaign, this might mean that topics like contemporary cultural issues, military tactics and valour (often popular among politically engaged male or veteran audiences) dominate the discussion, whereas perspectives emphasising civilian suffering or moral critique (perhaps more commonly expressed by other demographics) are scarcer, again not because the broader public rejects those views, but because those who hold them are less present or less vocal in these forums.

For the researcher, these biases mean one should never equate the loudest voices in the comments with a reliable gauge of overall public opinion. At the same time though, it is important to recognise that many readers do treat comment forums as barometers of public sentiment. Research has shown that people often generalise from just a few visible comments when judging what ‘most people’ think about an issue. For example, an experiment by Zerback and Fawzi demonstrated that participants’ perceptions of public support for a policy swung dramatically depending on whether they saw a news story accompanied by predominantly supportive comments or the same story with mostly critical comments.<sup>56</sup> More recently, Lee et al. found that, even if the journalist maintains neutrality, users exposed to opinion-reinforcing comments tend to infer that both the article and the broader public are aligned with that sentiment. These effects are amplified when comments appear in their ‘native’ comment section format (i.e., displayed below the article in the standard interface), rather than embedded in the

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<sup>54</sup> See Antonis Kalogeropoulos, Samuel Negredo, Ike Picone and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, ‘Who Shares and Comments on News?: A Cross-National Comparative Analysis of Online and Social Media Participation’, *Social Media + Society*, 3.4 (2017), pp. 1–12.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Zerback and Fawzi.

article, suggesting that users often treat unmoderated comments as a more authentic, if not more accurate, reflection of public opinion.<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, Naab et al. have showed that critical user comments, especially those that directly challenge the quality or accuracy of a news article, can actively reduce the perceived credibility of an article.<sup>58</sup> This effect was magnified when critical comments received Likes, but could be mitigated if they were challenged by other users through counter-speech.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, replies from professional moderators were less effective, suggesting that peer-based disagreement carries greater legitimacy in these informal digital arenas.<sup>60</sup> This perhaps reflects a broader societal mistrust of institutional ‘authority’ figures, prevalent in online spaces often valued for their perceived lack of regulation, contributing to the idea that peer feedback is more ‘authentic’. The critical importance of authenticity to commenters, already identified as a key element of cultural memory in Chapter 1, will be explored further in the case studies.

The impact of these comments can be especially pronounced for younger users who have grown up accustomed with digital media.<sup>61</sup> The UK’s communications regulator Ofcom’s 2024 analysis revealed that 48 per cent of UK children aged 12 to 15 who consume news via social media said they would look at the comments or what people have said to assess whether a story is ‘true’.<sup>62</sup> This made comment-checking the most common method of verifying online news among respondents in this age group (see Figure 1.13) These findings suggest that

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<sup>57</sup> Eun-Ju Lee, Yoon Jae Jang and Myojung Chung, ‘When and How User Comments Affect News Readers’ Personal Opinion: Perceived Public Opinion and Perceived News Position as Mediators’, *Digital Journalism*, 9.1 (2021), pp. 42–63

<sup>58</sup> Teresa K. Naab, Dominique Heinbach, Marc Ziegele and Marie-Theres Grasberger, ‘Comments and Credibility: How Critical User Comments Decrease Perceived News Article Credibility’, *Journalism Studies*, 21.6 (2020), pp. 783–801

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 795.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> See for example Sky News, ‘Teenagers Turning to Instagram, TikTok and YouTube for News Instead of Traditional Channels’, *Sky News*, 21 July 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/teenagers-turning-to-instagram-tiktok-and-youtube-for-news-instead-of-traditional-channels-12655915> [accessed 21 April 2025].

<sup>62</sup> Statista, *Ways Children Fact-Check Social Media News United Kingdom (UK) 2024, by Age Group*, originally conducted by Ofcom (March 2024) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1268663/children-factchecking-online-news-united-kingdom-uk/> [accessed 21 April 2025].

teenagers prioritise peer reactions over institutional sources when evaluating the credibility of information online, highlighting the potent social authority attributed to user-generated content.<sup>63</sup> This underlines why studying these comment sections is crucial: they are not just passive repositories of opinion but active sites where credibility is negotiated and public understanding is shaped, particularly for younger demographics.

**Figure 1.13: How UK Children (12–15) Verify Social Media News (2024)**

Most likely actions children would take to check the reliability of news on social media sites or apps in the United Kingdom (UK) as of March 2024, by age group

Ways children fact-check social media news United Kingdom (UK) 2024, by age group

	12 years	13 years	14 years	15 years	Total	Your Headline Your Notes:
Look at the comments/ what people have said about the story	50%	49%	43%	48%	48%	
Check to see if the same story appears anywhere else	47%	43%	45%	47%	45%	
Think about the what the story is about to see how likely is it to be true	38%	39%	46%	40%	41%	
Think about whether the person who shared it was someone I trusted	23%	30%	36%	36%	32%	
Check if it was by an organisation I thought was trustworthy	27%	27%	35%	29%	30%	
Look at how professional the story looks, e.g. are there spelling mistakes, do the images or videos look high quality?	24%	24%	28%	34%	28%	

Cropped Version  
Double click to open exact file with complete data

Note(s): United Kingdom; November 2023 to March 2024; 12-15 years; 552 respondents; among those using social media for news  
Further information regarding this statistic can be found on [Page 4](#).  
Source(s): Ofcom; [ID\\_1268663](#)

statista

Thus, while comment sections cannot tell us what the silent majority believes, they do reveal which narratives and sentiments are being expressed loudly enough to shape the ambient sense of ‘what people are saying’. This dual reality calls for caution but also underlines the significance of studying these forums: the comments may not be representative polls, but they do indicate which interpretations of the past are catching attention, sparking passion, or creating a (potentially false) impression of consensus in the public eye.

<sup>63</sup> Ofcom, ‘Children’s News Consumption Survey 2022’, *Statista*  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1268663/children-factchecking-online-news-united-kingdom-uk/>.

## Trolls, Bots, and the Problem of Authenticity

A second related issue is that not all commenters are sincere, or even real. The open, anonymous nature of most comment sections means they can be exploited by trolls and even bots. Trolling refers to users posting deliberately provocative or off-topic messages with the intent to disrupt the conversation or inflame others. In online debates, trolls and ideologically motivated users often exploit the most emotionally charged or culturally divisive issues, what might be called digital fault lines (issues that reliably provoke conflict and emotional reactions in online spaces), as a strategy to provoke reaction and dominate discourse.<sup>64</sup> In a historical context, a balanced discussion about Britain's wartime conduct could be derailed by a commenter dropping an outrageous statement (e.g. an overtly racist claim or a wild conspiracy theory) not as a genuine contribution, but as bait to anger or distract other participants. Such content can hijack the discourse, introducing extreme or bad faith points that genuine participants then feel compelled to rebut, thus shifting attention and tone.

Separately, there is the concern of orchestrated influence operations, astroturfing campaigns (the artificial creation of what looks like grassroots support for a cause, usually organised from above) and bots (automated or semi-automated accounts) that inject narratives into comment forums. Social bots, defined as 'automated accounts that mimic human behaviour', have been shown to subtly reinforce or amplify polarised narratives.<sup>65</sup> Although they may not always dominate direct interaction, their influence often occurs through 'indirect

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<sup>64</sup> See for example William Proctor and Bridget Kies, 'Editors' Introduction: On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars', *Participations*, 15.1 (2018), pp. 127–33; Henna Paakki, Heidi Vepsäläinen, and Antti Salovaara, 'Disruptive Online Communication: How Asymmetric Trolling-Like Response Strategies Steer Conversation off the Track', *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, 30 (2021), pp. 425–61 and Asta Zelenkauskaitė, *Creating Chaos Online: Disinformation and Subverted Post-Publics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022)

<sup>65</sup> Abeer Aldayel and Walid Magdy, 'Characterizing the Role of Bots' in Polarized Stance on Social Media', *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 12.1 (2022), p. 1.

exposure' to content via follows and reposts, which can often reinforce user views without overt engagement.<sup>66</sup>

For this study, overt inauthentic manipulation was not an obvious feature of the dataset, but I remained vigilant. During data collection and analysis, I watched for red flags such as multiple comments with identical text (a sign of copy-paste spam or bot activity), accounts that posted the exact same unusual argument across different articles, or language that seemed wildly off-topic or generated (for example, nonsensical sentences or irrelevant slogans). If a suspicious cluster of comments was identified, I treated those comments with caution or excluded them from fine-grained interpretation.

In practice, only a minority of comments raised such concerns; the vast majority appeared to be individual users expressing personal (if sometimes extreme or contrarian) views. Notably, other commenters themselves occasionally took on the role of gatekeepers. In several instances, users responded to inflammatory posts with remarks like 'Ignore that user, it's probably a bot' or 'Don't feed the troll'. I treated these meta-comments as part of the data, since they reflect a public awareness of inauthentic discourse and constitute a form of grassroots moderation. Equally, it should be borne in mind that the invocation of labels like '*bot*' or '*troll*' by the article's public gatekeepers can also function as rhetorical weapons. Rather than necessarily identifying genuine inauthentic behaviour, such labels may be used to delegitimise 'real' opponents, dismiss dissenting viewpoints, or shut down uncomfortable perspectives without engaging with the substance of their claims.

It is also worth stressing that trolls and bots do not exist outside the structures of digital culture. Even insincere or artificial comments have a performative effect and are thus worth analysing. As Whitney Phillips argues, 'knee-jerk condemnation of trolling does not and cannot

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

account for the fact that trolling behaviours run parallel to a host of culturally accepted logics. Trolls may push these logics to their furthest and most grotesque extremes, but ultimately trolls' actions are imbricated in the same cultural systems that constitute the norm'.<sup>67</sup> Recognising this helps situate trolling not merely as disruption, but as a revealing performance of the emotional and rhetorical contours of public discourse, and the systems which support them.

Studies indicate that bots can amplify extreme sentiments, create the illusion of widespread support for polarising views, and erode trust in legitimate communicators.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, this is because these bot commenters still participate in the same emotional economies as human users, reinforcing dominant discursive patterns or dragging debates toward outrage. As Murthy et al. note, such automated participation reveals how digital influence depends not only on content, but also on socio-technical capital; the temporal, social, and economic resources that enable certain actors (human or not) to dominate conversational visibility.<sup>69</sup> In this sense, both trolls and bots expose the permeability of online discourse, where authenticity and manipulation blur, and where even the most artificial contributions can have tangible effects on tone, attention, and collective sentiment.

Work by Eberwein also cautions against assuming all disruptive or inflammatory commenters are insincere.<sup>70</sup> His qualitative interviews with habitual commenters on news sites reveal that many of those often labelled trolls in fact see themselves as 'warriors of faith', users motivated by strong ideological convictions or personal disillusionment with journalism, who

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<sup>67</sup> Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), p. 115.

<sup>68</sup> See for example, Ali Unlu and others, 'Unveiling the Veiled Threat: The Impact of Bots on COVID-19 Health Communication', *Social Science Computer Review*, 43.4 (2025), 675–704; Loni Hagen and others, 'Rise of the Machines? Examining the Influence of Social Bots on a Political Discussion Network', *Social Science Computer Review* (2020), 1–24; Dhiraj Murthy and others, 'Automation, Algorithms, and Politics Bots and Political Influence: A Sociotechnical Investigation of Social Network Capital', *International Journal of Communication*, 10 (2016), 4952–71.

<sup>69</sup> Dhiraj Murthy and others, 'Automation, Algorithms, and Politics Bots'.

<sup>70</sup> Tobias Eberwein, '“Trolls” or “Warriors of Faith”? Differentiating Dysfunctional Forms of Media Criticism in Online Comments', *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, 18.4 (2020), pp. 575–87.

view their interventions as a necessary corrective to perceived media failings.<sup>71</sup> While their rhetoric may be combative or extreme, their intention is often to challenge dominant narratives rather than to simply provoke. It is thus important not to simply write off every extreme viewpoint as ‘just a troll’ and ignore it; to do so would risk overlooking the rhetorical strategies being employed and the reasons such messages might resonate or draw reactions within the community.

Therefore, my approach was to include all visible comments in examining discourse patterns and rhetorical dynamics, but to refrain from drawing conclusions that treat every comment at face value. I explicitly acknowledge that elements of the dialogue could be contrived or exaggerated. By focusing on what the comments *do* (e.g. provoke backlash, reinforce a narrative, introduce doubt) rather than who the commenters *are*, the analysis remains valid even if certain comments were posted in bad faith. In other words, what matters for our purposes is less the genuine identity or intention behind each comment and more the role that comment plays in the public conversation about memory.

### **Anonymity and Incivility**

Most online comment forums allow (or even encourage) users to post under pseudonyms or with no personal identification. This anonymity is a double-edged sword for research. On one hand, anonymity can encourage more honest or uninhibited expression, as people might voice unpopular opinions or raw emotions that they would likely suppress if their real name were attached (out of fear of social repercussion).<sup>72</sup> In this sense, anonymity can widen the range of viewpoints and feelings on display, offering a valuable window into sentiments that might otherwise remain private. On the other hand, anonymity is also frequently blamed for fuelling

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> See the discussion of the impact of anonymity on online newspaper forums in Arthur D. Santana, ‘Virtuous or Vitriolic: The Effect of Anonymity on Civility in Online Newspaper Reader Comment Boards’, *Journalism Practice*, 8.1 (2014), pp. 18–33.

incivility. Indeed, for some, the very word ‘comments’ is associated with an ‘overwhelmingly young white male toxic space, one dominated by harassment, abuse, as well as “people showing no respect, no compassion and no empathy”’.<sup>73</sup> In the context of memory debates, the cover of anonymity might enable individuals to articulate contrarian or politically incorrect views about the Second World War that they would hesitate to publicly associate with their offline identity (for example, critical takes on revered war leaders, or by extension sympathy for historically vilified figures).

Yet recent research suggests that anonymity alone may not be the decisive factor in shaping online toxicity. In a 2021 study comparing anonymous and non-anonymous comment sections in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, Knustad and Johansson concluded that pseudonymity can be ‘valuable for a freer, more democratic debate’, and posited that the level of toxicity found in comments was far more dependent on the platform used than whether the user was using a pseudonym.<sup>74</sup> Glawion’s study of the Axis History Forum (AHF) offers further nuance to this picture.<sup>75</sup> Although the forum actively discourages full anonymity, prohibiting ‘anonymous proxies’ and encouraging users to ‘sign your posts with your real first name’, this does not prevent the emergence of ideologically charged and emotionally invested discourse.<sup>76</sup> Despite AHF’s self-identification as an ‘apolitical’ space, Glawion notes that it ‘provides a space for both subtle and overt glorification as well as an overall normalisation of Third Reich-inspired culture’.<sup>77</sup> While users frequently present themselves as ‘a multitude of self-made experts’ and ‘serious researchers’, she observes that while some discussions strive

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<sup>73</sup> Ben Cardew, ‘Online Comments: Is the Space Below the Line Too Toxic or Can They Be Fixed?’, *Guardian*, 31 January 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jan/31/online-comments-toxic-interaction-racism-harassment> [accessed 4 December 2022].

<sup>74</sup> Magnus Knustad and Christer Johansson, ‘Anonymity and Inhibition in Newspaper Comments’, *Information*, 12, 6, (2021), p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> Anastasia Glawion, *Remembering World War II: A Mixed-Methods Exploration of Memory Practices on an Online Forum*, *Digitale Literaturwissenschaft*, 1st edn (Berlin: Springer, 2023).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

for ideals of objectivity, many threads ‘oscillated between historical accounts and emotional neo-patriotic discussions’.<sup>78</sup>

This has important methodological implications. The incivility or intensity of a thread should not automatically be dismissed as a distortion of the debate. On the contrary, it can serve as a barometer of the emotional stakes involved, signalling where memory is most volatile, identity is most implicated, and social norms are most under pressure. In these moments, the very features that enable incivility, anonymity, lack of face-to-face accountability, or minimal moderation, can also allow users to express genuine frustrations and deeply held beliefs. Incivility, then, is not just a by-product of poor platform design, but can be read as an indicator of how fiercely the past continues to matter in the present.

Anonymity also means we as researchers know very little about the commenters themselves. Demographic or experiential context that could enrich interpretation, such as whether a given commenter is older or younger, a military veteran or a civilian, a British or foreign national, well-educated or not, is usually unavailable. In some comments, users voluntarily provide personal context (‘As a veteran, I think...’, or ‘My mother lived through the Blitz and told me...’), which I take note of as potentially valuable background. However, there is no way to verify this information, and they could well be examples of rhetorical techniques being used to lend authority to readers’ arguments.

Overall, anonymity limits what we can know about who is speaking and likely contributes to a coarser discourse, but it also enables a candid, unfiltered glimpse into segments of the public’s emotional engagement with history. Wahl-Jorgensen suggests anger has now become a ‘central framework for understanding political life’, and the ‘algorithmic manipulation’ of such emotion should be taken extremely seriously given the increasingly

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

dominant role online news consumption occupies in public life.<sup>79</sup> I read each comment in the context of its surrounding discussion and paid careful attention to tonal cues (e.g. use of sarcasm, ALL-CAPS shouting, emojis like 😏 or 😬) to judge how it was intended and received. When harsh or abusive comments appeared, I noted them and sometimes quote them in the analysis to illustrate the emotional climate. As a result, my analysis treats incivility not as something to be excused or ignored, but as part of the phenomenon under study, as another facet of how people remember and contest the past, and what readers are exposed to, in online spaces.

### Visibility and Engagement Biases

Given the prevalence of uncivil discourse, trolling, and automated content online, it is important to emphasise that comment sections are not neutral repositories of public opinion (if indeed such exist). Their underlying infrastructure, including sorting mechanisms and algorithmic filters, actively shapes what users see and engage with. As Makhortykh et al. argue in their study of memory-related search outputs, algorithmic systems can themselves become ‘memory warriors’, selectively amplifying narratives and downplaying others, especially around contested histories like the Holodomor (the mass famine in Soviet Ukraine in 1932–33, often considered a genocide).<sup>80</sup>

The result, in one analyst’s words, has been the transformation of the public sphere into a ‘stand-up comedy club’, where ‘clowns have an immediate advantage in the attention economy’ due to their ability to provoke immediate outrage.<sup>81</sup> This effect is not limited to the comments section: as Levy demonstrates by examining Facebook’s algorithm, even users who

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<sup>79</sup> Karin Wahl-Jørgensen, *Emotions, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), p. 109.

<sup>80</sup> See Mykola Makhortykh, Aleksandra Urman and Roberto Ulloa, ‘Memory, Counter-Memory and Denialism: How Search Engines Circulate Information about the Holodomor-Related Memory Wars’, *Memory Studies*, 15.6 (2022), pp. 1330–1345.

<sup>81</sup> William Davies, *This is Not Normal: The Collapse of Liberal Britain* (London: Verso, 2021), p. 151.

actively subscribe to news sources with differing viewpoints are often shown a filtered selection of content that aligns with their previous behaviours or inferred preferences.<sup>82</sup> In other words, selective exposure begins at the article level, before users ever reach the comments. Once there, engagement-driven sorting mechanisms reinforce this narrowing of perspective by displaying comments with the most ‘likes’, upvotes, or replies first.

This creates a feedback loop: an early reply to an article that strikes a chord (garnering numerous upvotes or replies) is pushed to the top where even more readers see it, gaining even more attention. Conversely, a comment that initially gets ignored or receives downvotes might be buried, effectively vanishing from most readers’ view. Park et al. found that sorting comments by popularity not only reduces the diversity of views expressed but can also consolidate opinion by encouraging users to conform to the dominant tone, especially when it appears already settled.<sup>83</sup>

Waddell and Sundar’s study adds further nuance to this picture. In their experimental research, they found that users rely on the tone and sentiment of the top few comments, not merely their popularity metrics, as a shorthand for gauging public opinion. When early comments express uniform support or criticism, they serve as heuristic cues, shaping how readers evaluate the article and whether they feel comfortable expressing dissent.<sup>84</sup> Notably, they found it is the content and tone of these prominent comments that exert the strongest influence: a stream of uniformly critical or supportive remarks can dramatically shift perceptions of consensus, while the precise number of ‘likes’ or upvotes matters far less.<sup>85</sup> This

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<sup>82</sup> See Ro’ee Levy, ‘Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization: Evidence from a Field Experiment’, *American Economic Review*, 111.3 (2021), pp. 831–870.

<sup>83</sup> See Inyoung Park, Hyungbo Shim, Jang Hyun Kim, Changjun Lee and Daeho Lee, ‘The Effects of Popularity Metrics in News Comments on the Formation of Public Opinion: Evidence from an Internet Portal Site’, *The Social Science Journal* (2020), pp. 1–16.

<sup>84</sup> See T. Franklin Waddell and S. Shyam Sundar, ‘#thisshowsucks! The Overpowering Influence of Negative Social Media Comments on Television Viewers’, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 61.2 (2017), pp. 393–409.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

insight underscores how algorithms, by determining which comments rise to the top, do more than filter discourse; they actively frame it.

For the present research, this dynamic has some important implications. First, when analysing the threads, I could not treat each comment as an independent, equal unit of data; I also had to consider *position* and *visibility*. A comment pinned to the top with +500 upvotes, for example, was not necessarily more persuasive in content than one that appeared later, but it was significantly more likely to have been seen, engaged with, and interpreted as indicative of broader public sentiment. As a result, I prioritised analysis of which comments received the most likes, upvotes, or replies, and used these interaction patterns to inform my interpretation.

This was not to measure truth or popularity in any absolute sense, but to trace which viewpoints gained traction within the given forum's algorithmically mediated environment. When certain stances, for instance, defending a controversial military decision, consistently appeared in top-ranked comments, I treated these as indicators of dominant framing or community-level resonance. However, at the same time I was cautious not to attribute a comment's visibility solely to either algorithmic amplification or sentiment-driven popularity. Instead, I considered how these forces worked in tandem. Together, these factors highlight the need to interpret comment visibility not as a neutral reflection of collective opinion, but as the outcome of dynamic interactions between platform architecture, affective engagement, and the narrative preferences of an online community at a given moment.

### **Content Moderation and Data Gaps**

A practical limitation of using comment sections is that the dataset may be incomplete due to moderation and content removal. Most news sites employ moderators (human or algorithmic) to delete comments that violate policies (e.g. hate speech, personal abuse, libel), and users themselves can often flag content for removal, as well as delete traces of their own

engagements. The comments I collected are those that were publicly visible at the time of collection. If a comment was posted but later removed by a moderator (or by the user who posted it), it would not have appeared in my data. There is thus an unseen ‘dark matter’ of discourse that we cannot analyse, potentially including some of the most offensive, extreme, or legally problematic statements, which were taken down and are absent from the archive. Their removal could slightly sanitise the picture we see, making the discussion seem more tempered than it was in real time. Occasionally, remaining comments offered clues about such deletions (e.g. ‘I see the censors are at it again; my previous post got removed’), which confirmed that moderation was actively shaping the conversation. I noted these hints qualitatively, but systematically recovering deleted comments was beyond the scope of the project.

What this means is that the data we analyse is the post-moderation discourse; essentially, the subset of comments that passed whatever filtering was in place. While the vast majority of comments likely remain, it is important to acknowledge this filtering. Epistemologically, this is acceptable for my research questions because I am interested in publicly articulated and circulating memory narratives – which, by definition, excludes whatever was quickly removed from public view. If a hateful comment was posted but immediately deleted, its influence on the public narrative was likely minimal (save perhaps a fleeting effect on those who saw it in the interim). Thus, focusing on what remained public is arguably more appropriate, as that is the content that continued to shape perceptions among readers.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge that a combination of moderation efforts and simply the time elapsed between the posting of the articles and the commencement of the study may cause this study to underestimate the peak levels of hostility or the presence of certain taboo views in these debates. With one in twenty British users reportedly deleting their Facebook accounts

for example in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018, and fresh waves of departures continuing in response to ongoing concerns over data privacy and platform policies, user attrition may have significantly reshaped the composition of public debate on the platform.<sup>86</sup> In practice, it seemed apparent though that enough contentious material remained present in the data on both Facebook and the news platforms under scrutiny that the general patterns of conflict, aggression, and division were still clear, even if the absolute worst comments were cut out. Ultimately, transparency about these potential data gaps strengthens the study: it reminds the reader that we are observing a curated discourse and that any claims are made with the understanding that they apply to the conversation as can be *publicly seen*, not to every word ever typed.

### **Evolving Online Platforms and Source Selection**

Finally, a broader methodological limitation which must be addressed is the scope of the online platforms covered. This study concentrated on established UK news outlets (most commonly *MailOnline*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *The Times*) and their associated Facebook pages as arenas of public memory discourse. This choice enabled a comparative analysis across a spectrum of mainstream media ideologies and ensured the data came from venues with significant visibility in British public life.

However, even while writing this thesis, digital news consumption and discussion habits have been rapidly evolving. By focusing on traditional news sites and Facebook, the study omits many newer or alternative platforms where public discourse is prevalent, especially among younger generations – such as Twitter/X, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, TikTok, and

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<sup>86</sup> Radhika Sanghani, 'I Downloaded All My Facebook Data and It Was a Nightmare', *BBC Three*, 21 June 2018 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/93d1393a-1c12-485f-b7fe-5146cd48c12c> [accessed 22 April 2025]; Zak Doffman, 'Deleting Facebook Surges in Popularity: Sudden Decision Pushes Users to Quit', *Forbes*, 9 January 2025 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2025/01/09/deleting-facebook-surges-in-popularity-sudden-decision-pushes-users-to-quit/> [accessed 22 April 2025].

others.<sup>87</sup> In the 2010s, when much of the data was generated, news websites and Facebook were indeed central forums for public commentary. However, by the mid-2020s audiences (particularly youth) have increasingly migrated to different spaces.<sup>88</sup>

As Ofcom reports, fewer than 10 per cent of young adults now go directly to news websites for information, preferring aggregated or social feeds.<sup>89</sup> Recent data shows that for UK 12–15 year-olds, while the BBC network retains the highest overall reach (39 per cent), the most-used *individual* access points for news are now overwhelmingly social platforms: TikTok (31 per cent), YouTube (30 per cent), Instagram (24 per cent), and Facebook (21 per cent).<sup>90</sup> This shift raises the possibility that the platforms and pages examined in this thesis represent ‘yesterday’s’ arenas of memory contestation to some extent. However, the fundamental dynamics of online memory contestation observed here likely persist, adapted to new platforms.

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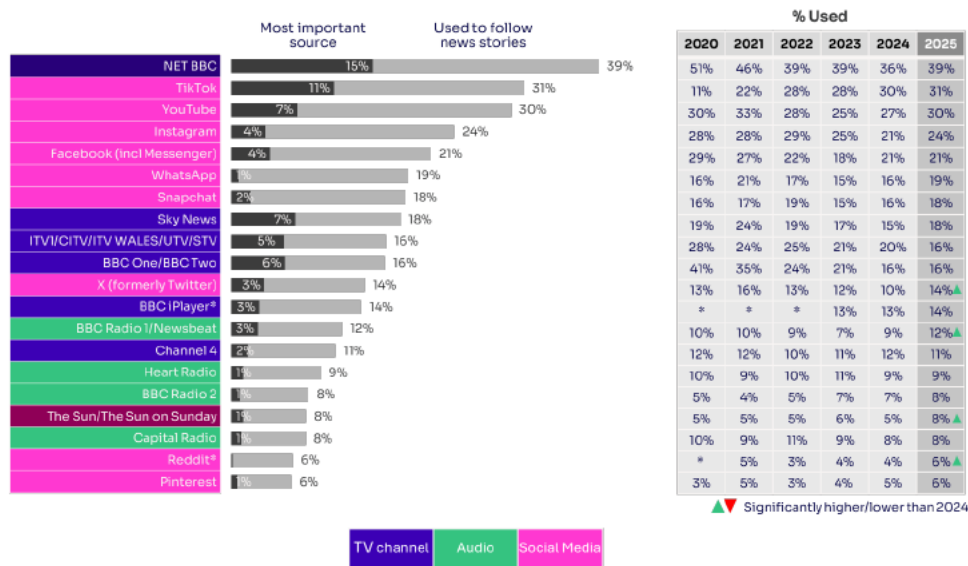
<sup>87</sup> For example, TikTok has seen explosive growth as a news and discussion source, going from negligible UK usage in 2019 to being used for news by 10 per cent of adults (and a much higher 28 per cent of teenagers) by 2023. See Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK: 2023* (Ofcom, 2023), p. 2.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* The source shows that Instagram and YouTube similarly now rival or exceed Facebook’s importance as a news source for young users.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>90</sup> Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK: 2025* (Ofcom, 2025), p. 28.

**Figure 1.14: UK Children (12-15) Top News Sources 2020–2025<sup>91</sup>**



Overall, the arena of online memory discourse, like cultural memory at large, is constantly in flux. The data analysed in this thesis captures a period (mainly the 2010s) where news comment sections and Facebook were dominant venues for public commentary on historical issues. Going forward, memory scholars will need to follow the audience to new platforms (TikTok videos, YouTube, Twitch and Reddit communities etc.) to see how the contestation evolves. The limitation here is one of generalisability over time: the findings illuminate examples of memory debates in the venues studied, but caution should be used in extending them to different digital contexts or indeed temporally to the mid-2020s and beyond without further research.

That said, the fundamental principle likely endures – wherever people publicly respond to representations of history, similar processes of contestation, emotional investment, and narrative negotiation are at play. The task is to remain vigilant about where those discussions migrate and how platform dynamics change. For example, podcasts have increasingly emerged as a significant medium for news consumption and public discourse. By 2025, the UK podcast

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

audience reached an estimated 15.5 million listeners, with platforms like YouTube and Spotify leading in popularity.<sup>92</sup> Notably, YouTube reported over 1 billion monthly podcast listeners globally in early 2025, highlighting the platform's expansive reach.<sup>93</sup>

Overall, using online comments as data carries significant challenges: commenters are a self-selecting minority, discussions can be distorted by who speaks loudest or by malicious actors, anonymity both frees expression and fuels incivility, platform mechanics can tilt the apparent consensus, moderation can remove parts of the conversation, and interpreting tone in text is an art rather than a science. These limitations, however, do not nullify the value of the material – they simply require the researcher to analyse with care, and to be acutely aware of context. This involves acknowledging and understanding the limitations while leveraging the data's many strengths.

## **Conclusion**

This methodology chapter has established the conceptual foundation and research design underpinning the thesis. Rooted in the understanding that collective memory is an ongoing, contested process, it outlined an approach for tracing how moments of historical controversy reverberate through different layers of digital public discourse. By focusing on instances where authority figures challenge Britain's dominant Second World War narrative, the research tracks how memory moves from articulation to media mediation, and finally to vernacular contestation by online audiences.

To address both the breadth and texture of this online commentary, the study utilised an abductive, interpretive approach that integrated inductive thematic coding with targeted

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<sup>92</sup> Statista, 'Podcasts in the UK - Statistics & Facts', *Statista*, 2025 <https://www.statista.com/topics/6908/podcasts-in-the-uk/> [accessed 23 April 2025].

<sup>93</sup> Tim Katz, 'Drop the Mic: Celebrating 1 Billion Monthly Podcast Users on YouTube', *YouTube Official Blog*, 26 February 2025 <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/1-billion-monthly-podcast-users/> [accessed 23 April 2025].

computational tools. While the use of digital data presents unavoidable ethical and epistemological challenges, particularly concerning representativeness, anonymity, moderation, and interpretive ambiguity, these limitations do not nullify the value of the material.

Crucially, the chapter affirms that online comments are not mere ephemera or distractions from ‘real’ historical discourse; they are active ingredients in how memory is negotiated and felt by ordinary citizens. As evidence from Ofcom shows, reading comments is now integral to how people, especially younger users, assess news credibility and social consensus. Reactions beneath a news story become barometers of legitimacy and emotional mood. In the context of war memory, this means that online responses to commemorative news stories, especially those saturated with vitriol, nostalgia, or moral judgment, can shape not only how the ethics of specific campaigns (such as the bombing of Dresden) are remembered, but how Britain conceives of its historical identity more broadly.

As the following chapters demonstrate, many of the tropes voiced in comment sections echo the testimonies of veterans recorded by institutions like the International Bomber Command Centre. Through familial anecdotes, affective assertions, and rhetorical defences of ‘national pride’, commenters perform and reinforce dominant memory narratives, sometimes in concert with, and sometimes in defiance of, the media’s framing. These interactions are not peripheral to public memory. They are central to its formation in the digital age.

## **Chapter Two: Memory, Myth, and National Identity: The Second World War as Britain's Sacred Story**

In an era defined by geopolitical instability, rapid technological advancement, and fractious domestic politics, the past remains a battleground.<sup>1</sup> Across the globe nations are grappling with their historical narratives; cultural memories that underpin national identity are being scrutinised, contested, and re-imagined.<sup>2</sup> The United Kingdom is no exception. From the protracted debates over Brexit to the ongoing culture wars surrounding empire, race, and immigration, the question of what it means to be British is inextricably linked to how the nation remembers its history. This chapter argues that in this climate of profound ontological insecurity, the memory of the Second World War has not receded into the annals of history and remains a vital, versatile anchor for British identity. While some scholars, like Alec Ryrie, have suggested that the ‘age of Hitler is ending’, this chapter contends that such a view underestimates the war’s continuing adaptive power: far from fading, it endures precisely because it can be reactivated, reframed, and repurposed to meet the emotional and moral needs of the present.<sup>3</sup>

Ryrie defines the ‘age of Hitler’ as an era when ‘appalled fascination with the Nazis dominated our moral imagination’, leading to a ‘broad and stable consensus about our most basic shared values’ that felt like ‘timeless, self-evident truths’.<sup>4</sup> He contends this age is ending precisely because ‘stability and consensus look likely to be in short supply’.<sup>5</sup> However, this chapter argues that rather than fading away, the war’s narrative is being re-interpreted and called upon by all sides in an increasingly fragmented political landscape. In a climate of

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<sup>1</sup> See Niels F. May and Thomas Maissen (eds), *National History and New Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century: A Global Comparison*, Routledge Approaches to History, 44 (New York: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See Erica Resende, Dovilė Budrytė, and Douglas Becker (eds), *Defending Memory in Global Politics: Mnemonical In/Security and Crisis*, Interventions (London and New York: Routledge, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Alec Ryrie, *The Age of Hitler and How We Will Survive It* (London: Reaktion Books, 2025), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

profound ontological insecurity, the war serves as a versatile and powerful source of legitimation for competing national visions. Its role as a foundational sacred story, a bulwark against the anxieties of post-imperial decline, social fragmentation, and a fracturing relationship with Europe, remains key to a variety of British identities. In this chapter, we will explore the mechanisms of collective memory, deconstruct the enduring power of Britain's wartime mythos, and demonstrate how this single historical episode has become a central organising principle for both conservative and progressive visions of the nation's past, present, and future. It finds that paradoxically, in a seemingly divided country, the memory of the Second World War provides a rare, albeit complex, point of unity, offering a shared language of resilience, sacrifice, and ultimate triumph that continues to shape political discourse and national sentiment.

### **Collective Memory and the Importance of Hegemonic Narratives**

To understand how the past shapes the present, we must begin with the concept of collective memory. Pioneered by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, the term posits that memory is not a purely individual, psychological act, but a social one framed by the specific groups to which we belong, such as the family or religious communities.<sup>6</sup> While Halbwachs focused on these smaller social frameworks, his ideas provide the groundwork for understanding how shared recollections can be scaled up to the level of the nation. As philosopher Ernest Renan argued more than a century ago, a nation is not defined by race, language, or geography, but is a 'spiritual principle' built upon a 'rich legacy of memories'.<sup>7</sup> It is the culmination of 'a long past

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser, Heritage of Sociology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Ernest Renan and M. F. N. Giglioli, *What Is a Nation? and Other Political Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 261.

of efforts, sacrifices, and devotion’, founded on a ‘capital stock’ of shared glories and heroic griefs. The nation, in this sense, *is* its collective memory.<sup>8</sup>

This memory is not an objective record of historical facts; rather, it is expressed through powerful myths. These myths are not mere falsehoods, but simplified, emotionally resonant narratives that dramatise and selectively narrate a nation’s past, giving it contemporary meaning and purpose. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall explains, nations are ‘systems of cultural representation’.<sup>9</sup> This perspective parallels Benedict Anderson’s seminal idea of the nation as an ‘imagined community’, in which citizens who will typically never meet, let alone know each other, nevertheless share an image of their communion.<sup>10</sup> Such elements constitute what Hall terms the ‘narratives of the nation’, which tell a people who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going.<sup>11</sup> Writing a century after Renan, Leszek Kołakowski echoed this point when he defined a nation simply as its ‘collective memory, which in one way or another extends to all of us, via school, but also through a variety of common traditions – monuments, songs, anthems, music, and literature. All of this makes us a single nation’.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the very notion of a single ‘collective memory’ can misleadingly suggest a unified social mind.<sup>13</sup> To better capture the dynamic and contested nature of the stories nations tell themselves, political theorist Duncan Bell instead offers the concept of the mythscape.<sup>14</sup> He argues for a clear distinction between memory (which he defines in a limited sense as the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘The Question of Cultural Identity’, in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 612.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, ‘The Question of Cultural Identity’, p. 620.

<sup>12</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, ‘Pamięć kształtuje narody’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25 April 2008, quoted in *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, ed. by Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. v, trans. by Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik.

<sup>13</sup> Mano Gabor Toth, ‘Dealing with Conflicting Visions of the Past: The Case of European Memory’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017), p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Duncan S. A. Bell, ‘Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 54 (2003), pp. 63–81.

‘socially-framed property of individual minds’ anchored in direct, lived experience) and mythology, which comprises the broader, transmissible stories a nation tells about itself.<sup>15</sup> Memory, in this strict sense, is not transferable across generations, as it is tied to the individuals who experienced the events. Mythology, however, can be. The mythscape, then, is ‘the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of people’s memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly’.<sup>16</sup> This framework allows us to see national identity not as a fixed inheritance, but as the fluid and contested product of continuous negotiation.

However, to understand the mechanics of how myths are sustained and contested within the mythscape, the concept of cultural memory is indispensable. A term used as early as the 1950s by philosopher Paul Ricœur but most famously developed in the 1990s by Jan and Aleida Assmann, cultural memory refines the abstract notion of collective memory by distinguishing it from everyday ‘communicative memory’.<sup>17</sup> As Jan Assmann explains, communicative memory is the domain of informal, everyday discourse and is rooted in personal experience, with a limited time depth that ‘reaches no farther back than eighty years, the time span of three interacting generations’.<sup>18</sup>

By contrast, cultural memory is institutionalised and ‘serves to stabilise and convey that society’s self-image’ through a durable repertoire of symbolic forms.<sup>19</sup> Aleida Assmann further clarifies this distinction by dividing cultural memory into two categories: the canon and the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>17</sup> See Suzi Adams, ‘A Note on Ricœur’s Early Notion of Cultural Memory’, *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, 10.1 (2019), pp. 112–24; Jan Assmann, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’, in *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*, ed. by Peter Meusbürger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), pp. 15–27 and Aleida Assmann, ‘Canon and Archive’, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 97–107. See also Jan Assmann, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’, in Ibid., pp. 109–18.

<sup>18</sup> Assmann, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’, in Erll and Nünning (eds) *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> Jan Assmann, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,’ *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), p. 132.

archive.<sup>20</sup> The canon is the active, working memory of a society, a highly selective collection of ‘normative and formative texts, places, persons, artifacts, and myths which are meant to be actively circulated and communicated’.<sup>21</sup> The archive, on the other hand, is the passive or reference memory, preserving what has been forgotten but not destroyed. It is a storehouse of ‘cultural relicts...disconnected from their former frames which had authorised them or determined their meaning’.<sup>22</sup> Cultural memory is thus a dynamic interplay between what a society actively celebrates (its canon) and what it preserves but does not actively circulate (its archive). This process is constantly being reshaped across ‘plurimedial networks’ (journalism, arts, rituals, politics) in response to ‘the demands of the present.’<sup>23</sup>

For such public narratives to hold power, they must resonate with private and familial experience. As Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson argue, a memory must ‘ring true’ by speaking simultaneously to public discourse and personal inheritance.<sup>24</sup> They note the applicability of Hirsch’s concept of postmemory: the way the generation after a major trauma inherits its weight not through direct experience, but through the stories, images, and behaviours passed down by the previous generation.<sup>25</sup> In Britain, memories of the Second World War persist in this mode; family stories of the Blitz, medals in a drawer, or faded photographs bind later generations affectively to the conflict, making it a living part of their identity.<sup>26</sup> Robert Eaglestone’s notion of affect-memory extends this point: what is inherited is not precise factual recall but a powerful emotional register.<sup>27</sup> We may not have heard an air-

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<sup>20</sup> See A. Assmann, ‘Canon and Archive’.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Rigney, ‘Remembrance as Remaking: Memories of the Nation Revisited’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 24.2 (2018), p. 244 and Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson, ‘Introduction: “Keep Calm and Carry On”: The Cultural Memory of the Second World War in Britain’, in *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, ed. by Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Noakes and Pattinson, ‘Introduction’, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Eaglestone, ‘Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War’, in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 96.

raid siren in 1940, yet its sound in a film can move us profoundly.<sup>28</sup> This ‘memory of the memory’ is precisely why challenges to the war myth provoke such visceral reactions: they touch the emotional core of national identity.<sup>29</sup>

For such narratives to become authoritative, however, they must not only be transmitted but achieve hegemony. A narrative can be considered hegemonic when ‘a critical mass of social actors accepts it and buys into it as a social fact’, reinforced by the authority of social, political, and cultural institutions such as schools, museums, media, and governments.<sup>30</sup> Such myths function as what Liu and Hilton call a nation’s charter: accounts of origins, mission, and values.<sup>31</sup> As Felix Berenskoetter adds, the political potency of a national biography lies in its ability to provide a community with a ‘master narrative’ that both legitimises courses of action and supplies ontological security.<sup>32</sup>

To understand how a narrative can achieve this level of dominance, Broecker draws on the influential theory of discourse developed by political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.<sup>33</sup> Their central argument is that our understanding of social reality is constructed through discourse. This encompasses not just language, but a whole system of shared meanings that shapes our perception of the world. For them, political life is a constant struggle between competing discourses to become dominant, or hegemonic.<sup>34</sup> A discourse achieves hegemony when its particular worldview is no longer seen as one interpretation among many, but becomes

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Jelena Subotić, ‘Narrative, Ontological Security and Foreign Policy Change’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12.01 (2016), p. 615. See also Dovile Budryte, Erica A. Simone, and Douglas Becker, “‘Defending Memory’: Exploring the Relationship Between Mnemonical In/Security and Crisis in Global Politics’, *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*, 6.1 (2020), p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> See James H. Liu and Denis J. Hilton, ‘How the Past Weighs on the Present: Social Representations of History and Their Role in Identity Politics’, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44, 2005, pp. 537–556.

<sup>32</sup> Felix Berenskoetter, ‘Parameters of a National Biography’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 20(1), 2014, p. 279.

<sup>33</sup> Hannah Broecker, *Securitisation as Hegemonic Discourse Formation: An Integrative Model* (Cham: Springer, 2022).

<sup>34</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 105–106.

accepted as universal common sense, appearing as a natural and intuitive truth that marginalises all alternatives.<sup>35</sup>

Within this system, certain key terms, such as ‘the war’ or ‘democracy’, do not have a single fixed meaning. Instead, they function as empty signifiers, symbols whose meaning remains deliberately open.<sup>36</sup> Crucially, ‘empty’ does not mean false or deceptive; rather, it indicates that the term’s meaning is not rigidly defined. Because of this flexibility, an empty signifier can operate as an umbrella concept capable of invoking a wide array of meanings (much like the Remembrance poppy). This capacity draws distinct, even disparate elements into what Laclau and Mouffe call a ‘chain of equivalence’, in which they are treated as expressions of a shared principle.<sup>37</sup>

In this way, an empty signifier becomes a powerful rallying point, structuring the broader discourse and enabling it to achieve hegemonic status. In the British context, ‘the war’ operates in precisely this way: not as a fixed historical reference, but as a flexible symbolic container through which values such as courage, sacrifice, resilience and unity are continually articulated. Its very openness allows it to function as a unifying narrative, capable of accommodating shifting political and cultural meanings while retaining its hegemonic force.

Yet, as Broecker emphasises, such chains presuppose a constitutive outside, an antagonist that defines what the discourse is not.<sup>38</sup> To demonstrate, she shows how in international relations ‘development’ can stand for progress, prosperity, and stability, but only by being contrasted with its opposite: ‘underdevelopment’.<sup>39</sup> In twenty-first-century international relations, this opposition has gained renewed urgency through the securitisation

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<sup>35</sup> Broecker, *Securitisation*, p. 106.

<sup>36</sup> Broecker, *Securitisation*, p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 127–128; see also Broecker, *Securitisation*, pp. 101–102.

<sup>38</sup> Broecker, *Securitisation*, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

of development.<sup>40</sup> According to securitisation theory, security threats do not exist independently; they are produced through political processes in which a securitising actor declares something to be under existential threat, persuades an audience of this danger, and legitimises exceptional measures in response.<sup>41</sup>

Broecker demonstrates that this process delineates the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable subject-positions. Nations receiving aid are positioned as the deviant and dangerous ‘Other’: economically dysfunctional (harbouring illicit or ‘war’ economies), politically fragile or unaccountable, ideologically resistant to liberal norms, and epistemically deficient in the ‘correct’ forms of knowledge and governance.<sup>42</sup> Each of these traits marks a deviation from the normative ideal of development, reinforcing hierarchical relations of knowledge, authority, and power.

Crucially, this construction also legitimises intervention. By portraying underdevelopment as a global security threat, the discourse justifies the imposition of ‘corrective’ measures (from governance reforms to the granting of highly conditional loans to violations of sovereignty) as acts of protection both for the recipient and for the international order.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, the urgency generated by securitisation stabilises the discourse: it presents development as indispensable to global safety and moral order, re-anchoring the chain of equivalence around a securitised master-signifier while excluding those cast as threats to it.

In our case, the potency of the Second World War as an empty signifier in British politics and culture stems from its clear moral opposition to Nazism, a confrontation that gives the good war its quasi-sacred quality. Ryrie argues that in an increasingly secular society, Adolf

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>41</sup> Rita Floyd, ‘Securitisation and the Function of Functional Actors’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 9.2 (2021), p. 81.

<sup>42</sup> Broecker, *Securitisation*, p. 160.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

Hitler has effectively replaced Jesus Christ as the fixed reference point for defining evil.<sup>44</sup> To praise Hitler, he quips, is now as blasphemous as once praising Satan.<sup>45</sup>

Likewise, memory scholar David Tollerton suggests that the war's sacred power derives from being defined against the profane, with Nazism, and particularly the Holocaust, as the ultimate transgression.<sup>46</sup> Drawing on Gordon Lynch's model of sacrality, Tollerton agrees that any perceived violation of this sacred memory is felt as a moral injury demanding redress.<sup>47</sup> He documents how British state-supported Holocaust remembrance initiatives (including Holocaust Memorial Day, plans for a new London memorial, which has still not yet opened as of October 2025), and school visits to Auschwitz are profoundly infused with manifestations and perceptions of the sacred.<sup>48</sup>

These initiatives consistently frame the Holocaust as an event that makes unique, universal, and enduring moral demands upon society. As Tollerton shows, Holocaust Memorial Day functions as a national rite of civic renewal; the proposed Victoria Tower Gardens memorial was explicitly conceived as a 'sacred space for reflection' beside Parliament; and the 'Lessons from Auschwitz' programme resembles a moral pilgrimage through which participants experience transformation and return to bear witness.<sup>49</sup> Through such sacralised

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<sup>44</sup> Alec Ryrie, *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See David Tollerton, *Holocaust Memory and Britain's Religious-Secular Landscape: Politics, Sacrality, and Diversity* (Oxford: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> Tollerton, *Holocaust Memory and Britain's Religious-Secular Landscape*, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> See Tollerton, chapter five, 'Holocaust Memorial Day': for analysis of Britain's annual remembrance ceremony as a state-envisioned civic rite that fuses secular and sacred language. Tollerton shows how ritual forms-candles, testimony, moments of silence-recast Holocaust remembrance as a moral axis for national renewal and a pedagogical instrument of civic virtue (pp. 105–125). See also chapter six, 'The Victoria Tower Gardens Memorial and Learning Centre': for discussion of the proposed national memorial beside Parliament, explicitly framed by government discourse as a 'sacred space for reflection.' Tollerton situates the project within a lineage of sacred civic spaces, interpreting it as a spatial embodiment of moral pedagogy and British values (pp. 126–155). In addition see chapter seven, 'Lessons from Auschwitz': for exploration of the Holocaust Educational Trust's student visits as a contemporary form of pilgrimage. Tollerton highlights how the journey's structure-departure, encounter, and return-produces a transformative moral narrative through which Holocaust memory functions as both sacred encounter and civic education (pp. 156–173).

forms, Holocaust memory since the 1990s has been woven into the fabric of Britain's civic education, moral value construction, and public negotiation of its past.

Writing in 2020, Tollerton suggested 'there [was] no immediate indication of public Holocaust memory in Britain declining in importance'.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, however, Ryrie concludes that this 'age of Hitler' is ending.<sup>51</sup> He argues that its moral resonance is failing as modern issues like climate change, migration and economic precarity demand ethical frameworks Nazism cannot supply. 'Simply knowing that Hitler was a monster', he warns, 'is not an adequate guide to the world we live in.'<sup>52</sup> For Ryrie, while societies still instinctively fall back on the familiar narratives of 1940 to make sense of contemporary dangers, these invocations have become increasingly hollow.

Drawing on Tolstoy's line that 'each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way', Ryrie observes that no two evils are alike, and further that modern evils, unlike Nazism, are diffuse and impersonal.<sup>53</sup> Economic inequality, generational impoverishment, and the climate crisis cannot be vanquished by slaying a single villain. Yet, in his view, our moral reflex remains to cast such problems as wars of good against evil. This tendency, he writes, produces 'a certain bleak comedy' in moments like the COVID-19 pandemic, when governments 'rummaged through their back catalogue of crises' to find a template that could make sense of the emergency.<sup>54</sup> Wartime memes proliferated; politicians and monarchs invoked the 'Blitz spirit'; and Boris Johnson once more attempted to model himself on Churchill. However, heroic imagery substituted for practical competence, and the nation's moral vocabulary, so rooted in 1940, proved ill-suited to the ethical and administrative complexities of a pandemic. Britain, Ryrie laments, 'brought a Spitfire to a germ fight and proved better at stirring wartime rhetoric

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> Ryrie, *The Age of Hitler*, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

than at effective public health policy'.<sup>55</sup> In his starkest comparison, Ryrie notes that 'more Londoners died of COVID in April 2020 than were killed in any month of the Blitz'.<sup>56</sup>

For Ryrie, such episodes reveal the exhaustion of a moral imagination still governed by the shadow of 1940. The reflex to search for new 'Hitlers' – or 'little Hitlers hiding behind every curtain' – exposes a framework cracking under the strain of crises that resist the moral logic of wartime: 'Viruses, we discovered, are in fact not Nazis.'<sup>57</sup> What was once the moral touchstone of Western civilisation has become, in his account, a comforting but inadequate script, a story whose power to define right and wrong is ebbing even as its language continues to echo through public life.

Yet one can also argue that public life's continued saturation with wartime themes contradicts Ryrie's claim: far from ending, the 'age of Hitler' endures through its continual reactivation across new moral and political terrains. The war functions as a versatile empty signifier whose repetition is not a symptom of decline but the very means of its endurance. What Ryrie reads as hollow nostalgic mimicry is, in effect, a process of continual re-securitisation: the governing myth renews its authority by redefining the boundaries of threat and virtue. Each new crisis invites a fresh articulation of the same moral grammar which can, and does, recast climate change, pandemics, or migration as battles that demand unity, sacrifice, and national resilience. In this process, the myth's chain of equivalence is reactivated: courage, duty, and defiance are reattached to new antagonists, from 'invisible enemies' like the coronavirus to 'invasions' of migrants or 'wars' on fossil fuels.

The effect, therefore, is not erosion but reinforcement. As with Broecker's discussion of securitised development discourse, the invocation of wartime language grants contemporary

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 111–112.

policy a renewed urgency and legitimacy, casting collective action as both moral duty and self-defence. Thus, when the Environmental Audit Committee calls for a ‘national mobilisation, or “war effort” on energy efficiency to insulate homes and cut emissions, or when the Home Secretary warns of a migrant ‘invasion on our southern coast’, these are not isolated rhetorical flourishes.<sup>58</sup> They are acts of re-securitisation that stabilise the hegemonic myth by binding new political challenges into its moral grammar. Even in public health policy, the rhetoric of conflict persists: in 2024, campaigners insisted the UK must adopt a ‘war footing’ against obesity, and the House of Lords framed diet-related disease as a national emergency.<sup>59</sup> As the next section will show, Britain’s war story, far from fading, remains the active emotional and ethical charter of its imagined community, sustained through a continual interplay of assimilation and confrontation.

### **A Living Myth**

Cultural figures have long commented on why the war’s narrative ‘works’ so effectively in Britain’s imagination. Screenwriter Frank Cottrell-Boyce observed, ‘We’re attracted to it because of its moral certainties. Try explaining the Cold War to kids: it was about a metaphysical geography of Europe that has completely vanished. But they have no problem grasping what the Normandy landings were about.’<sup>60</sup> In films, books and television Hitler-inspired villains recur endlessly across genres – from Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings* and the

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<sup>58</sup> Damian Carrington, ‘Energy efficiency: ‘war effort’ needed to cut bills and emissions, say MPs’, *Guardian*, 5 January 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/05/energy-efficiency-war-effort-needed-to-cut-bills-and-emissions-say-mps> [accessed 6 October 2025]; Philip Hubbard, ‘Suella Braverman’s Talk of a Refugee “Invasion” is a Dangerous Political Gambit Gone Wrong’, *King’s College London*, 3 November 2022 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/suella-bravermans-talk-of-a-refugee-invasion-is-a-dangerous-political-gambit-gone-wrong> [accessed 6 October 2025].

<sup>59</sup> Denis Campbell, ‘Tories and Labour urged to show courage to act on unhealthy food’, *Guardian*, 16 March 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/16/tories-and-labour-urged-to-show-courage-to-act-on-unhealthy-food> [accessed 6 October 2025].

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Pulver, ‘Interview: Why Are We So Obsessed with Films About the Second World War?’, *Guardian*, 17 July 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jul/17/why-so-obsessed-second-world-war-films> [accessed 6 December 2022].

Daleks in *Doctor Who* to Voldemort in *Harry Potter*.<sup>61</sup> Historian Myra Cross notes how wartime imagery permeates everyday life: black-and-white war films are staples of weekend television; bookstore shelves overflow with titles on Nazi Germany and Winston Churchill, often dwarfing works on other periods; and even children's comics and annuals still recount tales of derring-do from 1939–1945.<sup>62</sup> Janet Watson once highlighted a *Guardian* columnist's joke that Britons divide history into three epochs: '1) The earth cools. 2) Life begins. 3) Britain wins the Second World War.'<sup>63</sup> The quip, though humorous, illustrates how thoroughly the 1939–1945 narrative is woven into British cultural common sense.

Robert Eaglestone warns that the nation's enduring attachment to the moral clarity of the Second World War risks becoming a form of 'cruel nostalgia', a longing that conceals inequality, managerial failure, and political complacency, amounting to what he terms 'memory blackmail'.<sup>64</sup> This critique proved prescient during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the British government and media almost instinctively reached for wartime language. Boris Johnson styled himself the leader of a wartime government, while ministers lauded NHS doctors and nurses as the national 'frontline', urging citizens to rediscover the 'Blitz spirit'.<sup>65</sup> The vaccine rollout was hailed as a 'Dunkirk moment', and restrictions were described as 'unprecedented since the Second World War'.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Charlotte Runcie, 'Are Most of the Famous Fictional Baddies in Post-War Popular Culture Based on Hitler?', *The Telegraph*, 11 November 2020 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/radio/what-to-listen-to/famous-fictional-baddies-popular-culture-since-1945-based-hitler/> [accessed 14 June 2022].

<sup>62</sup> Myra L. Cross, 'The Depiction of Germans in British Films: How it Changes, How Far Such Changes Reflect Government Policy and Public Opinion' (unpublished PhD thesis, The Open University, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Janet Watson, 'Total War and Total Anniversary: The Material Culture of Second World War Commemoration in Britain', in Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (eds) *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 175.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Eaglestone, 'Cruel Nostalgia and Covid-19', in Pettit, ed., *COVID-19, the Second World War, and the Idea of Britishness*, p. 305

<sup>65</sup> Joanne Pettitt, 'COVID-19, the Second World War, and the Idea of Britishness', in *Ibid.*, p. 1; Leighton Andrews, 'Like Any Wartime Government': COVID-19, Churchillian Imaginaries and the Limits of English Exceptionalism', in *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97; Charlie Hall, 'Global Threats To An Island Story: COVID-19 and the British 'Foundation Myth' of 1940', in *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Donaldson, 'Taking It on the Chin: Sport, War and COVID-19', in *Ibid.*, p. 123.

As we have seen, Ryrie interprets Britain's preference for stirring wartime sentiment over confronting the moral and administrative complexities of a modern pandemic as evidence of moral exhaustion and the fraying of the national story. Yet this reading overlooks the interplay of *public ritual and private affect* that represents authentic cultural memory, and in turn sustains Britain's mythscape. Rather than revealing decay, these invocations demonstrate how the sacred story of the war continues to mediate between individual emotion and collective identity.

Lauren Cantillon extends this analysis, showing that metaphors of mobilisation and endurance re-anchored the pandemic within the emotional regime of 1940, celebrating 'civilian bravery as the road to national survival' and discouraging open displays of fear or dissent.<sup>67</sup> As Joanne Pettitt summarises, such memory-work depends on 'collective acts of selection and amplification that help to create a simplified and therefore 'usable' version of the past'.<sup>68</sup> The government's reluctance to ban mass gatherings such as the Cheltenham Festival or major football fixtures exemplified this selective remembering. In 1939, the authorities had immediately cancelled all large public events; in 2020, by contrast, ministers invoked the Blitz spirit to legitimise delay, appealing to the rhetoric of 'carrying on' and calm resilience.<sup>69</sup> Leighton Andrews linked this reluctance to a deeper current of English exceptionalism: the wartime narrative, revived under Boris Johnson's Churchillian persona, sustained the belief that Britain's 'freedom-loving' character set it apart from continental neighbours.<sup>70</sup> As Anne Applebaum and Lawrence Freedman cautioned at the time, this sense of uniqueness could be misleading, encouraging ministers early in the pandemic to imagine 'we're not Italy [who had

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<sup>67</sup> Lauren Cantillon, 'Keep Calm and Bake Bananas': Reimagining Wartime Posters for COVID-19', in *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>68</sup> Pettitt, 'COVID-19, the Second World War, and the Idea of Britishness', p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Donaldson, 'Taking It on the Chin: Sport, War and COVID-19', p. 123.

<sup>70</sup> Andrews, 'Like Any Wartime Government', p. 92.

been hit earlier by the pandemic and imposed restrictions on society], we'll do this our own way'.<sup>71</sup>

Strikingly though, even critics of the government drew upon the same wartime frame. Broadcasters such as Piers Morgan chastised ministers for *misusing* rather than *misappropriating* the 'Blitz spirit', urging the public instead to emulate the sacrifices of their wartime predecessors by 'putting the elderly and infirm' first and accepting the suspension of the sporting calendar.<sup>72</sup> In both praise and condemnation then, the pandemic was thus narrated through the same moral idiom of collective endurance and duty – a shared symbolic vocabulary through which national crisis could be rendered intelligible. Within this frame, obedience and resilience became markers of moral citizenship, echoing slogans such as 'Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution – Will Bring Us Victory.'<sup>73</sup>

This reactivation of the sacred story extended deep into the textures of everyday life. The wartime frame was not merely deployed for political advantage; it was embraced, recycled, and performed by the public itself, offering moral orientation and emotional solidarity in a period of isolation and fear. As the months of lockdown unfolded, this participatory dimension became most visible in the commemorations of VE Day's seventy-fifth anniversary in May 2020, when the idioms of the 'people's war' were restaged in millions of homes across the country. Across Britain, socially distanced street parties and doorstep gatherings mirrored, in miniature, the famous celebrations of 1945. Residents decorated their homes with Union Jack bunting (sales of VE-themed bunting and flags boomed ahead of the anniversary, with suppliers

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<sup>71</sup> Dominic Nicholls, 'Experts Fear British "Exceptionalism" Built Up Around War Has Stymied Its Response to Virus', *Telegraph*, 9 May 2020, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>73</sup> Linda Maynard, 'A Beacon of Light': Representations of Captain Tom Moore and the 'Silent Generation' of COVID-19 Victims', in *Ibid.*, p. 195.

reporting record orders) and held sing-alongs of wartime classics like Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again'.<sup>74</sup>

The media actively encouraged this performative continuity: The *Independent* published a guide on 'how to plan the perfect VE Day party at home', complete with playlists of 1940s hits and period-appropriate menus.<sup>75</sup> In addition, the Queen's broadcast on BBC One deliberately echoed her father's 1945 radio address, inviting reflection on 'a total war' in which 'no one was immune from its impact'.<sup>76</sup> She recalled that 'the outlook seemed bleak, the end distant, the outcome uncertain', yet Britain had 'kept faith that the cause was right' – language that resonated powerfully amid the uncertainties of lockdown.<sup>77</sup> Her speech intertwined remembrance with reassurance: 'Never give up, never despair – that was the message of VE Day', she declared, before urging listeners to see in their quiet streets 'the love and care that we have for each other', insisting that 'we are still a nation those brave soldiers, sailors and airmen would recognise and admire'.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, the Royal Air Force staged commemorative fly-pasts over every nation of the UK, Red Arrows over London, RAF Typhoons over Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast, underscoring the idea of a united kingdom paying tribute.<sup>79</sup> Even the landscape was enlisted: a lone Spitfire flew over the white cliffs of Dover which directly linked 2020 to Britain's 'finest hour'.<sup>80</sup> These were not purely nostalgic

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<sup>74</sup> Caroline Davies, 'Boom in Bunting Sales as Britons Set to Celebrate VE Day at Home', *Guardian*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/may/06/boom-in-bunting-sales-as-britons-set-to-celebrate-ve-day-at-home> [accessed 7 October 2025].

<sup>75</sup> Olivia Petter, 'How to Plan the Perfect VE Day Party at Home', *Independent*, 8 May 2020 <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/ve-day-2020-party-ideas-food-games-how-to-plan-decoration-a9499426.html> [accessed 20 May 2023].

<sup>76</sup> BBC, 'VE Day: UK's Streets not Empty as Filled with Love, says Queen', *BBC News*, 8 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52590865> [accessed 7 October 2025].

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Caroline Davies, 'VE Day: RAF Jets to Roar Over UK to Mark 75th Anniversary', *Guardian*, 8 May 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/08/raf-jets-to-roar-over-uk-to-mark-75th-anniversary-of-ve-day> [accessed 6 October 2025].

<sup>80</sup> Jack Dyson, 'Second World War Spitfires' VE Day Flypast over White Cliffs of Dover to be Aired on BBC One', *KentOnline*, 8 May 2020 <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/dover/news/spitfires-flying-above-white-cliffs-appear-on-tv-for-ve-day-226908/> [accessed 6 October 2025].

spectacles; they explicitly connected contemporary society with the moral grammar of the good war, offering a sense of purpose and resilience at a moment of national vulnerability.

The sacred story of the Second World War thus remains a touchstone, providing a symbolic language of courage and unity. At its heart lies a simple tale of good versus evil and resilience against the odds, a ‘foundation myth for modern Britain’, a nation facing crises of identity and decline.<sup>81</sup> The key events of 1940 (Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, and the Blitz) are remembered less as military history than as moral parables celebrating communal stoicism and reinforcing a self-perception of a people most resolute in crisis and at their best when alone. However, there are other aspects to the narrative of the war. As may be overlooked in our summary of pandemic responses; victory is also crucial: D-Day and VE Day mark the war’s triumphal conclusion. As Menno Spiering summarises, the narrative runs from ‘a period of misguided appeasement of the Nazis; the nation wakes up at the eleventh hour; a military expedition into Europe; near defeat, but a glorious national rescue from the beaches of Dunkirk; for a time Britain opposes the Nazis on its own; a Nazi invasion is thwarted in the “Battle of Britain”; bombing raids on British cities (“the Blitz”) are withstood by a nation united in defiance; invasion of the Continent; defeat of the Nazis; Victory’.<sup>82</sup>

### **National Imaginaries: ‘Little England’ and ‘Greater Britain’**

From this foundation, two distinct but overlapping interpretations of Britain’s wartime role emerge. The first is that of ‘Little England’: the plucky, insular, underdog. As Noakes has suggested, the myth of Britain as a ‘plucky little island that stands up against the overwhelming might of Nazi Germany...codifies for us something about what it means to be British, about

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<sup>81</sup> Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 111.

<sup>82</sup> Menno Spiering, *A Cultural History of British Euroscepticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 9.

British character'.<sup>83</sup> This narrative, epitomised by the summer of 1940, highlights British self-reliance and resilience. The citizen's duty is framed as primarily domestic, embodied in the *Blitz spirit* of stoicism and collective effort. The housewife becomes a pillar of national survival, guided by gendered slogans such as 'Make Do and Mend'.<sup>84</sup> Despite women's extensive and highly varied participation in the war effort (by 1944 over seven million women worked in industry or civil defence, or the auxiliary services), there has remained 'little or no room in the popular memory of the war for women in uniform; instead, women represent the nation's values, the family at home that the men are fighting to defend. Active images of women in wartime are mediated through the need for them to retain a relative degree of passivity in the public narrative of war'.<sup>85</sup> For example, the memory of female Special Operations Executive (SOE) agents was shaped by descriptions emphasising their feminine appearance and then reassuring the public that they had returned to more traditional duties like domesticity and knitting.<sup>86</sup>

Crucially, these threads render 'Little England' a largely passive, reactive script: events are experienced as imposed from outside; citizens absorb the shock, improvise within constraints, then return to routine. The label 'Little Englander' itself first surfaced during the Boer War as an anti-imperial term for those who wanted Britain to focus on home and shun foreign 'adventures'.<sup>87</sup> It carried an introverted imaginary – Englishness marked by insularity,

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<sup>83</sup> Lucy Noakes, quoted in Simon Montlake, 'Battle of Britain's history: How the myth of WWII shaped Brexit', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 28 March 2019 <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2019/0328/Battle-of-Britain-s-history-How-the-myth-of-WWII-shaped-Brexit> [accessed 17 November 2021].

<sup>84</sup> Michael Samuel, 'Finest Hour 2.0: Digital Nostalgic Popular Culture and COVID-19', in *COVID-19, the Second World War, and the Idea of Britishness*, p. 313.

<sup>85</sup> Wendy Ugolini and Juliette Pattinson, 'Negotiating identities in Multinational Britain during the Second World War', in *Fighting for Britain? Negotiating Identities in Britain During the Second World War*, ed. by Wendy Ugolini and Juliette Pattinson, *British Identities Since 1707*, 7 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), p. 10; Lucy Noakes, *War and the British* (London 1998), p. 120. See also Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War*, (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 170.

<sup>86</sup> Juliette Pattinson, "'A Story That Will Thrill You and Make You Proud": The Cultural Memory of Britain's Secret War in Occupied France', in *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, ed. by Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. 133.

<sup>87</sup> Francesca Melhuish, 'Powellite Nostalgia and Racialised Nationalist Narratives: Connecting Global Britain and Little England', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 26.2 (2024), p. 469.

reserve and self-sufficiency – often depicted as the ‘Little Man’ at ease in his garden, sitting room and small domestic world.<sup>88</sup>

Popular culture translates the same small-scale, reactive ethos into wartime memory: *Dad’s Army* (1968–77) distils 1940 into gentle nostalgia in which even male defence is portrayed as vulnerable rather than aggrandised; sirens, shortages and orders from ‘above’ set the terms, and a Home Guard of comic, endearing amateurs muddles through.<sup>89</sup> The show achieves its humour by juxtaposing the professional Germans with the amateurish British, resurrecting and reinforcing the ‘insane optimism at being alone’ and ensuring ‘foreigners are absolutely other’.<sup>90</sup> The effect is cumulative: feminised tropes of care and endurance are transposed onto the whole community as modest, reactive heroism, offering a comforting myth of unity and defiance – an ‘anaesthetic’ against post-imperial drift into obscurity and disunity.<sup>91</sup>

However, there is also a different telling of the war, one in which Britain asserts far more agency. Woods notes that alongside the underdog thread runs the ‘overdog’ thread of ‘ruling the waves’ and orchestrating victory.<sup>92</sup> In this version, Britain did not merely stand alone in 1940; it won the Battle of Britain, sank the *Bismarck*, broke the Enigma code, invented the bouncing bomb, and led a global coalition that liberated North Africa, Italy, France and the Low Countries. The same memories have sustained post-war visions of Britain as a ‘world policeman’, institutionalised by its seat on the UN Security Council.<sup>93</sup>

Even if events like the Suez Crisis of 1956 exposed the hollowness of Britain’s global pretensions, the Falklands War of 1982 resurrected the myth successfully.<sup>94</sup> Although Margaret Thatcher invoked the vulnerability of 1940, claiming victory had been won against ‘impossible

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> *Dad’s Army* (BBC, 1968–77).

<sup>90</sup> Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 57.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>92</sup> Hannah Rose Woods, *Rule, Nostalgia: A Backwards History of Britain* (London: WH Allen, 2022), p. 31.

<sup>93</sup> Liu and Hilton, p. 538.

<sup>94</sup> Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 243, p. 246.

odds', she also, as Robert Saunders observes, 'rebuked the "waverers and the faint-hearts" who thought "that Britain was no longer the nation that had built an Empire and ruled a quarter of the world":'<sup>95</sup> 'The lesson of the Falklands', she declared, 'is that Britain has not changed and that this nation still has those sterling qualities which shine through our history. This generation can match their fathers and grandfathers... When the demands of war and the dangers to our own people call us to arms – then we British are as we have always been.'<sup>96</sup>

Later, interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq revived this same heroic vocabulary, recoding interventionism as a moral duty to uphold global order. Following 9/11, leaders like Tony Blair and George Bush played on images of the Blitz and D-Day to 'justify their approaches to international relations and to sell the idea of a continuing common destiny of their peoples'.<sup>97</sup> Read at face value, this ostensibly more self-confident telling reprises a late-Victorian 'Greater Britain' refitted for 1939–1945: an outward-facing polity overcoming little-England provincialism (alleviating the dreaded 'curse of small island countries, the dwarfing of mind which would otherwise make us Guernsey a little magnified') which celebrates an imperial-and-allied war prosecuted by a 2.5-million-strong Indian Army alongside hundreds of thousands from Africa, the Caribbean and the Dominions.<sup>98</sup>

However, this version only works by strategic omission. The Far Eastern theatre is pushed to the margins: the fall of Singapore in February 1942, often described as Britain's worst military disaster since the Somme, was 'too painful' for metropolitan memory and was eclipsed by the European narrative; the Burma campaign, though ultimately victorious, was

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<sup>95</sup> Hall, 'Global Threats To An Island Story', pp. 19–20., Robert Saunders, 'Brexit and Empire: "Global Britain" and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48.6 (2020), p. 1162.

<sup>96</sup> Saunders, 'Brexit and Empire', p. 1162.

<sup>97</sup> Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 269.

<sup>98</sup> Stuart Ward, *Untied Kingdom: A Global History of the End of Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 43, p. 44; Patrick Finney, 'Isaac Fadoyebo's Journey: Remembering the British Empire's Second World War', in *Remembering the Second World War*, ed. by Patrick Finney (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 71–88.

distant from the home front and quickly seemed hollow as Burma moved to independence, giving little incentive to celebrate a hard-won ‘imperial’ success.<sup>99</sup> The ‘hazy and fragmented memories’ of the Far East are often confined to representations of prisoners of war (such as the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*).<sup>100</sup> The Indian contribution, meanwhile, despite some 2.5 million men being mobilised into the Indian Army, is only ‘dimly registered in historiography and popular memory’.<sup>101</sup>

Crucially, the eclipse of these imperial narratives supplies both visions of Britain articulated here with a simplified archive: for *Little England*, it sustains the island imaginary of imposed violence, suffering and stoic endurance; for *Greater Britain*, it preserves a record of unambiguous agency by bracketing defeat, decolonisation, and the awkward centrality of imperial manpower. As Robert Saunders argues, ‘forgetting’ synthesises two otherwise discordant stories, the global titan and the small island ‘punching above its weight’, by casting empire as something Britain *did* rather than something it *was*.<sup>102</sup> Hence politicians toggle between them as needs arise: post-Brexit appeals to ‘Global Britain’ (defined by ministers as a resolve ‘to continue to be a successful global foreign policy player, and to resist any sense that Britain will be less engaged in the world’, and emblazoned in the 2017 Conservative manifesto that ‘the United Kingdom is a global nation. Our history is a global history; our future must be global too’) sit comfortably alongside invocations of resilience, because both draw on the same selective memory that marginalises Singapore, Burma, Africa and India and other imperial roles in the sacred story.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Noakes and Pattinson, “Keep Calm and Carry On”, p. 15; Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 226

<sup>100</sup> Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 230.

<sup>101</sup> Finney, ‘Isaac Fadoyebo’s Journey’, p. 82.

<sup>102</sup> Saunders, ‘Brexit and Empire’, p. 1160.

<sup>103</sup> Alicja Curanović and Piotr Szymański, ‘Mission Saves Us All: Great Russia and Global Britain Dealing With Ontological Insecurity’, *International Relations* (2022), p. 13.

## Claiming Ownership: From the People's War to the Thatcher Revolution

At the same time, the very adaptability that keeps the myth alive, and so politically expedient, has also made it a site of perpetual struggle. Because both 'Little England' and 'Greater Britain' offer emotionally charged visions of who the British are and what they stand for, political and cultural actors have repeatedly sought to fix their meanings in more stable form. Competing groups have tried to claim interpretive ownership of the sacred story, asserting which values it ought to celebrate, who counts as its heroes, and what lessons it should teach. This struggle has unfolded not only in politics but also in popular historiography, literature, and media, as successive generations have re-narrated the war to align with changing social ideals and moral economies.

The late 1960s saw the rise of popular histories such as Angus Calder's *The People's War* (1969), which portrayed the war as a great leveller and social revolution, laying the foundations for the welfare state.<sup>104</sup> This left-leaning narrative of a classless 'people's war' and progressive post-war consensus became deeply influential, seeping into textbooks and collective understanding. David Edgerton, however, has critiqued this as a retrospective construction.<sup>105</sup> He argues that the national idea of a 'people's war' was actually created by historians themselves in the late 1960s, becoming a celebratory and descriptive term for wartime Britain rather than the critical or internationalist concept it often was during the war years. He suggests that many of the ideas now associated with the war, such as the national focus on the proto-welfare state and the nation 'coming together', were imposed backwards onto the 1940s by these post-war historians.<sup>106</sup> Edgerton further argues that the enduring power of this historical framing is profound: 'it is a tribute to the power of the historians who created

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<sup>104</sup> Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939–1945* (London: Cape, 1969).

<sup>105</sup> David Edgerton, 'The Nationalisation of British History: Historians, Nationalism and the Myths of 1940', *English Historical Review*, CXXXVI, 581, 2021, pp. 950–985.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 972.

the new post-war national histories... that their work should be so easily conflated with what happened', such that their assumptions dominate textbooks and curricula 'to this day'.<sup>107</sup>

If liberals in the 1960s had enshrined a social-democratic version of the war myth, by the 1980s conservatives were vigorously reasserting a more traditional, martial interpretation. Scholars Graham Dawson and Bob West, writing in 1982, observed that Britain was engaged in a symbolic 'struggle over national identity' conducted through the war's popular memory.<sup>108</sup> Drawing on the example of the Falklands War and a resurgence of patriotism under Margaret Thatcher, they argued that popular memory of the war was being mobilised to bolster a right-wing, nationalist vision of Britain. They noted that 'popular memory is often conservative in its nature', pointing to the persistent heroisation of 'Churchill, the Bulldog Breed, the soldier-heroes with their backs to the sea at Dunkirk, and the civilian-heroes who endured the Blitz', all celebrated in nostalgic media and political rhetoric.<sup>109</sup>

Martin Shaw argues that Thatcher's appropriation retained the Second World War's emotional capital but stripped away its egalitarian core – claiming the 'deep patriotism' of the period while 'jettison[ing] the sharing of equality under threat'.<sup>110</sup> As Smith observes, between the Falklands victory and the defeat of the miners' strike in 1985, Thatcher's government was able to rewrite the meaning of 1940, transforming it into a moral and economic fable: This realignment saw the 'locust years' projected onto the politicians of the 1960s and 1970s, characterised as decades of moral libertarianism and economic 'profligacy', which preceded a new 'year of national regeneration' under Thatcher.<sup>111</sup> This interpretation legitimised a new

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 984.

<sup>108</sup> Graham Dawson and Bob West, 'Our Finest Hour? The Popular Memory of World War II and the Struggle over National Identity', in *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television*, ed. by Geoff Hurd (London: BFI, 1984), pp. 8–13.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>110</sup> Martin Shaw, 'Past Wars in Present Conflicts: From the Second World War to the Gulf', in Martin Evans and Ken Lunn, eds., *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), p. 193 in Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 252.

<sup>111</sup> Smith, *Britain and 1940*, p. 44, p. 95, pp. 126–7.

national narrative centred on ‘individualism’, ‘self-reliance’, and ‘free enterprise’, contrasting sharply with the Labour/People’s War myth that stressed ‘collectivism’ and the ‘welfare state’.<sup>112</sup>

However, by the turn of the millennium, Connelly concluded that any consensus over the war’s meaning was again ‘rapidly falling to pieces’.<sup>113</sup> The cohesive, all-pervasive national culture that once sustained the myth, he argued, was eroding under the pressures of demographic change, social atomisation, and media fragmentation. The decline of a ‘white, Anglo-Saxon’ cultural core had given way to a more complex, multicultural tapestry in which immigrants increasingly demanded recognition of their forebears’ wartime service.<sup>114</sup> Meanwhile, alterations to broadcasting and communications laws had ‘shattered the consensus of the Sunday-afternoon television matinee and the single-screen cinema’.<sup>115</sup> Connelly had already noticed that new forms of entertainment and new visions of conflict were displacing the old, steadily weakening the war myth’s unifying power. In his view, the once-hegemonic story of 1940 had lost its ability to command the national imagination and had entered its ‘final throes’.<sup>116</sup>

Later developments partly confirmed, but also complicated, Connelly’s prognosis. Research by Tilley and Heath in 2007 identified a generational transition away from pride rooted in empire and military triumph towards civic values and multicultural integration.<sup>117</sup> More recent research has shown that British youth display a striking ‘culture of shame’ regarding their imperial past, particularly when contrasted with the pride expressed by their Russian counterparts, reinforcing the sense of a generational reorientation towards critical

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 127., p. 145.

<sup>113</sup> Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 275.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>117</sup> James Tilley and Anthony Heath, ‘The decline of British national pride’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 58.4 (2007), pp. 661–78.

engagement with history.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, Gaston and Hilhorst's study of the Brexit campaign reiterated a sense of scepticism towards imperial nostalgia.<sup>119</sup> Their qualitative research found 'scant evidence of any support at the citizen level for such ideas' glorifying Britain's colonial past.<sup>120</sup> In fact, many focus group participants spoke 'vehemently against Britain's colonial legacy', frequently employing the violent word 'rape' to describe the nation's imperial role.<sup>121</sup>

Nevertheless, despite such fragmentation, the wartime myth has undoubtedly endured, and as we have already glimpsed, continues to be mobilised by both left and right political factions. In the 2010s even Jeremy Corbyn, a longstanding critic of British militarism, still felt obliged to pay tribute to the wartime generation during his time as leader of the opposition. Though criticised in 2015 for failing to sing the national anthem at a Battle of Britain service and for what the press called a 'half-hearted' bow on Remembrance Sunday, Corbyn repeatedly emphasised respect for veterans.<sup>122</sup> In 2018 he announced that Labour's manifesto would include 'a new social contract' for former service personnel, insisting that Remembrance Sunday should honour 'all those killed in war as we strive for a world of peace', while promising 'the security and support our veterans deserve'.<sup>123</sup> A year later, marking the 2019

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<sup>118</sup> Valeria Kasamara, Marina Maximenkova, and Anna Sorokina, 'National Pride in the Collective Memory of British and Russian Youth', *Higher School of Economics Research Paper*, 71 (2019).

<sup>119</sup> Sophie Gaston and Sacha Hilhorst, *At Home in One's Past: Nostalgia as a Cultural and Political Force in Britain, France and Germany* (London: Demos, 2018) <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/At-Home-in-Ones-Past-Report.pdf> [accessed 7 October 2025].

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Roy Greenslade, 'Jeremy Corbyn and the National Anthem - A Press Chorus of Disapproval', *Guardian*, 16 September 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2015/sep/16/jeremy-corbyn-and-the-national-anthem-a-press-chorus-of-disapproval> [accessed 18 May 2023]; Guardian Staff, 'Jeremy Corbyn Criticised for Not Bowing Deeply Enough at Cenotaph', *Guardian*, 8 November 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/08/jeremy-corbyn-cenotaph-bow-scrutinised-social-media-remembrance-sunday> [accessed 18 May 2023]; Adam Withnall, 'On Remembrance Sunday All Anyone Could Talk About Was Whether Or Not Jeremy Corbyn Bowed', *Independent*, 8 November 2015 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-bow-at-cenotaph-on-remembrance-sunday-sparks-row-on-twitter-a6725976.html> [accessed 18 May 2023].

<sup>123</sup> Ashley Cowburn, 'Jeremy Corbyn Says "Scourge" of Homelessness Among Armed Forces Veterans Must End', *Independent*, 10 November 2018 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-armed-forces-homeless-rough-sleepers-remembrance-day-armistice-ww1-cenotaph-a8626381.html> [accessed 18 May 2023].

Remembrance Day service, he again praised the ‘huge sacrifices’ made by ‘many brave people from Britain and all across the world’ in the two world wars.<sup>124</sup>

In more recent years, Boris Johnson, Rishi Sunak, and Sir Keir Starmer have each drawn on 1940 analogies to frame Ukraine’s resistance to the Russian invasion as a contemporary echo of Britain’s war. Johnson addressed the Ukrainian parliament in May 2022, declaring ‘this is Ukraine’s finest hour’ and explicitly invoking the 1940 imagery of British resistance under siege.<sup>125</sup> Sunak, in his 2024 address to the Ukrainian parliament, invoked this lineage: ‘If 1940 was our finest hour ... and Ukraine’s was two years ago as you resisted the Russian invasion ... then perhaps today is more like 1942.’<sup>126</sup> Starmer has echoed this framing as well: in August 2025 he said Ukraine is ‘fighting for the same values as the Allies did in the Second World War’.<sup>127</sup> He also declared on the eightieth anniversary of VE Day (that Russia’s war shows that the Second World War is ‘not just history’ – asserting that past and present are entwined in the moral struggle.<sup>128</sup> That such ideologically diverse leaders converge on this symbolic script, casting Ukraine’s struggle in the language of British wartime virtue, testifies to the hegemonic reach of the sacred story.

If, by the turn of the millennium, Connelly saw the cohesive post-war culture that had sustained the myth as ‘rapidly falling to pieces’, DeGroot locates a brief afterglow of that

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<sup>124</sup> Jeremy Corbyn, ‘Corbyn Marks Remembrance Sunday with Message to Armed Forces, Veterans and Their Families’, *The Labour Party*, 10 November 2019 <https://labour.org.uk/press/corbyn-marks-remembrance-sunday-with-message-to-armed-forces-veterans-and-their-families/> [accessed 18 May 2023].

<sup>125</sup> Boris Johnson, ‘“This Is Ukraine’s Finest Hour” - PM to address Ukrainian Parliament,’ *GOV.UK*, 3 May 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/this-is-ukraines-finest-hour-pm-to-address-ukrainian-parliament>.

<sup>126</sup> Rishi Sunak, ‘Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s Address to the Ukrainian Parliament: 12 January 2024,’ *GOV.UK* (12 January 2024), <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-minister-rishi-sunaks-address-to-the-ukrainian-parliament-12-january-2024>.

<sup>127</sup> Amy Sedghi and Tom Ambrose, ‘Ukraine Is Fighting for the Same Values as the Allies Did in Second World War, Says Keir Starmer’, *Guardian*, 15 August 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2025/aug/15/keir-starmer-zelenskyy-values-ukraine-uk-politics-latest-updates-news> [accessed 7 October 2025].

<sup>128</sup> The Odessa Journal, ‘Keir Starmer: Russia’s War Against Ukraine Shows That World War II Is Not Just History’, *The Odessa Journal*, 8 May 2025, <https://odessa-journal.com/keir-starmer-russias-war-against-ukraine-shows-that-world-war-ii-is-not-just-history> [accessed 7 October 2025].

consensus in the 2012 Olympics, when a self-consciously multicultural Britain appeared to reconcile pride and diversity in a single narrative of national unity.<sup>129</sup> Yet, as DeGroot notes, the Scottish independence and Brexit referendums soon fractured that moment, exposing renewed anxieties about identity and belonging.<sup>130</sup> The apparent culmination of Connelly's 'final throes' thus proved cyclical rather than terminal: fragmentation reignited the very myths it seemed to dissolve. As Britain's social and political unity has splintered, its leaders have repeatedly turned back to the Second World War as a common moral vocabulary through which to reimagine solidarity. Each new rupture, whether Brexit, the pandemic, or the war in Ukraine, has inspired renewed invocations of 1940's 'finest hour', allowing the myth to reassert its authority even amid division. How, then, has the governing narrative managed not only to survive such challenges, but to re-establish itself as the emotional and moral core of British identity?

### **Broadening the Sacred Story**

In the twenty-first century, Britain's sacred war story has faced mounting criticism for its omissions and hierarchies. Scholars and activists alike have drawn attention to what Browning and Haigh term the 'hierarchies of heroism' that structure national remembrance, where martial service is elevated above all other forms of contribution, and militarised ideals of courage still dominate the moral imagination.<sup>131</sup> Critics argue that Britain's sacred narrative remains infused with structural racism, sexism and imperial nostalgia, glorifying figures such as Churchill while

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<sup>129</sup> Jerome DeGroot, J. (2021). 'Public Memory and Political Discourse: Commemoration in the UK | National Council on Public History' *ncph.org*, <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/public-memory-and-political-discourse-commemoration-in-the-uk/>.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Christopher S. Browning and Joseph Haigh, 'Hierarchies of Heroism: Captain Tom, Spitfires, and the Limits of Militarized Vicarious Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2.3 (2022), pp. 1–13.

overlooking the Bengal Famine of 1943, which cost more than three million lives, and other colonial atrocities.<sup>132</sup>

Mahoney has noted ‘increasingly public and powerful attempts’ to contest Britain’s commemorative and ritualistic practices: the rejection of NHS clapping during COVID as hypocritical, the refusal by growing numbers to wear poppies, and most dramatically the toppling of Edward Colston’s statue during the Black Lives Matter protests.<sup>133</sup> These acts reignited debates about figures such as the imperialist Cecil Rhodes, the slaveholder Robert Milligan, and Prime Ministers William Gladstone and Winston Churchill, whose legacies have faced scrutiny regarding their ties to slavery or colonial violence, and underscore how the sacred story of the Second World War now intersects with wider, often transnational struggles over race, empire and historical justice.<sup>134</sup>

Yet, as Alan Lester observes, not all these challenges seek to dismantle the national myth; many attempt instead to deepen and recontextualise it.<sup>135</sup> His account of the 2021 Churchill College, Cambridge, events (collectively titled *The Racial Consequences of Mr Churchill*) capture this ambivalent position. Organised by Professor Priyamvada Gopal and featuring scholars such as Kehinde Andrews, Madhusree Mukerjee and Onyeka Nubia, the

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<sup>132</sup> See an overview of the Peace Pledge Union’s 2024 ‘Decolonising Remembrance’ initiative at Nadja Lovadinov, “What Do We Mean by Decolonising Remembrance?”, *Morning Star*, 10 November 2024, <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/f/what-do-we-mean-decolonising-remembrance> [accessed 7 October 2025]. See also the controversy over the ‘hats and coats’ design of the Memorial to the Women of World War II explored in Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, ‘The people’s war in personal testimony and bronze: Sorority and the memorial to The Women of World War II’, in *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, ed. by Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 67–88.

<sup>133</sup> Cat Mahoney, “‘We Will Meet Again’: Mobilising Prosthetic Memories of the Second World War during the UK Covid-19 Lockdown’, in Pettitt, ed., *Covid-19, the Second World War, and the Idea of Britishness*, p. 264.

<sup>134</sup> See for example John Powell, ‘William Gladstone and the Question of Slavery, 1832–33’, *Journal of Liberal History*, 120 (Autumn 2023), pp. 1–31; Emma Day, ‘Rhodes Must Fall: The Legacy of Cecil Rhodes in the University of Oxford’, *Oxford Centre for Global History*, February 2023, <https://globalcapitalism.history.ox.ac.uk/files/case31-rhodesmustfallpdf> [accessed 30 December 2025] and Georgie Wemyss, ‘Robert Milligan: Hidden moments of contest’, *Cast in Stone* (University of Exeter, 2020) <https://castinstone.exeter.ac.uk/database/s/en/page/case-studies-robert-milligan> [accessed 30 December 2025]

<sup>135</sup> Alan Lester, “Winston Churchill in the Culture War: Defending an Icon,” *Snapshots of Empire* (University of Sussex blog), 28 February 2024 <https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/snapshotsofempire/2024/02/28/winston-churchill-in-the-culture-war-defending-an-icon/> [accessed 7 October 2025].

discussions aimed to examine Churchill's racial views and imperial policies in the same exhaustive light that his wartime heroism traditionally enjoys. The organisers explicitly framed the series as an exercise in 'discussion, not debate', designed to 'bring long-overdue balance to a heavily skewed national story'.<sup>136</sup>

Indeed, the dominant approach has been to broaden the myth, making it more truthful by making it more inclusive and complex. Scholars have stressed the need 'to go beyond the dominant myths to ensure that "the stories behind it are retold in their unabridged versions"', embedding war memory within a 'more multiracial and international framework' and bringing the 'imperial dimensions of the war and its aftermath more fully into the picture', thereby resisting the tendency to equate remembrance with forgetting empire.<sup>137</sup> This intellectual aim reflects what Michael Rothberg terms multidirectional memory: an understanding of collective remembrance not as a zero-sum contest for space but as a process of dynamic cross-referencing, dialogue, and mutual illumination between disparate histories.<sup>138</sup> In this view, the memory of the Second World War can intersect productively with those of migration, decolonisation, and the struggle for racial justice; linking, for instance, the commemoration of wartime service to later narratives of Commonwealth citizenship and the migration of the 'Windrush' generation from the Caribbean, so that public memory becomes more resonant, plural, and connected.

In recent decades, these theoretical and ethical calls for a more inclusive remembrance have translated into concrete commemorative reforms. Following the precedents of the Bevin

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Martin Francis, 'Men of the Royal Air Force, the Cultural Memory of the Second World War and the Twilight of the British Empire', in *Gender, Labour, War and Empire: Essays on Modern Britain*, ed. by Philippa Levine and Susan R. Grayzel (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 193; Santanu Das, 'Introduction', in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, ed. by Santanu Das (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1–6; quoted in Wendy Ugolini, "'When Are You Going Back?': Memory, Ethnicity and the British Home Front", in *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, p. 89; Patrick Finney, 'Isaac Fadoyebo's Journey: Remembering the British Empire's Second World War', in *Remembering the Second World War*, ed. by Patrick Finney (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 73.

<sup>138</sup> Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (California: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 122.

Boys (coal miners conscripted for wartime labour), who were permitted to march in Remembrance from 1998, and the Women’s Land Army (female agricultural workers), which secured formal recognition only in 2000, the twenty-first century has seen numerous tangible attempts to achieve these aims.<sup>139</sup> In 2002 the Commonwealth Memorial Gates in Hyde Park were unveiled to honour non-European war service, whilst in 2008 the Imperial War Museum’s ‘From War to Windrush’ exhibition explicitly challenged the exclusionary whiteness of official imagery.<sup>140</sup> The 2010s saw a national memorial to African and Caribbean service personnel appear in London’s Windrush Square (The memorial’s lead advocate, Jak Beula, stressed its purpose was to ensure that young Britons of African and Caribbean descent know ‘the valuable input their forefathers had in the two world wars’); and campaigns such as ‘We Also Served’ secured a statue to Noor Inayat Khan, the Indian-British SOE agent, correcting the postwar tendency to anglicise or erase her heritage.<sup>141</sup>

Since 2020, the ‘Remember Together’ campaign (launched by British Future in partnership with the Royal British Legion) has sought to bring people of different backgrounds together ahead of Remembrance Sunday and insist that ‘all who served are fully recognised’ regardless of ethnicity or origin.<sup>142</sup> In 2021, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission formally acknowledged that ‘pervasive racism’ led to the failure to mark or name perhaps 116,000–350,000 fallen soldiers of colour from the two world wars, leaving them in unmarked

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<sup>139</sup> Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> Patrick Finney, ‘Isaac Fadoyebo’s Journey’, p. 74., Wendy Ugolini, ‘When are you going back?’, p. 92.

<sup>141</sup> Ministry of Defence and The Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon, ‘First ever memorial to African and Caribbean service personnel unveiled in Brixton,’ *GOV.UK*, 24 April 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-ever-memorial-to-african-and-caribbean-service-personnel-unveiled-in-brixton> [accessed 20 September 2025]; Olive Vassell, ‘Black London’, in *Mapping Black Europe: Monuments, Markers, Memories*, ed. by Natasha A. Kelly and Olive Vassell (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023), p. 69 and Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson, ‘Introduction’, p. 13.

<sup>142</sup> British Future, ‘MPs, Veterans and Public Support “Remember Together” Call for Greater Recognition of Black and Asian WW2 Service’, *British Future*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.britishfuture.org/mps-veterans-and-public-support-remember-together-call-for-greater-recognition-of-black-and-asian-ww2-service/> [accessed 20 May 2023].

graves or collective memorials.<sup>143</sup> A Special Committee report attributed these failings to an 'overarching imperial ideology' which presumed that 'native' communities would not 'understand or appreciate a headstone', thereby justifying a hierarchy of remembrance that denied non-European troops the equality in death promised to their white comrades.<sup>144</sup> The report clarified that, in addition to those entirely missing, between 45,000 and 54,000 casualties were deliberately commemorated unequally, often recorded only in paper registers.<sup>145</sup> The Commission apologised unreservedly, with its director-general admitting these 'failings of the past should absolutely not have happened'.<sup>146</sup>

In 2025, the CWGC expanded this research with the publication of *Remembering the Dead of the British Empire*, a follow-up report that reviewed commemorative activities after the Second World War.<sup>147</sup> The research found a distinct difference from the First World War, concluding there was no evidence that individuals were systematically excluded from named commemoration and that over 650,000 casualties from across the Empire were commemorated by name.<sup>148</sup> However, the report still identified five distinct areas of unequal treatment. These included African and Indian bodies being more readily left behind during 'concentration' efforts, resulting in their commemoration shifting from individual graves to memorials, and the families of these groups being excluded from verifying casualty details.<sup>149</sup> The report concluded that these discriminatory outcomes were not the product of explicit intention but

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<sup>143</sup> Alexandra Topping, 'UK Failure to Commemorate Black and Asian War Dead Known "For Years",' *Guardian*, 22 April 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/apr/22/scandal-of-unequal-commemoration-of-uks-ww1-dead-known-about-for-years> [accessed 20 September 2025].

<sup>144</sup> Commonwealth War Graves Commission, *Report of the Special Committee to Review Historical Inequalities in Commemoration* (Maidenhead: Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2021), pp. 39, 49.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> Commonwealth War Graves Commission, *Remembering the Dead of the British Empire: A Review of Commemorative Activity During and After the Second World War* (Maidenhead: Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2025), p. 4.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

were ‘made possible by a fundamentally unequal British imperial system’ of which the Imperial War Graves Commission was an integral part.<sup>150</sup>

Historian David Olusoga, whose documentary *The Unremembered: Britain’s Forgotten War Heroes* (2019) helped bring this injustice to light, claimed the century long failure to commemorate these soldiers amounted to ‘apartheid in death ... one of the biggest scandals I’ve ever come across as an historian’.<sup>151</sup> Yet, crucially, once again Olusoga’s outrage does not reject the sacred story itself: it demands that its circle of remembrance be widened. His work exemplifies a generation of historians who argue that true fidelity to Britain’s ‘finest hour’ requires confronting its exclusions. The task, as Olusoga frames it, is not to desecrate the myth but to redeem it – by ensuring that the story of sacrifice and solidarity told each November finally includes all those who fought and died under the British flag.

Major anniversaries have amplified this drive for inclusivity. For VE Day 75 in 2020, leaders from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Sadiq Khan and Rishi Sunak, were prominently involved in wreath-laying and speeches.<sup>152</sup> Queen Elizabeth II reminded viewers that the war ‘had been fought by peoples of many lands, many faiths, united in common cause’, while the then Prince of Wales led the two-minute silence not from London but from Balmoral, with a Scottish piper and an Edinburgh cannon salute.<sup>153</sup> In Cardiff, the Welsh First Minister stressed that ‘the unity of the Commonwealth nations, who joined together to fight the spread of fascism’ must be remembered alongside home-front sacrifices.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Topping, ‘UK Failure to Commemorate Black and Asian War Dead’.

<sup>152</sup> Jessica Murray and Sarah Marsh, ‘VE Day 2020: 75th Anniversary - Two-Minute Silence, Red Arrows Flypast (Live)’, *Guardian*, 8 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2020/may/08/ve-day-2020-75th-anniversary-two-minute-silence-red-arrows-flypast-live> [accessed 20 September 2025].

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Welsh Government, ‘VE Day 75 - First Minister Pays Tribute to Those Who Lived Through The Second World War’, [media.service.gov.wales](https://media.service.gov.wales/news/ve-day-75-first-minister-pays-tribute-to-those-who-lived-through-the-second-world-war#:~:text=To%20all%20the%20Servicemen%20and,in%20mines%3B%20in%20our%20communities), 8 May 2020, <https://media.service.gov.wales/news/ve-day-75-first-minister-pays-tribute-to-those-who-lived-through-the-second-world-war#:~:text=To%20all%20the%20Servicemen%20and,in%20mines%3B%20in%20our%20communities> [accessed 20 September 2025].

Across social media, Britons shared family stories not only of English riflemen, but of Scottish sailors, Welsh miners, Indian infantrymen and Polish pilots. Even polarised political figures signalled their shared membership of the myth. The Home Secretary Suella Braverman tweeted a photo of her Mauritian great-uncle in uniform, thanking ‘all Commonwealth servicemen and women’. (See Figure 2.1)<sup>155</sup>

**Figure 2.1: Suella Braverman MP’s VE Day 2020 Twitter Post**



One of her fiercest critics, activist Dr Shola Mos-Shogbamimu, echoed the sentiment, urging Britons to remember Black and Asian contributions under the hashtag #LestWeForget (See Figure 2.2).<sup>156</sup> Polling by British Future indicated strong resonance for such gestures: 78 per cent of white Britons and 76 per cent of ethnic minority Britons agreed that highlighting Commonwealth contributions would make remembrance feel more relevant.<sup>157</sup> The group’s

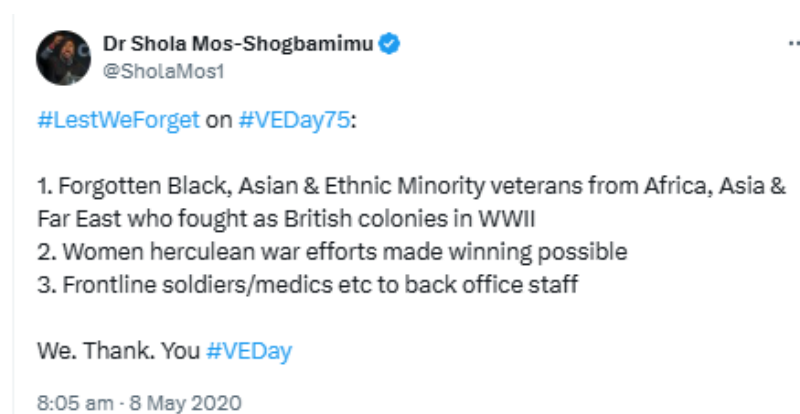
<sup>155</sup> Suella Braverman, Twitter post, 8 May 2020  
<https://twitter.com/SuellaBraverman/status/1258888667923468289?lang=en-GB> [accessed 20 May 2023].

<sup>156</sup> Shola Mos-Shogbamimu, Twitter post, 8 May 2020  
<https://twitter.com/SholaMos1/status/1258654261547880449> [accessed 20 May 2023].

<sup>157</sup> British Future, ‘MPs, veterans and public support “Remember Together”’.

open letter in 2020, signed by senior figures across parties including London Mayor Sadiq Khan and former Chancellor Sajid Javid, insisted that ‘this is a history that we share, and of which we can all be proud’.<sup>158</sup> By VE Day 80 in 2025, further polling suggested continued public consensus: 86 per cent of respondents agreed that ‘we should commemorate all those who fought for Britain in the World Wars, regardless of where they came from’, with 64 per cent strongly agreeing.<sup>159</sup> 77 per cent believed that remembering the shared wartime history of British and Commonwealth troops ‘can help build cohesion in today’s multi-ethnic society’, and 81 per cent thought that teaching children about the diversity of Britain’s wartime allies ‘can help them understand the multi-ethnic society we share today’.<sup>160</sup>

**Figure 2.2: Dr Mos-Shogbamimu VE Day Twitter Post 2020**



Seen critically, however, such apparent bipartisan support for inclusivity can be read strategically. As Broecker reminds us, hegemonic narratives maintain dominance not only by securitisation (defining and defending against perceived threats) but also by assimilation: discourses and the subject-positions favoured within them ‘gain in (political) power to the degree that they are able to include and represent a number of different subject-positions within

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> British Future, *VE Day 80: Public Supports Efforts to Raise Awareness of Commonwealth WW2 Service*, 8 May 2025, <https://www.britishfuture.org/ve-day-80-public-supports-efforts-to-raise-awareness-of-commonwealth-ww2-service/> [accessed 8 October 2025].

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

that discourse'.<sup>161</sup> Incorporating new figures (Sikh soldiers, Caribbean airmen, female munitions workers) into the wartime story strengthens rather than undermines the hegemonic chain of equivalence. By linking these subaltern figures to the core signifiers of courage, sacrifice, and victory, proponents of the governing myth can actually shore up its legitimacy and quieten doubters, ensuring they can readily apply it anew to fresh contexts.

Yet, as Janet Watson observed of earlier commemorative shifts in the 1980s and 1990s, such gestures of inclusion can be superficial.<sup>162</sup> As she explains, whilst that period began to celebrate everyone 'no matter what they had done between 1939 and 1945', these expansions rarely transformed the underlying narrative or its hierarchies.<sup>163</sup> Women and civilians were newly visible, but the myth continued to revolve around masculine heroism, national unity, and righteous victory. Contemporary gestures supporting multicultural remembrance, especially isolated social media posts, can seem to repeat this pattern: broadening the surface of the myth without altering its foundations.

The 2017 *BBC News* feature *Reclaiming Remembrance: 'I Thought It Was a White Event'* illuminated this tension.<sup>164</sup> Its interviewees (Dr Irfan Malik, Rabia Mirza and others) welcomed recent efforts by institutions such as the Royal British Legion to highlight Commonwealth and Muslim service. Yet they also lamented that these advances coexist with persistent blind spots in popular culture. Mirza cited Christopher Nolan's blockbuster *Dunkirk* (2017) as a case in point: while the acclaimed director insisted on keeping the film 'apolitical', this very stance erased the Indian and colonial troops who had been present at the evacuation.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Broecker, *Securitisation*, pp. 102–3.

<sup>162</sup> Watson, 'Total war and Total Anniversary', pp. 175–194.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>164</sup> Alpha Ceesay, 'Reclaiming Remembrance: "I Thought It Was a White Event"', *BBC News*, 12 November 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-41917784> [accessed 8 October 2025].

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

What presents itself as neutrality thus reproduces the old exclusions, reaffirming the ‘white war’ imaginary that inclusive remembrance supposedly seeks to overcome.

Such examples expose the limits of the myth’s assimilative power. Beneath its apparent pluralism, the sacred story’s core moral logic persists; a moral universe in which courage and unity are celebrated, while doubt or dissent remain marginal. The injunction that *we can and we should all be proud* of this history, reaffirmed repeatedly during VE Day 80 in 2025, remains central to Britain’s commemorative grammar. In the House of Commons, Conservative MP Saqib Bhatti declared that ‘VE Day and VJ Day must forever be remembered and etched into our memories. I am sure this whole House will agree that it is important that we remember these historic days for years to come’.<sup>166</sup> Such rhetoric captures how inclusive remembrance operates less as a challenge to the myth than as its renewal. Inclusivity, in this sense, demonstrates the myth’s elasticity rather than its fragility: it expands the field of belonging while preserving the core hierarchy of pride, gratitude, and unity.

However, some challenges to hegemonic memory resist reconciliation. There are moments when the hegemonic order’s assimilative capacity falters, when symbols of the war are invested with irreconcilable meanings, and the sacred story can no longer contain both liberal and conservative, domestic and international visions within a single frame. Studying these moments reveals not only how a hegemonic or ‘sacred’ story endures under pressure, but also where it begins to crack. Political and cultural practices in such periods often oscillate between ethical reactions, which as we have seen acknowledge rupture and invite change, and

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<sup>166</sup> *Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan: 80th Anniversary*, House of Commons Debate, 6 May 2025, *Hansard*, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2025-05-06/debates/70B8E4DA-A1F2-46EC-9F8C-60E918092B81/VictoryInEuropeAndVictoryOverJapan80ThAnniversary> [accessed 8 October 2025]; see also *A Speech Delivered by The King on the 80th Anniversary of VE Day*, 8 May 2025, Royal.uk, <https://www.royal.uk/VEDay80> [accessed 8 October 2025]; *80th Anniversary of Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan*, House of Lords Debate, 9 May 2025, *Hansard*, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2025-05-09/debates/BD817776-A24D-4CC1-AEAE-9807EDE7210B/80ThAnniversaryOfVictoryInEuropeAndVictoryOverJapan> [accessed 8 October 2025]; and *Debates in the Lords*, 3 April 2025, *Hansard*, <https://www.parliament.co.uk/debate/2025-04-03/lords> [accessed 8 October 2025].

ideological reactions, which conceal it. It is within the latter, the defensive efforts to keep the myth intact, that the boundaries of Britain's hegemonic memory become most visible.

### **The Limits of Assimilation: When Myths Collide**

Moments of fracture are particularly revealing. Broecker uses the term *dislocation* to describe such ruptures, events or discursive crises that the hegemonic order cannot easily absorb or domesticate.<sup>167</sup> Dislocations expose the contingency of what had seemed natural or self-evident: they remind us that every social order is only one possible arrangement among others, never fully fixed or secure. When dislocation occurs (Broecker cites examples such as economic crashes or depressions) established rules and meanings lose their hold, and actors are forced to improvise: to re-articulate meaning in conditions of uncertainty.<sup>168</sup> Such indeterminacy can open space for transformation, but it can equally provoke defensive reactions. Competing actors struggle to re-stitch the narrative, some seeking to restore the old moral order, others to redefine it. Each attempt to repair coherence, however, exposes how strained the hegemonic framework has become, revealing the limits of assimilation and the fragility of the myth itself.

The Brexit campaign offers perhaps the clearest example of such a dislocation: a moment when the basic moral grammar of the sacred story could no longer accommodate the range of meanings projected onto it. Scholars have emphasised that campaigners 'on both sides invoked contested memories of the past and made normative claims about Britain's 'natural' allies and markets'.<sup>169</sup> On the Leave side, Boris Johnson claimed the EU was pursuing a federal dream 'akin to what Hitler once tried', urging Britons to 'be the heroes of Europe again'.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Jacob Torfing cited in Hannah Broecker, *Securitisation*, p. 133.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>169</sup> Robert Saunders, 'Brexit and Empire: "Global Britain" and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48.6 (2020), p. 1165.

<sup>170</sup> Rowena Mason, 'Iain Duncan Smith Backs Boris Johnson Over EU-Hitler Link', *Guardian*, 15 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/15/boris-johnson-likens-eu-to-nazi-superstate> [accessed 8 October 2025].

Addressing the Home Affairs Select Committee, Conservative MP Sir Bill Cash invoked the anniversary of the Normandy landings, arguing that those who fought and died there ‘did not do so to enable convicted EU rapists, paedophiles and drug dealers who are now here in prison to be protected under the new European human rights laws’.<sup>171</sup> Brexiteer MP Mark Francois made the wartime link even more explicit: ‘My father, Reginald Francois, was a D-Day veteran. He never submitted to bullying by any German and neither will his son.’<sup>172</sup> This theme was amplified by newspapers like the *Sun*, which evoked the Second World War sitcom *Dad’s Army* with its headline, ‘Who do EU think you are kidding Mr Cameron?’<sup>173</sup> Similarly, the *Daily Mail* invoked the famous 1939 House of Commons cry ‘Speak for England!’ to frame the referendum as a comparable ‘crossroads in our island history’.<sup>174</sup>

Remain campaigners mobilised the same mythic vocabulary in reverse. Veterans such as Field Marshal Lord Bramall warned that leaving the EU would betray the peace their generation had fought to secure, while David Cameron even urged voters to ‘remember the white headstones’ as a moral injunction to preserve European unity: ‘Isolationism has never served this country well. Whenever we turn our back on Europe, sooner or later we come to regret it. We have always had to go back in, and always at much higher cost.’<sup>175</sup> Combined, the opposing sides generated over 3,300 articles which contained references to empire, British identity, sovereignty, the Second World War, and the concepts of remembrance and restoration.<sup>176</sup> This mnemonic tug-of-war exposed the fragility of the wartime consensus. No longer a unifying moral charter, the war became a contested mirror reflecting two incompatible

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<sup>171</sup> Gaston, and Hilhorst. *At Home in One’s Past*, p. 64.

<sup>172</sup> Rose Woods, *Rule, Nostalgia*, p. 25.

<sup>173</sup> Tom Newton Dunn, ‘Who Do EU Think You Are Kidding Mr Cameron?’, *Sun*, 3 February 2016, cited in Steve Buckledee, *The Language of Brexit: How Britain Talked Its Way Out of the European Union* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 122.

<sup>174</sup> ‘Who Will Speak For England?’, *Daily Mail*, 4 February 2016, cited in Buckledee, p. 120.

<sup>175</sup> Forces News, “Second World War Veterans Warn Against Brexit,” *Forces News*, 9 May 2016, <https://www.forcesnews.com/news/tri-service/second-world-war-veterans-warn-against-brexiteer> [accessed 8 October 2025]

<sup>176</sup> Sophie Gaston, and Sacha Hilhorst. *At Home in One’s Past*, p. 16.

visions of Britain: one as an independent island power, the other as the moral conscience and willing partner of post-war Europe. The antagonistic frontier between sovereignty and solidarity, nationalism and cosmopolitanism could no longer be contained within a single narrative frame.

The persistence of this divide was evident even six years later in a 2022 Mass Observation directive on the war's continuing legacy (a Directive I authored), structured around how Britons learn about the Second World War, how they interpret Germany's historical responsibility, and how film, media and online platforms shape contemporary political attitudes. One respondent remarked: 'Although Hitler lost, I feel the Germans were very clever the second time when Angela Merkel and the European Union issued directives which we had to obey.'<sup>177</sup> Others lamented that 'many people's perceptions of Germany and other European countries are still so coloured by WW2... I think people's outdated views are a significant factor in the Brexit vote'.<sup>178</sup> Another recalled that 'so many actual veterans didn't want us to leave the EU'.<sup>179</sup>

For these observers, there was 'no question that a conception of Britain based on the idea that it 'stood alone' during the Second World War and beat the Germans, is central to British identity and contributed to Brexit'.<sup>180</sup> One observer even summarised the dichotomy charted in this chapter: the war, they wrote, has 'two differing legacies'; on one hand, the 'Little England' mentality that cherishes independence and the 'Dunkirk Spirit' of resilience; on the other, 'the belief we are European and need a united Europe'.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Mass Observation, Spring Directive 2022: The Second World War, Response C5991.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., Response C3210.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., Response S5866.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., Response H7052 and Response H6949.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., Response A5853.

Such irreconcilable interpretations show why dislocations can be so revealing. They expose the underlying framework of Britain's wartime mythology, the network of ideas and emotions that link together courage, sacrifice, freedom, and unity into a single moral story. In Laclau and Mouffe's terms, Brexit unmasked the 'chains of equivalence' that hold this story together: the flexible associations that give the war its enduring power to mean different things to different people. The debate revealed that the sacred story's unifying appeal rests on constant boundary-work, on deciding who may invoke the stories of 1939–1945, and for what moral purpose.

Comparable dislocations recur whenever the moral foundations of Britain's wartime story are publicly questioned. Few figures illustrate this defensiveness more clearly than Winston Churchill. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests reignited debate over his legacy when demonstrators targeted the statue in Parliament Square, prompting fierce denunciations from politicians and the press.<sup>182</sup> Boris Johnson again led this line of defence, as he produced a series of public statements detailing how Churchill saved Britain 'from a fascist and racist tyranny', and condemned the subsequent boarding up of his statue, although as Pettitt notes, 'it had been boarded up at different times when he was Mayor of London himself'.<sup>183</sup> A year later, the academic discussions examining his racial views were ultimately shut down amid accusations of Churchill College 'trashing' his reputation and of facilitating 'pseudo-academic detractors'.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> BBC, "Black Lives Matter Protest: Why Was Churchill's Statue Defaced?", *BBC News*, 8 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-london-52972531> [accessed 8 October 2025].

<sup>183</sup> Boris Johnson, Twitter post, 12 June 2020 <https://twitter.com/borisjohnson/status/1271388180193914880>; Pettitt, 'COVID-19, the Second World War and the Idea of Britishness', p. 9.

<sup>184</sup> See Craig Simpson, 'Churchill "White Supremacist" Leading Empire "Worse than Nazis", Claims', *The Telegraph*, 11 February 2021 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/02/11/churchill-white-supremacist-leading-empire-worse-nazis-claims/> [accessed 7 October 2025]., Rory Tingle, 'Controversial Black Studies Professor Claimed British Empire Was "Worse than the Nazis"', *Daily Mail*, 12 February 2021 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9253179/Controversial-black-studies-professor-claimed-British-Empire-worse-Nazis.html> [accessed 7 October 2025]., and Andrew Roberts and Zewditu Gebreyohanes, *The Racial Consequences of Mr Churchill: A Review*, foreword by Rt Hon Sir Nicholas Soames (London: Policy Exchange, 2021).

While the meanings attached to Churchill have evolved, the mythology surrounding him remains remarkably resilient. As Stephen Fielding, Bill Schwarz, and Richard Toye observe, Churchill's image has in recent decades been subordinated 'to one of the truly hegemonic myths of British history: the caring monarch'.<sup>185</sup> In popular culture, from *The King's Speech to The Crown*, he increasingly appears not as the dominating 'saviour of civilisation', but as the antiquated, 'delusional' servant of a gentler sovereign order.<sup>186</sup> Yet, as Fielding and his colleagues note, the threshold for what constitutes an 'attack' on his legacy remains extraordinarily low: even 'tempered criticism' is often received as heresy.<sup>187</sup> When, in an otherwise celebratory BBC documentary, Jeremy Paxman described Churchill as 'a chancer, an egotist ... and sometimes a bit of a charlatan', his descendants 'went 'nuts'', and great-grandson Randolph Churchill condemned the 'impertinence', insisting the family name still 'brings a smile to people's faces'.<sup>188</sup> Such visceral reactions to academic inquiry and mild critique alike reveal how jealously the Churchill myth is policed, and more broadly, how tightly the boundaries of Britain's wartime morality remain drawn.

Studying events when this morality is challenged then, exposes where Britain's hegemonic myth meets its limits; when adaptation can no longer contain antagonism and meaning must be renegotiated in public view. The following chapters examine these dynamics in one of the most volatile arenas of all: the memory of Britain's strategic bombing campaign against Germany. If Brexit exemplified a political dislocation, where the sacred story's moral grammar fractured under rival claims of sovereignty and solidarity, for decades the memory of Britain's strategic bombing campaign has exposed a deeper moral and ethical dislocation. Here, the tension is primarily not between competing futures (although it can be linked to Britain's

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<sup>185</sup> Steven Fielding, Bill Schwarz, and Richard Toye, *The Churchill Myths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 145.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

continuing relationship with modern Germany and Europe) but between pride and remorse, heroism and atrocity.

The bombing war remains an unsettled corner of the good war, difficult to reconcile with the moral grammar of righteous victory. Bomber Command veterans have gradually been incorporated into the sacred story through memorials such as the 2012 Bomber Command Memorial in Green Park and the 2018 International Bomber Command Centre in Lincoln, yet many long felt neglected, haunted by the moral ambiguity and society's judgment of their service. Even now, attempts to revisit the campaign historically or politically can prove volatile.

On the surface the February 1945 bombing of Dresden, in particular, continues to occupy a uniquely charged position. In October 2023, Defence Secretary Grant Shapps drew condemnation for comparing Israel's aerial bombardment of Gaza to Britain's wartime raids on Dresden, suggesting that 'When Britain bombed Dresden, 35,000 people lost their lives...we've sort of forgotten that in war, very sadly, people lose their lives.'<sup>189</sup> Critics accused him of moral distortion, and the controversy did not just reignite long-standing arguments about proportionality; it triggered the very dynamic of politicised outrage and identity-based defence that, as the next chapter will argue, now defines the bombing war's sanctified public memory.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Laura Kuenssberg (@bbclaurak), "Shapps implying a comparison btw Israel's actions now and Britain's in WW2. Quote.", *X*, 12 November 2023, <https://x.com/bbclaurak/status/1723682976616038726> [accessed 8 October 2025].

<sup>190</sup> Chris Doyle, 'West's Anti-Arab Racism Exposed by Israeli War on Gaza', CAABU (Council for Arab-British Understanding), 20 November 2023, <https://www.caabu.org/news/article/wests-anti-arab-racism-exposed-israeli-war-gaza-article-chris-doyle> [accessed 8 October 2025].

**Figure 2.3: Grant Shapps' Invocation of Dresden on National Television, 2023**



Whether Shapps's comment was a careless aside or a calculated defence of hard choices, it underscored how the bombing war now acts as a fault line of a new kind: not simply a quiet moral ambiguity, but a fiercely defended public shrine where any challenge, analogy, or perceived critique triggers a volatile reaction. Indeed, the very fact that a senior government minister felt comfortable invoking Dresden not as a taboo, but as a casual allegory for necessary wartime choices, is itself evidence of its newly sanctified place in the national story.

Over the past decade, veterans, clergy, and historians seeking to draw attention to the complexities of the bombing campaign have repeatedly met with resistance. By tracing how such interventions are framed in the press and contested in digital forums, the following chapters will examine in microcosm the mechanisms through which Britain's sacred story is challenged, defended, and continually remade. They ask: which arguments are absorbed into the myth's moral chain, and which are cast out as transgressions? How does perceived authority of the challenger; the veteran, the cleric, or the historian, shape these reactions? And how does affective memory mediate these responses in an age where outrage is amplified, and remembrance ritualised online?

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that, contrary to the suggestion that the ‘age of Hitler is ending’, the memory of the Second World War endures in Britain not as a fading historical episode but as a living sacred story. It functions as a hegemonic and emotionally charged narrative that provides ontological security in an era of profound uncertainty. Its power lies in its adaptability as an ‘empty signifier’, whose core moral grammar (a virtuous nation tested, resilient, and ultimately triumphant) is continually reapplied to new challenges. This durability is sustained not only through institutionalised cultural memory but through an affective inheritance, the ‘memory of the memory’, that binds generations to the conflict’s emotional weight even without direct experience.

The myth’s survival depends on a dynamic interplay of two key processes. First, it renews its authority through re-securitisation, where its moral grammar is invoked to frame contemporary crises, from pandemics to wars to migrations, as existential battles demanding unity and sacrifice. Second, it maintains its hegemonic reach through assimilation, by broadening its circle of remembrance to include previously marginalised figures, thereby strengthening its claim to represent a unified, multicultural nation. These processes allow the sacred story to sustain two distinct but complementary national imaginaries: the insular, stoic ‘Little England’ that endures against the odds, and the assertive, interventionist ‘Greater Britain’ that projects its values globally. By toggling between these visions, the myth provides a versatile script for almost any political contingency.

Yet this elasticity has limits. The myth’s coherence is threatened by moments of dislocation, ruptures like the Brexit referendum, where the sacred story was invoked by opposing sides to legitimise irreconcilable futures. In these moments, the narrative ceases to be a unifying charter and instead becomes a contested battleground, exposing the fragile ‘chains

of equivalence' that hold its meaning together. The fierce policing of figures like Churchill further reveals the boundaries of acceptable critique; while the myth can absorb inclusivity, it actively resists interpretations perceived as desecration. The result is a paradoxical mix of unity and volatility, making the war story both a source of shared identity and a map of contemporary cultural divides.

To see these dynamics under maximum stress, the next chapter turns to the memory of Britain's strategic bombing campaign. If Brexit revealed a contemporary political dislocation, the bombing war exposes a deeper moral one, creating a tension between heroism and atrocity that cannot be easily resolved within the good war narrative. By examining public controversies surrounding this difficult history, we can observe in microcosm how the sacred story is defended, contested, and remade when faced with challenges that strike not at its edges, but at its very moral core.

### **Chapter Three:**

#### **The Heroism of Destruction: Sanctifying the Bomber War**

The sacred story of the Second World War persists through continual re-articulation. Often associated with the memory of Britain standing alone in 1940, this narrative has progressively expanded to include a wider constellation of participants and perspectives, from the Commonwealth men and women who served across the globe to the civilians whose endurance under fire became part of the national myth of resilience. This chapter argues that, in recent decades, RAF Bomber Command has also been increasingly assimilated into that evolving narrative, and that a service once shadowed by moral controversy is now celebrated as an embodiment of courage and sacrifice within the canon of Britain's good war.<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, such a development may seem unsurprising. Acts of heroism, technical ingenuity, and endurance are woven deeply into the popular memory of the conflict. Bomber Command's contribution to victory was vast and costly: 55,573 aircrew were killed, 'more than those who serve in the entire Royal Air Force today', and thousands more were wounded or captured.<sup>2</sup> Their story appears to fit naturally within Britain's commemorative vocabulary of sacrifice and service, alongside the Spitfire pilots of Fighter Command or the sailors of the Atlantic convoys.

Yet the bomber war was a uniquely complex episode, one that fused courage with devastation and produced deep moral wounds that, for some, never fully healed. Post-war testimony reveals that while many veterans stood proud of their service, others experienced

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Houghton, 'The "Missing Chapter": Bomber Command Aircrew Memoirs in the 1990s and 2000s' in *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, ed. by Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, 'About Bomber Command', *RAF Benevolent Fund* <https://www.rafbf.org/bomber-command-memorial/about-bomber-command> [accessed 10 November 2025].

significant guilt.<sup>3</sup> Colin Harrison of 467 Squadron exemplified this deep, lingering ambivalence. He was haunted by a photograph of an elderly couple killed in Hamburg, recording: ‘I often thought about those two old people... I often wondered whether they had anything to do with me... I wondered if I’d done it’.<sup>4</sup> Such moments of reckoning expose the deep ambivalence that shadowed even the most dutiful participants in the campaign.

This chapter explores how that moral complexity has been remembered, reframed, and ultimately sanctified within Britain’s post-war imagination. It traces the shifting meanings attached to Bomber Command; from Cold War containment and the moral anxieties of the nuclear age, through the heritage-era rehabilitation of the 1980s, to the twenty-first-century memorials that canonised the airmen as martyrs of duty. In doing so, it asks how a campaign often interpreted as morally unsettling throughout the postwar period has become yet another cornerstone of Britain’s sacred story, setting the stage for the next chapter’s examination of how these tensions are articulated, mediated, and contested within the digital public sphere.

### **Bomber Command as Embodiment of the Sacred Story**

On the surface, the Bomber Command offensive epitomised the heroic ideals at the heart of Britain’s sacred war narrative. The sacred story (as detailed in Chapter 1) is built on a powerful dual image of British identity: the steadfast Little England that stood alone against tyranny, and the assertive Greater Britain that drew upon its empire and industrial might to help liberate Europe. In both conception and practice, the strategic bombing campaign fused these two mythic strands, while its human component (the vast network of ground and air crews) came

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<sup>3</sup> See James Greenhalgh, ‘The Long Shadow of the Air War: Composure, Memory and the Renegotiation of Self in the Oral Testimonies of Bomber Command Veterans Since 2015’, *Contemporary British History*, 35.4 (2021), pp. 477–514.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Lowe, *Inferno: The Devastation of Hamburg 1943* (London: Viking, 2007), p. 329.

to embody the social solidarity of the People's War, and its material impact was central to the final Allied victory.

In its early years, when Britain stood largely on the defensive, Bomber Command was the 'only way the war could actually be carried to the enemy'.<sup>5</sup> However, the physical force available was modest and improvisational (a fact underscored by Britain having only 280 bombers ready for operational use in September 1939 compared to the Luftwaffe's almost 1,200).<sup>6</sup> This small force was critically exposed, as it relied on 'stop-gap bombers', many of which were already considered obsolete.<sup>7</sup>

This profound quantitative and qualitative deficit led to a swift and painful confrontation with reality. The pre-war doctrine of the 'self-defending daylight bomber formation' was proven 'untenable' almost immediately.<sup>8</sup> In a disastrous raid on Wilhelmshaven in December 1939, half of the attacking force failed to return, exposing the vulnerability of these early aircraft and the futility of daylight precision.<sup>9</sup> Air Commodore Norman Bottomley nonetheless praised the crews' resolve, likening their determination to maintain formation under attack to the 'old Thin Red Line' or the 'Shoulder to Shoulder' of Cromwell's Ironsides, a comparison that underscored the endurance and discipline expected of a fighting minority facing impossible odds.<sup>10</sup>

The following spring brought even greater calamity. During the Battle of France, crews flying obsolete Blenheims and Fairey Battles pressed on with what Churchill called 'almost daily deeds of fame', comparing their efforts to the 'Charge of the Light Brigade at

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars: A History of Bomber Command* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Brett Holman, "'Bomb Back, and Bomb Hard!': Debating Reprisals During the Blitz', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 58(3) (2012), p. 402.

<sup>7</sup> Max Hastings, *Bomber Command* (London: Pan Books, 2010), p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: Was the Allied Bombing of Civilians in WWII a Necessity or a Crime?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 5.

Balaclava'.<sup>11</sup> One bomber formation, 2 Group, developed a reputation for 'completing attacks when everybody else had abandoned them' and 'pressing on to the Dutch coast in broad daylight when others had returned for lack of cloud cover'.<sup>12</sup>

In retrospect, such episodes reveal how the early experience of Bomber Command should fit neatly within the Little England framework. The British self-perception prizes moments when the nation 'stood alone and took it on the chin', and the early Bomber Command certainly represents a symbol of stubborn defiance.<sup>13</sup> The image of small formations of vulnerable bombers confronting overwhelming odds, often with tragic results, aligns closely with the national myth of the plucky island standing alone, defined not by power but by resolve. This was not yet the vast industrial war machine of 1943–45, but a fragile, under-resourced force whose persistence carried profound symbolic weight. In the years of the Blitz and the fall of France, the knowledge that Britain was 'hitting back' provided powerful psychological support.<sup>14</sup>

However, as the war progressed, Bomber Command grew into a formidable instrument of total war, becoming a literal vehicle of Greater Britain's reach, power, and ultimate victory. By 1942–43, with the introduction of four-engine heavy bombers (Stirling, Halifax, Lancaster) and the mounting of thousand-plane raids, the campaign took on an epic scale.<sup>15</sup> In turn, the volume of bombs dropped increased exponentially. After dropping 5,000 tons in the whole of 1940, in 1943 Bomber Command was able to drop 180,000 tons.<sup>16</sup> In the first four months of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War*, (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, 13 February 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 133.

<sup>15</sup> See the chapter 'Millennium' in Denis Richards, *The Hardest Victory: RAF Bomber Command in the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 126–136.

<sup>16</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 104.

1945, it dropped a mammoth 181,000 tons, which was nearly one-fifth of its total for the whole war.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the war, Bomber Command had 98 operational squadrons equipped with 2,856 aircraft, including 1,600 heavy bombers.<sup>18</sup> Night after night, year after year, bombers built in Canadian and British factories roared out toward Germany.<sup>19</sup> The organisation that had begun as a desperate stopgap evolved into a major offensive force projecting Britain's industrial and technological prowess. In this sense, the bomber offensive came to embody Greater Britain's wartime role: not just an island nation surviving the onslaught, but an imperial and industrial power capable of taking the offensive against Nazi Germany.

The impact of this offensive was cumulative and multifaceted: military, industrial and psychological. Although the area-bombing campaign was often inaccurate, it compelled Germany to divert colossal resources to home defence. By 1944, some two million Germans were engaged nightly in anti-aircraft operations, whilst the Luftwaffe was forced to redeploy 70 per cent of its fighters to defend the Reich.<sup>20</sup> Up to twenty-thousand 88-mm guns, among Germany's best anti-tank weapons, were tied up in flak batteries rather than deployed against the Allied armies.<sup>21</sup> The air-defence system consumed a fifth of all German ammunition and up to two-thirds of its radar and optical-instrument production.<sup>22</sup>

The campaign's direct effects also became more tangible from 1944 onwards. Precision strikes on oil plants, transport hubs and rail networks crippled Germany's capacity to wage war.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Trevor Nash, 'An Analysis of the Factors Affecting the Royal Air Force's Bomber Force/Bomber Command Aircrew Operational Training Pipeline and the Resulting Training Methodologies Adopted Between 1922 and 1945' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2023), p. 150; Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 437.

<sup>19</sup> Simon P. MacKenzie, *Bomber Boys on Screen: RAF Bomber Command in Film and Television Drama* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Randall Hansen, *Fire and Fury: The Allied Bombing of Germany 1942–1945* (New York: New American Library, 2009), p. 279.

<sup>21</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 105; Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 302.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Pimlico, 2006), p. 160.

The attacks on refineries reduced German aviation-fuel output from 156,000 tons in May 1944 to barely 10,000 tons by September, grounding much of the Luftwaffe.<sup>23</sup> The systematic bombing of rail lines and marshalling yards (the ‘Transportation Plan’) proved critical to the success of D-Day, delaying German reinforcements and paralysing logistics.<sup>24</sup> In the nights preceding the landings, Bomber Command dropped more than 5,000 tons of bombs on coastal defences; helping to silence nine of ten major gun batteries.<sup>25</sup> Its aircraft also took part in the raids that finally sank the battleship *Tirpitz* and disrupted the V-weapon programme at Peenemünde.<sup>26</sup>

The psychological dimension of the campaign was also significant. Even if it ultimately failed to fracture German morale or provoke revolt, the bombing war inflicted a pervasive sense of terror, fatigue, and despair. Early raids on Berlin in 1940 shattered confidence in Nazi promises of invulnerability, undermining Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring’s prestige and alarming Joseph Goebbels’s Propaganda Ministry.<sup>27</sup> By 1943, the ‘terror of Hamburg’ had produced an unprecedented crisis of morale: the refugee columns fleeing the city spread panic deep into the countryside, and Armaments Minister Albert Speer warned that a few more such raids could force surrender.<sup>28</sup>

As the bombing intensified through 1944–45, the cumulative strain produced apathy, numbness, and a brutalised will to survive. Reports from Darmstadt and other destroyed cities described a population ‘incapable of feeling’, emotionally anaesthetised by incessant fear.<sup>29</sup> However in the final months, the onslaught on eastern cities such as Dresden, Leipzig, and Chemnitz was designed precisely to induce chaos and despair among civilians retreating before

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<sup>23</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 426.

<sup>24</sup> Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 228.

<sup>25</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 67; Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 233.

<sup>26</sup> Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 251, p. 299.

<sup>27</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>29</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 419.

the Red Army.<sup>30</sup> German historian Götz Bergander argues that the Dresden raid ‘swept away what was left of the will to resist’, confirming that while the bombing failed to incite political revolt, it succeeded in spreading psychological collapse.<sup>31</sup>

### **The People’s War: The Social Fabric and Human Cost**

This industrial-scale offensive was sustained by a vast human infrastructure. At its peak in 1944, Bomber Command’s 36,000 aircrew were supported by more than 190,000 male and female ground personnel.<sup>32</sup> The latter encompassed mechanics, armourers, drivers, radio operators and Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) members whose labour kept the squadrons operational.<sup>33</sup> As the war progressed, more trades were opened to women, reaching 70 shared trades by the end of 1940.<sup>34</sup> The courage of the groundcrews may have been procedural rather than spectacular, measured in constancy and repetition (the work of mechanics, fitters, and riggers involved long, difficult hours doing the daily maintenance of aircraft, whilst exposed to the elements), but it also involved the dangerous work of clearing ‘hang-ups’ and defusing bombs.<sup>35</sup> WAAF members frequently covered twenty-four-hour watches in control rooms, maintaining radio contact with returning aircraft; one operator, ‘Pip’ Beck, famously continued her duty even as an intruder bombed the airfield.<sup>36</sup> The collective effort embodied the moral and social ideals later mythologised in the People’s War. Though divided by specialised trades, Bomber Command was bound together by mutual dependence and sustained by the conviction that ordinary perseverance could achieve extraordinary results.

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<sup>30</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Götz Bergander, *Dresden im Luftkrieg: Vorgeschichte – Zerstörung – Folgen* (Cologne, 1978), p. 349., cited in Tami D. Biddle, ‘Wartime Reactions’, in Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang, eds., *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden* (London: Pimlico, 2006), p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> Dan Ellin, ‘The Many Behind the Few: The Lives and Emotions of Erks and WAAFs of RAF Bomber Command 1939–1945’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2015), p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> See Ellin’s wider thesis.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172., p. 191.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

This ethic found its most brutal expression among the aircrews themselves. Inside the cramped hull of a Halifax or Lancaster, the emotional code of the People's War was enacted nightly. Crews forged small-group solidarities (jokes, superstitions, shared silences) that mirrored the imagined national family of the home front.<sup>37</sup> The RAF practice of allowing crews to self-select, and then to stay together, gave a sliver of agency amid overwhelming risk and reinforced the ethic of comradeship that wider post-war remembrance culture would elevate.<sup>38</sup>

The psychological toll was cumulative: hours of vibration, cold and noise; the corrosive wait in briefing rooms; and the ritual of writing 'last letters' before take-off.<sup>39</sup> Many crews used these letters as a profound act of self-construction, seeking to frame their legacy and justify their service to loved ones. They often presented their role as a national duty, a moral necessity to create a 'better [and] more lovely place' in a righteous fight against Nazism, which one airman described as 'the greatest organised challenge to... Christianity and civilisation that the world has ever seen'.<sup>40</sup>

This duty was, in statistical terms, one of Britain's deadliest. For the aircrews (volunteers drawn from across the Commonwealth, most still in their late teens or early twenties) the odds of survival were brutal.<sup>41</sup> A 'bearable' loss rate was defined as five per cent per mission, yet it was often far higher: 12.5 per cent of bombers sent to Berlin in November 1941 failed to return; the same month 13 per cent were lost over Mannheim; and 21 per cent over the Ruhr.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Frances Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>39</sup> See Eleni Eldridge-Tull, "'Remember Me Darling': Memory, Masculinity and Morality in the Last Letters of RAF Bomber Command, 1939–1945", *Cultural and Social History*, 21.3 (2024), pp. 415–434.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 426–7.

<sup>41</sup> Heather Hughes, 'Memorializing RAF Bomber Command in the United Kingdom', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 16.3 (2023), pp. 272–73.

<sup>42</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 48; Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 151.

The peril remained constant even as Bomber Command reached the height of its power. The Nuremberg raid of 30 March 1944 saw ninety-six aircraft lost (an 11.9 per cent attrition rate in a single night).<sup>43</sup> This operation, which became known as the ‘Night of the Strong Winds’, was described by crews as a raid that should never have been carried out.<sup>44</sup> It was ‘doomed to failure’, primarily due to an incorrect wind forecast.<sup>45</sup> Crews were flying in a bright moon on a long leg that took them ‘directly between two of Germany’s biggest night fighter stations’, where fighters were waiting for the bombers’.<sup>46</sup> Later that summer, attacks on synthetic oil plants at Wesseling and Homberg produced losses of 27.8 and 13.6 per cent respectively.<sup>47</sup>

Only in the final months of the war did loss rates fall close to 1 per cent.<sup>48</sup> Yet the campaign was never ‘risk-free’: more than four hundred British bombers were destroyed between the Dresden raids of February 1945 and the war’s end in early May.<sup>49</sup> As Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, himself admitted, ‘scarcely one man in three could expect to survive his tour of thirty operations’.<sup>50</sup>

Nor was enemy fire the only hazard. Weather, fatigue, and machine could be just as lethal.<sup>51</sup> On one Berlin raid in December 1943, 29 Lancasters crashed on return in foul weather, killing 140 men.<sup>52</sup> Design trade-offs amplified risk: armour plate that might have saved crews was pared back to carry more bomb load.<sup>53</sup> For those crews who survived being shot down

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<sup>43</sup> Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> Mel Rolfe, *Flying Into Hell: The Bomber Command Offensive in World War Two as Witnessed by the Crews Themselves* (London: Grub Street, 2001), p. 122.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 236, p. 243.

<sup>48</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 387.

<sup>49</sup> Taylor, *Dresden*, p. 427.

<sup>50</sup> Eldridge-Tull, ““Remember Me Darling””, p. 416.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 212.

<sup>53</sup> David F. Crew, *Bodies and Ruins: Imagining the Bombing of Germany, 1945 to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 45.

over occupied Europe, the horror often continued. Around 9,800 Bomber Command airmen became prisoners of war.<sup>54</sup> Many faced immediate peril upon landing from enraged civilians, and new forms of suffering in captivity.<sup>55</sup> One airman who landed near Frankfurt was ‘attacked by a mob in the streets’ and was ‘only saved by a Luftwaffe patrol’.<sup>56</sup> In total, of the 125,000 airmen who served, over 55,000 were killed and a further 18,000 wounded or captured – casualty rates surpassed only by German U-boat crews.<sup>57</sup>

Overall, with their undeniable courage, sacrifice and central role in Allied victory, it may seem striking how long it took for Bomber Command’s veterans to be fully honoured in the national story. The belated memorialisation, symbolised in the opening of the 2012 London monument, naturally raises the question: What took so long? Why did veterans from this iconic service, which can be tethered so clearly to the narratives of Little England, Greater Britain and the People’s War, have to campaign into the 21st century for a national memorial and medal?<sup>58</sup> In handing out the newly created Bomber Command clasps in 2013, Prime Minister Cameron acknowledged the seven-decade gap, telling the assembled veterans, ‘we’re sorry that it’s taken 70 years to recognise properly the full scale of the action, the courage, the bravery and the sacrifice that you showed’.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 305.

<sup>55</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 207; Rolfe, *Flying Into Hell*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>56</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 252.

<sup>57</sup> Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 305; Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 104; Andrew Knapp, ‘The Horror and the Glory: Bomber Command in British Memories since 1945’ *Mass Violence and Resistance*, (2016) <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/horror-and-glory-bomber-command-british-memories-1945.html> (accessed 1st April 2026), p. 3.; Lawrence Paterson, *The U-Boat War: A Global History 1939–1945* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2022), pp. 315–16.

<sup>58</sup> See BBC News, ‘Campaign Medal Call for WWII Bomber Command Veterans’, *BBC News*, 26 May 2018 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lincolnshire-44255399> [accessed 6 November 2025].

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Defence and Prime Minister's Office, ‘Arctic Convoy and Bomber Command Veterans Honoured’, *GOV.UK*, 19 March 2013 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/arctic-convoy-and-bomber-command-veterans-honoured> [accessed 25 December 2025].

**Figure 3.1: Prime Minister Cameron presents Bomber Command Clasp (2013)<sup>60</sup>**



The long hesitation to commemorate Bomber Command reflects the moral ambiguity of this victory. The very traits that made the bomber offensive such a powerful embodiment of Britain's sacred story, its fusion of stoic endurance, industrial might, and moral conviction, also made it a challenge to that story's comforting simplicity. In *Little England* terms, the campaign exemplified courage in adversity; in *Greater Britain* terms, it demonstrated the nation's capacity to project power across continents; and in *People's War* terms, it relied on collective sacrifice across class and gender. Yet those same qualities produced a disquieting mirror image: moral endurance became the capacity to inflict destruction on civilians; industrial efficiency became a mechanism of terror; and collective duty became participation in a strategy whose human cost defied easy justification. The next section explores this paradox; how the strategic bombing campaign, for all its heroism, confronted the nation with ethical questions that long delayed its incorporation into Britain's heroic narrative.

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<sup>60</sup> Press Association, 'British PM Honours Veterans of RAF and Arctic Convoys in Second World War', *Guardian*, 19 March 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/19/raf-arctic-convoys-veterans-honours> [accessed 14 November 2025].

## Bomber Command as Challenge to the Sacred Story

Throughout Bomber Command's history and legacy, there have been restraints around its celebration and questions regarding its conduct. Even at the height of its effectiveness, Bomber Command's moral legitimacy was never entirely secure. Strategic bombing threatens the sacred story at both of its strongpoints, the heroically righteous war and the unified People's War, by pairing genuine bravery with the systematic killing of civilians, and by exposing, within the RAF itself, coercive practices that sit uneasily with the myth of a compassionate national family.

In identifying these contradictions, the aim is not to engage in 'myth-busting' (a framework that, as several scholars have noted, can obscure as much as it reveals by simply inverting a heroic narrative into a villainous one). As Mark Connelly argues, such debunking often mistakes revelation for understanding: critics obsessed with 'the truth' fail to grasp that people may only have been too willing to accept wartime propaganda because they offered meaning, hope, and coherence in moments of crisis.<sup>61</sup> Zealous revisionists like Clive Ponting and Nicholas Harman (who have previously sought to debunk myths surrounding Dunkirk), he observes, succeeded only in showing how robust the overarching national myth remained, able to 'swallow criticisms and simply reshape them'.<sup>62</sup> Connelly draws on Roland Barthes to explain this resilience: myth, Barthes suggests, does not deny reality but purifies it, giving complex human acts 'the simplicity of essences' and abolishing their dialectic.<sup>63</sup>

Yet Bomber Command resists this purification. Its legacy refuses the simplicity of essence that myth demands, continually reopening the dialectic between courage and destruction, virtue and violence. In identifying the sources of this tension, the following section

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<sup>61</sup> Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

seeks to show why the story of the bomber offensive has proven so difficult to purify, simplify, or securely contain within Britain's sacred narrative of the good war.

### **The (D)evolution of the Bomber War**

At the war's outset, Britain's bombing policy was framed by ethical restraint. As Overy notes, a public informed by liberal and Christian moralities opposed the deliberate targeting of civilians, and a 1940 RAF directive explicitly forbade 'indiscriminate bombing'.<sup>64</sup> The aim was to distinguish British conduct from the Luftwaffe's terror raids on Guernica and Warsaw. Yet this moral boundary soon eroded under the pressures of war. The fall of France and the heavy losses of early daylight raids exposed the 'drastic inadequacies' of the British bomber force.<sup>65</sup> By 1941–42, British strategy had pivoted decisively toward 'area bombing', the deliberate bombardment of whole urban districts to break enemy morale. An Air Staff memo from October 1941 confirmed that the 'ultimate aim' was to render cities 'physically uninhabitable' and to instil 'constant personal danger' in the population.<sup>66</sup> Under Harris, appointed in 1942, this logic hardened: the destruction of German houses, utilities, and lives became 'accepted and intended aims', not unfortunate by-products.<sup>67</sup>

Alongside these operational realities, emotional forces played a crucial role. As Margaret Kertesz observes, the Blitz and a hostile press fostered a powerful 'personal, emotional desire for vengeance' that 'paved the way for intensive bombing campaigns'.<sup>68</sup> The Coventry raid of November 1940 proved a decisive turning point. The *Daily Express* headline

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Overy, "'Why We Bomb You': Liberal War-Making and Moral Relativism in the RAF Bomber Offensive 1940–1945' in A. Cromartie, ed. *Liberal Wars: Anglo-American Strategy, Ideology and Practice*. 1st ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2015) pp. 22–38; Michael Walzer, 'Supreme Emergency' in David Kinsella and Craig L. Carr, eds, *The Morality of War: A Reader* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), p. 254.

<sup>65</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 32.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Overy, *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War Over Europe* (New York: Viking, 2013), p. 65.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Overy, 'Allied Bombing and the Destruction of German Cities', in Roger Chickering, Stig Förster and Bernd Greiner, eds., *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Genocide, 1937–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 290.

<sup>68</sup> Margaret Kertesz, 'The Enemy: British Images of the German People During the Second World War' PhD Thesis, (University of Sussex, 1992) p. 99.

of 16 November 1940 captured the national grievance; 'BOMB BACK, AND BOMB HARD'.<sup>69</sup> The *Daily Mail* reported that 80 per cent of correspondence urged 'unlimited reprisals on German cities'.<sup>70</sup> Opinion polls corroborated this mood: approval of bombing German civilians rose from 46 per cent in October 1940 to 54 per cent by April 1941.<sup>71</sup> Strikingly, the loudest demands for vengeance came from regions least affected by bombing, suggesting that imagined solidarity with the Blitzed cities (as opposed to actual first-hand experience) intensified calls for retaliation.<sup>72</sup> Churchill gave voice to this mood in July 1941, promising to 'mete out to the Germans the measure, and more than the measure, that they have meted out to us'.<sup>73</sup>

Yet this same rhetoric also galvanised the first organised resistance to the bombing offensive. From late 1940, moral and political critics warned that Britain was descending the very slope it claimed to resist. Their concerns coalesced in the formation of the Committee for the Abolition of Night Bombing (CANB) in 1941, which, following renewed momentum and broader support, was reconstituted as the Bombing Restriction Committee (BRC) the following year.<sup>74</sup> At the centre of this emerging opposition stood George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, 'the most persistent and the most celebrated critic of the bomber offensive'.<sup>75</sup>

Though he supported the struggle against Nazi Germany, Bell insisted that certain moral boundaries could not be crossed in the name of victory. His interventions consistently challenged the legality and morality of what he called 'obliteration bombing'.<sup>76</sup> In his 1940

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<sup>69</sup> Brett Holman, "'Bomb Back, and Bomb Hard": Debating Reprisals during the Blitz', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* (2012), p. 394.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>72</sup> Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 50.

<sup>73</sup> British Pathé, 'Churchill Speaks At County Hall (1941)', *YouTube*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRBGFYVOELk> [accessed 19 March 2024].

<sup>74</sup> Richard Overy, 'Constructing Space for Dissent in War: The Bombing Restriction Committee 1941–1945', *The English Historical Review*, 131(550), 2016, p. 596.

<sup>75</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 220.

<sup>76</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 181.

Penguin Special *Christianity and World Order*, Bell asserted that the Church ‘must not hesitate...to condemn the bombing of civilian populations quite outside the military zone’ and to reject ‘any measures directly aimed at destroying the morale of a population’.<sup>77</sup> In April 1941 he published a high-profile appeal in *The Times*, urging both Britain and Germany to renounce the night-bombing of towns.<sup>78</sup> The following month, Bell restated his position before the Canterbury Convocation, to the ‘consternation of the assembled bishops’.<sup>79</sup>

Although Bell was never a formal member of the BRC, he corresponded closely with its organisers and frequently drew on their research and moral reasoning in his speeches.<sup>80</sup> Like Bell, BRC figures grounded their critique in both ethical and practical concerns. H. Stanley Jevons, Professor of Economics at University College Cardiff and later the committee’s chair, denounced the deliberate bombing of ‘unsuspecting men, women and children’ as ‘un-British, unsporting, un-Christian’.<sup>81</sup> Vera Brittain, the prominent novelist and pacifist, questioned Britain’s right to ‘carry out through its Bomber Command a policy of murder and massacre in our name’.<sup>82</sup>

The impact of these protests has been contested by scholars. Francis has summarily claimed that ‘[c]ritics of the bombing campaign were unrepresentative and peripheral figures’.<sup>83</sup> Kertesz similarly argues that their influence on public opinion was negligible and that the wider moral culture of wartime Britain was shaped less by conscience than by emotion. She identifies a powerful ‘personal, emotional’ desire for vengeance, fostered by the Blitz and amplified by the press, which ‘paved the way for intensive bombing campaigns’.<sup>84</sup> Once the

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<sup>77</sup> Overy, ‘Constructing Space for Dissent in War’, p. 600.

<sup>78</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, pp. 179–180.

<sup>79</sup> Overy, ‘Constructing Space for Dissent in War’, p. 603.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 596, p. 613.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 596.

<sup>82</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 180.

<sup>83</sup> Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 172.

<sup>84</sup> Kertesz, ‘The Enemy’, p. 99.

offensive was under way, Kertesz suggests, ‘few people positively demanded that indiscriminate bombing should cease...and dissenting opinion found it hard to get a public hearing’.<sup>85</sup> Kertesz cites a January 1944 Mass-Observation report showing that ‘three-quarters of the people asked still thought that only military targets were being bombed’.<sup>86</sup> Yet she observes that Mass-Observation itself doubted the innocence of this belief: ‘if there was deception, there was also self-deception; and if there was a conspiracy to deceive, then the public, or at least the thinking portion of it, was party to that deception’.<sup>87</sup> She concludes that while figures like Bishop George Bell received pockets of admiration, their interventions did not coalesce into a broader movement and were largely ignored by the press.<sup>88</sup>

However, Overy has argued that Bell’s arguments likely resonated more widely than previously assumed.<sup>89</sup> He cites Liddell Hart’s 1944 letter to Bell, relaying that an RAF friend had suggested, ‘a very large proportion of the silent public had supported the Bishop’.<sup>90</sup> Many letters echoed these sentiments. One woman, on fire-watching duty, wrote, ‘Heaps of people all over the country will be grateful for your courage.’<sup>91</sup> Overy emphasises that this sentiment, despite being immeasurable, should not be ignored. In his view, the BRC and its allies ‘assumed an important role for dissent in wartime with which others could identify, even if they were unwilling to participate fully’.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Overy positions the BRC’s sentiments as a factor persuading Air Ministry officials to adopt a cautious tone. This was exemplified by Air Vice Marshal John Slessor’s 1942 warning to the Director of Plans to use the term ‘industrial centres’ in place of ‘centres of population’ to avoid directly mentioning targeting civilians.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152–153.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Overy, ‘Constructing Space for Dissent in War’, pp. 596–622.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 619.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 611.

Whichever view is accepted, both Kertesz's and Overy's interpretations are crucial for understanding how Bomber Command's legacy can unsettle Britain's sacred war narrative. If Kertesz and Francis are right, and the bombing offensive reflected the will of the people as much as the policy of their leaders, then the *People's War* was sustained as much by retribution as by solidarity. Several historians have pointed to Home Intelligence reports which indicate the public approved of the escalating violence.<sup>94</sup> After the first thousand bomber raid was attempted, reports found that 'nothing has given such a lift to public confidence for many months as the raid on Cologne'.<sup>95</sup> Although 'some regret' was voiced 'that women and children should have to suffer', 'no one has been heard to suggest that we should limit our attacks on this account', and 'even the most soft-hearted' deemed it 'the only way... to drive home to the German people what their airmen have been doing'.<sup>96</sup>

If Overy's account is accepted, however, the picture darkens in a different way; the People's War becomes one of moral dissonance between government, military, and populace, where officials pursued and often concealed a policy they knew would trouble Britain's conscience. Here it is worth remembering that, for his part, Harris urged the government to speak plainly about their objectives.<sup>97</sup> He pressed for an explicit admission that the offensive was 'deliberately aimed at the destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers and the disruption of civilised community life'.<sup>98</sup> Politicians and the Air Ministry, however, clung to the public pretence that (in the words of Clement Attlee) 'no indiscriminate bombing' was taking place.<sup>99</sup> Hastings has described how, from beginning to end of the war, ministers 'prevaricated – indeed, lied flatly again and again – about the nature of the bomber

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<sup>94</sup> Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), pp. 160–164; Holman, "'Bomb Back, and Bomb Hard'", p. 406.

<sup>95</sup> McLaine, *Ministry of Morale*, p. 161.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Overy, 'Why We Bomb You', p. 27.

<sup>98</sup> Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 115.

<sup>99</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 212.

offensive'.<sup>100</sup> The official line, as articulated by Under Secretary Sir Arthur Street, was that the widespread devastation was merely the 'inevitable accompaniment of an all-out attack on the enemy's means and capacity to wage war'.<sup>101</sup>

The bureaucratic detachment of this language contrasted sharply with the gruesome physical destruction it disguised. The use of high explosives and incendiaries created unprecedented firestorms.<sup>102</sup> The bombing of Hamburg in 1943 saw temperatures exceed 1,000°C and hurricane-force winds tear through the city, whilst the flames reached thousands of feet into the sky.<sup>103</sup> Asphalt boiled, tramcars melted, and thousands who sought refuge in basements suffocated as the flames consumed the oxygen, a fate repeated in city after city, where asphyxiation became one of the most common forms of death.<sup>104</sup> Rescue teams, including prisoners from the Neuengamme concentration camp, recovered barely recognisable bodies, with adult corpses often shrunken to the size of infants.<sup>105</sup> In the town of Paderborn, following a firestorm in March 1945, relatives carried the unrecognisable remains of their loved ones to the city's cemeteries 'in cardboard packets or cigar boxes'.<sup>106</sup>

The destruction of Dresden in February 1945 dramatically exposed the divergence between official British policy rhetoric and the reality of the air war, causing a major political and media crisis. Officially described to aircrews as a strike on a 'first-class industrial city', the raid obliterated a largely undefended cultural centre.<sup>107</sup> By then the Luftwaffe could only offer negligible resistance, and the city's last heavy flak batteries had been redeployed to the front.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 220.

<sup>102</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 17.

<sup>103</sup> Lowe, *Inferno*, p. 208.; Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 18.

<sup>104</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 18; Crew, *Bodies and Ruins*, p. 75; Taylor, *Dresden*, p. 329.

<sup>105</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 18.

<sup>106</sup> Crew, *Bodies and Ruins*, p. 21.

<sup>107</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2006), p. 567.

<sup>108</sup> See Air Ministry, *The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force 1933–1945* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1983), p. 382; and Sönke Neitzel, 'The Attack on the City' in Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang, eds., *Firestorm: the Bombing of Dresden* (London: Pimlico, 2006), p. 67.

Internal briefings revealed an additional motive: to ‘show the Russians when they arrive what Bomber Command can do’.<sup>109</sup>

However, the raid’s immediate political effect stemmed from the reaction in the United States. An *Associated Press* correspondent, following an Allied press briefing, reported that commanders had embraced ‘deliberate terror bombing of German population centers [sic] as a ruthless expedient to hasten Hitler’s doom’.<sup>110</sup> The dispatch, swiftly suppressed in Britain but splashed across the front pages in the United States, provoked alarm in London and Washington. Cecil King of the *Daily Mirror* board called the report ‘entirely horrifying’ because it provided ‘official proof for everything Goebbels ever said on the subject’.<sup>111</sup> In America, the *Washington Star* warned that if the Allies had indeed adopted terror bombing, ‘we cannot complain if history indicts us as co-defendants with the Luftwaffe commanders’.<sup>112</sup>

It was in this atmosphere that Churchill issued his minute to the Chiefs of Staff on 28 March 1945, asking whether German cities were being attacked ‘simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts’.<sup>113</sup> In its original draft he went further, describing the destruction of Dresden as ‘a serious query against the conduct of Allied bombing’, a striking reversal from his own February enthusiasm for attacks on East German cities.<sup>114</sup> Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, ‘dismayed and outraged’, urged Churchill to withdraw the minute; the redrafted version replaced ‘terror’ with ‘destruction’, omitted Dresden entirely, and shifted focus to the practical problem of occupying a ‘ruined land’.<sup>115</sup> The moral unease was thus translated into administrative prose.

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<sup>109</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 446.

<sup>110</sup> Knapp, ‘The Horror and the Glory’, p. 19; Biddle, ‘Wartime Reactions’, pp. 104–7.

<sup>111</sup> Taylor, *Dresden*, p. 415.

<sup>112</sup> Biddle, ‘Wartime Reactions’, p. 108.

<sup>113</sup> Christopher C. Harmon, ‘Are We Beasts?’ Churchill and the Moral Question of World War II ‘Area Bombing’, *Newport Papers #1, December* (Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>114</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 448.

<sup>115</sup> Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 134; Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 275.

Gerard De Groot has described Churchill's minute as 'a cowardly attempt to distance himself from a morally reprehensible action'.<sup>116</sup> Yet other historians emphasise that Churchill's attitude was more complex. Biddle suggests that Churchill's decision to issue the controversial minute is 'not particularly out of character if one considers the Prime Minister's decidedly ambivalent attitude towards bombing through the course of the war'.<sup>117</sup> Harmon likewise contends that the Dresden raid left Churchill 'deeply affected', and that the minute was less hypocrisy than a sincere 'repudiation' of indiscriminate bombing 'when the war's end was close at hand'.<sup>118</sup> Sanders and Grint agree that Churchill was 'never entirely taken in by the smugness of the proponents of area bombing': when shown film footage of ruined German cities earlier in the war, he had reportedly asked his colleagues, 'Are we beasts? Are we taking this too far?'<sup>119</sup>

By contrast, Max Hastings argues that Churchill was fundamentally concerned only with 'what was strategically desirable and tactically possible', and that he 'never suffered a moment's private misgiving' about the general course of the air offensive.<sup>120</sup> For Taylor, the March 1945 minute 'showed a certain instinctual politician's feeling for subliminal changes in the country's mood', as Britons grew uneasy with what was being done in their name.<sup>121</sup> As with both schools of thought regarding public attitudes to bombing, both interpretations of Churchill's position are deeply unsettling to Britain's post-war mythology.

Either Churchill experienced a belated moral recognition that lent uncomfortable substance to enemy propaganda about Allied brutality, or he performed a calculated act of

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<sup>116</sup> Gerard J. De Groot, *Liberal Crusader: The Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair* (London: Hurst, 1993), p. 204.

<sup>117</sup> Biddle, 'Wartime Reactions', p. 115.

<sup>118</sup> Harmon, 'Are We Beasts?', p. 21.

<sup>119</sup> Paul Sanders and Keith Grint, 'The Interplay of the Dirty Hands of British Area Bombing and the Wicked Problem of Defeating Nazi Germany in the Second World War - A lesson in Leadership Ethics', *Leadership*, 15(3) (2018), pp. 289–90.

<sup>120</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 125.

<sup>121</sup> Taylor, *Dresden*, p. 434.

political manoeuvring, an instinctive effort to shield both himself and Britain's international reputation from the moral consequences of a policy he had never truly questioned. Once again, both interpretations of the episode reiterate an awkward foundation beneath the national myth of the moral war: victory was secured not only through ruthless effectiveness, but also through hypocrisy and moral evasion. As Noble Frankland later lamented, 'Most people were very pleased with Bomber Command during the war and until it was virtually won; then they turned round and said it wasn't a very nice way to wage war.'<sup>122</sup>

Kertesz and other scholars have concluded that ultimately public opinion fluctuated with the tides of war; German victories bred animosity among the British, while German defeats led to a softening of attitudes.<sup>123</sup> Cross suggests that whilst the discovery of atrocities in concentration camps like Belsen triggered a spike in anti-German sentiment, 'this was soon softened by awareness of the scale of the German defeat and the awfulness of conditions in post-war Germany'.<sup>124</sup> At the conclusion of the war, it was estimated that around 20 per cent of all housing in Germany had been destroyed or damaged by bombing, amounting to 3.6 million homes.<sup>125</sup> In major cities the rate of destruction was even higher, with some cities experiencing destruction or damage to more than half of their housing, with the initial estimates suggesting around 7.5 million Germans had been left homeless.<sup>126</sup> Most modern estimates suggest around 380,000 Germans were killed by this offensive.<sup>127</sup> Knapp points out that six major raids alone resulted in nearly 100,000 civilian deaths; including over 34,000 deaths in

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<sup>122</sup> Noble Frankland, 'Some Thoughts About and Experience of Official Military History', *The Journal of the Royal Air Force Historical Society*, 17 (1997), p. 20.

<sup>123</sup> Kertesz, 'The Enemy', p. 172, Myra Lesley Cross, 'The Depiction of Germans in British Films: How it Changes, How Far Such Changes Reflect Government Policy and Public Opinion' (unpublished PhD thesis, The Open University, 2009), p. 283.

<sup>124</sup> Lesley Cross, 'The Depiction of Germans in British films', p. 277.

<sup>125</sup> Julius A. Rigole, *The Strategic Bombing Campaign Against Germany during World War II* (unpublished master's thesis, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Knapp, 'The Horror and the Glory', p. 3. See also for example, Bas Von Benda-Beckman, *A German Catastrophe? German Historians and the Allied Bombings, 1945–2010* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 11.

Hamburg in July 1943, 5,600 in Kassel in October 1943, 7,500 in Darmstadt in September 1944, 25,000 in Dresden, 17,600 in Pforzheim in February 1945, and 4,000–5,000 in Würzburg in March 1945.<sup>128</sup> The Pforzheim raid, which destroyed 80 per cent of the city, exemplified what some scholars have called an ethical ‘zone of no return’.<sup>129</sup>

In academia, debates over the morality of this destruction have continued to simmer ever since. Many post-war analysts questioned whether the Allies’ justifications remained tenable as the conflict neared its conclusion. Liddell Hart’s final work argued that Britain ‘pursued area-bombing long after it had any reason or excuse for such indiscriminate action’.<sup>130</sup> U.S. Naval War College historian C. C. Harmon later described the policy as a tragic necessity that met a ‘reasonable man’s’ standard in the war’s early years but should have been abandoned once Nazi defeat was certain.<sup>131</sup>

Some scholars have been harsher In their judgment: in the 1990s Markusen and Kopf controversially likened strategic bombing itself to genocide, claiming its bureaucratic efficiency and dehumanising logic paralleled mechanisms of extermination.<sup>132</sup> Whilst even the foreword of their book was reticent about endorsing that claim, criticisms have continued to emanate from scholars in the twenty-first century. In 2006, philosopher A. C. Grayling judged the deliberate targeting of civilians a ‘moral crime’.<sup>133</sup> He argued that in the process of fighting a just war against ‘morally criminal enemies’, the Allies ‘allowed themselves to join their enemies in the moral depths, a fact which should be profoundly and frankly regretted’.<sup>134</sup> Writing his thesis in 2014, John D. Alexander similarly rejected both military and moral

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<sup>128</sup> Knapp, ‘The Horror and the Glory’, p. 4.

<sup>129</sup> Sanders and Grint, ‘The Interplay of the Dirty Hands’, p. 273, p. 283.

<sup>130</sup> Basil Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1970), p. 612.

<sup>131</sup> Harmon, ‘Are We Beasts?’, p. 23.

<sup>132</sup> Eric Markusen and David Kopf, *The Holocaust and Strategic Bombing: Genocide and Total War in the Twentieth Century* (Colorado: Westview Press Inc., 1995).

<sup>133</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 274.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

justifications for deliberately targeting urban areas, contending that Britain's area bombing failed the tests of effectiveness and ethics alike.<sup>135</sup>

Against this tide of criticism, several historians and RAF figures have defended Bomber Command's leaders and the moral context of their actions. In 2004, Frederick Taylor argued that the fact Dresden was largely undefended does not mean the Allied bombing 'cannot be justified'.<sup>136</sup> He maintained that Dresden was not an 'open city' but a significant hub for administration, industry, and communications, lying close to the front lines by February 1945. Taylor highlighted that the RAF's approach followed a longstanding strategy which, due to 'unseasonably good weather exactly over the city, an unexpected absence of opposition, a lack of the usual 'cock-ups', the inexperience of the city's people [whose population had thus far escaped direct bombing], and the local Nazi leadership's appalling neglect of air raid protection', led to the immense firestorm.<sup>137</sup>

Jeremy Black has contended that to impose peacetime moral standards on those waging total war is to distort wartime necessity, arguing that Harris served a democratic state confronting a uniquely vicious regime.<sup>138</sup> Air Commodore (Ret'd) Peter Gray has likewise argued that 'the bottom line... was that the Second World War was total war and had to be won', and the strategic air offensive played a 'vital part'.<sup>139</sup> He reiterates it is 'not appropriate to use modern constructions out of the context of the times'.<sup>140</sup> Gray makes the case that the 'Bomber

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<sup>135</sup> John D. Alexander, 'Justice in Warfare: The Ethical Debate over British Area Bombing of German Cities in World War II' (unpublished PhD thesis, Boston University School of Theology, 2014), p. 530.

<sup>136</sup> Taylor, *Dresden*, p. 475.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Telegraph, 'Bomber Harris was a war hero, not a war criminal | History Defended', *YouTube*, 15 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvbsuXb26Gg> [accessed 11 November 2025].

<sup>139</sup> Peter Gray, 'The Gloves Will Have to Come Off: A Reappraisal of the Legitimacy of the RAF Bomber Offensive Against Germany', *Air Power Review*, 13.3 (2010), p. 9.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

Barons' did not begin the war intending to kill civilians; the shift to area bombing was a 'gradual escalation' and 'incremental process'.<sup>141</sup>

Even if these arguments are accepted though, the moral logic they rest upon remains starkly brutal. To defend this reasoning solely by appealing to the demands of 'total war' also risks overlooking the contemporary protest that endured even during the darkest hours of an existential struggle and, furthermore, proliferated in the war's later stages. The official history of the campaign records that the Secretary of State for Air received 'many anxious enquiries' about the bombing of residential areas, lamenting that he had to contend with 'a widespread and deep-rooted ignorance of the operational problems involved'.<sup>142</sup> Yet the same account acknowledges that 'the more apparent it became that in the majority of its major area attacks Bomber Command was, in fact, aiming at the centres of the residential areas, the more pronounced the protests became'.<sup>143</sup> This implies that public unease was not a post-war invention but an immediate moral reaction, one that deepened as the campaign's methods and intentions became harder to disguise. Such reactions again complicate the notion of a unified wartime consensus, lending weight to a persistent and at times forceful undercurrent of dissent that challenged official narratives of necessity.

The BRC for example, 'expanded its activities over the course of the bomber offensive in direct relation to the expansion of the campaign itself'.<sup>144</sup> In 1944, Vera Brittain's *Seed of Chaos* condemned the bombing campaign as a 'speed-up of human slaughter, misery and material destruction'.<sup>145</sup> She predicted that such 'callous cruelty' would one day appear as 'an extreme form of criminal lunacy'.<sup>146</sup> In this light, the invocation of total war as moral

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 25, p. 27.

<sup>142</sup> Charles Webster, and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939–1945. Volume 3: Victory*. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1961), p. 114.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Overly, 'Constructing Space for Dissent in War', p. 612.

<sup>145</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 185.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

justification cannot conceal that many contemporaries already perceived its cost in spiritual and civilisational terms, especially given the BRC's criticisms 'anticipated the post-war concern with protecting civilians in war, formalised in the 1949 Geneva Convention and the 1977 Additional Protocols'.<sup>147</sup>

The cold rationalisation of necessity also obscures the campaign's psychological toll on those who carried it out. Many accounts suggest that Bomber Command crews sustained conviction in their mission throughout the conflict, consciously rationalising its necessity. Some veterans later asserted that worry or 'concern at the consequences' never entered their minds.<sup>148</sup> They were buoyed by the belief that they were fighting a just war, and that the Germans were 'undergoing the punishment they [had] hitherto meted out'.<sup>149</sup> In the struggle for 'self-preservation', wider moral doubts were often 'side-lined': as one veteran recalled 'The trials of the German nation did not worry us an awful lot.'<sup>150</sup> Hastings cites a June 1942 Air Ministry report, which examined hundreds of airmen's letters opened by wartime censors, which cited the 'effect of airmen's remoteness from their attacks on human beings' in facilitating these seemingly detached attitudes.<sup>151</sup>

Yet recent scholarship complicates this picture. Heather Venable's study of US bomber crews challenges the assumption (famously advanced by psychologist Dave Grossman) that distance diminishes the psychological cost of killing, revealing instead that even amid the ideological clarity of total war, the act of destruction could exact profound moral strain.<sup>152</sup> Among the United States Army Air Forces, bombardiers (whose role placed them in direct control of the payloads and their immediate consequences) were frequently recorded as

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<sup>147</sup> Overy, 'Constructing Space for Dissent in War', p. 622.

<sup>148</sup> Richards, *The Hardest Victory*, p. 334.

<sup>149</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 178.

<sup>150</sup> Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 162.

<sup>151</sup> Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 178.

<sup>152</sup> Heather P. Venable, 'Living with Killing: World War II US Bomber Crews', *ETHER: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower*, 2.3 (2023), p. 45.

suffering acute psychological trauma.<sup>153</sup> Medical officers documented men who froze or ‘blacked out’ over their targets, unable to release their bombs, and others who were hospitalised after realising their payloads had struck civilian areas.<sup>154</sup> This convergence of fear, devastation, and moral dissonance produced what is now recognised as moral injury: the distress experienced when individuals ‘perpetrate, fail to prevent, or witness events that contradict deeply held moral beliefs and expectations’.<sup>155</sup>

A similar tension, whilst perhaps less visible, haunted Britain’s own airmen. As A. C. Grayling observes, most ‘knew full well what they were doing, and accepted it, or suffered silently because of it’.<sup>156</sup> Crucially though, that silence was not purely voluntary. Wells notes that while American psychiatrists increasingly recognised such breakdowns as ‘stress reactions’, the RAF maintained a punitive ethos that equated collapse with moral failure – ensuring that doubt was suppressed not only by belief, but by institutional coercion.<sup>157</sup>

The RAF’s ‘Lack of Moral Fibre’ (LMF) policy, introduced in 1940 and formalised in September 1941, grew from what one historian calls Command’s ‘pervasive paranoia’ about the possibility of mass non-compliance, and was deliberately crafted as a deterrent rather than a system of care.<sup>158</sup> Those who refused to fly (whether through fear, exhaustion, or early signs of neurosis) were stripped of rank and wings in front of their squadron, publicly shamed, and reclassified as ‘Waverers’.<sup>159</sup> They were marched to Not Yet Diagnosed (NYDN) centres where, as tail-gunners later recalled, men were ‘treated like criminals’, forced to parade with

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>155</sup> Venable, ‘Living with Killing’, p. 44.

<sup>156</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 277.

<sup>157</sup> Mark K. Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare: The Allied Aircrew Experience in the Second World War* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1995), pp. 78–79.

<sup>158</sup> Christopher Kingdon, ‘Behind Closed Doors: Revisiting Air Command’s “Lack of Moral Fiber and Waverer Disposal Policy” and Its “Treatment” of Neurotic Cases, 1941–1945’, *Chicago Journal of History*, Issue 2 (Autumn 2013), p. 15.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

their badges removed, and regarded from the outset as cowards rather than patients.<sup>160</sup> The punishment was explicitly classed. Officers were typically invalided and quietly removed from flying duties, but working-class NCO aircrew were redirected to menial or even combatant labour, marked with a red 'W' on their employment papers to ensure that the stigma followed them into civilian life; the Air Ministry even sought to prevent former LMF men from being hired by civil aviation firms.<sup>161</sup>

For many airmen the fear of this lifelong disgrace, more than any official sense of duty, compelled them to continue flying despite, terror, trauma or the cumulative breakdown of nerves. Crucially, the system's coercive reach also extended to those whose resistance stemmed from *moral* unease. In May 1943 the Halifax wireless operator Willie Lewis told his skipper that he was 'very uneasy' that their target, Wuppertal, was 'overflowing with refugees', and that he felt he was being ordered to commit 'deliberate murder'.<sup>162</sup> Lewis confessed he had 'a good mind not to come' but ultimately suppressed his objections for fear of attracting an LMF charge. He resolved instead to abandon any pretence that he was fighting a clean or respectable war: 'we are only mean bastards taking orders from a bunch of hypocrites'.<sup>163</sup>

Such episodes illuminate how LMF could be weaponised not only against psychological fragility but also against moral dissent. A starker example is the case of Squadron Leader Maurice Roy Skeet.<sup>164</sup> A pilot in the Middle East in the early years of the war, on learning of Bomber Command's shift to the tactic of 'area bombing', Skeet reportedly refused to lead further sorties, appalled by the deliberate targeting of civilians.<sup>165</sup> His son later discovered that his father had been labelled LMF not for operational failure, but for moral

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>162</sup> Francis, *The Flyer*, pp. 173–4.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Kingdon, 'Behind Closed Doors', p. 27.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

refusal. On the very day he was branded with the stigma, Skeet shot himself at his air base at Linton-on-Ouse.<sup>166</sup> The episode reveals not only the immense fear attached to the LMF label but also the moral conflicts that could underlie defiance. The ‘People’s War’, in other words, depended not only on courage and solidarity but on a coercive regime that punished vulnerability and pathologised both conscience and fear, revealing a troubling underside to Britain’s wartime self-image.

Taken together, the intersecting dynamics of destruction, vengeance, moral protest, bureaucratic evasion, and private trauma expose the highly fraught terrain on which Bomber Command’s legacy rests. The twin myths of Little England and Greater Britain, the heroic defiance of the weak and the righteous power of the strong, are both compromised, or at the very least heavily complicated, by a campaign that sanctioned the intentional killing of civilians. Equally, the People’s War can be unsettled either by the idea that the British public enthusiastically endorsed such indiscriminate killing, or alternatively by the coercive systems that disguised the bombing and punished those airmen who faltered. Furthermore, whilst the tolerance of groups like the BRC reflects a distinctive, commendable, feature of Britain’s wartime political culture, such lenience did little to blunt the anger of the protestors themselves. Thus, to celebrate Bomber Command without confronting these contradictions is to preserve a myth shorn of its moral cost; to condemn it outright is to deny the courage and sacrifice that made victory possible.

### **Managing the Moral Paradox: From Silence to Sanctification**

The profound contradiction between Bomber Command as both heroic embodiment and moral challenge meant that its legacy has remained consistently vulnerable to wider cultural and geopolitical shifts. This vulnerability has shaped a long, uneven process of remembering and

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

forgetting, in which Bomber Command's meaning has been continually redefined by the moral and political needs of each era. As Broecker argues, hegemonic discourse operates through continual adaptation, absorbing or repelling challenges to its coherence.<sup>167</sup> This framework helps explain how the broader sacred story of the Second World War has managed the bomber war's moral dissonance. At different moments, British culture has alternately ignored, rejected, defended, and ultimately assimilated Bomber Command into its national narrative. The following sections trace how this evolving tension has been expressed in popular culture; how films, memorials, and public debates have variously silenced, justified, or celebrated the bombing campaign and why confronting its moral ambiguities has grown ever more controversial in the contemporary age of outrage.

### **From Ambivalence to Condemnation: 1945–1970s**

Churchill's shifting stance on Dresden in March 1945 set the tone for two decades of moral evasion. His victory speech omitted any reference to Bomber Command, and Arthur Harris (once celebrated as the architect of Britain's air power) was excluded from honours lists and quietly exiled to South Africa.<sup>168</sup> These gestures reflected diplomatic necessity more than guilt. Stalin's government claimed that the Dresden raid 'was part of a capitalist plot against German workers'.<sup>169</sup> This narrative effectively made the people of Dresden 'innocent victims both of the Nazis and the aggressors of the decadent western democracies'.<sup>170</sup> As Connelly observes, the new Cold War order required West Germany as an ally; it suited Britain not to dwell on its destruction.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Hannah Broecker, *Securitisation as Hegemonic Discourse Formation: An Integrative Model* (Cham: Springer, 2022).

<sup>168</sup> Knapp, 'The Horror and the Glory', p. 6.

<sup>169</sup> Mark Connelly, 'Britain and the Debate over RAF Bomber Command's Role in the Second World War', *Historische Literatur*, 2.2 (2004), p. 15.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 6–7.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12., Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 157.

Official commemoration maintained a careful equilibrium. RAF memorials and Westminster Abbey's Battle of Britain Chapel acknowledged aircrew sacrifice while avoiding mention of civilian casualties.<sup>172</sup> The 1955 film *The Dam Busters* and the BBC's *War in the Air* (1954–55) reinforced this sanitised heroism.<sup>173</sup> By celebrating ingenuity and precision, they reframed the campaign's moral weight, transforming the image of area bombing from indiscriminate destruction into one of disciplined skill, courage, and strategic necessity. The result was what Knapp terms a 'relative quietism': subdued public honour for airmen, silence on ethics.<sup>174</sup>

The heightening tensions of the nuclear age shattered that equilibrium. The image of burning cities acquired new moral resonance amid the brinkmanship of the Cuban missile crisis and the intensification of the Vietnam War.<sup>175</sup> The rise of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the publication of the official history of the strategic air offensive in 1961 reframed the bomber war as both precursor and warning.<sup>176</sup> While author Noble Frankland insisted Bomber Command had 'no moral case to answer', the latter caused unease by exposing the 'long concealed, half-known truth' that the British bombing campaign 'had set out to hit German civilians'.<sup>177</sup>,

That unease soon erupted. David Irving's *The Destruction of Dresden* (1963) sensationalised the raid and massively inflated its death toll, transforming the city into a symbol

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<sup>172</sup> Hughes, 'Memorializing RAF Bomber Command in the United Kingdom', p. 273.

<sup>173</sup> Simon P. MacKenzie, *Bomber Boys on Screen*, p. 54. See also Paul Brickhill, *The Dam Busters* (London: Evans Brothers, 1951), and *The Dam Busters*, dir. by Michael Anderson (Associated British Picture Corporation, 1955).

<sup>174</sup> Knapp, 'The Horror and the Glory', p. 5.

<sup>175</sup> Crew, *Bodies and Ruins*, p. 148. See also Frances Houghton, 'The Last Battle: Bomber Command's Veterans and the Fight for Remembrance', *The Historian*, 144 (Winter/Spring 2020), p. 8.

<sup>176</sup> Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany 1939–1945*, History of the Second World War: United Kingdom Military Series, 4 vols (London: HMSO, 1961), Claudia Marx, 'Memorialising the Second World War: The Bomber Command Memorial in London', in *Denkmal\_Emotion: Politisierung - Mobilisierung - Bindung*, ed. by Stephanie Herold and Gerhard Vinken (Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2021), p. 34; Mark Connelly, 'Britain and the Debate over RAF Bomber Command', p. 10.

<sup>177</sup> Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 151 and MacKenzie, *Bomber Boys on Screen*, p. 136.

of Allied moral collapse.<sup>178</sup> Labelling the bombing ‘the ‘biggest bloodbath in European history’, Irving’s book argued that 135,000 people had been killed in the raid.<sup>179</sup> His claims, amplified by Cold War propaganda and popular press, made Dresden shorthand for atrocity. East German publications such as *Inferno Dresden* (1965) echoed his inflated numbers and recast the raid as a capitalist war crime and a warning of nuclear apocalypse.<sup>180</sup> Though later discredited for falsifying evidence, Irving’s figures proved remarkably durable. As Tami Biddle observes, his book ‘brought the air raid back into view in a dramatic way’, transforming Dresden from a military operation into a humanitarian catastrophe.<sup>181</sup>

This sensationalism set the emotional template for later artistic treatments. Rolf Hochhuth’s *Soldiers* (1968), a controversial play that opened in London after protests at the National Theatre and was ultimately staged at the New Theatre, dramatised imaginary conversations about the bombing war and accused Churchill of pursuing ‘terror bombing’, elevating Bishop Bell as its moral counterpoint.<sup>182</sup> A year later Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) used dark satire and the author’s own prisoner-of-war experience to catapult Dresden into the war-weary U.S. cultural mainstream as a symbol of civilian destruction.<sup>183</sup> Len Deighton’s *Bomber* (1970), published in London as a meticulously researched and widely read documentary-style novel, reconstructed a single night’s raid from RAF, Luftwaffe and civilian viewpoints, deliberately dissolving the line between perpetrator

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<sup>178</sup> David Irving, *The Destruction of Dresden* (London: William Kimber, 1963). For an account of how Irving manipulated the casualty figures see Richard J. Evans, *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), pp. 151–2.

<sup>179</sup> Crew, *Bodies and Ruins*, p. 147.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. See also Walter Weidauer, *Inferno Dresden. Über Lügen und Legenden um die Aktion “Donnerschlag”* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1965).

<sup>181</sup> Biddle, ‘Wartime Reactions’, p. 120.

<sup>182</sup> MacKenzie, *Bomber Boys on Screen*, p. 141. See also See Rolf Hochhuth, *Soldiers: An Obituary for Geneva*, trans. Robert David MacDonald (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968).

<sup>183</sup> Biddle, ‘Wartime Reactions’, p. 120.

and victim.<sup>184</sup> Together, these works carried the bombing war into popular culture not as strategy or necessity but as tragedy, culpability, and shared human cost.

The Thames Television documentary *The World at War* (1973–74) epitomised this shift. Its treatment of strategic bombing (especially the ‘*Nemesis: Germany (February-May 1945)*’ episode) presented Dresden as an emblem of moral excess.<sup>185</sup> Laurence Olivier’s narration, describing the raids as ‘in the technical language of the experts a severe case of overbombing’, dripped with irony, while eyewitness Ursula Grey’s haunting testimony evoked scenes of civilian horror: refugees trampled in the firestorm, the blind carrying the crippled, the ground itself consuming the living.<sup>186</sup> Olivier’s conclusion that the industrial damage was minor and the railway operational within days (yet ‘over 100,000 people died’), echoed Irving’s inflated figures and sealed the city’s symbolic role as ‘another monument to total war’.<sup>187</sup> The episode’s stark montage of ruins, set to the programme’s funereal score, reinforced the ominous and tragic tone.<sup>188</sup>

Knapp has claimed that the 1960s and 70s represented ‘the nearest that the United Kingdom came to a consensus opposed to the bombing campaign’.<sup>189</sup> For many veterans, this new orthodoxy was devastating, as it seemingly condemned them as war criminals. As has been well documented, the moral whiplash surfaced in numerous memoirs and interviews.<sup>190</sup> Miles Tripp’s *The Eighth Passenger* (1969), which recounted his refusal to release bombs over Dresden’s city centre, epitomised this internal struggle.<sup>191</sup> Fellow Bomber Command veteran

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<sup>184</sup> Mark Connelly, ‘Britain and the Debate over RAF Bomber Command’, p. 12. See also Len Deighton, *Bomber* (London: Cape, 1970).

<sup>185</sup> ‘Nemesis: Germany (February - May 1945)’, *The World at War*, episode 20 (Thames Television, 1974).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Knapp, ‘The Horror and the Glory’, p. 33.

<sup>190</sup> Frances Houghton, ‘The “Missing Chapter”’, p. 167. See also Hastings, *Bomber Command*, p. 458.

<sup>191</sup> Miles Tripp, *The Eighth Passenger* (London: Heinemann, 1969). See also Frances Houghton, *The Veterans’ Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 255.

Frank Musgrove later expressed a deep suspicion that Tripp's description of dropping his payload 'harmlessly in fields' was 'a gloss on events'.<sup>192</sup> He believed this story had been 'conditioned by increasingly aggressive contemporary public discourses' circulating about the Dresden raid in the late 1960s.<sup>193</sup> Whether literal truth or symbolic confession, his account reflected a generation's struggle to reconcile personal duty and identity with public shame. For his part, Musgrove felt he had been 'branded for life' in peacetime Britain.<sup>194</sup>

### **From Protest to Prestige: Reclaiming the Narrative, 1980s-1990s**

By the early 1980s, veterans mounted a concerted campaign to restore their reputation. The Falklands War rekindled patriotic pride, Harris's death in 1984 reopened the bombing debate, and the fortieth anniversary of VE Day (1985) offered an occasion to reassert honour.<sup>195</sup> Under Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Beetham, the Bomber Command Association (BCA) reframed decades of criticism not as legitimate moral scrutiny but as a betrayal. As Hughes argues, this rhetorical pivot was crucial: the BCA mobilised Bomber Command's troubled historical legacy (its embroilment in area-bombing debates, its postwar distancing by politicians, and the continued lack of medallion recognition) and consolidated these elements into a persuasive discourse of veteran marginalisation.<sup>196</sup> Moral indictment became moral restitution.

The unveiling of the Sir Arthur Harris statue outside St Clement Danes church in London in 1992 was a particularly sensitive and well-studied occasion. Having been hotly debated in the press during its fundraising campaign, the opening ceremony attended by the Queen Mother faced vocal protests, with detractors comparing Harris to Eichmann and

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<sup>192</sup> Miles Tripp, *The Eighth Passenger*, p. 87; Frank Musgrove, *Dresden and the Heavy Bombers: An RAF Navigator's Perspective* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2005), p. 108.

<sup>193</sup> Houghton, 'The "missing chapter"', p. 169.

<sup>194</sup> Frank Musgrove, *Dresden and the Heavy Bombers*, pp. 74–5. See also Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, p. 241.

<sup>195</sup> Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, p. 246; Mark Connelly, 'Britain and the Debate over RAF Bomber Command', p. 14; Hughes, 'Memorializing RAF Bomber Command in the United Kingdom', p. 277.

<sup>196</sup> Hughes, 'Memorializing RAF Bomber Command in the United Kingdom', p. 279.

labelling him a ‘mass murderer’.<sup>197</sup> Scuffles broke out, whilst on the night of the unveiling, the statue was ‘daubed with red paint’.<sup>198</sup> It was attacked again soon after, and has since been defaced several times.<sup>199</sup> The controversy encapsulated Britain’s divided conscience: one side saw a war criminal, the other a wronged patriot. The *Daily Mail* hailed the statue as justice for men denied recognition, condemning the dissenting ‘peace idiots’.<sup>200</sup> A *Sunday Telegraph* poll argued that most people supported the statue and, equally, that many felt criticism (especially from German quarters) was unwarranted, highlighting a complex interplay of memory, guilt, and national pride.<sup>201</sup>

This reassertion of pride coincided with what Raphael Samuel has described as an ‘extraordinary...evergrowing enthusiasm for the recovery of the national past’.<sup>202</sup> Commemoration became ‘increasingly linked with commodification’, involving the production of specific visions of the past (often emphasising heroism and pride) in the service of present-day anxieties.<sup>203</sup> Commemorative items proliferated, selling ‘courage along with coins, tenacity with tea towels, status with stamps, and pride with plates’.<sup>204</sup> The need to look back was fuelled by national crises, such as the loss of empire and de-industrialisation, with the ‘victor narrative’ acting as a ‘social glue through difficult phases of national life’.<sup>205</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, local memorials proliferated, especially in Lincolnshire (‘Bomber County’). Civic groups, churches, and families erected plaques and windows in small

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<sup>197</sup> Frances Houghton, ‘The “missing chapter”’, p. 164; Mark Connelly, ‘Britain and the Debate over RAF Bomber Command’, p. 15.

<sup>198</sup> Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 2; Lowe, *Inferno*, p. 321.

<sup>199</sup> Hughes, ‘Memorializing RAF Bomber Command in the United Kingdom’, p. 279.

<sup>200</sup> Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*, p. 138.

<sup>201</sup> Connelly, ‘Britain and the Debate over RAF Bomber Command’, p. 15.

<sup>202</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 188.

<sup>203</sup> Janet Watson, ‘Total War and Total Anniversary: The Material Culture of Second World War Commemoration in Britain’, in Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (eds) *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 176.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Greta Fedele and others, ‘Public History and Contested Heritage: Archival Memories of the Bombing of Italy’, *Public History Review*, 27 (2020), p. 2.

acts of remembrance. These ‘bottom-up’ efforts complemented the BCA’s ‘top-down’ lobbying, resulting in what Hughes terms a layered commemorative landscape, neither wholly triumphalist nor entirely penitential.<sup>206</sup> For Knapp though, these initiatives, alongside the RAF’s involvement in post-war conflicts, helped to reframe Bomber Command within the context of ongoing military service and sacrifice, further embedding their story in the national consciousness. He suggests that ‘[i]f there was some substance in the 1970s to portrayals of bomber crews as “forgotten heroes” or “black sheep”, such claims had little justification by the early twenty-first century’.<sup>207</sup> He points out that the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight now features not just the iconic Spitfires and Hurricanes, but also the Lancaster.<sup>208</sup> For many veterans, this attitudinal shift culminated with the opening of the Green Park Memorial in 2012.

### **The Celebration of Bomber Command: A New Stage of Memory**

The final push for a national memorial began in the 2000s. BCA’s primary rhetorical tool remained the claim that veterans had been deliberately overlooked, an injustice that felt more acute as the ‘advancing age of surviving veterans’ meant time was running out.<sup>209</sup> This sense of imbalance was amplified by a ‘rash of new war memorials in London’, particularly the unveiling of the Battle of Britain Monument in 2005, which again focused predominantly on Fighter Command.<sup>210</sup>

The campaign for a national memorial, launched in 2007, attracted influential allies from the media and entertainment industry. In 2010, The *Daily Express* ran a fundraising ‘crusade’ to secure the ‘fitting monument that [Bomber Command veterans] have so far been denied’.<sup>211</sup> However, the road to realising the eventual Green Park monument was not easy.

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<sup>206</sup> Hughes, ‘Memorializing RAF Bomber Command in the United Kingdom’, p. 271.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>208</sup> Knapp, ‘The Horror and the Glory’, p. 29.

<sup>209</sup> Hughes, ‘Memorializing RAF Bomber Command in the United Kingdom’, p. 275.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274; Marx, ‘Memorialising the Second World War’, p. 35.

<sup>211</sup> Marx, ‘Memorialising the Second World War’, p. 35.

The campaign had to overcome objections to the memorial's proposed scale and classical design, as well as significant funding shortfalls and tax hurdles as costs escalated.<sup>212</sup> The final cost reached £9.5 million, and eventually required major donations from wealthy benefactors, including businessman and philanthropist John Caudwell, Conservative donor and former international development minister Lord Ashcroft, and media proprietor Richard Desmond (alongside a groundswell of contributions from the general public) to gather the needed funds.<sup>213</sup> Additional media, especially the *Telegraph* with its 'Forgotten Heroes' campaign, championed the cause to rally support.<sup>214</sup> Donations flooded in, symbolically including everything from pensioners' pound coins to a child's 2 pence coin sellotaped to a form.<sup>215</sup>

Aside from a £1 million government grant to resolve VAT issues, no public money was spent on the memorial by the government.<sup>216</sup> However, even critics like historian Claudia Marx conceded that while the memorial was primarily the project of a small committee and donors, 'the support it received from parts of the media, their audiences and senior politicians indicates that its general message of commemorating wartime bravery and sacrifice resonated with a significant portion of the British public'.<sup>217</sup>

The unveiling of the Bomber Command Memorial in June 2012, followed by the award of a campaign clasp in 2013 and the later establishment of the International Bomber Command Centre (IBCC) in Lincoln in 2018 (which recorded its 500,000th visitor in 2024), marked a decisive shift in the public memory of Britain's strategic bombing campaign.<sup>218</sup> This sequence

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<sup>212</sup> Robin Gibb and others, *The Bomber Command Memorial: We Will Remember Them* (Hitchin, Herts: Fighting High Ltd., 2012), p. 49.

<sup>213</sup> Marx, 'Memorialising the Second World War', p. 35; Gibb and others, *The Bomber Command Memorial*, p. 51.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>216</sup> Gibb and others, *The Bomber Command Memorial*, p. 51.

<sup>217</sup> Marx, 'Memorialising the Second World War', pp. 38–39.

<sup>218</sup> BBC News, 'Bomber Command Memorial Unveiled in Ceremony', *BBC News*, 12 April 2018 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lincolnshire-43715894> [accessed 14 November 2025]; Charis Scott-Holm and Amber Macey, 'Bomber Command Centre Celebrates 500,000th Visitor', *BBC News*, 21 May 2024 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5110vzkyd0o> [accessed 14 November 2025].

signalled a transition from cautious acceptance to overt celebration, constituting a fourth stage of remembrance that extends beyond the ‘slow growth of acceptance and memorialisation’ that has characterised remembrance of Bomber Command since the 1980s.<sup>219</sup>

The tone of this new era was set immediately in 2012: far from a modest or peripheral act of commemoration, the ceremony became a major national occasion, officiated by the Queen and attended by senior members of the Royal Family before an audience of 6,500 veterans and relatives.<sup>220</sup> The memorial features striking neoclassical architecture and a statue of a seven-man bomber crew, solemnly gazing upward, whilst the ceremony itself culminated in a flypast first by modern Tornado jets, and then by the Royal Air Force’s last airworthy Lancaster bomber, which, in a moment of profound (if not perfectly co-ordinated) public theatre, released not bombs but a cascade of red poppies over the park.<sup>221</sup> The choice of a prominent site in Green Park (within sight of Buckingham Palace) underscored Bomber Command’s formal ‘reincorporation’ into Britain’s ‘mainstream narrative’ of the war.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Knapp, ‘The Horror and the Glory’, p. 5.

<sup>220</sup> BBC, ‘Queen Unveils RAF Bomber Command Memorial’, *BBC News*, 28 June 2012 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18600871> [accessed 14 November 2025].

<sup>221</sup> Ibid. For an account of the mistiming of the flypast and the inaccuracy of its poppy drops, see Michael Clarke, ‘And the Poppies Fell in Soho - The Unveiling of the Bomber Command Memorial’, *RUSI Commentary*, 28 June 2012 <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/and-poppies-fell-soho-unveiling-bomber-command-memorial> [accessed 14 November 2025].

<sup>222</sup> Hughes, ‘Memorializing RAF Bomber Command in the United Kingdom’, p. 286.

**Figure 3.2: The Opening of the Bomber Command Memorial in Green Park, London  
(June 2012)<sup>223</sup>**



A deep sense of vindication was felt by the veterans themselves. At the 2012 unveiling, their voices provided the human element to the narrative. Former pilot Alan Biffen, aged 87, expressed his relief ‘that at long last Bomber Command is being remembered not only for what it achieved but also for the lives of the young men who never came back’.<sup>224</sup> For 93-year-old Dennis Wiltshire, the memorial represented ‘closure and a long-awaited acknowledgement’ after almost 70 years of waiting, providing a place for families to pay their respects.<sup>225</sup> In the years since its unveiling, the memorial has become a focal point each year for wreath-laying

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<sup>223</sup> Merlin Fulcher, ‘Queen opens Bomber Command Memorial’, *Architects’ Journal* (London), 28 June 2012, <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/archive/queen-opens-bomber-command-memorial> [accessed 14 November 2025].

<sup>224</sup> BBC, ‘Queen Unveils RAF Bomber Command Memorial’.

<sup>225</sup> Ministry of Defence, ‘Queen Unveils Memorial to Bomber Command Airmen’, *GOV.UK*, 28 June 2012 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/queen-unveils-memorial-to-bomber-command-airmen> [accessed 14 November 2025].

and remembrance ceremonies, with veterans and the public leaving countless wreaths, crosses and notes, evidence, as Hughes remarks, of its importance as a ‘popular shrine’.<sup>226</sup> Sam Edwards has highlighted how, when dissenting voices have vandalised the memorial, such acts have been labelled ‘desecrations’.<sup>227</sup> He links this deep-seated reverence to the First World War, arguing that the unprecedented mass death and absence of repatriated bodies transformed civic memorials into ‘sacred shrines of the secular age’.<sup>228</sup> Like the poppy, however, this First World War commemorative grammar has since been transposed onto the Second World War, effectively shielding the once-controversial bomber offensive behind an impenetrable veil of sacred memory.

### **Moral Balancing as Afterthought?**

Prior to the opening of the 2012 memorial, the BCA’s Sebastian Cox insisted: ‘We were particularly concerned that this wasn’t seen as triumphalist. It’s not about beating the Germans or winning the war. It is about the people who died.’<sup>229</sup> However, critics were disappointed that the ceremony ‘unambiguously presented all in Bomber Command as heroes’, in doing so ‘studiously [ignoring] the historical debates that have presented differing interpretations of Bomber Command’s tactics, efficacy and place in the wider Allied war effort’.<sup>230</sup> Others condemned what they saw as a pompous architectural design. In the *Guardian*, Richard Gott dismissed the memorial as ‘neo-classical’ bombast and part of a ‘flurry of memorials [that] discourages deeper analysis of the cost of war’, warning that it risked sanctifying what many

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<sup>226</sup> Hughes, ‘Memorializing RAF Bomber Command in the United Kingdom’, p. 286.

<sup>227</sup> Sam Edwards, ‘Sacred Shrines of the Secular Age: War Memorials and Landscape in the Twentieth Century and Beyond’, in *War and Memorials: The Age of Nationalism and the Great War*, ed. by Frank Jacob and Kenneth Pearl (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019), p. 46.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-66.

<sup>229</sup> David Charter and Tom Coghlan, ‘Bomber Command’s air crews honoured at last’, *The Times* (London), 28 June 2012 <https://www.thetimes.com/travel/destinations/europe-travel/germany/berlin/bomber-commands-air-crews-honoured-at-last-lm098x6cz8c> [accessed 14 November 2025].

<sup>230</sup> Damien Williams, ‘Once More, With Feeling: Commemorating Royal Air Force Bomber Command in Late Modern Britain’, in *Battlefield Events: Landscape, commemoration and heritage*, ed. by Keir Reeves and others (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), p. 123.

across Europe perceived as ‘British war crimes’ and describing aerial bombing as ‘one of the most vile legacies of the twentieth century’.<sup>231</sup> Even sympathetic commentators expressed unease. Historian Richard Overy maintained that Bomber Command ‘deserved to be remembered – with honesty [as the caveat]’, arguing that to honour the airmen without acknowledging the immense suffering they inflicted was to falsify history.<sup>232</sup>

This omission almost became a diplomatic flashpoint. Dresden’s mayor, Helma Orosz appealed directly to London Mayor Boris Johnson to ensure the memorial commemorated the bombing victims of all nations.<sup>233</sup> Her intervention led to a perfunctory, diplomatically phrased secondary inscription: ‘This memorial also commemorates those of all nations who lost their lives in the bombing of 1939–1945.’<sup>234</sup> Orosz welcomed it as a ‘gesture of reconciliation’, yet its belated addition can easily be interpreted less as an act of moral reflection than a pragmatic act of moral containment.<sup>235</sup> It inoculated the memorial against its most pointed criticism, the exclusion of civilian victims, without altering its primary function as a national shrine to aircrew sacrifice, especially once we consider the plethora of far more vindicating inscriptions on display at the site. Tellingly, on the back of the statue of the airmen for example is Pericles’ famous funeral oration: ‘Freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it.’<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Richard Gott, ‘This Flurry of Memorials Discourages Deeper Analysis of the Cost of War’, *Guardian*, 21 June 2012 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/21/memorials-cost-of-war-bomber-command> [accessed 29th August 2023].

<sup>232</sup> Richard Overy, ‘RAF Bomber Command Deserves to Be Remembered - With Honesty’, *Guardian*, 22 June 2012 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/22/raf-bomber-command-remembered-with-honesty> [accessed 11th November 2025].

<sup>233</sup> Marx, ‘Memorialising the Second World War’, p. 38

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> Daily Express Reporter, ‘Dresden’s mayor blesses memorial’, *Express* (London), 27 June 2012 <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/329135/Dresden-s-mayor-blesses-memorial> [accessed 14 November 2025].

<sup>236</sup> Neville Morley, ‘Freedom Is the Sure Possession’: Modern Receptions of Pericles’ Funeral Oration’, in *The Athenian Funeral Oration: After Nicole Loraux*, ed. by David M. Pritchard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), p. 434.

**Figure 3.3: Statue Inscription: ‘Freedom Is The Sure Possession of Those Alone Who Have The Courage To Defend It’**



### **Bomber Command and the Age of Outrage**

The successful canonisation of Bomber Command has produced a new kind of vulnerability. Once the narrative became sanctified, through the Green Park memorial and the increasingly unified rhetoric of political leaders, any moral critique, however nuanced, risked being treated as sacrilege. The emotional power of the Bomber Command story is not new. As we have seen, the 1992 unveiling of the Harris statue provoked fierce moral confrontation, exposing how remembrance could still divide the nation. Yet while the emotional grammar of outrage has endured, its form has changed. What took shape in print newspapers and physical protest in the early 1990s would, by the 2010s, be amplified through algorithms, migrating into a digital arena where indignation became instantaneous, viral, and more economically viable than ever.

This dynamic was already evident in reactions to the 2012 Bomber Command Memorial. While its advocates celebrated it as long-overdue justice for veterans, even mild

criticism provoked a torrent of hostility. Richard Gott's *Guardian* column describing the memorial as 'triumphalist and devoid of reflection' triggered an avalanche of digital vitriol. As Petra Rau observed, the intensity of the debate was palpable not only in the news articles themselves but in the 'flurry of commentary' they provoked.<sup>237</sup> What had once been contested in editorials and protests was now refracted through a mass of anonymous online voices.

By the mid-2010s, this defensive reflex had become highly politicised. Greenhalgh argues that the memory of Bomber Command had evolved into 'a site through which right-wing media could contest the reputed dominance of liberal and left-wing views of Britain's military past'.<sup>238</sup> The 2015 Dresden anniversary made this clear. When Archbishop Justin Welby spoke of 'sorrow and repentance', tabloids accused him of 'apologising for bombing the Nazis'.<sup>239</sup> As we shall explore in Chapter Five, comment sections erupted, transforming a gesture of reconciliation into a digital spectacle of moral policing. Outrage was now fuelled by the algorithmic logics of engagement: each indignant post, like, or share reinforced the hierarchy of emotion governing online attention. The bombing war's legacy thus became a touchstone in Britain's culture wars, where piety, patriotism, and populism collided in real time.

The same pattern resurfaced repeatedly. Vandalism of the Green Park memorial in 2019 prompted another wave of online fury, while debates surrounding Victor Gregg's (Chapter Four) and Sinclair McKay's (Chapter Six) writings on Dresden revealed the narrowing space for moral ambiguity.<sup>240</sup> Gregg's description of the raid as a 'crime', spoken from within the

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<sup>237</sup> Petra Rau, *Our Nazis: Representations of Fascism in Contemporary Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 41.

<sup>238</sup> Greenhalgh, 'The long shadow of the air war', p. 502.

<sup>239</sup> Larisa Brown and Steve Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry" for Bombing the Nazis in Dresden Raids', *MailOnline*, 13 February 2015 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2952945/Archbishop-says-sorry-bombing-Nazis-Justin-Welby-attacked-bizarre-apology-Dresden-raids-makes-no-reference-RAF-heroes-killed-Hitler.html> [accessed 17 March 2025].

<sup>240</sup> BBC News, 'London's WW2 Bomber Command Memorial Vandalised', *BBC News*, 21 January 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-46953436> [accessed 14 November 2025]; Dominic Nicholls and Paola Luelmo, 'Bomber Command Memorial Vandalised as Head of RAF Benevolent Fund Defies Calls to Fence Off Landmark', *Telegraph*, 21 January 2019 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/01/21/bomber-command-memorial-vandalised-head-raf-benevolent-fund/> [accessed 14 November 2025].

veteran community, shattered the illusion of unanimity; scholar McKay's empathetic reconstruction of the firestorm was praised for its humanity yet condemned as revisionist. Each controversy unfolded within an economy of outrage where algorithms rewarded affective certainty over nuance, and moral reflection and emotional authenticity became rival currencies of belonging.

Even establishment conservatives were not immune. Writing for *The Times* in 2019, historian Max Hastings, long sympathetic to the armed forces, published a reassessment of the Dam Busters raid that sought to balance admiration for the crews with recognition of civilian suffering.<sup>241</sup> Yet this measured reflection, grounded in Michael Howard's axiom that 'we make war as we can, not as we should', again provoked vitriolic online reaction. Commenters accused him of desecrating 'the silent graves of far better men'.<sup>242</sup> That a conservative historian writing in a conservative newspaper could face such backlash underscored that this was not simply a left-versus-right debate. Outrage had seemingly become ambient, a ritual of belonging in a digitised moral community. Understanding these rituals is key to understanding the future of Bomber Command's legacy, the future of Britain's memory of the Second World War, and in turn, the future of British identity itself.

## Conclusion

This chapter has traced the enduring moral paradox of Bomber Command: a campaign whose narration can both embody and unsettle the nation's sacred story of the Second World War. It epitomised the ideals of courage, endurance, and collective sacrifice that define the People's War, yet its methods (the deliberate bombing of cities and the coercive discipline within its ranks) pose a deep challenge to that same mythology of moral righteousness. The tension

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<sup>241</sup> Max Hastings, 'Exploding the Dam Busters Myth', *The Times*, 31 August 2019 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/max-hastings-exploding-the-dam-busters-myth-rstscw00d> [accessed 19 March 2024].

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

between bravery and devastation, duty and destruction, continues to shape how the campaign is remembered.

The post-war evolution of this legacy reveals the competing pressures of pride, conscience, and geopolitics. During the Cold War, the bomber offensive was subsumed into narratives of deterrence and technological superiority, allowing its moral ambiguities to be reframed as strategic necessity. By the 1960s and 1970s, however, this containment began to fracture: amid growing nuclear anxieties and moral unease over technological warfare, the bombing campaign was increasingly reinterpreted as a precursor to the age of mutually assured destruction. Cultural representations and public debate cast Bomber Command less as a symbol of victory than as a warning about the perils of total war, exposing the discomfort that lay beneath Britain's self-image of moral restraint. From the 1980s onward, the rise of heritage culture and the politics of commemoration reanimated the airmen's story as a symbol of national renewal. The campaign for recognition, driven by veterans and amplified by the press, transformed feelings of neglect into a populist moral crusade. By the early twenty-first century, the Green Park Memorial and the International Bomber Command Centre had reinstalled Bomber Command at the heart of Britain's civic religion; its airmen canonised as martyrs of duty, their cause sacralised as another pillar of national identity.

The argument advanced here is that this sanctification mirrors the wider consolidation of Britain's sacred story traced in the previous chapter. As that narrative has become increasingly hegemonic, absorbing both conservative and inclusive reinterpretations, Bomber Command's memory has been drawn ever more firmly into its orbit. The Green Park memorial functions as a popular shrine: a site of pilgrimage where pride eclipses ambivalence, and moral complexity is ritualised rather than resolved. Yet this very sacralisation renders the legacy newly volatile. The more Bomber Command is woven into Britain's moral identity, the greater the risk that any critical reflection will be received as profanation.

That volatility defines the contemporary moment. In an age where remembrance circulates through digital media saturated with affect and outrage, even measured attempts to confront the bombing war's ambiguities risk igniting moral backlash. The next chapter turns to that arena, exploring the means by which scholars can examine how the sanctified memory of Bomber Command is performed, defended, and contested within Britain's networked public sphere.

## **Chapter Four: The Wise, Heroic, Ignorant Traitor: Online Reactions to Victor Gregg's Experience of the Dresden Bombing**

When Second World War veteran Victor Gregg appeared on *BBC Breakfast* in October 2019 to mark his one-hundredth birthday, the segment unfolded as a carefully choreographed scene of national affection.<sup>1</sup> Seated upright on the familiar red sofa, medals pinned neatly to his jacket, Gregg's formal attire signalled ceremony as much as biography. The presenters addressed him with visible warmth and deference, leaning in attentively as he spoke, while laughter punctuated the exchange. Gregg joked about being lured into the army by the promise of 'a cup of tea and a bun', teased the hosts about the impracticality of the oversized birthday cake placed before him, and deadpanned about surviving to his two-hundredth birthday. His delivery was dry, mischievous, and precise, inviting the audience to enjoy him as much as to listen to him.

**Figure 4.1: 'What are you going to do on my 200th birthday?': Celebrating Victor Gregg's Centenary on *BBC Breakfast*<sup>2</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> BBC Breakfast, 'Victor Gregg Is 100 Years Old. He's a World War II Veteran and Has Written a Book about His Experiences', *BBC One Breakfast*, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07r2njc> [accessed 5 July 2024].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

For viewers encountering Gregg for the first time, this was a familiar televisual ritual rather than an introduction to a controversial witness. He appeared as a reassuring figure of continuity: a centenarian veteran embodying stoicism, humour, and national endurance. Crucially, the BBC's framing prioritised Gregg's identity as a combatant, the 'Rifleman' of his memoir's title, rather than his status as a survivor of the Dresden firestorm.<sup>3</sup> While Dresden was mentioned, the interview's narrative arc focused on his enlistment and his role in conventional military victories, such as the Battle of Alamein. In doing so, the programme positioned him within the heroic, legible tradition of the fighting soldier, distancing him from the moral ambiguity that surrounds the bombing war. Within this carefully managed frame, Gregg was presented as a quintessential national treasure: not as a source of critique, but as a figure through whom remembrance could be safely enacted.

#### Figure 4.2: The Presenter's Dilemma: Navigating Controversy Amid Celebration on

##### *BBC Breakfast*

**Louise Minchin:** You've written all about this in your book, which I know lots of people will be familiar with. And it's clear that you have amazing memories. So, for your 100th birthday and we don't often have people for their 100th birthday... **Victor Gregg:** [Interrupting] Okay where's my present? [Laughter] **Louise Minchin:** Well! I'm glad you mentioned that, just hold on... **Dan Walker:** Hold on, I'm going to have to do my best here. **Louise Minchin:** I was going to ask you what you were going to do today! **Victor Gregg:** I don't believe it... I don't believe it! **Louise Minchin:** Come on Dan!

**Dan Walker:** [Lifting a massive rectangular cake] It's very heavy! [He places it on the table] **Victor Gregg:** What on earth? How am I going to take that home? **Dan Walker:** Well, you say you were offered a cup of tea and a bun, and you never got the bun, so we thought we'd actually get you a cake. **Victor Gregg:** Is that a real cake? **Louise Minchin:** Yes! **Dan Walker:** That's... that's your cake. It's edible! **Victor Gregg:** What it's edible? **Dan Walker:** It's edible. You can eat the whole thing, or you can share it, there you go. **Victor Gregg:** [Looking at the cake writing] Who am I going to share it with then? **Dan Walker:** [Laughs] Happy 100th birthday Victor! Well, there's a few obvious candidates Victor. **Victor Gregg:** How am I going to cart that about? Have you got a wheelbarrow? **Dan Walker:** We've even got plates and knives and things... **Victor Gregg:** What you mean the three of us have got to eat that? [Laughter]

**Louise Minchin:** Oh Victor, it's really, really lovely to see you again. Happy birthday. **Victor Gregg:** Well, I wish everybody well, I wish the world well. It's breaking my heart what is happening. Really is, after all that struggle and that sacrifice. To see now... we're even in danger of losing our community as a United Kingdom... No, no. I'm against it all and I think it's... I think it's terrible. It's terrible. It makes me want to cry to think about it. Thinking that we can go it alone, we can't. But there you are, that's only an old geezer talking.

**Dan Walker:** Don't you dare put yourself down, it's lovely to have you on this morning. And it's wonderful to hear your opinion and to tell some of your stories as well. Victor's book *Rifleman* has been reissued to mark his 100th birthday... and he's got a cake as well. **Louise Minchin:** [Smiling] And he's got a cake. **Dan Walker:** It's available [the book] now if you'd like to read his incredible story. **Victor Gregg:** If I drop dead... it's because of that! [Points to cake] **Dan Walker:** [Laughing] Please don't do that!

<sup>3</sup> Victor Gregg and Rick Stroud, *Rifleman: A Front-Line Life* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

At first glance, the appearance thus registered as politically ‘safe’. It followed a familiar broadcast ritual in which the ageing veteran is celebrated, contained, and affirmed as a benign moral presence. Yet the interview was not entirely insulated from political tension. Toward its conclusion, Gregg moved unprompted from reminiscence to critique, lamenting that Brexit was ‘breaking my heart’ and warning that Britain risked ‘losing our community as a United Kingdom’.<sup>4</sup> When Gregg concluded this passionate intervention by dismissing himself as ‘only an old geezer talking’, presenter Dan Walker seized the conversational lifeline. ‘Don’t you dare put yourself down,’ Walker admonished, adopting a tone of protective affection that effectively neutralised the political charge of the moment (see Figure 4.2).<sup>5</sup>

By focusing on Gregg’s self-deprecation rather than the substance of his warning, Walker shifted the frame from political debate back to intergenerational respect. He validated Gregg’s right to speak, noting it was ‘wonderful to hear [his] opinion’, without engaging with the critique itself, treating the dissent as a cherished elder’s prerogative.<sup>6</sup> The exchange was thus swiftly cauterised; Walker immediately pivoted back to the safety of commerce and confectionery; the special centenary edition of *Rifleman* and the birthday cake, firmly resealing the commemorative frame.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the exchange already hinted at Gregg’s willingness to exceed the expected boundaries of veteran testimony.

Audience reactions to this *BBC Breakfast* appearance, when circulated on Facebook, largely reinforced the programme’s respectful framing.<sup>8</sup> The comments section became a repository of gratitude, with users declaring Gregg a ‘total legend’, a ‘true gentleman’ who

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<sup>4</sup> BBC Breakfast, ‘Victor Gregg Is 100 Years Old’.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Victor Gregg and Rick Stroud, *Rifleman - New edition: A Frontline Life from the Battles of Alamein and Arnhem to the Bombing of Dresden* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> BBC Breakfast, ‘100-year-old Veteran Victor Gregg’, *Facebook*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/bbcbreakfast/videos/742811026181139/> [accessed 18 December 2025].

should be afforded ‘total respect’.<sup>9</sup> Crucially, even where viewers engaged with his anti-Brexit stance, the tone remained deferential. One comment summarised: ‘An amazing person with such fortitude and strength of character even if I do disagree with some of his political views.’<sup>10</sup> Another user argued that ‘[he] has lived through a lot and lost a lot and has witnessed a heck of a lot’, suggesting that his wartime suffering granted him a unique license to speak (‘He knows what he’s talking about’).<sup>11</sup> In this context, Gregg’s authority remained intact: his critique was absorbed as sincere concern rather than perceived betrayal.

However, this relative calm stands in contrast to the online reception Gregg received earlier the same year. In February 2019, marking the anniversary of the Dresden bombing, Gregg appeared on ITV’s *Good Morning Britain* and described the Allied raid as ‘evil’, explicitly calling it a ‘war crime’.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on his experience as a prisoner of war in the city who witnessed the bombing on the ground, he offered graphic testimony of civilian suffering, language that sharply disrupted the familiar moral grammar of Britain’s good war. The programme’s coverage proved far less containable. Tellingly, both the *Good Morning Britain* interview and a separate *ITV News* feature were uploaded to YouTube with their comment sections disabled, a pre-emptive moderation tactic often reserved for sensitive content.<sup>13</sup> Deprived of this outlet, the debate migrated to the *MailOnline*, where the response was highly polarised.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., comment 44, comment 178, comment 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., comment 206.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., comment 161.

<sup>12</sup> Good Morning Britain, ‘Victor Gregg Describes Witnessing Dresden Bombings First-Hand 74 Years Ago’, *YouTube*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vNT7012BJg> [accessed 18 December 2025].

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. See also ITV News, ‘Former British Prisoner Victor Gregg, 99, on Why Dresden Should Never Be Forgotten’, *YouTube*, 14 February 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aUqi9CWTwg> [accessed 18 December 2025].

<sup>14</sup> Rory Tingle, ‘“The Children Melted, Their Bones Were Too Tender”: British Prisoner of War Due To Be Shot in Dresden On Day RAF Killed Tens of Thousands Relives his Incredible Escape and the True Horror of Bombing Raids 74 years Ago’, *Mail Online*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6699261/British-prisoner-war-shot-Dresden-day-RAF-killed-tens-thousands.html> [accessed 18 December 2025].

Figure 4.3: Good Morning War Crime: Victor Gregg on *Good Morning Britain*, 2019<sup>15</sup>



Here, the limits of veteran reverence became visible. Alongside expressions of gratitude and sympathy were hundreds of hostile interventions accusing Gregg of hindsight, ingratitude, or outright treachery. Many of the most upvoted comments rejected his moral claims in emphatic terms, often written in block capitals, insisting that ‘WE WERE AT WAR’ and that ‘MANY CIVILIANS WERE KILLED IN THE BOMBINGS OF BRITAIN’.<sup>16</sup> Others questioned Gregg’s credibility entirely, casting doubt on his memories or accusing him of fabricating aspects of his story (‘Can anyone confirm Mr Gregg's self-portrayal as a fearless WW2 hero? Thought not.’)<sup>17</sup> The same figure celebrated months later as a national treasure was, in this context, reframed by some commenters as a dangerous revisionist or ‘traitor’ to the national story.

Taken together, these episodes foreground the central problem this chapter seeks to address; namely how far veteran authority in contemporary Britain extends when it moves from

<sup>15</sup> Good Morning Britain, 'Victor Gregg Describes Witnessing Dresden Bombings First-Hand 74 Years Ago'.

<sup>16</sup> Tingle, comment 1, comment 389.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., comment 106.

commemoration to moral critique. Victor Gregg's reception suggests that respect for veterans is neither unconditional nor politically neutral but structured by powerful expectations about what veterans should represent, and what they should refrain from questioning.

Before Gregg can be understood as a controversial or dissenting figure, it is therefore necessary to clarify what the Second World War veteran signifies in British public life. The chapter begins by examining the veteran not simply as a historical witness, but as a potent cultural figure, one routinely mobilised to embody resilience, moral clarity, and national continuity in moments of uncertainty. Drawing on examples such as the elevation of Captain Sir Tom Moore during the COVID-19 pandemic, it shows how veterans are framed as reassuring moral presences whose authority derives less from critique than from embodiment. Age, medals, humility, and restraint operate as key symbolic resources within what may be described as a ritual economy of remembrance.

It is against this symbolic backdrop that Gregg's testimony acquires its disruptive force. Like Moore, Gregg emerged as a public figure late in life and was widely presented as authentic, relatable, and morally grounded. Unlike Moore, however, he repeatedly used both his written and televised platforms to articulate discomfort, shame, and anger, most notably in relation to Dresden. His interventions therefore challenge not simply particular historical interpretations, but the emotional and moral economy within which veteran authority is normally sustained.

This challenge moves beyond what Frances Houghton has termed 'public sites of contest'.<sup>18</sup> While Houghton notes that some Second World War veteran memoirs have sought to correct the historical record regarding neglected units, Gregg's work did not merely seek to restore a marginalised narrative. Instead, it confronted the moral foundations of Britain's

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<sup>18</sup> Frances Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 270.

wartime conduct itself, challenging the heroic framing that continues to underpin much of Britain's commemorative culture. In doing so, Gregg participated in a still rarer tradition of veteran life; writing that resisted not only historical omission, but the comforting moral consensus surrounding the memory of the Second World War.

The remainder of the chapter traces how this resistance was articulated, mediated, and received. It examines Gregg's memoirs as acts of public memory, before turning to his media appearances between 2011 and 2021, analysing how broadcasters and newspapers alternately foregrounded his combatant identity, softened his moral claims, or redirected attention away from their implications. The chapter then turns to audience reception, focusing on online comment sections responding to Gregg's major public interventions. To analyse how the digital public reconciles its reverence for the 'wartime generation' with a veteran's anti-triumphalist narrative, a corpus of 9,282 comments was compiled across 11 separate comment datasets (2013–2021).

To account for these dynamics, the chapter draws on social psychological research, particularly the intergroup sensitivity effect (ISE) and the black sheep effect (BSE).<sup>19</sup> These frameworks conceptualise veteran authority not as a stable moral resource, but as a contingent and context-dependent form of legitimacy. They help explain why insider criticism may be tolerated when it is perceived as loyal concern yet swiftly reclassified as deviant or disloyal when it threatens the group's moral self-image. In this sense, digital media spaces emerge as arenas in which the boundaries of acceptable remembrance are actively negotiated and enforced.

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<sup>19</sup> See Matthew J. Hornsey, Tina Oppes, and Alicia Svensson, "'It's OK if We Say It, but You Can't': Responses to Intergroup and Intragroup Criticism', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 32 (2002), 293–307, and José M. Marques, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt, and Jacques-Philippe Leyens, 'The "Black Sheep Effect": Extremity of Judgments Towards Ingroup Members as a Function of Group Identification', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18 (1988), 1–16.

Rather than adjudicating the historical legitimacy of Gregg's claims, this chapter uses his case to illuminate the affective and symbolic constraints placed on veteran testimony in contemporary Britain. In doing so, it shows how the authority of the veteran is both powerful and precarious: celebrated when it reassures, contested when it condemns, and instrumentalised in the ongoing struggle over how the nation remembers its good war.

### **His Story is All Our Stories: A Second World War Veteran's Authority in British Public Life**

In 2020, Captain Sir Tom Moore's life transformed, as an initially private act of charity became a nationally celebrated phenomenon, 'capturing the hearts' of the United Kingdom and beyond.<sup>20</sup> His journey commenced on 6 April, when, at the age of 99, he began walking one hundred laps of his garden with the modest goal of raising £1,000 for the NHS before his 100th birthday.<sup>21</sup> His efforts quickly caught the public's eye when, on 8 April, his local TV news programme aired a segment about him, a piece prompted by a press release sent by his daughter, Hannah Ingram-Moore. The attention rapidly scaled, and by 14 April, Captain Tom's JustGiving page had broken the £1 million mark, due to widespread national media coverage.<sup>22</sup> One day later, the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, labelled him an 'inspiration to us all' as donations soared past £10 million.<sup>23</sup> Completing his initial hundred-lap goal on 16 April,

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<sup>20</sup> Hazel Shearing, 'Captain Tom Moore: How the War Veteran Captured Our Hearts', *BBC News*, 30 April 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52316856> [accessed 8 May 2025].

<sup>21</sup> For an overview of the events surrounding Captain Tom in 2020, see PA News Agency, 'Captain Tom: A Timeline of the Veteran's Life Since He Raised Millions for NHS', *Bracknell News*, 30 January 2021 <https://www.bracknellnews.co.uk/news/national/19058991.captain-tom-timeline-veterans-life-since-raised-millions-nhs/> [accessed 8 May 2025].

<sup>22</sup> Sofia Lotto Persio, 'World War II Veteran Captain Tom Moore Celebrates 100th Birthday After Raising \$40 Million for COVID-19 Frontline Workers', *Forbes*, 30 April 2020 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sofialottopersio/2020/04/30/world-war-ii-veteran-captain-tom-moore-celebrates-100th-birthday-after-raising-40-million-for-covid-19-front-line-workers/> [accessed 8 May 2025].

<sup>23</sup> Department of Health and Social Care and The Rt Hon Matt Hancock, 'Health and Social Care Secretary's Statement on Coronavirus (COVID-19): 15 April 2020', *GOV.UK*, 30 April 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/health-and-social-care-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-15-april-2020> [accessed 8 May 2025].

Captain Tom then vowed to continue walking, further fuelling public support and media fascination.<sup>24</sup>

Accolades and honours quickly followed. On 17 April, the Duke of Cambridge celebrated him as an ‘absolute legend’, and donations surged past £20 million.<sup>25</sup> By 21 April, Captain Tom had virtually opened a new Nightingale hospital (a temporary COVID-19 treatment centre) in his native Yorkshire, marking another high point in his burgeoning legacy.<sup>26</sup> His nationwide cultural impact was confirmed on 24 April when he became the oldest artist to top the UK singles charts with a rendition of ‘*You’ll Never Walk Alone*’, performed alongside singer Michael Ball.<sup>27</sup> On the 30th, to mark his 100th birthday, the Royal Air Force conducted a ‘Battle of Britain’ flypast over his home (involving a Spitfire and a Hurricane), and he received over 150,000 birthday cards from well-wishers.<sup>28</sup> The recognitions continued into May, with Captain Tom receiving a gold Blue Peter badge on the 5th and the Freedom of the City of London on the 12th.<sup>29</sup>

In July, Moore’s contributions were formally recognised when the Queen knighted him at Windsor Castle; a moment, as Lisa McCormick notes, that was ‘rushed through after Downing Street received over 100 petitions’, exemplifying the ritualised ‘heroisation’ of

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<sup>24</sup> Sky News, ‘Coronavirus: Veteran, 99, Raises £12m for NHS and Vows to Keep Walking for as Long as People Donate’, *Sky News*, 16 April 2020 <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-veteran-99-who-has-raised-9m-for-nhs-to-keep-walking-while-people-donate-11973802> [accessed 8 May 2025].

<sup>25</sup> Aurora Bosotti, ‘Prince William Reveals Huge Donation as He Praises Captain Tom Moore’, *Express.co.uk*, 16 April 2020 <https://www.express.co.uk/news/royal/1270166/Prince-William-news-coronavirus-charity-donation-Captain-Tom-Moore-NHS-fundraise-latest> [accessed 8 May 2025].

<sup>26</sup> Zoe Drewett, ‘Captain Tom Opens New Nightingale Hospital After Raising £27,000,000 for NHS’, *Metro*, 21 April 2020 <https://metro.co.uk/2020/04/21/captain-tom-opens-new-nightingale-hospital-raising-27000000-nhs-12588823/> [accessed 8 May 2025].

<sup>27</sup> Laura Snapes, ‘Captain Tom Moore Becomes Oldest Artist to Claim UK No 1 Single’, *Guardian*, 24 April 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/apr/24/captain-tom-moore-becomes-oldest-artist-to-claim-uk-no-1-single> [accessed 8 May 2025].

<sup>28</sup> ITV News, ‘RAF Flypast to Honour Captain Tom Moore on 100th Birthday’, *ITV News*, 30 April 2020 <https://www.itv.com/news/anglia/2020-04-30/raf-flypast-to-honour-captain-tom-moore-on-100th-birthday> [accessed 8 May 2025].

<sup>29</sup> See BBC News, ‘Captain Tom Moore Receives Gold Blue Peter Badge’, *BBC News*, 5 May 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-52550309> [accessed 8 May 2025]; and BBC News, ‘Coronavirus: Captain Tom Moore Awarded Freedom of the City of London’, *BBC News*, 12 May 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-52617255> [accessed 8 May 2025].

pandemic figures.<sup>30</sup> Moore, she argues, ‘substantiated the parallel between the Second World War and the coronavirus crisis’, stepping forward as a veteran ‘to do his bit for King/Queen and country’.<sup>31</sup> Images of his slow, deliberate walk – regimental medals gleaming, back slightly stooped – fused present crisis with cherished wartime memory, presenting both Moore and the nation as ‘underdogs [...] resolute in a crisis, and determined to fight gallantly against the odds’.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, what made Moore’s figure so potent was not just what he did, but how he did it. As Wade et al. argue, his age, regional identity, medals, and modest manner endowed him with ‘multivalent semiotic potential’.<sup>33</sup> He became an ‘embodied philanthropist’, whose physical effort and visible frailty conveyed a quietly compelling form of sacrificial citizenship.<sup>34</sup> Moore’s broken-down body stood in stark contrast with the ‘leisurely activism commonly practiced by celebrity athletes’, and his simple but exemplary effort enabled him to ‘more easily embody a governing ideal of ‘philanthromentality’.<sup>35</sup> His performance drew on the symbolic codes of Britain’s wartime past while aligning with a pandemic discourse saturated in battle metaphors (with governments promising to ‘wage war’ on the virus), offering an emotionally resonant display of collective perseverance.<sup>36</sup>

In turn, media coverage did not merely document his story but actively *mediatised* it, transforming his effort into a sacralised national ritual. Moore’s veteran identity, combined with his fundraising for the NHS (itself an institution increasingly framed in sacred and mythic

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<sup>30</sup> Lisa McCormick, ‘Marking Time in Lockdown: Heroization and Ritualization in the UK during the Coronavirus Pandemic’, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 8 (2020), p. 335.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Wade, Nicholas Hookway, Kevin Filo, and Catherine Palmer, ‘Embodied Philanthropy and Sir Captain Tom Moore’s “Walk for the NHS”’, *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing*, 27.3 (2022), p. 1 <http://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.1747>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> See Andreas Musolff, ‘“World-Beating” Pandemic Responses: Ironical, Sarcastic, and Satirical Use of War and Competition Metaphors in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic’, *Metaphor and Symbol*, 37.2 (2022), pp. 76–87.

terms) helped anchor the uncertainties of lockdown within a redemptive national narrative.<sup>37</sup> This affective resonance drew upon broader discourses that cast the NHS as a quasi-religious symbol of British civic identity: a ‘national treasure’ capable of binding the nation in times of crisis.<sup>38</sup> As Kettell and Kerr argue, the promise of renewal of the NHS functioned as the ‘Holy Grail’ of political symbolism during the Brexit era.<sup>39</sup> Together, Moore and the NHS provided the ingredients for a tantalising narrative arc; one that media coverage sustained and amplified throughout the year, turning individual effort into a collective parable of national resilience.

Moore was later named GQ’s ‘Inspiration of the Year’, featuring on their cover, and was honoured in the capital’s New Year’s Eve celebrations.<sup>40</sup> Through a simple act of walking, Moore raised over £32 million and became, for many, a national emblem of resilience and quiet resolve.<sup>41</sup> As one tribute put it, the ‘stoic, warm, measured, focused and kind’ Captain Tom helped people through ‘divorce, lockdown and despair’.<sup>42</sup> The narrative surrounding Captain Tom was neatly summarised by the publisher of his autobiography, who emphasised in the book’s blurb the idea that his life story mirrored the collective experiences of generations of Britons. The publisher noted: Captain Sir Tom Moore’s story is all our stories . . . Captain Tom’s story is that of our parents and our grandparents. It is the story of the past hundred years here in Britain.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See Roberta Bivins and Mathew Thomson, ‘Anniversary Fever? History and the Culture of NHS Celebration’, *Modern British History*, 36.1 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwae066>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> See Steve Kettell and Peter Kerr, ‘The Brexit Religion and the Holy Grail of the NHS’, *Social Policy & Society*, 20.2 (2021), pp. 282–295.

<sup>40</sup> See GQ, ‘GQ Men Of The Year Awards 2020 Winners: From Paul Mescal to Captain Sir Tom Moore’, *British GQ*, 26 November 2020 <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/gq-awards-2020-winners> [accessed 8 May 2025]., and ITV News, ‘London Light Show Pays Tribute to Figures of 2020’, *ITV News*, 1 January 2021, <https://www.itv.com/news/2021-01-01/london-light-show-pays-tribute-to-figures-of-2020> [accessed 4 July 2024].

<sup>41</sup> BBC News, ‘Captain Tom’s NHS Appeal Closes at Nearly £33m’, *BBC News*, 1 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-52498156> [accessed 8 May 2025].

<sup>42</sup> Rachel Obordo and Guardian Readers, ‘“The Best of Humanity”: Readers’ Tributes to Captain Sir Tom Moore’, *Guardian*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/03/age-no-barrier-readers-tributes-captain-sir-tom-moore> [accessed 4 July 2024].

<sup>43</sup> Tom Moore, *Tomorrow Will Be A Good Day* (London: Michael Joseph, 2020).

It is interesting to consider then, what would happen were such a figure (so steeped in personal, cultural, and historical authority) to challenge this characterisation of history. How would the media, and the public, react to a prominent Second World War veteran with a distinctive, familiar accent, indicative of his working-class roots, and an equally humble, straightforward demeanour who used their public platform to present a cautionary narrative on war and its glorification? In this context, the late Victor Gregg's portrayal in the media from 2011 to 2021 presents a compelling case study opportunity.

Gregg was a British veteran who served in the Army during the Second World War, experiencing firsthand the horrors of combat across multiple theatres, including Europe and North Africa. Known for his forthright stance on how society remembers and glorifies conflict, he was not merely a witness to history but a vocal critic of its romanticisation. Like Captain Tom, Gregg only emerged as a public figure in his later years. In his case, he used the media attention surrounding the publication of his 2011 memoir *Rifleman: A Frontline Life* to advocate for a more honest engagement with the realities of warfare.<sup>44</sup>

In both the memoir and subsequent interviews, he offered a sobering account of what it meant to fight: the chaos of explosions and gunfire, the acrid stench of burning oil and flesh, and the piercing screams of the wounded. Reflecting on the 1941 Battle of Beda Fomm, where the Allies blocked the retreat of the Italian 10th Army, he recalled: 'The whole area to our front was covered in smoke from the burning tanks and trucks, the ground littered with the dead and dying... Mixed with all this were the terrifying screams of the poor sods trapped inside their steel coffins.'<sup>45</sup> Gregg admitted that, as he became 'institutionalised' into a kill-or-be-killed mentality, he felt little pride in his wartime actions.<sup>46</sup> 'The only time I ever felt proud', he said,

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<sup>44</sup> Victor Gregg and Rick Stroud, *Rifleman: A Frontline Life* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53–4.

<sup>46</sup> International Bomber Command Centre, *Interview with Victor Gregg*, IBCC Digital Archive, 2016, <https://ibccdigitalarchive.lincoln.ac.uk/omeka/collections/document/3414> [accessed 8 May 2025].

‘was when we was in Italy and you're going along. You're pushing these Germans back and then you go through these villages and little towns and all the people come out cheering... they're throwing flowers and they're offering you their vino and stuff like that’.<sup>47</sup>

This staunch modesty, despite taking part in many acts of undoubted bravery as a member of the Rifle Brigade and later as a paratrooper and prisoner of war, as well as serving as a spy in the postwar period, combined with his distinctive London Cockney accent, working-class roots and undeniable wit, distinguished him as another highly relatable figure whose reflections challenged conventional narratives. His reflections challenge dominant narratives of the good war not through abstraction (philosophical reasoning, academic critique, or detached commentary) but through experiential authority. As John A. Wood notes in his study of Vietnam veteran memoirs, such ‘worm’s-eye’ accounts derive authority from their proximity to events.<sup>48</sup> Many Vietnam veterans described their war as uniquely surreal and incomprehensible to outsiders, with one insisting that what he said about war ‘is true because he was on the field’ – and ‘if you don’t know that, you don’t know anything’.<sup>49</sup> This sentiment was later satirised by another marine in the familiar joke: ‘How many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a light bulb? You wouldn’t know, you weren’t there.’<sup>50</sup>

A similar sense of dislocation and strangeness underpins Gregg’s reflections on war, especially in drawing attention to the mechanical and impersonal nature of industrial warfare. Recounting his experience at El Alamein, he vividly described the assembly of firepower: ‘Behind the twenty-five-pounders were the sixty-pounders and behind them the howitzers.’<sup>51</sup> The battlefield, as he recalled it, was an inferno of impersonal force, a place where Axis troops

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> John A. Wood, *Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016), p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. See also Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin Press, 1997), pp. 1–3.

<sup>50</sup> Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 170.

<sup>51</sup> Gregg and Stroud, *Rifleman: A Frontline Life*, p. 91.

(attacking forlornly uphill) were met with an ‘avalanche of hot, exploding metal’.<sup>52</sup> The killing, he noted, felt detached and distant. Asked by the podcast network and digital history channel *History Hit* what it felt like to kill at such range, he replied, ‘you don’t worry about it too much because at that stage of the battle they’re still five or six hundred yards away... you don’t really get a sense of killing people until you’re looking in the bloke’s eyes’.<sup>53</sup>

His account reflects what Islam et al. describe as the veteran’s ‘split identity’: a psychological tension between the combatant self, who adapts to the violent and morally suspended context of battle, and the veteran self, who later reevaluates those actions through the lens of post-war social norms and moral reflection<sup>54</sup>. ‘None of us enjoyed what was happening’, Gregg added, ‘what kept us firing was that the boot could just as easily have been on the other foot, and, in the past, it too often had been. The battlefield gave us its usual choice: to kill or be killed’.<sup>55</sup> In this light, his narrative not only conveys the harsh impersonality of modern warfare but also reveals the layered process through which moral meaning is retroactively imposed on actions once driven by survival.

That postwar moral lens did not lead Gregg to pacifism, however. On the contrary, it deepened his belief that some wars, despite their horror, are justified. While his portrayals of combat emphasise its violence, dehumanisation, and personal toll, he was equally insistent that the war against fascism had to be fought: ‘I hate war – I have seen what it does – but in my view we must keep our guard up, sometimes pacifism just isn’t an option, sometimes we have to use force.’<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> History Hit, *My Life and World War Two - World War Two*, 2019, <https://access.historyhit.com/world-war-two/videos/my-life-and-world-war-two> [accessed 4 July 2024].

<sup>54</sup> Azharul Islam and others, ‘Autobiographical Memory of War Veterans: A Mixed-Studies Systematic Review’, *Memory Studies*, 14.2 (2021), p. 223.

<sup>55</sup> Gregg and Stroud (2011), p. 96.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

Indeed, whilst his discussions often emphasise the personal struggles of being a soldier, and the moral complexities involved in wartime actions, he urged ‘anyone who doesn’t believe me to visit the remains of Oradour-sur-Glan [sic] [referring to the massacre of the French town by the Waffen SS on 10 June 1944] and to ask themselves whether they would submit to a power that allows such things’.<sup>57</sup> For Gregg, retrospective reflection was not an argument for moral equivalence but for moral vigilance: the horrors of war must be remembered, not to renounce resistance, but to understand its cost.

It is precisely this belief in the war’s tragic necessity that makes Gregg’s depiction of Dresden so eye-catching for both the researcher and reader. In *Rifleman* (as well as his subsequent publication *Dresden: A Survivor’s Story*), and numerous interviews, he did not frame the bombing as a strategic operation but as a massacre where the targets were predominantly civilians, not soldiers.<sup>58</sup> ‘There was no excuse’, Gregg wrote, ‘for the men who ordered this terrible event to be carried out’.<sup>59</sup> In contrast to earlier campaigns, where violence was reluctantly accepted within a broader ethical framework, for Gregg, Dresden represented a categorical rupture: a moment when British military action transgressed the very moral boundaries it purported to defend.

Gregg’s personal experience in February 1945 lends further weight to his moral judgment. On the eve of the bombing, he was incarcerated in a makeshift prison awaiting execution for sabotage having destroyed machinery in a soap factory where he had been conscripted to work as a POW.<sup>60</sup> The first wave of Allied bombs that struck Dresden on 13 February 1945 inadvertently saved his life by destroying the prison. Recounting the moment, he wrote: ‘[f]rom inside the building [the prisoners] saw the flares through the glass cupola,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Victor Gregg, *Dresden: A Survivor’s Story, February 1945* (London: Bloomsbury Reader, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

filling the night sky with blinding light, like enormous Christmas trees they floated to earth dripping the burning phosphorus onto the streets and buildings'.<sup>61</sup> Realisation dawned slowly, 'we were trapped in a cage that stood every chance of becoming a mass grave'.<sup>62</sup> Once the prison was hit many of them, including Gregg's friend Harry, were killed when the glass dome which housed them collapsed.

Knocked unconscious by the blast, Gregg awoke to find the building in ruins and the city in flames. His narrative, marked by vivid detail and disorientation, evokes a raw, survivalist instinct: '[t]he problem was where we should go: we were cut off on all sides'.<sup>63</sup> He and a small group of prisoners made their way through the city, dodging bombing runs, sprinting past firewalls, and navigating streets that had been reduced to rubble. 'We just sort of glued ourselves together', he recalled, 'as if there was safety in numbers'.<sup>64</sup> As he moved through Dresden, his sense of time and geography collapsed. Landmarks were gone. The once familiar city centre had become an alien, shattered terrain. 'We ended up in open fields', he wrote, 'by a single railway line hidden from view down a steep embankment'.<sup>65</sup>

His description of the nightmarish surrealism is punctuated by imagery of eerie beauty, the phosphorus flares illuminating the destruction below, juxtaposed with the visceral horror of people being 'slowly sucked into the vortex... lifted up into the sky and into the pillars of smoke and fire'.<sup>66</sup> Gregg's account (whilst haunting) is not unique in this regard, but emblematic: it echoes the sensory and emotional texture found in other survivor testimonies, such as that of Ludwig Faupel, a Hamburg fireman in 1943. Faupel described a city consumed by 'roaring, boiling hell', where burning debris fell from the sky, the air was unbreathable, and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–6.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

people collapsed from exhaustion, overcome by heat and panic, their final moments spent ‘screaming with fear and pain’.<sup>67</sup> Like Gregg, Faupel evokes not only the physical devastation of aerial bombardment but also a complete unravelling of space, time, and moral orientation, a descent into chaos in which survival itself feels ethically unsettling.

Nevertheless, in the moment Gregg did not remain a passive observer. Amid the chaos, he joined makeshift rescue efforts, helping to pull survivors from rubble and combat the fires, though these attempts were often overwhelmed by firestorms powerful enough to uproot trees and hurl debris. While he consistently defended the RAF crews (‘they were under orders’), he offered no such clemency to the architects of the raid: ‘The only reason for keeping this atrocity in the public eye is to horrify people so much that they never again allow their representatives to order such crimes.’<sup>68</sup> In the afterword to *Dresden*, he posed the question: ‘Was this the greatest war crime of all?’<sup>69</sup> Whilst he offers no definitive answer, in several public appearances Gregg repeatedly called the bombing ‘evil’ and even labelled it a ‘genocide’.<sup>70</sup>

This language places him in stark contrast to many contemporary historians and fellow veterans. Unlike Jörg Friedrich’s *Der Brand*, which described the bombing as ‘the intentional mass killing of urban residents’, most twenty-first century historical accounts have stopped short of such stark moral verdicts.<sup>71</sup> Several German historians have strongly criticised Friedrich for advancing a victim-centred narrative that echoes older apologetic discourses and

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<sup>67</sup> L. Faupel, typescript account, FZH 292–8, A-F quoted in Keith Lowe, *Inferno: The Devastation of Hamburg, 1943* (London: Viking, 2007), pp. 196–7.

<sup>68</sup> Gregg, *Dresden*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>70</sup> See *BBC News*, ‘WW2 Veteran: Dresden Bombings “Evil”’, *BBC News*, 11 February 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-47201136> [accessed 4 July 2024]. The accompanying headline read: ‘UK WW2 Veteran says Dresden bombings Were a "War Crime"’, and Florence Snead, ‘“Nothing Prepared Me for What I Saw” Says War Veteran Victor Gregg’, *inews*, 13 February 2020, <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/dresden-75-anniversary-bombing-attack-victor-gregg-second-world-war-397645> [accessed 4 July 2024]. In the interview, Gregg stated: “To stoop as low as we had to stoop is genocide, there’s no other name for it. We resorted to killing women and children, because that’s what it amounted to.”

<sup>71</sup> Jörg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945*, trans. by Allison Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 483.

draws problematic moral equivalencies between the Allied bombing campaign and the Holocaust. As von Benda-Beckmann notes, historians such as Süß, Blank, and Arnold have dissociated themselves from Friedrich's approach, rejecting both his interpretive framework and his emotionally charged language as incompatible with a historically grounded and ethically coherent account of the air war.<sup>72</sup>

More commonly, scholars now acknowledge the scale of German civilian suffering while insisting on fundamental distinctions in intent and legal classification. Schwartz and Comer warn against framing Allied actions as morally equivalent to Nazi atrocities, noting that such comparisons risk minimising the unique genocidal intent behind the Holocaust.<sup>73</sup> They contend that while both groups suffered, moral equivalence claims obscure the radically different objectives and historical contexts of the violence inflicted. Unlike the Nazi killers, they emphasise, Allied aircrews 'fought a desperate battle for survival in dangerous European skies whilst often regretting the consequences of their allotted tasks'.<sup>74</sup>

This emphasis on intent, regret, and the psychological burden of the aircrews also resonates with how many veterans themselves remembered Dresden. As we have seen, veterans whose testimonies were archived by the International Bomber Command Centre (IBCC) often described the raid as a source of undeserved shame. One referred to it as 'the dreaded word' that always came up to delegitimise their efforts; another noted that the raid had come to be seen as a 'genocidal' act, not because they believed it, but because the public had imposed that

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<sup>72</sup> For detailed scholarly critiques of Friedrich's victim-centered approach, see Dietmar Süß, *Tod aus der Luft. Kriegsgesellschaft und Luftkrieg in Deutschland und England* (Munich: Siedler, 2011); Jörg Arnold, *The Allied Air War and Urban Memory. The Legacy of Strategic Bombing in Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Malte Thießen, *Eingebrannt ins Gedächtnis. Hamburgs Gedenken an Luftkrieg und Kriegsende 1943 bis 2005* (Munich: Dölling und Galitz, 2007). For a discussion of all three perspectives, see Bas von Benda-Beckmann, *German Historians and the Bombing of German Cities: The Contested Air War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 231–250.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Schwartz and Debra R. Comer, 'Comparative Victimisation and Victimhood during the Second World War: Claims of Moral Equivalence', *Journal of Military Ethics*, 17.2–3 (2018), pp. 92–107.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

interpretation.<sup>75</sup> Within this context, Gregg's use of the term genocide breaks from both academic consensus and dominant veteran narratives.

However, Gregg's words should not be dismissed as mere rhetorical excess. To use Frances Houghton's words, whilst she accepts that Second World War memoirs are 'notoriously vulnerable to charges of historical unreliability', she also implores the researcher to recognise that 'the embellishments, the factual discrepancies, the shifting and conflicting memories which naturally occur within the narratives of the soldier-raconteur... are precisely what make them a fascinating and rich source of evidence about the experience of war as it is lived and remembered throughout a former soldier's lifetime'.<sup>76</sup>

This interpretive sensitivity to the expressive and constructed nature of memory is echoed by oral historians such as Lynn Abrams and Alessandro Portelli, who each emphasise that testimony is shaped as much by present concerns as by past events. Abrams describes oral history as 'the performance of a speech act', urging attention not only to what is said but to how it is performed for an audience.<sup>77</sup> Portelli meanwhile contends that 'oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did'.<sup>78</sup> In this view, testimony becomes less a record of events than a negotiation through which the speaker retrospectively constructs meaning and identity. Similarly Houghton, drawing on Laura Marcus, argues that the value of veteran memoirs lies not in their literal accuracy but in their 'auto/biographical intention' (which Marcus defines as a sincere attempt 'to understand self and experience, and to make these clear to others').<sup>79</sup> This

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<sup>75</sup> James Greenhalgh, 'The Long Shadow of the Air War: Composure, Memory and the Renegotiation of Self in the Oral Testimonies of Bomber Command Veterans since 2015', *Contemporary British History*, 35.4 (2021), pp. 477–514.

<sup>76</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, p. 2., and p. 53.

<sup>77</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 130.

<sup>78</sup> Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 67.

<sup>79</sup> Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 3, cited in Houghton, p. 10.

perspective, Houghton suggests, allows such narratives to be taken seriously even when factual discrepancies arise.

Gregg's most incendiary claims, then, should not be seen as lapses of historical discipline, but a calculated narrative performance, an attempt to claim moral and experiential authority within a contested field of memory when conventional calm or silence could be read as complicity. Rather than reassuring the listener with detached professionalism, Gregg wielded emotional intensity to invert the moral hierarchy of wartime memory, placing the soldier, not the statesman or historian, at the centre of historical judgment. In this context, Gregg's indictment of Dresden is not historical distortion but a deliberate act of bearing witness. His memoir channels what Houghton calls the 'still-painful emotions' many veterans carried, for whom writing offered a 'meaningful opportunity to ventilate traumatic memories'.<sup>80</sup>

This helps us understand why, when discussing Dresden, Gregg refused to retreat into the language of tragic necessity. He insisted the bombing was morally indefensible, a betrayal of the very values Britain claimed to uphold. Islam et al. describe such memory acts as rare, noting that veterans typically internalise 'hegemonic dominance', aligning their recollections with prevailing narratives of national virtue.<sup>81</sup> Yet they also identify important exceptions: 'if the veteran is highly politically motivated and outspoken, they will narrate war experiences without being influenced by the ongoing cultural expectations and political adversities'.<sup>82</sup> In this light, Gregg's postwar political trajectory is telling. Disillusioned by the rehabilitation of German wartime industrialists such as Alfred Krupp, he became active in trade unionism, joined the British Communist Party, and campaigned against German rearmament.<sup>83</sup> His lifetime experiences instilled a profound scepticism toward state authority: a refusal to 'accept

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>81</sup> Islam et al., p. 219.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>83</sup> See Victor Gregg and Rick Stroud, *Soldier, Spy: A Survivor's Tale* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

that any one person is infallible', especially when power is wielded without accountability, and a deep mistrust of 'the statements of those who hold the reins of power'.<sup>84</sup>

However, while Gregg remained unflinching in his condemnation of Britain's wartime leadership, he consistently stopped short of blaming the RAF aircrews who carried out the raid. This distinction reflects a nuanced moral positioning that may exemplify what Ruben and LaPiere term a strategic management of 'public and private regard', the balance veterans navigate between their internal sense of self-worth (private regard) and their perception of how society values their service (public regard).<sup>85</sup>

Gregg's testimony complicates this binary framework. He expressed enduring pride in the Allied cause while describing the Dresden bombing as a personal source of shame, an event so morally aberrant that it destabilised the very justification for the war. This moral bifurcation suggests a fractured yet durable form of private regard: one that preserves pride in service while rejecting particular state actions as illegitimate. His rhetorical strategy (exonerating the aircrews while condemning those who issued the orders) allows him to maintain solidarity with fellow servicemen and protect the symbolic integrity of the soldier, even as he delivers a radical indictment of the political and military hierarchy.

Still such careful calibration, denouncing systemic decisions while reaffirming the honour of ordinary servicemen, may explain why Gregg's views, though provocative, remained broadly admissible within commemorative culture. For example, his claim that Churchill 'should have been shot' for authorising the Dresden raid, though extreme, was reported not as fringe provocation but as a morally serious indictment, legitimised by lived experience.<sup>86</sup> As

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<sup>84</sup> Gregg and Stroud (2011), *Rifleman*, p. 194.

<sup>85</sup> Mollie A. Ruben and Teagan LaPiere, 'Social Identity and the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Male Veterans', *Health Psychology Report*, 11.3 (2023), pp. 262–68

<sup>86</sup> Von Alexander Menden, 'Feuersturm in Dresden: "Was ich sah, hat mich zum Psychopathen gemacht"', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14 February 2015, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/feuersturm-in-dresden-was-ich-sah-hat-mich-zum-psychopathen-gemacht-1.2348026> [accessed 9 May 2025].

the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* observed, ‘if what every German commentator would rightly interpret as revisionism sounds different coming from Victor Gregg’s mouth, it is not because of his Cockney accent’.<sup>87</sup> Rather, it was his record that mattered: ‘he fought against the Nazis from the beginning of the Second World War to the end. He was with the Rifle Brigade at El Alamein, in the Italian campaign and as a parachutist at the Battle of Arnhem; all his friends died in battle. Secondly, he was the only Briton who experienced the bombing of Dresden in the city itself.’<sup>88</sup>

In Britain, Gregg’s eyewitness account became a recurring touchstone in national memory. His testimony circulated widely in broadcast media, and he took part in publicised reconciliation events with former enemies and fellow survivors.<sup>89</sup> Gregg described these encounters as cathartic, providing some relief from the guilt he had carried for decades.<sup>90</sup> By the time he turned one-hundred years old in 2019, *History Hit* called him ‘Britain’s most famous veteran’.<sup>91</sup>

Yet whilst Gregg undoubtedly became a well-known figure, questions remain about the limits of that recognition. Did his status as a veteran grant him unassailable authority in public discourse? Or was it his careful framing, targeting leadership while sparing servicemen, that

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Translation of: ‘Wenn das, was jedem deutschen Kommentator zu Recht als Revisionismus ausgelegt würde, aus dem Mund von Victor Gregg anders klingt, dann liegt das nicht an seinem Cockney-Akzent: Erstens kämpfte er von Beginn des Zweiten Weltkriegs bis zum Ende gegen die Nazis. Er war mit der Rifle Brigade in El-Alamein, beim Italienfeldzug und als Fallschirmspringer bei der Schlacht bei Arnheim; alle seine Freunde fielen im Kampf. Zweitens war er der einzige Brite, der die Bombardierung Dresdens in der Stadt selbst erlebte.’

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> See Amie Gordon, ‘British and German WWII Veterans Meet 74 Years After They Fought’, *MailOnline*, 11 July 2016 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3682056/British-German-WWII-veterans-shake-hands-74-years-fought-battle-Battle-El-Alamein.html> [accessed 5 July 2024]., and History Hit, *Out of the Inferno: Surviving Dresden* (History Hit, 2018) <https://access.historyhit.com/videos/out-of-the-inferno-surviving-dresden> [accessed 5 July 2024]. The latter shows Gregg meeting Irene Uhlendorf, a child at the time of the bombing.

<sup>90</sup> Mike Ridley, ‘Second World War Veteran, 100, Finally Beats His Demons After Surviving RAF Firebombing of Dresden That Killed 1000s’, *Sun*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/10928737/ww2-veteran-100-firebombing-dresden/> [accessed 5 July 2024].

<sup>91</sup> History Hit, ‘Victor Gregg: Britain’s Most Famous War Veteran Turns 100’, *History Hit*, 2019, <https://access.historyhit.com/videos/victor-gregg-britain-s-most-famous-war-veteran-turns-100> [accessed 5 July 2024].

made his critique palatable to a public still emotionally invested in Britain's wartime self-image? In what contexts, and under what conditions, were his claims embraced, contested, or ignored? These questions prompt a closer analysis of the framing and reception of Gregg's interventions, particularly in online media. Were challenges to his views driven purely by disagreement with his arguments, or were they shaped by how those arguments were mediated, editorialised, and positioned for public consumption? The rest of the chapter addresses these questions directly, tracing the deployment of, and reactions to, Gregg's testimony across online news platforms and digital commentary.

### Media Coverage of Victor Gregg, 2011–2021

Between 2011 and 2021, Victor Gregg's experiences and insights received considerable attention from major newspapers and media outlets. His story as a survivor of the Dresden bombings and a Second World War veteran was a focal point of numerous articles and public social media posts. Whilst Gregg consistently appeared in UK media across the decade (for example alongside his BBC appearances he was featured on *ITV News* and ITV's *Good Morning Britain* television show in 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2020) attention predictably coalesced around a few key catalysts; primarily his book launches, but also significant historical anniversaries (such as Remembrance Days, the 70th and 75th anniversaries of Dresden, as well as his 100th birthday), whilst he also produced a handful of his own opinion articles in the *Guardian*.<sup>92</sup> Altogether, this prompted a wide variety of online discussions about his

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<sup>92</sup> For Victor Gregg's televised appearances, see *ITV News*, "I Was Almost Ashamed of Being British": Dresden Remembered 70 Years On', *ITV News*, 13 February 2015 <https://www.itv.com/news/2015-02-13/i-was-almost-ashamed-of-being-british-dresden-remembered-70-years-on>; *Good Morning Britain*, 'Remembrance Day: Two Veterans Tell Their Very Different Accounts of War', *YouTube*, 10 November 2017 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cw6\\_6\\_s9CyU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cw6_6_s9CyU); Helen Kelly, 'ITV GMB: Veteran Lashes Out at BBC in Licence Fee Backlash', *Express.co.uk*, 6 June 2019 <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1139414/ITV-Good-Morning-Britain-veteran-BBC-licence-fee-Piers-Morgan-Susanna-Reid-video-watch>; *Good Morning Britain*, 'Victor Gregg Describes Witnessing Dresden Bombings First-Hand 74 Years Ago', *YouTube*, 13 February 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vNT7012BJg>; *Good Morning Britain*, 'Dresden Survivor Describes the Horrors 75 Years On', *YouTube*, 13 February 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7bPRMoYuzI> [all accessed 5 July 2024]. For Gregg's authored commentary, see Victor Gregg, 'Whether by Drone or by Gun, Killing the Bad Guy Is Never That Simple',

experiences and insights. As will be shown, his political opinions in particular were often seized upon as part of broader agendas.

In the first wave of attention given to Gregg, in February 2011, Gregg's accounts were prominently featured in the *Daily Express* under the title 'Surviving Dresden'.<sup>93</sup> The piece was published to coincide with the 65th anniversary of the bombings and was part of a broader promotion for his memoir. The *Independent* also published a review of *Rifleman*, underscoring the riveting and often shocking nature of Gregg's wartime experiences.<sup>94</sup> The review highlighted his vivid descriptions of the bombings and the subsequent firestorm that engulfed Dresden, emphasising the personal trauma and moral complexities he faced.

However, critical media engagement with *Rifleman* was minimal. The *Express* article for example, whilst presenting the work as 'a unique insight into the terrible horrors of the firestorm', constituted an abridged extract from Gregg's book rather than a standard book review.<sup>95</sup> This was a substantial feature of its presentation, taking a narrative approach to introduce the book's themes, revolving around Gregg's experiences during the Dresden bombing as a POW. Accordingly, it didn't independently engage with the book's content or question Gregg's account.

The *Independent* meanwhile featured the book in its 'Wednesday Book' section, which typically included concise reviews or highlights of newly released books.<sup>96</sup> In this instance, the article also mentions the book alongside a promotional offer, which again suggests some level of partnership or commercial interest. Similarly to the *Express*, the *Independent* did not delve

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*Guardian*, 28 March 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/28/drone-gun-killing-bad-guys>; Victor Gregg, 'I Survived the Bombing of Dresden and Continue to Believe It Was a War Crime', *Guardian*, 15 February 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/feb/15/bombing-dresden-war-crime> [both accessed 5 July 2024].

<sup>93</sup> Victor Gregg and Jane Warren, 'Surviving Dresden', *The Express*, 7 February 2011, p. 28.

<sup>94</sup> Martin Fletcher, 'A Born Survivor's Gripping Tale; The Wednesday Book', *Independent*, 21 March 2011, p.18.

<sup>95</sup> Gregg and Warren, 'Surviving Dresden'.

<sup>96</sup> Fletcher, 'A Born Survivor's Gripping Tale'.

into a critical analysis of *Rifleman*. The discussion is brief (just under four hundred words) and primarily promotional, lacking in-depth engagement with the content or themes of the book. Whilst Gregg's memories of Dresden are described as 'possibly one of the most shocking accounts of warfare you will ever read', once again there is no questioning of Gregg's account or deeper examination of the narrative.<sup>97</sup>

This reception, however, contrasts sharply with the more sustained public discussion that would emerge nearly a decade later around historian Sinclair McKay's book *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, the subject of my third case study chapter.<sup>98</sup> While Gregg's memoir was largely treated as a powerful but contained personal narrative, media engagement with McKay's book often ventured further into public debates about British wartime conduct and moral responsibility. One of the few tangible connections between the two cases is Gary Sheffield's *Mail on Sunday* review, where he praised *Rifleman* as one of the finest first-hand accounts of infantry combat.<sup>99</sup> Notably, the First World War historian would later criticise McKay's reluctance to offer moral judgment, positioning Gregg's candour as a comparative strength.

Yet Sheffield's own treatment of Gregg was limited in scope. While acknowledging Gregg's statement that Dresden made him 'ashamed to be British', he did not explore the ethical weight of that admission.<sup>100</sup> Instead, his praise focused on the memoir's visceral descriptions of frontline combat rather than its moral implications. Similarly, a *Daily Mail* article from August 2011 hailed *Rifleman* as an 'unputdownable memoir', with Peter McKay noting that Gregg's 'coldly factual' depiction of the Dresden firestorm surpassed even Vonnegut's

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Sinclair McKay, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* (London: Viking, 2020).

<sup>99</sup> Gary Sheffield, 'The Boy Who Learned to Kill and Hate War: Review of *Rifleman: A Frontline Life*', *Mail on Sunday*, 15 May 2011, Books section, p. 12.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* in emotional intensity.<sup>101</sup> *Rifleman* was thus framed as a witness narrative to be admired, not as a political intervention to be debated.

The focus on the emotive power of Gregg's story also permeated the television and radio appearances he made in 2011. For example, the *BBC Radio 2* documentary *Victor*, narrated by actor John Hurt, detailed Gregg's personal and often harrowing experiences through dramatic reconstructions and his own reflections, mirroring the structure of his memoir.<sup>102</sup> The narration, and Gregg's storytelling, once again reconstruct his life from pre-war England through his wartime experiences, emphasising the horrors and personal struggles he endured. The documentary uses this narrative form to highlight the impact of war on an individual, focusing on Gregg's personal journey and the dramatic events he survived.

From the outset then, *Victor* presents Gregg as an ordinary person thrust into extraordinary circumstances, enhancing the dramatic and heroic aspects of Gregg's life story: 'This is the true story of an ordinary man who came to live an extraordinary life. Against all the odds he survives some of the most ferocious battles the world has ever seen.'<sup>103</sup> Lines such as, 'Listen then to Victor', imply authenticity and significance.<sup>104</sup> It positions Gregg not just as a storyteller but as a witness to history, whose personal testimony carries weight and deserves attention. Similarly, by stating that Gregg is 'ready to speak', the narrative implies that there is something significant and previously unspoken that will now be revealed.<sup>105</sup> This builds anticipation and underscores the importance of Gregg's personal reflections within the broader context of war history.

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<sup>101</sup> Peter McKay, 'Warrior with a Story to Inspire Us All', *The Peter McKay Column, Daily Mail*, 22 August 2011, p. 17.

<sup>102</sup> BBC Radio 2, 2011. *Victor*. [radio documentary] BBC Radio 2, 12 November 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0171p6v> [accessed 5 July 2024].

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

Notably, the documentary also avoided critically analysing or challenging Gregg's account. Whilst there are questions posed to Gregg by producer Andy West, sometimes piercing in nature (such as asking whether Gregg's bayonet training with straw prepared him for 'sticking a bayonet into another man'), it lacked any significant commentary from historians, military experts, or cultural analysts that might provide critical insight or contest Gregg's views on the war.<sup>106</sup> The use of first-person narrative throughout the documentary, such as when Gregg describes personal encounters on the battlefield or his feelings about the aftermath, 'you smell them as you get near to it. Burning flesh is terrible', focuses again on his individual experiences and emotional reactions, reinforcing the authenticity of his personal story rather than exploring the broader historical context.<sup>107</sup> This absence is notable in sections where such analysis could provide additional nuance. Gregg's reflection on the impact of war for example and his continuing sense of guilt, 'the man who presses a button is a man who commits the sin', is presented without critique or discussion of the moral complexities of war.<sup>108</sup>

Instead, the strategic placement of specially commissioned music by Thea Gilmore throughout the documentary ensures the focus of the listener remains fixed on the emotional and dramatic elements of Victor Gregg's story. The lyrics often parallel the narrative moments, enhancing the listener's engagement and (attempting to) deepen the emotional resonance of Gregg's wartime experiences. For example, the melancholy lyrics 'It's graduation day, and the ghost of '39 will be slipping across the line', played towards the end of the documentary, resonates with the theme of passing time and the enduring impact of past experiences.<sup>109</sup> The reference to 'the ghost of '39' serves as a reminder of the war's long-lasting effects on

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

individuals and societies. It suggests (rather unsubtly) a graduation from one era of life to another, for an individual deeply changed by the experiences of war.

One review in the *Spectator* by radio critic Kate Chisholm raised reservations about this form of presentation.<sup>110</sup> She suggested that the poetic narration by John Hurt and the musical score might have actually diminished Gregg's authority as a witness. The review argued that Victor's blunt and honest voice about his wartime experiences was powerful enough without needing to be softened or made to seem unreal. It concluded, 'Victor gave us a perspective on war that is personal and yet also universal. If that's not history, what is?'<sup>111</sup> Again then, this criticism did not question the value of the testimony itself, but rather centred on the idea that the documentary's artistic elements could lead listeners to doubt Gregg's existence and the authenticity of his testimony, potentially undermining the significance of his personal reflections on historical events.

For others though, the emotional appeal of the documentary was lauded, with the *Telegraph* describing the documentary as 'remarkable': 'Here's a man who joined the Army as a teenager, fought at El Alamein, parachuted into Arnhem, was captured, escaped, was captured again. His stories are vivid, lucid, earthily unsentimental, salted by having seen death close-up many times.'<sup>112</sup> A longer review in the *Sunday Telegraph* also praised Gregg for his sincerity and the powerful narrative of his wartime experiences, suggesting '[f]ew old soldiers speak as bluntly or as honestly as Victor Gregg'.<sup>113</sup> This opening line sets the overall tone for the review, establishing Gregg as a unique and frank narrator. It also hints at division in the veteran community over how the bombing campaign should be perceived and discussed. However, the author does not pass personal judgment on the matter. Contentious aspects of Gregg's statement

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<sup>110</sup> Kate Chisholm, 'History Lesson: Arts - Radio', *Spectator*, 19 November 2011, p. 56.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Gillian Reynolds, 'Gillian Reynolds: Pick of the Day', *Telegraph*, 12 November 2011, p.39.

<sup>113</sup> Cole Moreton, 'When the Last of Them Have Gone', *Sunday Telegraph*, 13 November 2011, p. 25.

(such as the statement ‘I was quite aware why we had joined the war – because of what the Third Reich was doing – but at Dresden, we did worse’) are left unanswered.<sup>114</sup> If anything, the review paints a portrait of Victor Gregg as a veteran who is not afraid to confront and articulate the darker aspects of war, making his narrative both compelling and controversial, but also *more* authentic.

Further praise came from 2013 articles in both *The Telegraph* and *The Spectator*, which framed Gregg as a uniquely credible witness.<sup>115</sup> In *The Telegraph*, Tom Chivers explored Gregg’s condemnation of British bombing policy and leaders like Churchill and Attlee with qualified deference. Chivers does not necessarily endorse Gregg’s views in their entirety but suggests that Gregg’s direct experience as a survivor grants him a unique authority to make such judgments. He states, ‘I don’t know, and can’t know, whether the Dresden attack was militarily justified’, employing a double assertion of his uncertainty to emphasise the limitations of his own knowledge and perspective.<sup>116</sup>

Chivers does offer a cautious contextualisation of the bombing, noting that ‘Britain was in total war, and had suffered horrifying attacks of its own’.<sup>117</sup> By invoking the Luftwaffe raids and the broader logic of total war, he frames the Allied strategy as part of a brutal but reciprocal military calculus. At the same time, he distances himself from outright condemnation or defence of the raids, remarking: ‘Nowadays it would be morally unthinkable, of course: more practically, I believe that the tactic of attacking civilians to undermine a country’s morale... is not thought to be effective.’<sup>118</sup> His use of tentative, impersonal phrasing (‘not thought to be

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Tom Chivers, ‘Dresden Deserves to Be Remembered’, *Telegraph*, 13 February 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

effective’) sidesteps retrospective moral judgment, instead suggesting a shift in standards over time.

Yet Chivers stops short of challenging Gregg’s moral stance. ‘Mr. Gregg believes we should [apologise]’, he writes, ‘but he was there and has earned a right that I don’t have’.<sup>119</sup> This acknowledgement foregrounds the special status accorded to firsthand experience in public discourse. Rather than dispute Gregg’s claim, Chivers defers to it, implying that veterans possess a moral legitimacy unavailable to journalists or commentators. His authority rests not on rhetorical skill or historical expertise, but on lived experience; a proximity to violence that renders judgment not only permissible but earned.

The *Spectator* took this logic further, explicitly contrasting Gregg’s authority with that of modern journalists.<sup>120</sup> ‘Journalists like to call themselves witnesses to history’, the article begins, ‘but there is a key difference between a war correspondent and a participant in the events he or she recalls’.<sup>121</sup> Unlike reporters, it argues, Gregg had no choice about his proximity to violence. This lack of agency, combined with his moral clarity, lends his account a particular authenticity. His memoir is described as ‘the clear, unadorned recollection of an old soldier’ who not only remembers each bullet and comrade lost, but ‘uniquely, as a prisoner-of-war, [he] witnessed the destruction of Dresden from the ground up’.<sup>122</sup> This emphasis on direct, embodied knowledge reinforces the same hierarchy of credibility Chivers gestures toward, one in which Gregg’s account carries more weight precisely because it is not mediated by professional detachment.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Walter Ellis, ‘Riflemen by Victor Gregg Is a Book You Ought to Read’, *Spectator*, 21 March 2013, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/riflemen-by-victor-gregg-is-a-book-you-ought-to-read/> [accessed 6 July 2024].

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

Crucially the *Spectator* lends weight to Gregg's claim 'we were supposed to be the good guys, but we'd ended up worse than them', by insisting that *Rifleman* is 'not a leftist text. Nor is it remotely pacifist.'<sup>123</sup> This disclaimer functions as a rhetorical shield, anticipating and deflecting accusations that Gregg's perspective is ideologically suspect. Author Walter Ellis reinforces this framing by praising Gregg's 'robust thinking', casting him as a soldier who understood his duty and believed 'the enemy had it coming to them'.<sup>124</sup> In a telling comparison, Ellis contrasts Gregg favourably with George Orwell, suggesting that Gregg was the sort of man who, if faced in combat, 'would have fixed his sword and, unlike Orwell, run you through without a second's thought'.<sup>125</sup> Such imagery affirms Gregg's authority by aligning it with unflinching martial resolve, distancing him from more hesitant or intellectual figures.

Yet this ideological positioning is conspicuously selective. Omitted entirely is Gregg's postwar involvement with the British Communist Party. Initially anti-communist due to his wartime encounters with Russian forces, which had left him 'with a revulsion for anything Russian', in the early 1950s Gregg became involved with the National Society of Painters to facilitate his work as a sprayer at the Festival of Britain, a union that was influenced by communist members.<sup>126</sup> He also became disillusioned with the British Labour Party's stance on certain issues, notably the reinstatement of German 'war criminal and steel magnate' Alfred Krupp's fortune, which was primarily opposed by the Communist Party.<sup>127</sup> This led him to join the Party, where he became actively involved in its functions.

Whilst he 'blotted [his] copybook' at his first meeting by questioning a Stalin speech which was being discussed, 'asking [other members] if they really took all this propaganda and bullshit at face value', Gregg and his wife campaigned with the Party against German

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Gregg and Stroud (2011), *Rifleman*, p. 193.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

rearmament in London.<sup>128</sup> As a ‘suitable and politically reliable comrade’, Gregg eventually became chauffeur for the chairman of the Moscow Narodny Bank.<sup>129</sup> In this position, he transported VIPs and carried sensitive documents between various Russian cities, a role which would lead to his eventual recruitment as an informant by British intelligence services.<sup>130</sup> That the *Spectator* omits this history suggests that Gregg’s authority as a witness is sustained not despite his politics, but because those politics can be reframed or effaced. One is left to ask: had Gregg’s memoir more openly embraced pacifist or leftist positions, would it still have been hailed as a ‘valuable corrective to the larger narrative, illustrating that war is something that happens to people who never asked for it but are the most likely to be its victims’?<sup>131</sup>

A clear instance of how Gregg’s testimony could be recontextualised for political ends emerged in 2015, when the *Daily Mail* attacked the Archbishop of Canterbury for expressing ‘profound regret’ over the bombing of Dresden (the subject of the following chapter), accusing him of apologising ‘to the Nazis’ while omitting any mention of ‘RAF heroes killed by Hitler’.<sup>132</sup> The same article noted that Welby’s remarks had ‘sparked furore among veterans and Conservative politicians already angered by BBC news reports... dominated by graphic accounts of the deaths of German victims’.<sup>133</sup> These reports, it claimed, repeatedly featured ‘an interview with a British prisoner of war – who called the bombing of Dresden a ‘war crime’.<sup>134</sup>

That prisoner, it turned out, was Victor Gregg. In a companion piece more directly targeting the BBC, the *Mail* identified him by name and drew attention to his emphatic response

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 194–195.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>131</sup> Ellis, ‘*Rifleman* by Victor Gregg Is a Book You Ought to Read’.

<sup>132</sup> Larisa Brown and Inderdeep Bains, ‘BBC’s Insult to Hero Pilots: Dresden Coverage Attacks Britain’, *MailOnline*, 14 February 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2952971/BBC-s-insult-hero-pilots-Veterans-rage-Dresden-coverage-attacks-Britain-worse-Nazis-ignores-RAF-s-sacrifice.html> [accessed 9 May 2025].

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

(‘Definitely’) when asked whether the bombing constituted a war crime.<sup>135</sup> The article featured a supplementary timeline highlighting the BBC’s apparent overemphasis on German suffering. Gregg’s comments, including descriptions of British actions as ‘demonic’, ‘evil’, and likened to ‘roasting children alive’, were reproduced without context, amplifying their shock value.<sup>136</sup> While these terms originally referred to strategic decisions made by British leadership, the *Mail* presented them as sweeping indictments of the war effort.

Ultimately the headline, ‘BBC’s insult to hero pilots’, encapsulated the piece’s strategy: to frame the BBC’s coverage as a slight against the RAF, rather than engage seriously with Gregg’s testimony.<sup>137</sup> His statements were not critiqued directly but used symbolically to exemplify institutional betrayal. Gregg became a device in a broader narrative, an entry in a running tally of perceived imbalance, where German suffering was deemed overrepresented and British sacrifice sidelined (Figure 4.4).

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

Figure 4.4: Timeline of BBC's 2015 Dresden Coverage:

**HOUR BY HOUR, THEIR ONE-SIDED STORY: BBC'S COVERAGE OF DRESDEN**

The BBC's coverage of Dresden began on Thursday night:

**BBC News at Ten, 10.24-10.28pm**

Report dominated by disturbing images of German casualties and a graphic interview with prisoner of war Victor Gregg, 96, who talks of bodies 'exploding'. A whole minute is devoted to survivors Anita John and Nora Lang, who describe seeing 'the dead everywhere' and thinking it was 'the end of the world'.

Only 23 seconds are given to RAF veteran Harry Irons, 91, who is asked: 'Did you ever feel guilty after the war about what had happened at Dresden?' He replies: 'No, not really. I think because we were very young and we lost so many boys ourselves.'

The reporter says the campaign showed how the allies 'deliberately unleashed devastation on civilians'.

**BBC Breakfast, 6.07-6.10am yesterday**

Focuses on German survivor Ursula Elsner, who says: 'We clung to a lamppost but one woman didn't make it ... she was sucked into the burning ruins.'

No one from Bomber Command or UK military is featured. The only alternative view is from Dresden Military Museum's Gorch Pieken, saying: 'It is just an example of warfare and of course it makes sense ... Dresden was part of the enemy and you have to hit the enemy to end the Second World War.'



© Galina Biderwell/Getty Images

The BBC dedicated 32 minutes of coverage to the Dresden bombings (aftermath pictured) - of which just 23 seconds was spent on an interview with an RAF veteran

**BBC Breakfast, 7.40-7.48am**

Focuses on German victims, with no mention of Britons who died. Another interview with Victor Gregg, who says: 'We were supposed to be the good guys ... to rescue the EU from the evil of the Third Reich and we finished up worse than they were.'

Interviews with Nora Lang and Anita John, who says her parents suffocated in a cellar in Dresden.

**BBC Breakfast, 8.42-8.45am**

Repeated Victor Gregg interview. No mention of Britons who died.

**World at One, 7 minutes**

Another interview with Victor Gregg, who says the campaign was 'definitely' a war crime, calls British forces' actions 'demonic' and 'evil' and accuses them of roasting children alive. He adds: 'I've never seen people who didn't have any weapons being attacked before.'

**BBC News at One, 1.16pm-1.20pm**

Interview with Ursula Elsner. No mention of British loss of life.

**BBC News at Six, 6.16-6.19pm**

Report features interview with a former Hitler Youth member, aged 12 during the bombings, who recalls the 'whole city burning'. Comments from Justin Welby, and footage of demonstrators in Dresden. No mention of British sacrifice.

For regular readers of the *Daily Mail* and *MailOnline*, such coverage is characteristic of a wider and long-standing pattern of BBC criticism. The *Mail* frequently accuses the BBC of liberal or metropolitan bias, particularly in its political and historical reporting. These attacks reflect broader media dynamics in the UK, where the BBC's public service remit and licence fee funding model place it in a 'complex and demanding news landscape', under persistent scrutiny from both political and commercial interests.<sup>138</sup> Seaton characterises the BBC as a 'guardian of public understanding', but one that is perennially vulnerable to political pressure,

<sup>138</sup> Ofcom, *Drivers of Perceptions of Due Impartiality: The BBC and the Wider News Landscape* (London: Ofcom, 2022), p. 5

cultural shifts, and claims of representational failure.<sup>139</sup> The Corporation's mandate to speak to and for 'the whole baggy, untidy nation' renders it both symbolically powerful and structurally exposed, particularly when critics claim it has strayed from that inclusive mission.<sup>140</sup> As Seaton notes, the BBC is 'a public service that provides a binding capacity within the nation, an image of the nation to itself and an image of the nation abroad', making it especially prone to becoming a site of political contestation.<sup>141</sup>

In 2011, following a contentious Brussels summit, the BBC itself acknowledged that 'it is always challenging for an impartial news organisation to report without inflaming strong views on either side of the debate'.<sup>142</sup> In the aftermath of the eventual Brexit referendum, BBC News Director James Harding again issued a statement in response to accusations of bias from both the Remain and Leave camps.<sup>143</sup> In more recent years, the *Mail* has continued to target the BBC's coverage of a wide range of issues, from climate change to the Gaza crisis.<sup>144</sup> Another common point of criticism is the BBC's funding model, whereby a licensing fee is required from UK television owners. The *Mail* has long been sceptical of the fairness and

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<sup>139</sup> Jean. Seaton, 'The BBC: Guardian of Public Understanding', in *Guardians of Public Value: How Public Organisations Become and Remain Institutions*, ed. by Arjen Boin, Lauren A. Fahy and Paul 't Hart (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 87–110.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>142</sup> Helen Boaden, 'The Challenge of Reporting Britain's Role in Europe', *BBC - The Editors*, 20 December 2011, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2011/12/the\\_challenge\\_of\\_reporting.html](https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2011/12/the_challenge_of_reporting.html) [accessed 5 July 2024].

<sup>143</sup> Jane Martinson, 'BBC Hits Back at Daily Mail Accusation of "Brexit Bias"', *Guardian*, 13 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/oct/13/bbc-hits-back-against-daily-mail-accusation-of-brexit-bias> [accessed 10 May 2025].

<sup>144</sup> See for example, Colin Fernandez, 'BBC Climate Editor Whose Sister Is an Insulate Britain Fanatic Made False Claims on Global Warming Including Worldwide Deaths Are Rising and Madagascar Is on the Verge of Famine, Inquiry Finds', *MailOnline*, 11 May 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10799153/BBC-climate-editor-false-claims-global-warming-Panorama-broadcast-inquiry-finds.html> [accessed 6 July 2024]; and Mary O'Connor and Natalie Lisbona, 'BBC Plunged into New Bias Row After Journalists Behind Damning Report Accusing Israeli Soldiers of Beating and Humiliating Medics "Like" Videos Celebrating Hamas Terror Attacks', *MailOnline*, 25 April 2024, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13205515/BBC-plunged-new-bias-row-journalists-damning-report-accusing-Israeli-soldiers-beating-humiliating-medics-like-videos-celebrating-Hamas-terror-attacks.html> [accessed 6 July 2024].

sustainability of this model, especially in the context of the evolving digital media landscape and, more recently, an enduring ‘cost of living’ crisis.<sup>145</sup>

In June 2019, this issue in particular exposed Gregg’s dual role for right-leaning outlets. Following another of Gregg’s television appearances on *Good Morning Britain*, Gregg was quoted by the *Mail*, *Express*, and *Sun* accusing the BBC of ‘robbing the piggybank[s]’ of the elderly, an emotive metaphor used to condemn the Corporation’s decision to reintroduce licence fees for over-75s.<sup>146</sup> His statement, ‘It’s taking away, it’s only two days ago they were patting all these old people on the head and calling them heroes’, intensified the charge of betrayal.<sup>147</sup> Here, Gregg’s words function less as individual complaint than as symbolic ammunition in a broader campaign to challenge the BBC’s claim to moral and national legitimacy.

In the context of June 2019, Gregg was alluding to the commemorations of the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings. These ceremonies, much like VE Day the following year, again included extensive media coverage, public acknowledgments, and expressions of gratitude toward veterans for their service and sacrifices during the war.<sup>148</sup> In this light, Gregg’s comment underlines a perceived inconsistency or insensitivity in the BBC’s actions. Just after publicly honouring these individuals, the decision to impose license fees, which had been free

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<sup>145</sup> See for example, Matt Strudwick, ‘Nearly 130 People Prosecuted EVERY DAY for Failing to Pay TV Licence’, *MailOnline*, 28 March 2024, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12964295/fail-pay-tv-licence-people-prosecuted-crippling-medical-conditions.html> [accessed 6 July 2024]; and Glen Owen, ‘Ministers to Scale Back BBC Licence Fee to Ease the Cost-of-Living’, *MailOnline*, 8 July 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12278743/Ministers-plan-scale-159-BBC-licence-fee-ease-cost-living-crisis.html> [accessed 6 July 2024].

<sup>146</sup> See Joel Adams, ‘Dozens of Furious TV Viewers REFUSE to Pay Their Licences’, *MailOnline*, 10 June 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7134261/Dozens-furious-TV-viewers-REFUSE-pay-licences.html> [accessed 6 July 2024]; Kelly, ‘ITV GMB: Veteran Lashes Out at BBC’ and Ellie Cambridge, ‘WW2 PoW, 99, Accuses BBC of “Robbing the Piggy Banks” of Our Heroes as Free TV Licence Axed for Over-75s’, *Sun*, 11 June 2019, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/9279283/ww2-pow-99-accuses-bbc-of-robbing-the-piggy-banks-of-our-heroes-as-free-tv-licence-axed-for-over-75s/> [accessed 6 July 2024].

<sup>147</sup> Kelly, ‘ITV GMB: Veteran lashes out at BBC’.

<sup>148</sup> BBC News, ‘D-Day: Veterans and World Leaders Mark 75th Anniversary’, *BBC News*, 6 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48536906> [accessed 6 July 2024].

for all over-75s since 2000, struck him and many others as particularly jarring and disrespectful. In reporting these sentiments, the articles covering Gregg's criticism of the BBC's decision present him in a heroic light, as he is referred to as part of a generation which 'saved the world'.<sup>149</sup>

Gregg's narrative then, while deeply personal and poignant, has certainly been appropriated to serve varying political interests, demonstrating how adaptable and instrumental such testimonies can be. However, his forthright criticisms of wartime decisions only appear to have become controversial, amongst news articles at least, when they have been perceived to bolster a 'leftist' political agenda. It should be noted for example, that just a single day after the *Mail* criticised the BBC for its focus on Gregg's testimony in 2015, it went on to publish an extract from Gregg's 2013 book *Dresden: A Survivor's Story*, with the headline reverting in tone to describing it as an 'astonishing account', whilst it continued to circulate such articles on subsequent anniversaries of the bombing.<sup>150</sup>

Still, there is another layer of detail we can add here. In a 2019 *BBC Breakfast* interview, Gregg described the UK's departure from the EU as 'breaking [his] heart', a candid and emotive statement that might typically provoke criticism from right-leaning or Eurosceptic outlets.<sup>151</sup> Yet in this instance, the *Express* reported his comments with notable restraint. Rather than discrediting his views, the article framed them with respect, emphasising his long life, military service, and the poignancy of his reflections.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Kelly, 'ITV GMB: Veteran lashes out at BBC'.

<sup>150</sup> See Victor Gregg, 'Images That Brutalised My Mind for Years', *MailOnline*, 14 February 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2953385/I-watched-sank-exhausted-ground-died-pyre-smoke-flame-astonishing-account-British-POW-caught-Dresden-bombing.html> [accessed 29 August 2023].

<sup>151</sup> Mia Jankowicz, '100-Year-Old Veteran Gives Impromptu Anti-Brexit Speech on Live TV', *The New European*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/brexit-news-victor-gregg-100-year-old-veteran-on-bbc-breakfast-brexit-61744/> [accessed 10 May 2025].

<sup>152</sup> Helen Daly, 'War Veteran Victor Gregg says Brexit is "Breaking His Heart"', *Express.co.uk*, 15 October 2019 <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1190903/Brexit-news-war-veteran-Victor-Gregg-BBC-Breakfast-Dan-Walker-video> [accessed 6 July 2024].

Gregg's expression of dismay, '[i]t makes me want to cry thinking about it', was used to evoke empathy, casting him as a sorrowful but dignified elder.<sup>153</sup> His exchange with the presenters (including Dan Walker's gentle reassurance that he shouldn't be so hard on himself) and the article's reference to viewer praise on social media further reinforced this framing.<sup>154</sup> Gregg's views were not politicised but humanised; his veteran status lent moral authority, allowing him to speak from a position seemingly above partisan rancour. In this context, his emotional honesty did not undermine his credibility, it again enhanced it, positioning him as a figure whose lived experience conferred the right to speak on national matters with gravity and sincerity.

Certainly, bipartisan respect and admiration characterised the tone of the obituaries when Gregg, like Captain Tom Moore, passed away in 2021. In the articles which accompanied their deaths, many further parallels emerged. Captain Tom's obituaries sought to describe his early life, his military career in detail, and his rise to fame at the age of 99.<sup>155</sup> They narrated his journey from being a young soldier to becoming a national hero, reflecting on significant life events that shaped him. Several obituaries reflected on how his service in India and Burma influenced his later life, particularly his views on public service and the NHS, which he experienced both during and after the war.

Gregg's obituaries, whilst fewer in absolute number, still featured in (amongst others) *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, adopting comparable structures.<sup>156</sup> They

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> See for example BBC News, 'Captain Sir Tom Moore: "National Inspiration" Dies with COVID-19', *BBC News*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-55881753> [accessed 6 July 2024]; Stephen Bates, 'Captain Sir Tom Moore Obituary', *Guardian*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/02/capt-sir-tom-moore-obituary> [accessed 6 July 2024]; and Anthony Hayward, 'Remembering Captain Tom Moore, the War Veteran Who Inspired a Nation', *Independent*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/captain-tom-moore-obituary-war-veteran-raised-money-nhs-b1796107.html> [accessed 6 July 2024].

<sup>156</sup> See *The Times*, 'Victor Gregg Obituary', *The Times*, 20 October 2021, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/article/victor-gregg-obituary-8krz7xzrg> [accessed 6 July 2024]; *Telegraph* Obituaries, 'Victor Gregg, Rifleman with a Rebellious Streak Who Was Captured at Arnhem and Searched for

provided accounts of his harsh upbringing in King's Cross, London, his decision to join the army instead of continuing with petty crime, and his harrowing experiences at war. Again, these narratives sought to demonstrate how his past influenced his later views and writings, delving into the psychological and moral impact of his war experiences. The *Telegraph* recorded that for Gregg, Dresden 'had made him feel like a murderer and had altered his whole concept of war'.<sup>157</sup>

A favourable portrayal may be expected from the *Guardian* obituary written by Rick Stroud, who had developed a close relationship with Gregg.<sup>158</sup> Stroud helped produce Gregg's autobiographies, and their close collaboration allowed Stroud to deeply explore Gregg's extensive wartime experiences and his life afterwards. Stroud's role was not only as a biographer but also as a confidant and friend, helping to share Gregg's personal stories and insights with a wider audience. However, it should be noted that none of these obituaries, whilst noting Gregg's postwar aversion to authority (symbolised perhaps most poignantly by his act of throwing his Army kitbag containing his medals out of the window of the train on his way home in 1945), offered any rebuttal to his portrayal of Dresden.<sup>159</sup>

Gregg then, as a decorated and respected war veteran, occupied a distinctive and at times contradictory position within British cultural memory. His lived experience of the Dresden bombing, combined with a life of military service and political engagement, endowed his testimony with a rare kind of public legitimacy. As Houghton argues, published veteran memoirs operate not merely as recollections of personal experience but as 'vectors of memory';

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Survivors in the Rubble Following the Dresden Firestorm - Obituary', *Telegraph*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2021/11/24/victor-gregg-rifleman-rebellious-streak-captured-arnhem-searched/> [accessed 6 July 2024]; and Rick Stroud, 'El Alamein, Dresden and a Cold War Spy: The Incredible Life of Victor Gregg', *Guardian*, 17 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/17/el-alamein-dresden-and-a-cold-war-spy-the-incredible-life-of-victor-gregg> [accessed 17 October 2021].

<sup>157</sup> *Telegraph* Obituaries, 'Victor Gregg'.

<sup>158</sup> Rick Stroud, 'El Alamein, Dresden and a Cold War Spy'.

<sup>159</sup> *Telegraph* Obituaries, 'Victor Gregg'.

deliberate constructions that carry private memory into public discourse, offering a space where individual recollection collides with collective meaning-making.<sup>160</sup> Gregg's memoirs, and the interviews that accompanied them, exemplify this function. His account unsettled the moral architecture of Britain's wartime narrative in the media precisely because it originated from within the very ranks that such narratives are built to honour.

It may be assumed that in the relative absence of critical framing of his arguments, Gregg's wartime service and unflinching honesty would secure his authority in the public domain. Ruben and LaPiere's 2023 study of military social identity suggests that when veterans derive self-worth from public regard, how they believe society perceives their service, they become especially vulnerable to psychological strain if that validation is undermined.<sup>161</sup> Gregg, by contrast, seemed buffered by high private regard. Certainly, Gregg maintained a strong sense of private regard: he repeatedly affirmed that he spoke from experience, with moral clarity and little concern for others' approval. Indeed, across his decade of media appearances and public attention, Gregg remained steadfast in his key beliefs, whether regarding the brutality of the raids, the responsibility of those in command, or the continued need for remembrance and reconciliation.

Yet his own perception of the reception of his testimony suggests that Gregg's public regard, insofar as how society views and responds to veterans, was far less stable. In 2013, he reflected on the backlash he received following interviews and articles in which he labelled the bombing of Dresden 'a war crime at the highest level, a stain upon the name Englishman that only an apology made in full public view would suffice to obliterate'.<sup>162</sup> He recounted being treated as both 'some form of hero' and 'a Nazi supporter', noting that his words had caused

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<sup>160</sup> Houghton, *The Veterans' Tale*, p. 246.

<sup>161</sup> Ruben and LaPiere, 'Social Identity'.

<sup>162</sup> Gregg, 'I Survived the Bombing of Dresden'.

‘many people some hurt’.<sup>163</sup> The polarised responses were reported on again in 2019, when Gregg conveyed having received ‘a lot of stick’ from those who accused him of being ‘anti-British’ or ‘pro-German’.<sup>164</sup> Although he remained undeterred stating, ‘I say what I think, and I don’t care what others think of that’, he admitted in a later interview that the reaction could have been ‘unbearable’ had he not possessed such strong convictions.<sup>165</sup>

This volatile reception underscores a broader point: a veteran’s public authority is not inherently secure but depends on the alignment of their testimony with dominant cultural expectations. As Wood shows in his study of Vietnam War memoirs, even widely praised accounts were shaped by what publishers and reviewers deemed acceptable. In the American context, he observes that mainstream memoirs were often shaped by a prevailing narrative of patriotic dissent, a framework in which veterans could criticise aspects of the Vietnam War while still affirming their loyalty to the nation and the military. He suggests memoirs containing ‘more extreme, unambiguous antiwar messages’ were frequently bypassed in favour of those casting the conflict in ‘a nuanced but generally negative light’, allowing critique without repudiation.<sup>166</sup> Gregg’s case reflects a similarly conditional logic: while his dissenting voice was widely platformed in the British media, it was typically framed through the lens of his battlefield experience and personal integrity, qualities more compatible with Britain’s hegemonic narrative of the good war.

The result, as we shall further explore in the next section, was that Gregg’s most provocative claims (particularly his descriptions of Dresden as a war crime and Churchill as a

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> ITV News, ‘Former British Prisoner Victor Gregg, 99, on Why Dresden Should Never Be Forgotten’, and Good Morning Britain, ‘Victor Gregg Describes Witnessing Dresden Bombings First-Hand 74 Years Ago’.

<sup>165</sup> Menden, ‘Feuersturm in Dresden’; Menden, ‘The Singular Tale of a British Soldier Caught in the Firebombing of Dresden’, trans. by Liz Garrigan, *Worldcrunch*, 22 May 2024, <https://worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/the-singular-tale-of-a-british-soldier-caught-in-the-firebombing-of-dresden/> [accessed 10 May 2025]; Victor Gregg, ‘My Life and World War Two’, *History Hit*, 2019, <https://access.historyhit.com/videos/my-life-and-world-war-two> [accessed 10 May 2025].

<sup>166</sup> Wood, p. 8 and p. 98.

war criminal) were granted visibility, but not necessarily validation. Media coverage stopped short of embracing his critique as morally transformative, leaving the more volatile reactions to play out in online comment sections, where his authority was alternately revered, contested, or recoded as treachery.

Social psychological research helps clarify the dynamics of this fractured reception. Decades of research on the intergroup sensitivity effect demonstrates that *who* delivers a critical message often matters more than *what* is said.<sup>167</sup> Group members consistently react more defensively when criticism comes from an outsider, questioning their legitimacy and motives, whereas the same message from an ingroup member is typically met with less resistance. This asymmetry arises because ingroup critics are presumed to speak from loyalty and concern, while outgroup critics are more likely to be seen as hostile or self-interested. As Hornsey and Imani argue, audiences often view ingroup criticism as ‘intended to be constructive’ but view the same words from outsiders through a lens of ‘hostile and destructive motives’.<sup>168</sup>

However, this licence to criticise is conditional. If an ingroup critic is perceived to violate core values or threaten the group’s public image, their insider status may be swiftly revoked. At this tipping point, a different dynamic emerges: the black sheep effect.<sup>169</sup> Rooted in social identity theory, this effect predicts that deviant ingroup members, particularly those who undermine the group’s moral distinctiveness, are judged more harshly than similarly deviant outsiders. As Marques et al. demonstrate, such derogation serves a protective function: it allows the group to reaffirm normative boundaries, preserve collective self-esteem, and signal loyalty to shared values.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Hornsey, Oppes, and Svensson, “‘It’s OK if We Say It, but You Can’t’”, pp. 293–307.

<sup>168</sup> Matthew. J. Hornsey and Armin Imani, ‘Criticizing Groups from the Inside and the Outside: An Identity Perspective on the Intergroup Sensitivity Effect’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30.3 (2004), p. 365 and p. 367.

<sup>169</sup> Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens, ‘The “Black Sheep Effect”’, pp. 1–16.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

ISE and BSE are not competing explanations but sequential logics: the former governs initial openness to criticism; the latter activates when the message is seen as betrayal. In Victor Gregg's case his veteran status appears to have initially conferred legitimacy in media representations, but his anecdotal experiences suggest that by accusing Britain of war crimes and moral hypocrisy, for some at least he had crossed a line. The next section tests these dynamics in more detail by analysing public responses to Gregg's major media appearances. In doing so, it assesses whether we see a pattern of defence, disavowal and deviant-labelling in online commentaries which reflects this theorised transition from ISE to black sheep rejection.

We begin with reactions to Gregg's 2013 *Guardian* article. This allows us to trace how audiences engaged with his direct testimony: whether they accepted his authority as an eyewitness or reframed his message within broader political and moral debates. We then analyse responses to the *MailOnline*'s coverage in 2015, assessing whether criticism targeted Gregg himself or the institutions presenting his views. Finally, we consider reactions to later articles, including obituaries, to explore how shifting contexts shaped public perception. Together, these examples illuminate how Gregg's authority was invoked, challenged, or reinterpreted in real time by audiences negotiating the boundaries of national memory.

## **Stoking the Fire: Online Reactions to Victor Gregg**

### ***Guardian* Responses:**

Victor Gregg's article in the *Guardian* in 2013 served a dual purpose. Firstly, it was a platform for him to express unequivocal condemnation of the bombing of Dresden as a war crime, frankly underscored by the headline: 'I survived the bombing of Dresden and continue to believe it was a war crime.'<sup>171</sup> This phrasing is characteristically direct, confrontational, and definitive, and was always likely to elicit strong reactions. Yet Gregg's article is also

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<sup>171</sup> Gregg, 'I Survived the Bombing of Dresden'.

fundamentally an appeal for understanding, both of his own position and of Dresden's enduring moral and historical significance.

From the outset, Gregg establishes his authority by invoking his veteran status, writing that he 'wasn't new to murder and bloodletting' in 1945.<sup>172</sup> He then extends his critique beyond Dresden, situating it within a broader pattern of ethical lapses in modern conflicts: 'The massacres in Bosnia at Srebrenica, the hurling of Tomahawk missiles by British naval cruisers into the centre of an inhabited Benghazi, the manner in which as a nation we still tend to be sympathetic to the use of superior aircraft strength to bomb overcrowded refugee centers [sic].'<sup>173</sup>

In just under 650 words, Gregg attempts to bridge his personal trauma with the wider ethical implications of strategic bombing. His descriptions of the physical and psychological aftermath, alongside the use of the term 'war crime' in the headline, are not simply polemical but serve to legitimise his emotional investment and moral standing. He appeals to the reader directly: 'Bearing in mind that I care deeply about the future of all my children and grandchildren, please allow me to express my anger.'<sup>174</sup>

The public response to this intervention was predictably polarised. The article attracted over one thousand replies (986 of which remain visible to the researcher), many of which bypassed the historical and ethical complexities Gregg sought to foreground. A manual survey of the comment section reveals that readers frequently reverted to binary moral framings of right and wrong. The phrase 'war crime' appears to act as a rhetorical flashpoint, prompting several respondents to engage in palliative comparison, invoking events such as the Blitz or Nazi atrocities to reframe or justify the bombing of Dresden. As demonstrated in the Word Tree

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

analysis (Figure 4.5), this rhetorical deflection operates systematically at a syntactic level. The root phrase ‘war crime’ rarely functions as a terminal point of moral reflection; instead, it immediately fractures into defensive or comparative clauses. Moving from the structural mapping of the Word Tree to a close reading of its branches reveals how aggressively commenters police the boundaries of this terminology. For instance, the branches extending to historical atrocities like ‘Babi Yar,’ ‘the Bataan Death March,’ and ‘Mai Lai’ originate from discourse that explicitly redefines the parameters of criminality to protect the hegemonic narrative.<sup>175</sup>

In the underlying comment generating these nodes, the user asserts that a war crime strictly involves killing for ‘no military advantage,’ leveraging these universally condemned events to construct a rigid binary.<sup>176</sup> The Holocaust and Mai Lai are categorised as war crimes, whereas Dresden, framed strictly as an attack on ‘factories’ and a ‘rail centre’, is sanitised as a ‘particularly successful bombing raid’ (‘Ergo, no crime’).<sup>177</sup> Integrating the visual evidence of the Word Tree with the qualitative depth of the comments confirms that palliative comparison here is not merely a reflexive whataboutism, but a calculated discursive strategy deployed to cleanly excise British actions from the category of historical criminality.

However, the Word Tree analysis also reveals that this discursive policing is not absolute; the same digital infrastructure captures the active *contestation* of the sacred story. While many branches demonstrate defensive deflection, a close reading of the sub-branch leading to ‘Coventry’ reveals how dissonant voices attempt to reclaim the lexicon of British trauma. Rather than functioning as a palliative comparison to justify Dresden, the underlying comment invokes the lived experience of ‘Coventry (or Hull, or Liverpool)’ to validate the

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., comment 80.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

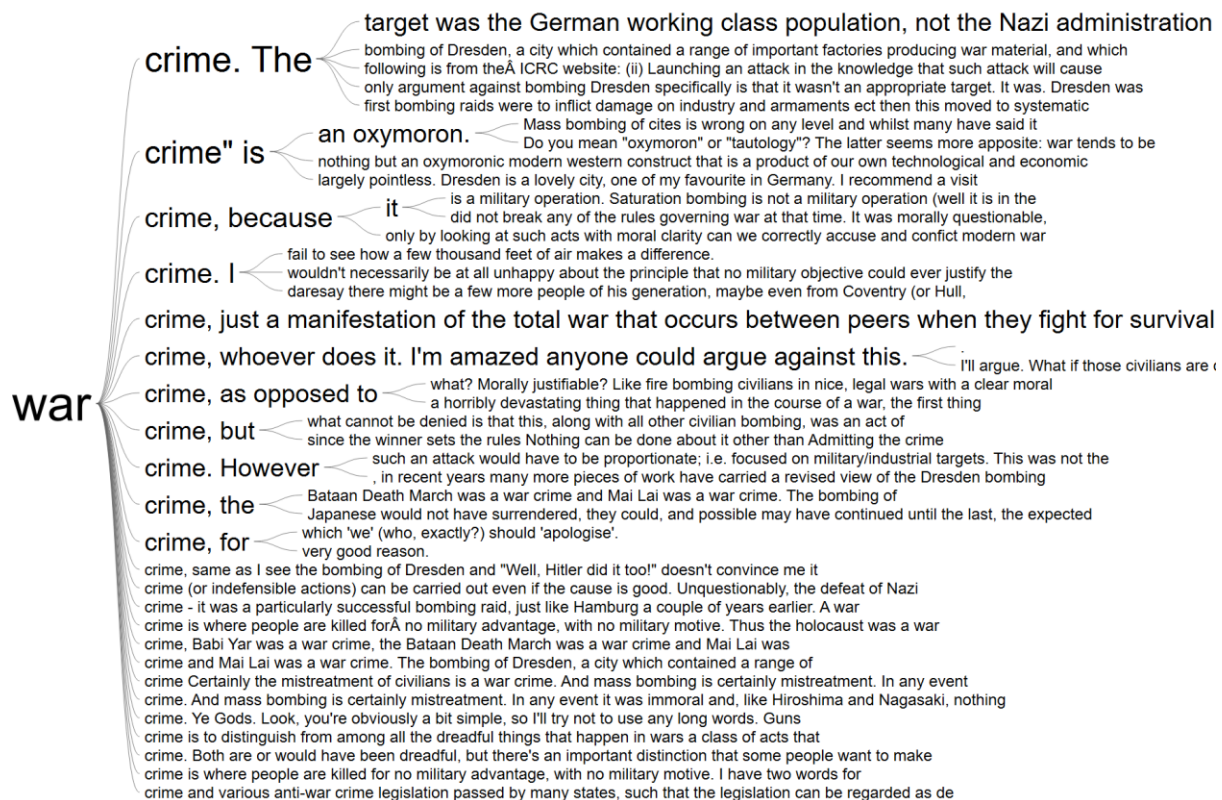
authority of the veteran who authored the article, suggesting that those who actually endured the Blitz might agree with his assessment of Dresden as a war crime.<sup>178</sup> This structural fracture in the consensus flows into a notable undercurrent of comments which expressed dismay at the retributive tone of the wider thread: ‘I do hate this world. And especially *Guardian* comments which seem to bring out the worst in people. All this talk of flattening Dresden and Germany, you should be ashamed of yourselves but I know you won’t be.’<sup>179</sup> Indeed, several comments leverage the central node to reflect the opposite stance, unequivocally condemning the bombing. As visualised in the uppermost branch of the Word Tree, some users directly embrace the terminology without deflection, anchoring the node 'crime' to explicit accusations of targeting civilians: ‘Yes, it was a war crime. The target was the German working class population not the Nazi administration.’<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., comment 276.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., comment 584.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., comment 6.

Figure 4.5. War Crime Discussions on Victor Gregg's *Guardian* Article<sup>181</sup>

Overall, the comment section reveals wildly differing opinions on the role of civilians in war and the extent to which they can be targeted, as well as the responsibility of individuals and nations for their actions during wartime. While some comments suggest that there are specific actions that constitute war crimes, such as shooting prisoners, in defending the British right to attack Dresden others argued that the debate was oxymoronic and ultimately redundant ‘[m]ass bombing of cities is wrong on any level and whilst many have said it was justified not many have ever seriously [sic] claimed it was morally right. The truth is other lives were probably saved because Dresden was bombed. They have equal value to those that died. Personally, I can't criticise anyone that made the decision at the time and in those circumstances.’<sup>182</sup> In using the same terminology another commenter agreed, arguing that the term ‘war crime’ is a modern western construct, ‘a product of our own technological and

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., comment 53.

economic superiority'.<sup>183</sup> They suggest that a thermonuclear exchange between the West and Soviets, for instance, would not have been a war crime but rather a manifestation of total war for survival.<sup>184</sup> At the same time, others contributing to the debate emphasise the importance of moving forward and promoting peace, while also acknowledging the responsibility of nations and individuals for their actions during wartime. Several commenters go to great lengths to justify their positions, with over 25 per cent of the total comments exceeding one hundred words in length, and two examples even exceeding the original article in length.

These long comments demonstrate the comparatively deep engagement of readers with the topic and their willingness to invest time and effort in researching and articulating their viewpoints, and ultimately attempting to disprove or discredit alternative viewpoints (however questionable the efficacy of this research, with the provenance of Wikipedia as a source becoming a topic of debate for example '[t]he wikipedia page actually has a pretty good summary of research').<sup>185</sup> They also highlight the complexity of the issue, with commenters frequently drawing on (their understanding of) historical evidence, published books, legal arguments, and moral considerations to support their positions that extend far beyond Gregg's personal experience and message.

In one of the longest comments, the author engages in an extended discussion of international law and the principle of proportionality to refute the aforementioned assertion that Dresden should not be considered a war crime, but rather a particularly successful bombing raid. In this example, they cite the International Committee of the Red Cross website and the

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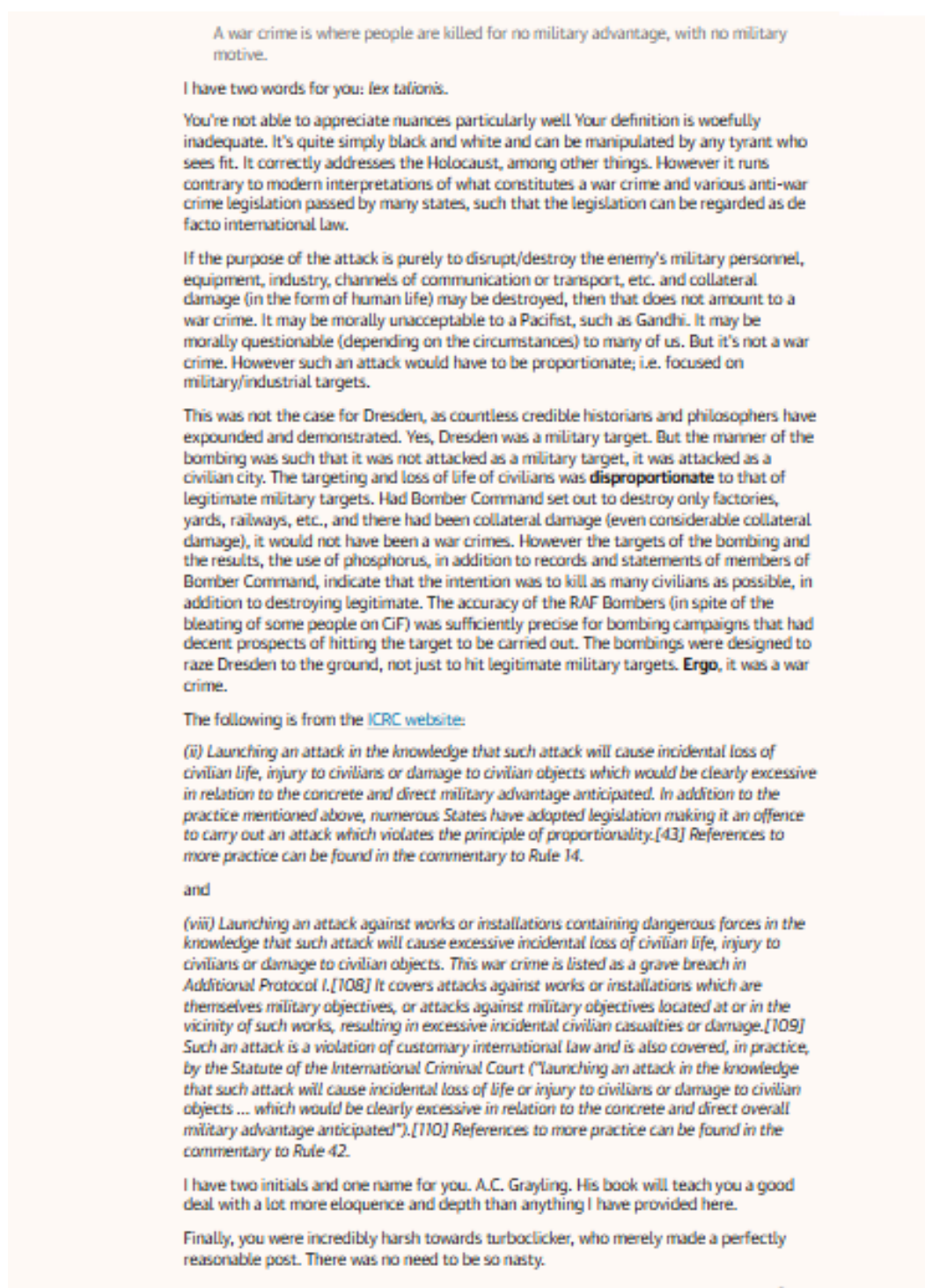
<sup>183</sup> Ibid., comment 113.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., comment 48.

work of A.C. Grayling to argue that the bombing of Dresden was a war crime due to its disproportionate impact on civilians (see Figure 4.6).<sup>186</sup>

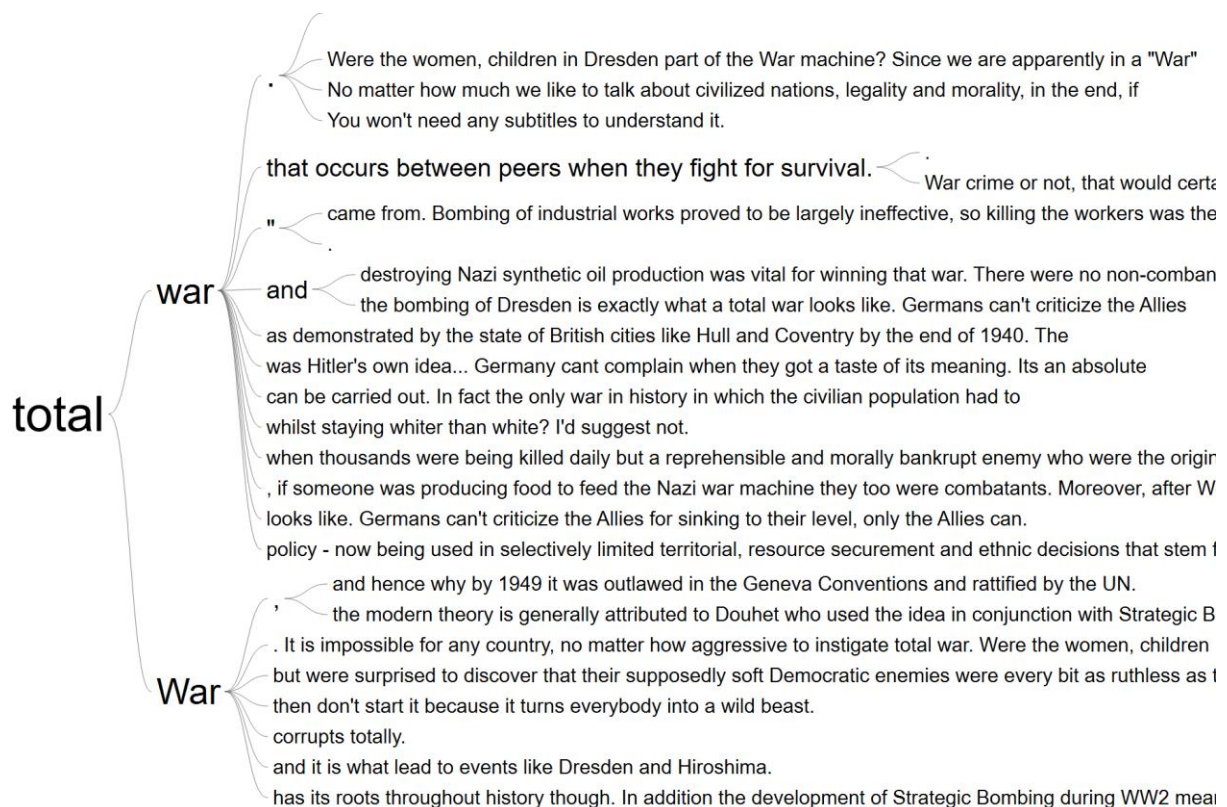
**Figure 4.6: Detailed Comment Example regarding International Law**



<sup>186</sup> Ibid., comment 89. See also Anthony C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: Was the Allied Bombing of Civilians in WWII a Necessity or a Crime?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

Other detailed threads focused again on the concept of ‘total war’, and whether it justifies the targeting of civilians. Whilst, as we have seen, some used it to justify the contemporary decision-making process, others rallied against its connotations. One comment claimed ‘there is no such thing as Total War. It is impossible for any country, no matter how aggressive to instigate total war. Were the women, children in Dresden part of the War machine?’<sup>187</sup> In all, twenty-five comments utilised this term, and discussed its historical precedents and moral implications (see Figure 4.7).

**Figure 4.7: Discussions of ‘Total War’ in the *Guardian***



These observations are significant as while his article serves as the catalyst for the debate, Victor Gregg as a topic remains generally on the periphery of these discussions. As a corpus the comments on the article total close to 90,000 words, but the search term ‘Victor Gregg’ appears just 15 times, and the abbreviated ‘Gregg’ 50 times. This is compared to over

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., comment 119.

200 mentions of the term ‘crime’, and over 150 references of the extended term ‘war crime’. If we extend the search to look for mentions of the ‘author’ we can see a further 44 results, but many of these are references to other works (an example comment being: ‘Another good book is McKinstry’s *Lancaster*, whose author concludes that the aim of the campaign was indeed to inflict the maximum death and injury and terror to the civilian population.’)<sup>188</sup>

Where Gregg is discussed, several commenters express admiration for his resolute sense of morality and the value of his testimony, acknowledging the horrors he witnessed and his right to speak out against the bombing. For example, one user writes, ‘A brave work – think the guy writing this as an eyewitness and former combatant...is surely therefore entitled to form a view of this incident in isolation.’<sup>189</sup> Another commenter expresses gratitude for Gregg’s courage in speaking against a ‘patriotic consensus’, suggesting that challenging widespread nationalistic narratives requires considerable moral and personal strength.<sup>190</sup>

Some commenters do criticise Gregg’s conclusions, arguing that his labelling of the bombing as a war crime is incorrect or immoral. One commenter notes, ‘[w]ar is an abomination. When forced on you – It’s win and subjugate or lose...Sorry Mr. Gregg, you get no sympathy from me!’<sup>191</sup> However, this remark prompted a flurry of angry defences of Gregg, highlighting his bravery and the trauma he experienced:

The only excuse I can think of for your making this cretinous remark is that your [sic] were too idle to even read the article you are commenting upon. Had you troubled to do so you would have discovered that Mr Gregg is not asking for sympathy from you. As an Allied soldier [sic] and POW in Dresden he saw some appalling sights and has

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., comment 49. The comment is referring to Leo McKinstry, *Lancaster: The Second World War's Greatest Bomber* (London: John Murray, 2009).

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., comment 903.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., comment 453.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., comment 440.

movingly and effectively described them here. The fact that you are totally unmoved by them tells us everything we need to know about you.<sup>192</sup>

Whilst the former commenter claimed to be able to ‘recall the Blitz’, Gregg’s authority amongst his defenders is leveraged especially forcefully against those deemed to be ‘armchair warriors’.<sup>193</sup> The latent criticism in the term ‘armchair warrior’ revolves around the perceived inexperience, hypocrisy, and lack of credibility of someone who speaks authoritatively on military or combat issues from a position of safety and comfort. An ‘armchair warrior’ is seen as engaging in discussions about war and conflict in a detached, theoretical manner, without understanding the harsh realities and complexities involved. Their views are often perceived as simplistic, naive, or overly confident because they lack firsthand experience.

In one thread, a commenter directly targets these users, suggesting ‘[i]f it was less serious it would be funny reading the comments of all the armchair warriors on here telling an eye-witness how wrong he is’.<sup>194</sup> Whilst another user responds, pointing out that there are other POW survivors with differing opinions, indicating that one person’s account should not be taken as the only truth, the original commenter agrees to respect both eyewitness opinions but again dismisses the views of those who haven’t experienced combat (see Figure 4.8). Echoing these views, another commenter states sarcastically (and possibly morbidly), ‘[w]hat a pity that many of those writing in here were not in Dresden with Victor Gregg so that they could give us an even deeper insight into the horror of what happened there!’<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., comment 442.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., comment 444.


<sup>194</sup> Ibid., comment 444.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., comment 825.


Figure 4.8: Comment Thread Discussing ‘Armchair Warriors’

 **DonkeyHotee** 15 Feb 2013 13:32 9 ↑  
If it was less serious it would be funny reading the comments of all the armchair warriors on here telling an eye-witness how wrong he is.  
[Report](#)


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 **dutchcourage49** → **DonkeyHotee** 15 Feb 2013 13:48 5 ↑  
@DonkeyHotee - You can set it against the testimony of another POW survivor who also says he was wrong.  
[Report](#)


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 **DonkeyHotee** ↔ **dutchcourage49** 15 Feb 2013 14:01 1 ↑  
@dutchcourage49 - fine, I'll respect both their opinions. But not people (which includes me) who've never been in the army or heard a shot fired in anger.  
[Report](#)


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 **theleverllier** ↔ **dutchcourage49** 15 Feb 2013 14:02 4 ↑  
@dutchcourage49 - indeed there are others in the authors position , POW, that where happy to see it happen and indeed wanted worse to happen. This is in the end just one persons view of the event .  
[Report](#)


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 **HarryTheHorse** ↔ **DonkeyHotee** 15 Feb 2013 15:17 2 ↑  
@DonkeyHotee - If it was less serious it would be funny reading the comments of all the armchair warriors on here telling an eye-witness how wrong he is  
Well at least they haven't insulted Victor Gregg by calling him "self loathing" which is the usual tactic of those who excuse civilian deaths in western wars.  
[Report](#)


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 **dutchcourage49** ↔ **DonkeyHotee** 15 Feb 2013 15:23 2 ↑  
@DonkeyHotee - I have, both, and my opinion that the objective of any military action is to win it as soon as possible, with the possible lowest loss of uniform life on your own side and the lowest possible loss of civilian life on both sides.  
I am not however stupid enough to think that civilian deaths can be avoided when your enemy site their military production and transport facilities in civilian areas and it is beyond the capability of your bomber function to target the military targets without collateral damage.  
[Report](#)

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 **DonkeyHotee** ↔ **dutchcourage49** 15 Feb 2013 15:34 1 ↑  
@dutchcourage49 - everyone is of course entitled to an opinion. Personally I am unsure whether bombing Dresden was wrong. My original point was simply that the opinion of someone who was there should not so easily be dismissed by people sitting at laptops who weren't even born when it happened.  
[Report](#)

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 **Turningleaves** ↔ **DonkeyHotee** 15 Feb 2013 16:24 1 ↑  
@DonkeyHotee - "I'll respect both their opinions. But not people (which includes me) who've never been in the army or heard a shot fired in anger."  
yes, very easy for us to sit and judge when we have never been in the position of being in a war, being shelled, having your life threatened by an invading army etc etc. None of us know of what we are capable until we are tested or what we would want our armed forces to do on our behalf in these situations.  
[Report](#)

The level of respect afforded to Gregg can also be observed in the deferential tone many commenters adopt when referencing his firsthand accounts, to the extent that an intriguing

dynamic unfolds whereby commenters visibly recalibrate their views after discovering that Victor Gregg was a British POW during the Dresden bombings, with some initially critical responders, if not changing their mind, becoming more measured in their writing. For instance, one commenter expresses a change in tone by saying, ‘Oops I missed the fact that Gregg was a British POW during the bombing of Dresden...I apologise for calling him Herr Gregg. Still, it doesn’t change my arguments.’<sup>196</sup> A separate comment also expressed ‘[p]rofound apologies to Mr. Gregg for my previous comments as I’d very wrongly assumed he was a soldier on the axis side during World War II’.<sup>197</sup>

These statements illustrate that while fundamental viewpoints might not shift dramatically, the recognition of Gregg’s direct involvement and suffering prompted a softer approach. When combined with postmemory, this can be seen to create powerful endorsements, such as in the statement: ‘The writer here has every right to express his feelings of anger and to remind us of the horrors of war. My grandfather was of the same generation and experienced similar things in the war... I think we must never forget the terrible sacrifice these men made during their youth and their voices must be heard.’<sup>198</sup>

Postmemory is a structure of intergenerational and transcultural transmission through which individuals engage affectively with events they did not experience firsthand. In this instance, the commenter speaks from a position shaped not by direct inheritance but by what Hirsch identifies as affiliative postmemory, a mode of connection forged through emotional resonance and mediated cultural forms.<sup>199</sup> Unlike familial postmemory, rooted in vertical transmission between parent and child, affiliative postmemory arises from horizontal identification, in which those outside the survivor family engage with transmitted trauma

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., comment 875.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., comment 955.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., comment 502.

<sup>199</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 36.

through mediated, resonant forms of connection.<sup>200</sup> These indirect yet emotionally charged connections can foster a sense of ‘living connection’ to past suffering, producing what Hirsch describes as a moral and cultural imperative to preserve, legitimise, and carry forward the voices of those who endured historical trauma.<sup>201</sup>

Yet personal and post-memories, as prominent features of the discourse, also worked in divergent directions. One commenter explicitly invoked their wartime childhood in Coventry to challenge the moral authority of Gregg’s testimony. ‘Do you suppose the author’s experience in Dresden is due more sympathy than my earlier similar experience as a child in Coventry?’ they asked, before asserting that if Dresden constituted a war crime, then Coventry ‘set the precedent’ and the Allied bombing was ‘justifiable retribution’.<sup>202</sup> This intervention was not merely defensive, it sought to reframe the moral terrain by asserting a counter-memory grounded in personal suffering and historical equivalence.

Here, memory becomes a contested and emotionally fraught space. As Hirsch explains, post-memories can be ‘transmitted to [the generation after] so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right’, though they are in fact shaped by ‘imaginative investment, projection, and creation’.<sup>203</sup> Postmemory, she writes, entails ‘an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture’, in which the coherence of inherited meaning remains fragile.<sup>204</sup> It is precisely this form of affective inheritance, this moral and emotional orientation to the past, that Gregg’s intervention unsettles. The commenter’s reaction can thus be read as an effort to resist such rupture; to defend the moral framework of a post-memorial landscape in which Allied bombing remains justified, and British suffering stands unchallenged.

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>202</sup> Gregg, ‘I Survived the Bombing of Dresden’, comment 747.

<sup>203</sup> Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 5.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

Notably this counter-intervention also extended into the realm of suspicion and cynicism. The commenter, in another post, questioned Gregg's national identity, remarking that the name 'Victor' was more likely to be found in Germany or Eastern Europe, and implied that his decision to attribute moral blame specifically to 'the English' (omitting the role of the USAAF in the raids) may have been commercially motivated, designed to preserve the book's appeal to American readers.<sup>205</sup> They also speculated that this framing aligned with the *Guardian's* editorial stance, suggesting the article's publication may have been facilitated by its anti-English tone.<sup>206</sup> In this reading, Gregg's post-memorial authority is not only challenged, but recast as a politically expedient and commercially strategic performance.

Such scepticism surfaced elsewhere. Another commenter referred to Gregg as 'simply an aged attention-seeker', again suggesting that his emotive rhetoric functioned less as an ethical intervention than as a form of self-promotion.<sup>207</sup> While this was the most overt accusation of opportunism, similar criticisms framed the article as ideologically motivated, accusing it of exploiting historical trauma to advance contemporary political agendas. In these responses, Gregg's veteran status did not protect him from scrutiny; on the contrary, it may have intensified resentment when his testimony was seen to contravene dominant national narratives.

However, this line of attack was focused far more on the *Guardian* itself. Several commenters suggested that the *Guardian* espoused a left-leaning or 'liberal' agenda which they believed influenced its historical and political narratives (see Figure 4.9). This critique frequently manifested as accusations of bias, with some readers articulating a perceived tendency of the *Guardian* to 'discredit Britain's achievements while promoting the immigrant

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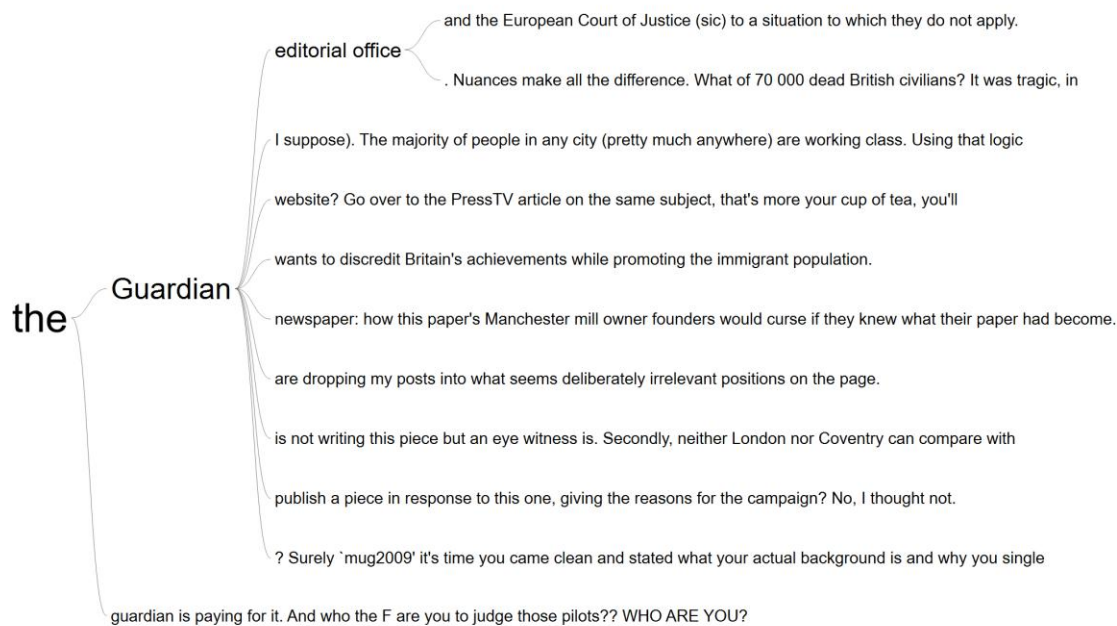
<sup>205</sup> Victor Gregg, 'I Survived the Bombing of Dresden', comment 868.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., comment 820.

population’, suggesting that the publication selected narratives that aligned with a specific ideological framework rather than presenting a balanced historical view.<sup>208</sup> This sentiment was echoed by another reader, who was critical of what they saw as a concentration of ‘masochistic Brits’ around the *Guardian*, which they believed distorted historical interpretation to overly scrutinise British culture and history.

**Figure 4.9: Commenter Grievances with the *Guardian***



Once again though, in the context of the overall comment section these comments were marginal, with only fifteen comments directly mentioning the publishing paper. Even fewer comments linked Gregg to this criticism. Whilst one reply leveraged Gregg’s eyewitness status to defend the article against the notion of it being a propaganda tool of the ‘Daily Mail of the left [sic]’, this skirmish quickly transitioned from a discussion of the *Guardian*’s potential political motives to a heated debate of the moral responsibilities of individuals during wartime, notably the pilots and the citizens of Dresden.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., comment 604.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., comment 691.

Overall, we can see that in reactions to this 2013 article there was significant empathy both for civilian suffering and for Gregg's opinion, but the use of language like the term 'war crime' was a highly sensitive point. Whilst some of this frustration was directed at Gregg, we can also see evidence of simmering institutional grievances, which may well have been exacerbated by the article's framing, which placed Gregg's 'anger' at experiencing a British 'war crime' immediately in the forefront of the reader's attention. To investigate the potential effect of this framing further, we will next consider whether this trend continued in responses to Gregg's 2015 interviews with *BBC Breakfast* and *Radio 5 Live* surrounding the seventieth anniversary of the bombings.<sup>210</sup> The reason for looking at reactions to these appearances is that the *BBC News* and *BBC Breakfast* Facebook pages' respective online promotional efforts, despite dealing with the same subject matter, varied markedly in their approach.

### 2015 BBC Interviews

In both BBC interviews with Gregg, the hosts set reverential tones by emphasising the historical context of his testimony, underscoring the controversy and the human toll of the Dresden bombings. The politeness of the discussions, such as '[v]ery good morning to you Victor' and '[w]e're very pleased that Victor is with us now', conveyed deep respect in their tone as well as language.<sup>211</sup> In the *BBC Breakfast* interview, the host further acknowledged the emotional weight of Gregg's story with statements like '[i]t must have been incredibly difficult' and '[h]ow did you deal with it over the years?' Through a tone of respectful inquiry, interviewers presented Gregg's memories not merely as testimony, but as moral insight, reinforcing his position as a 'vector of memory' with unique legitimacy.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> BBC Breakfast, "'It Was Evil': Victor Gregg First-Hand Account of the Dresden Bombing", *BBC One*, 13 February 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02jxx2t> [accessed 7 July 2024], and BBC Radio 5 Live In Short, 'British Dresden Survivor: All Was Aight in "Evil" Attack', *BBC Radio 5 Live*, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02jxnld> [accessed 7 July 2024].

<sup>211</sup> BBC Breakfast, "'It Was Evil'".

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

Along with providing his intentionally shocking memories of the bombings, these interviews allowed Gregg to emphasise the long-term psychological impact of what he witnessed, describing how the experience ‘dehumanise[d] everything’ and transformed him from an ‘ordinary bloke’ to someone who couldn’t laugh for 40 years. Whilst he again condemned the bombing as ‘evil’, and ‘demonic’ in the Radio 5 interview, and explicitly stated his refusal to forgive those who ordered the raids, he was also sure to emphasise in both interviews that he did not blame the airmen (‘I’ve never blamed the lads in the planes. I’ve never blamed the pilots for that, and the aircrews, understanding they were following orders and risking their lives.’)<sup>213</sup>

The promotion of the interviews on social media by the BBC *Breakfast* Facebook and Twitter pages framed Gregg as a heroic figure who had resonated with their audience (see Figure 4.10), with highlighted comments like ‘[t]he most powerful interview I’ve witnessed’ and ‘[i]ncredibly moving story. ‘What a hero’, positioning him not just as a survivor, but as someone worthy of admiration and respect for his resilience (and of a click to view).<sup>214</sup> By showcasing the ‘[h]uge feedback’ to the interview, these promotions encouraged viewers to watch through stressing the novelty and importance of the interview.<sup>215</sup> In the responses to the BBC *Breakfast* post, which amassed around 1500 contemporary replies, a significant portion of the audience mirrored such responses in expressing deep respect and admiration for Victor Gregg, recognising his bravery and the emotional weight of his experiences.

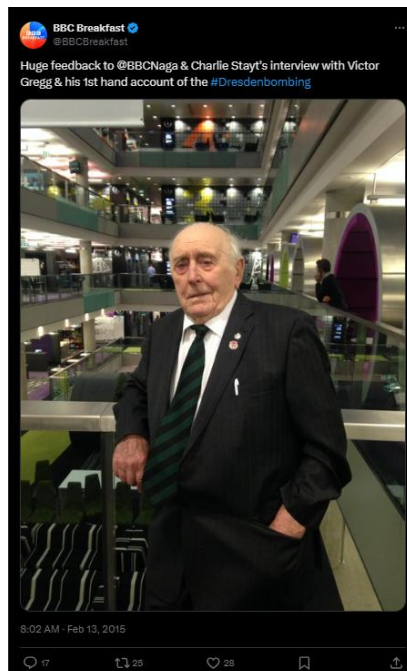
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<sup>213</sup> Ibid and BBC Radio 5 Live In Short.

<sup>214</sup> BBC Breakfast. “‘The Most Powerful Interview I’ve Witnessed’: Victor Gregg on the Dresden Bombing”. *Facebook*, 13 February 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/watch?v=1043763525637785> [accessed 7 July 2024].

<sup>215</sup> BBC Breakfast, post on *X* (formerly *Twitter*), 13 February 2015, <https://x.com/bbcbreakfast/status/566145497321455616> [accessed 7 July 2024].

**Figure 4.10: BBC *Breakfast* Social Media Posts regarding Victor Gregg**



One viewer even remarked, ‘Victor Gregg you are a legend of the truest kind. I sat in silence with tears running down my face, listening to you talk about your experience of War. What a brave man you are – and your family must be so so proud as am I. xxx [sic]’<sup>216</sup> This was not an isolated expression of emotion, as another viewer similarly conveyed, ‘I was crying whilst hearing this man’s story the other morning.’<sup>217</sup> In some cases, it was evident Gregg’s humble demeanour had also enhanced his appeal: ‘We listened in total silence. Such a moving

<sup>216</sup> BBC Breakfast. “‘The Most Powerful Interview I’ve Witnessed’”, comment 366.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., comment 705.

story. Glad the presenters let him talk with no interruption. The silent moments were the most heartbreaking, I cried for him. Total respect for this lovely gentleman.’<sup>218</sup>

The conduct of the interview itself also emerged as a significant topic of discussion. Numerous viewers praised the BBC for its sensitive handling of the segment, with presenters Naga Munchetty and Charlie Stayt earning thanks for letting Gregg speak without interruption. This sentiment was widespread, with one user calling it the ‘best BBC interview in years’.<sup>219</sup> In the second most liked comment in the dataset, receiving 430 likes, the author described how they ‘had to put [their] breakfast down and listen to this man recall the horrors he had witnessed. Awesome interview. It seemed like the whole programme’s schedule was put on hold whilst he spoke. Hats off to [presenters] Naga and Charlie for not interrupting him.’<sup>220</sup> Notably, even some users who identified as long-time critics of the BBC contrasted their general disapproval of the Corporation with their admiration for this ‘incredible interview’, which allowed audiences to hear the ‘horrors of Dresden’ firsthand.<sup>221</sup>

If we take a broader look at the comments, we can see terms such as ‘respect’ and ‘moving’ feature in the word cloud of the fifty most frequently occurring words (Figure 4.11). Popular comments often highlighted Gregg’s resilience and the courage required to share such harrowing memories publicly. In doing so, the third most liked comment reiterated the idea that Gregg’s testimony should be considered more valuable than that of modern scholars: ‘Textbooks are written by men who are just as corruptible as anybody else, and history is always written by the victors... The only way to build a good, unbiased, analytical perspective

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., comment 64.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., comment 23.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., comment 6.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., comment 664.



whilst Niall Ferguson has branded oral history ‘a recipe for complete misrepresentation because almost no one tells the truth, even when they intend to’.<sup>223</sup>

On the other flank, Penny Summerfield challenges the empiricist impulse within traditional social history to treat oral testimony as a flawed substitute for archival data, arguing instead for a methodological approach that foregrounds the interpretive richness of memory and subjectivity.<sup>224</sup> She explores how narrators both construct their accounts and seek emotional equilibrium through them. She suggests that veterans’ narratives, like those of the women she studied, are best understood as dialogic reconstructions shaped by cultural discourses, audience expectations, and the narrator’s search for meaning.<sup>225</sup> Similarly, Green and Troup assert that ‘all autobiographical memory is true; the interpreter must discover in what sense’, a view that invites a more reflexive, interpretive stance, one that values oral testimony not for its factual reliability but for the insight it offers into how individuals negotiate identity, trauma, and historical change.<sup>226</sup>

The commenter, however, appears less interested in engaging with historiographical debate and methodological balance than in exposing what they see as the bias of the archive itself. Here, the commenter appears to believe that Gregg’s unfiltered remembrance represents a form of what Michel Foucault might deem ‘subjugated knowledge’: ‘knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated ... low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity’.<sup>227</sup> By elevating Gregg’s

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<sup>223</sup> Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 79., A. J. P. Taylor, quoted in Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 70, and Tom Templeton, ‘Interview: Niall Ferguson’, *Guardian*, 18 January 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/jan/18/niall-ferguson-historian-interview> [accessed 11 May 2025].

<sup>224</sup> Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 17–18.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16–32.

<sup>226</sup> Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (eds), *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 236.

<sup>227</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Two Lectures’, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 82.

personal memory over their perception of academic historiography, the commenter grants it epistemic weight precisely because they believe his account stands outside institutional custodianship. Gregg's account is thus positioned not merely as testimony, but as counter-archive: a politically resonant alternative to the official record, grounded in its marginality.

However, more sceptical comments conveyed that whilst Gregg's authority granted him a voice, some of his conclusions should not be accepted: 'I respect his opinion and yes it was a dreadful decision to bomb the city. But to say that we were worse than the Nazis is not right. They set out to destroy a whole race of people and enslave the world if they could. So it has to be put into perspective.'<sup>228</sup> Other comments, whilst again deferential to Gregg, express concern that the commemoration of Dresden will overshadow and distract from British suffering: 'Full respect to this man but I wonder if the BBC will do a follow up about the firestorm that swept through London after a German bombing raid, dropping not only bombs but incendiaries.. People then were burnt alive, men, women and children etc., etc., but this event seems to get overlooked.'<sup>229</sup>

Similarly, critics of Gregg's use of the term 'evil' argue that the Allied actions, while ruthless, were necessary to expedite the end of the war and prevent further atrocities by the Axis powers. One commenter reflected on this necessity, stating that the carpet-bombing was a display of 'brute apocalyptic force' meant to crush any remaining Nazi resistance, which was continuing in the form of indiscriminate V-1 and V-2 rocket attacks on London.<sup>230</sup> They suggest that confronting evil required equally harsh measures and question how the Axis would have used such power had they possessed it first. This perspective underscores the belief that equating the Allies' actions with those of the Axis powers is a flawed interpretation that

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<sup>228</sup> BBC Breakfast. "The Most Powerful Interview I've Witnessed", comment 226.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., comment 79.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., comment 818.

overlooks the broader context and outcomes of the war. The commenter concludes that while both sides committed acts of evil, the post-war actions of the Allies, in rebuilding and democratising Germany and Japan, highlight a crucial difference in intentions and consequences.<sup>231</sup> Gregg's attempt to articulate a universal moral claim was thus interpreted by some as redemptive, but by others as overreach.

No doubt sensing the marketing potential available here, other promotional posts by the BBC seized upon this aspect of Gregg's testimony. On the *BBC Breakfast* webpage, for example, the seven minute interview was simply surmised by the tagline "It was evil" – Victor Gregg firsthand account of the Dresden Bombing', a phrase Gregg used in the opening seconds of the interview (see Figure 4.12).<sup>232</sup> A separate *BBC News* Facebook post, condensing the interview from seven to just under two minutes, also highlighted a specific quote from Gregg: 'I'll never forgive the people who ordered those raids and that goes for all of them – Churchill, Attlee, all of them. We were supposed to be the good guys', a statement which can be easily misconstrued.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> BBC Breakfast, "It Was Evil".

<sup>233</sup> BBC News, 'I'll never forgive the people who ordered those raids and that goes for all of them - Churchill, Attlee, all of them', *Facebook*, February 13 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=10152604002047217> [accessed 7 July 2024].

**Figure 4.12: BBC Breakfast Website Header: ‘It was Evil’**



Crucially, the repeated use of ‘all of them’ here could easily be assumed to also apply to the airmen themselves, or at least RAF commanders and planners (especially when combined with the collective implications of the term ‘we’). Stripped of its original context, the quote risks becoming a flashpoint for political grievance rather than historical reflection. One resulting comment even remarked, ‘BBC you should know better than to put such a story on Facebook. You’re baiting for it!’, implying the BBC News page was deliberately courting controversy.<sup>234</sup>

That said, perhaps aware of this possibility, the central portion of the condensed interview was dedicated to Gregg’s views about the airmen, and in the overall comment section it produced, there were few mentions of the Allied ‘airmen’ themselves. In one of the four

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., comment 304.

comments which used this term, the viewer specifically alluded to the more nuanced aspect of Gregg's argument: 'As he says, I too don't blame the airmen, they were just doing their duty in an already bloody, horrific and brutal war.'<sup>235</sup>

For many, Gregg's status as an honourable 'gentleman' ultimately transcended any debate. Indeed, the most popular comment by far (amassing 596 likes compared to the 116 likes achieved by the second most popular comment) advocated for a general deference to the perspectives of older individuals like Gregg, implying that their experiences and reflections are inherently valuable and deserving of attention, proclaiming: 'Whatever a 95 year old tells you, you'd better listen.'<sup>236</sup>

The discussion of Churchill, though, was far more contentious. Several comments defended Churchill's wartime decisions and framed Gregg's criticisms as either inappropriate or ahistorical. One such comment stated, '[w]ould he rather be German? Thank God we had Churchill or we wouldn't be here unless we all had blond [sic] hair and blue eyes'.<sup>237</sup> Another declared 'Sir Winston Churchill' to be 'one of the greatest men who ever lived'.<sup>238</sup>

However, even among Churchill's defenders, many commenters still expressed admiration for Gregg's wartime service. The ambivalence this created is captured in remarks such as '[r]espect the man. Question his opinion' and '[u]tmost respect for this gentleman but disagree with his view. For me, Churchill was right.'<sup>239</sup> Others defended Churchill on strategic and punitive grounds but again refrained from condemning Gregg. One wrote, '[s]orry but most people just don't agree with this man, I have respect for him as a veteran, but the Germans obliterated large cities in the UK & if I was Churchill, I'd of [sic] actually wiped Germany off

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., comment 180.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., comment 16.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., comment 54.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., comment 440.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., comment 16–5 and comment 290.

the map.’<sup>240</sup> These responses reveal a telling asymmetry: Churchill’s moral authority is reasserted, but Gregg’s voice is not disqualified. His standing as a veteran is preserved, his testimony acknowledged, even as his judgement is gently reframed or set aside.

This asymmetry becomes even more striking when considered alongside Fielding, Schwarz, and Toye’s analysis of Churchill’s cultural status.<sup>241</sup> They argue that Churchill operates not simply as a historical figure, but as a mythic emblem, a fantasised ‘mirror image’ of English identity, frequently invoked to stabilise national self-understanding amid contemporary crisis.<sup>242</sup> Although competing stories about Churchill persist, they assert the dominant narrative ‘carries the gravity of myth’, rendering it ‘difficult to circumvent’ and ‘impervious to critique’ in its mainstream expressions.<sup>243</sup> The symbolic potency of ‘Churchill-as-the-past’, they suggest, intensifies precisely as faith in modern British governance falters and ‘the idea of England becomes more precarious’.<sup>244</sup> In such a context, one might expect a critique like Gregg’s, delivered by a decorated veteran and framed in moral language, to provoke disavowal. As we have seen, ISE and BSE theories reinforce this expectation, suggesting that insider critics who challenge a group’s sacred narratives may be met with greater hostility than outsiders, particularly when their dissent threatens the group’s self-image.

And yet, these commenters do not reject Gregg. Instead, they engage in a rhetorical manoeuvre that draws a line between memory and judgement. His testimony is framed as emotionally sincere and experientially valid, but his moral conclusions are treated as subjective, an understandable by-product of personal pain, rather than a legitimate intervention in public memory. Gregg is thus respected as a witness, not as a judge of history. This

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., comment 391 and comment 456.

<sup>241</sup> Steven Fielding, Bill Schwarz, and Richard Toye, *The Churchill Myths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

distinction is vital. It allows commenters to express reverence for Gregg's service while reaffirming Churchill's unimpeachability. In doing so, they preserve the cultural value of veteran testimony without allowing that testimony to unsettle dominant narratives.

Another dynamic is also at play. As explored earlier in this chapter, veterans in British public life (like Churchill) often serve as moral symbols, evoking resilience, sacrifice, and national continuity. Figures such as Captain Tom Moore have demonstrated how the individual veteran can come to embody the emotional core of the national past. In this context, Gregg's authority is not easily discredited without jeopardising the symbolic coherence of commemoration itself. His voice is thus absorbed into the memory culture not as a disruptive force, but as part of its moral landscape, his dissent recast not as a break with collective values, but as an extension of them – incorporating solemnity and human fallibility. This permits him to remain within the moral community, while ensuring the wider narrative of just war and national virtue remains intact.

At first glance, the *BBC News* comment section appears to echo the responses to the *BBC Breakfast* post, with many users expressing admiration for Gregg's courage and testimony. However, the tone directed at the BBC itself is notably more hostile. While the earlier thread included praise for the Corporation's decision to platform Gregg, here the broadcaster becomes a focal point of criticism. Several commenters accused the BBC, 'a bunch of lowlifes', of exhibiting bias and revealing their 'true colours' by airing the interview.<sup>245</sup> Another user charged: '[t]ypical BBC blaming the war on the British what a disgrace', encapsulating a recurring grievance that the BBC, like the *Guardian*, distorts national history by overemphasising British culpability and ignoring more valorising narratives.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> BBC News, Facebook video, comment 26.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 454.

Even ostensibly positive comments often carried an undercurrent of scepticism. Remarks like ‘[f]inally the BBC broadcast summat honest and worth while [sic]’ imply that such programming is a rare departure from the norm, casting the interview as an exception within an otherwise distrusted output.<sup>247</sup> Similarly, the claim that ‘once again the BBC have broadcast an unbalanced, and some would say biased report, using this veteran’s experience to promote only one viewpoint’ reinforces the belief that the Corporation’s historical coverage routinely lacks impartiality.<sup>248</sup> The following section explores how *MailOnline* capitalised on this sentiment, using Gregg’s testimony not to advance his moral critique, but to mobilise institutional distrust and boost reader engagement.

### **A Fifth Columnist Hero: *MailOnline* Commenters and Victor Gregg**

In February 2015, the *Daily Mail* launched a fierce critique of the BBC’s coverage of the Dresden anniversary, positioning RAF veterans, politicians, and military historians as defenders of the heroic wartime narrative.<sup>249</sup> Emphasising the sacrifice of the ‘55,000 airmen who died for Britain’, the piece presented these veterans as neglected national heroes.<sup>250</sup> Former Defence Minister Sir Gerald Howarth was quoted accusing the BBC of presenting a ‘one-sided account’, and casting himself as protector of their legacy.<sup>251</sup>

Such rhetoric was central to a narrative that vilified the BBC. Descriptions of the coverage as ‘disrespectful to the airmen’ invited emotional responses, reinforcing a sense of moral violation.<sup>252</sup> Howarth’s statement, ‘to suggest that those responsible for Dresden were on a par with Hitler is an absolute disgrace’, heightened the stakes, portraying the BBC’s

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., comment 199.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., comment 412.

<sup>249</sup> Brown and Bains, ‘BBC’s Insult to Hero Pilots’.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

approach not just as misguided, but as fundamentally offensive.<sup>253</sup> This use of exaggerated language aimed to foreclose debate, framing the *Mail's* position as morally incontestable.

Howarth's outrage centred on Victor Gregg, and his statement that the Dresden bombing was 'definitely' a war crime. The article highlighted Gregg's accounts of women and children among the victims, while criticising the BBC for devoting only 23 seconds to a veteran who expressed no guilt, an imbalance presented as evidence of biased framing.<sup>254</sup> The clear implication was that the BBC privileged Gregg's critical account to promote an anti-heroic reading of Britain's war effort.

The article further undermined Gregg's moral authority by featuring Mike Brundle, a 25-year RAF veteran. His argument ('The BBC should have had someone who was a member of Bomber Command on that operation – those are the ones who risked their lives.') implied that legitimate testimony comes from those who directly participated in the bombings, not from witnesses like Gregg, whose status as a PoW placed him outside the chain of combat decisions.<sup>255</sup>

This intervention exemplifies what Browning and Haigh term the 'hierarchies of heroism' that dominate Britain's commemorative culture, where public legitimacy is granted above all to those whose military roles align with familiar narratives of frontline action, sacrifice, and national redemption.<sup>256</sup> As they note, the recent assertion of 'gendered and racialised military heroism' during moments of national crisis (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) has reinforced a rigid symbolic economy in which only certain figures, typically white, male, and combat-associated, are deemed appropriate vessels for national

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Christopher. S. Browning and Joseph Haigh, 'Hierarchies of Heroism: Captain Tom, Spitfires, and the Limits of Militarized Vicarious Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2.3 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac026>.

identification.<sup>257</sup> Brundle's intervention thus functioned as a disciplinary gesture: by insisting that only Bomber Command veterans should speak on Dresden, he narrowed the parameters of legitimate memory, recasting Gregg's broader ethical critique as marginal, even inappropriate.

Yet Gregg's case complicates even this framework. He is not a civilian interloper or marginal observer, but a white, male veteran with extensive frontline experience across multiple theatres. By the demographic and experiential standards identified by Browning and Haigh, he ought to sit comfortably within the heroic pantheon. And yet, because his testimony refuses to endorse the redemptive narrative of the bombing campaign and instead frames Dresden as a moral rupture, he is symbolically demoted.

In the comment section, the experiences of RAF airmen were undoubtedly privileged over both Gregg's account and that of contemporary civilians. Many posts, often invoking family members, spoke of their sacrifice in stark, reverent terms: 'The airmen were 100 per cent true heroes... they knew they may not come back.'<sup>258</sup> Though Gregg himself had expressed admiration for the airmen, commenters joined the *Mail* in condemning the BBC for its perceived disrespect. Unlike the more restrained BBC comment threads, here the sentiment was near uniform: the BBC's reporting had been biased and anti-patriotic. Readers condemned the Corporation's 'constant criticism of our war heroes' as 'absolutely disgusting', with several twisting the acronym into slurs such as 'British Bashing Corporation' or 'Brussels Broadcasting Corporation'.<sup>259</sup>

Many criticisms appeared to stem from the article's framing, with some commenters even speculating that readers were reacting based on preconceptions rather than direct viewing of the BBC's coverage. A few challenged this dynamic, accusing the *Mail* of misrepresenting

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>258</sup> Brown and Bains, 'BBC's Insult to Hero Pilots', comment 631.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., comment 267 and comment 205.

the broadcast. One user remarked, ‘I don’t believe the BBC criticised our brave airmen. You are making it up.’<sup>260</sup> Another argued that the BBC’s only offence was offering ‘differing viewpoints, to question, to provoke thought... Things totally alien to the *Mail*, who continuously serve up the same hysterical, dumbed-down, jingoistic, narrow-minded, right-wing rubbish.’<sup>261</sup>

Yet this dissent in turn drew fierce rebuttals. One reply discredited a critic based on their (unverified) location in Kuala Lumpur (casting them as an outsider), insisting that the BBC ‘deliberately misrepresented’ Dresden and failed to ‘give accurate, well-researched programmes’.<sup>262</sup> The accusation that the BBC wished to ‘rewrite history’ (in its guise as a ‘propaganda service for the EU’) was a particular concern for several commenters, and echoed broader anxieties about national sovereignty, especially salient in the pre-Brexit political climate.<sup>263</sup>

Such tensions manifested in some particularly venomous posts. One comment described the BBC’s ‘bleating, whinging, handwringing’ as the reason it had ‘lost respect’, while mocking its journalists as ‘smug’ and ‘overpaid’.<sup>264</sup> In a chilling escalation, the same commenter suggested that BBC staff should be sent to Syria or Ukraine, and added, ‘If [they] took some shrapnel and stopped a few rounds, so much the better.’<sup>265</sup> This hostility reveals a deep contempt for media professionals seen as out of touch or ideologically subversive. Though not all comments reached this level of aggression, many echoed calls to defund or dismantle the BBC. ‘Break up the BBC immediately. Not fit for purpose’, wrote one user.<sup>266</sup> Others

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., comment 467 and comment 123.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., comment 962.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., comment 964.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., comment 901 and 964.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., comment 901.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., comment 137.

decried BBC journalists as ‘politically correct traitors’, betraying a complete breakdown of institutional trust.<sup>267</sup>

Amid this fervour, Gregg’s name was conspicuously scarce. Of the 1,493 comments, only 11 mentioned him directly, compared to 460 that targeted the BBC. Where he was discussed, some commenters defended him, invoking his first-hand experience: ‘He was there – were you?... He didn’t blame the airmen...how dare you portray him as less than a man.’<sup>268</sup> But these remarks rarely gained traction. Instead, more popular comments dismissed Gregg as left-wing, ignorant, and even as a ‘fifth columnist’.<sup>269</sup> One particularly pointed reply mocked Gregg’s claim – ‘but what I saw in Dresden – I’ve never seen women and children involved before’ – as either naïve or dishonest: ‘Really? Then you must have slept through the shameless bombing of innocent civilians in Liverpool, Swansea, Coventry and of course the London Blitz. Where does the BBC find these people?’<sup>270</sup>

This comment turns Gregg’s own appeal to eyewitness authority against him, framing his failure to acknowledge British civilian suffering as evidence of hypocrisy. It casts him not as a bearer of moral insight, but as a selective witness who undermines national solidarity by failing to recognise Britain’s own victimhood. It positioned Gregg not simply as mistaken, but as an outsider whose views were unrepresentative, or worse, subversive. The suggestion that the BBC had sought out his perspective to advance a particular agenda reinforced accusations that it was no longer a trustworthy national institution and worked to validate the *Mail*’s concern.

However, as noted earlier, the *Mail* did not always treat Gregg’s account with hostility. In its circulation of extracts from his memoir in 2015 and 2020, Gregg was framed not as a

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., comment 427.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., comment 1040 and comment 108.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., comment 888

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., comment 356.

controversial critic, but as a harrowing witness to unimaginable suffering. In these articles, the editorial tone prioritised emotional immediacy over political framing. Though they reproduced Gregg's own words, their captions and headlines reinforced affective engagement rather than inviting critical distance. The 2015 extract foregrounded his near-execution and described civilians being 'turned into human torches', with the 'screaming of those being burned alive' filling the air.<sup>271</sup> The 2020 article featured the lurid headline, 'Families boiled alive... 75 years on, the most horrifically vivid account you'll ever read of the Allied bombing of Dresden.'<sup>272</sup> Terms such as 'war crime' and 'genocide', which the *Mail* had decried in the BBC's framing, went unchallenged.

Similarly, the *Mail's* coverage of Gregg's television appearances on *Good Morning Britain* appearances in 2019 and 2020 again highlighted his moral gravitas and haunting remarks, such as 'the children melted, their bones were too tender'.<sup>273</sup> In these articles, he was consistently described as a 'survivor', 'British prisoner of war', and 'witness', while phrases like 'true horror' and modal imperatives ('must remember', 'should never happen again') endowed his account with solemnity and moral urgency.<sup>274</sup> In the absence of an institutional target like the BBC, there was seemingly no effort (or need) to portray Gregg as biased or disloyal.

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<sup>271</sup> Victor Gregg, 'I Watched as They Sank to the Ground and Died in a Pyre of Smoke and Flame': Astonishing Account of British PoW Caught in Dresden Bombing', *MailOnline*, 14 February 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2953385/I-watched-sank-exhausted-ground-died-pyre-smoke-flame-astonishing-account-British-POW-caught-Dresden-bombing.html> [accessed 12 May 2025].

<sup>272</sup> Victor Gregg and Rick Stroud, 'Into the Inferno: A Vivid Account of the Allied Bombing of Dresden', *MailOnline*, 12 February 2020 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7997465/Into-inferno-75-years-horribly-vivid-account-Allied-bombing-Dresden.html> [accessed 12 May 2025].

<sup>273</sup> Rory Tingle, 'British PoW Due to Be Shot in Dresden on Day RAF Killed Thousands', *MailOnline*, 10 February 2019 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6699261/British-prisoner-war-shot-Dresden-day-RAF-killed-tens-thousands.html> [accessed 8 July 2024]; Lara Keay, 'Dresden Survivor Says Bombing "Turned Him into Psychopath" 75 Years On', *MailOnline*, 13 February 2020 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7999149/Dresden-bombing-survivor-Victor-Gregg-100-Good-Morning-Britain-75th-anniversary.html> [accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

Did this lead to a shift in the public response? Did readers respond with elevated respect, or did the *Mail* itself become suspect for platforming him? The comment threads offer mixed evidence. On the 2015 extract, one user expressed ‘relief to see comments from decent people who understand the horror of Dresden’, contrasting the sentiment on display with threads attacking the BBC ‘for daring to discuss Dresden’.<sup>275</sup> Others were less impressed. One commenter lamented the readership’s apparent refusal to engage with someone ‘who was actually there, and was horrified by it’, likening them to ‘football yobs’ stirred up by ‘nationalistic propaganda’.<sup>276</sup> Similar frustrations surfaced in 2019, as users voiced dismay that even Victor Gregg who, as one put it, ‘WAS ACTUALLY there when it happened [sic]’, was now being denigrated.<sup>277</sup>

Certainly, vehement criticisms of Gregg remained present in all four articles, with numerous users questioning his character and account. One bluntly declared: ‘Sorry Mr. Gregg – I don’t believe you.’<sup>278</sup> The terms ‘traitor’ and ‘quisling’, both used to denote betrayal, recurred in several posts: ‘Nice that you can sit there in a free country saying that in freedom because of what they did though isn’t it .....quisling.’<sup>279</sup> These rhetorical attacks operated as projection strategies, redirecting moral discomfort by portraying Gregg as weak, disloyal, or senile. Several commenters seized on his age, casting him as a ‘silly old sod’, too naïve or confused to grasp the supposed necessities of war.<sup>280</sup> This overlooks, as Lynn Abrams argues, the interpretive richness often found in older narrators, who often ‘have a better ability to narrate the past than younger people’.<sup>281</sup> Drawing on findings in neuroscience, Abrams notes that while memory changes with age, ‘[t]here is no reason to think that an older person’s

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<sup>275</sup> Gregg, ‘Account of British POW Victor Gregg caught in Dresden bombing’, comment 52.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 51.

<sup>277</sup> Keay, ‘Dresden Survivor Says Bombing “Turned Him into Psychopath”’, comment 546.

<sup>278</sup> Tingle, ‘British PoW Due to Be Shot in Dresden on Day RAF Killed Thousands’, comment 106.

<sup>279</sup> Gregg, ‘Account of British POW Victor Gregg caught in Dresden bombing’, comment 109.

<sup>280</sup> Keay, ‘Dresden Survivor Says Bombing “Turned Him into Psychopath”’, comment 452.

<sup>281</sup> Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 90.

memory is less acute or reliable than that of a younger person. Whatever our age, we remember what is important to us.’<sup>282</sup>

Others even turned Gregg’s status as a prisoner of war against him. One commenter remarked, ‘How is he brave? He was a POW... a victim of circumstance’, suggesting that his captivity and lack of combat agency undermined his right to pass moral judgment.<sup>283</sup> Another asked pointedly: ‘How would a POW possibly know the complicated strategic reasons why the bombing had to happen?’ This rhetorical move reclassifies Gregg not only as emotionally misguided, but as intellectually unqualified, subordinating lived experience to institutional military logic and reinforcing the idea that only certain forms of participation confer narrative legitimacy.<sup>284</sup> Though uncommon, these comments expose the uneasy place of POWs within Britain’s cultural imagination, where narratives of captivity are often selectively valued.

As Clare Makepeace has described, British POWs returning from captivity in Europe often struggled to articulate their experiences in a society that valorised active resistance and martial endurance.<sup>285</sup> The stigma of surrender, often internalised by the men themselves, clashed with dominant wartime ideals of heroism and stoicism, rendering their stories difficult to assimilate into the national narrative. As Makepeace notes, post-war Britain showed far greater interest in those who had ‘heroically escaped’ than in the quieter, more ambiguous testimonies of endurance and survival.<sup>286</sup> Pattinson et al. emphasise that escape ‘was not a common experience: only thirty British RAF personnel of the 10,000 incarcerated in Germany...reached either Britain or neutral territory’.<sup>287</sup> In many respects, Gregg’s account

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Keay, ‘Dresden Survivor Says Bombing “Turned Him into Psychopath”’, comment 880.

<sup>284</sup> Tingle, ‘British PoW Due to Be Shot in Dresden on Day RAF Killed Thousands’, comment 565.

<sup>285</sup> Clare Makepeace, *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>287</sup> Juliette Pattinson, Lucy Noakes, and Wendy Ugolini, ‘Incarcerated Masculinities: Male POWs and the Second World War’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 7.3 (2014), p. 182.

conforms to the heroic prisoner narrative: captured in combat, placed in solitary confinement, and narrowly escaping execution after sabotaging a Nazi facility. Yet the commenters above reframe this experience, casting captivity not as a testament to resilience, but as evidence of passivity, thereby disqualifying Gregg from the moral authority typically afforded to veterans.

In this way, Gregg's age, biography, and testimony were turned against him, less to refute his argument than to cast doubt on his right to speak. In doing so, commenters evaded direct engagement with the ethical implications of his testimony. In questioning how a celebrated veteran could be dismissed so readily, one user exposed the underlying contradiction: 'So DM readers... This is the best generation, an example to us all, least we forget and all that... unless they have a different point of view?? [sic]'<sup>288</sup> In doing so, they highlighted the conditional dynamics of Gregg's authority. In previous controversies, such as the backlash to the BBC's coverage of the Dresden anniversary, it was the institution, not Gregg, that bore the brunt of criticism. But here, in comment threads responding directly to Gregg's memoirs and interviews, he is positioned as the one undermining Britain's war legacy, particularly the heroism of the RAF. As such, he is no longer a contested symbol within a broader media debate, but the direct source of perceived moral transgression.

This distinction profoundly shaped the emotional response. The dynamics of the intergroup sensitivity effect (ISE) and black sheep effect (BSE) operated here in an unusually orthodox and untempered fashion. ISE predicts that ingroup critics like veterans are granted latitude, so long as their dissent is perceived as constructive.<sup>289</sup> But once Gregg labelled the bombing a war crime and condemned British leadership, his loyalty was questioned. The BSE then activated with full force: he was subject to harsher moral judgment not despite his veteran

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<sup>288</sup> Keay, 'Dresden Survivor Says Bombing "Turned Him into Psychopath"', comment 546.

<sup>289</sup> See also Anna-Kaisa Reiman and Tina C. Killoran, 'When Group Members Dissent: A Direct Comparison of the Black Sheep and Intergroup Sensitivity Effects', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 104 (2023), pp. 1–12.

status, but because of it. His critique, issued from within the moral circle of national sacrifice, was felt as particularly disruptive.

In this instance, the BSE did not merely punish transgression, it enabled reclassification. Gregg was recast not just as disloyal, but as someone who had never truly belonged to the imagined community of real veterans. His captivity facilitated this rhetorical manoeuvre: it became a way to strip him of combatant status and reframe him as a passive bystander, undeserving of moral authority. One commenter articulated this logic explicitly: ‘This man, a POW, was being held for execution – which is a war crime – [yet] actually criticises the UK, as do many Germans... Those pilots were heroes and should be recognised. This is what is wrong with [the] country now, is its population turning on itself or allowing others to do so. [sic]’<sup>290</sup> This attack is not merely personal, nor is it only retrospective, it reveals a deeper ideological effort to police the boundaries of acceptable memory and national self-perception.

Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt’s concept of mediated prospective memory helps explain the intensity of this response.<sup>291</sup> As she argues, memory work is not only retrospective but anticipatory: public narratives about the past are shaped by concerns about what such interpretations imply for the future. Media framings, in particular, link past events to prospective action, shaping what is remembered and what is seen as politically or morally necessary.<sup>292</sup> Gregg’s account threatens to destabilise the moral clarity of Britain’s wartime legacy. It evokes empathy with enemy civilians, questions the necessity of strategic bombing, and introduces moral ambiguity into a sacred national script. Within this frame, his testimony is not merely recollective, it is interpreted as an ideological intervention, one that calls for ethical reckoning and potential revision of the terms on which national pride is built. One

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<sup>290</sup> Keay, ‘Dresden Survivor Says Bombing “Turned Him into Psychopath”’, comment 892.

<sup>291</sup> Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt, ‘Bridging Collective Memories and Public Agendas: Toward a Theory of Mediated Prospective Memory’, *Communication Theory*, 23.2 (2013), pp. 91–111.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

commenter captured this dynamic with sardonic alarm: ‘Give it another decade, and the UK will have started World War Two, and the EU beat us down and won the War, with the way snowflake liberals cherry pick history.’<sup>293</sup>

These comments reposition Gregg not as a witness, but as a cultural symptom: an internal threat aligned with national self-sabotage. In doing so, they invoked a powerful and enduring trope in British political rhetoric: the ‘enemy within’.<sup>294</sup> As Dorey demonstrates, the Conservative right’s ‘war on woke’ has inherited and reanimated a lineage of rhetorical strategies that date back to Thatcher’s attacks on the ‘loony left’ and the miners’ strikes of the 1980s.<sup>295</sup> The enduring pattern is the identification of internal adversaries – academics, civil servants, broadcasters – who are said to erode national pride, promote guilt, and ‘rewrite’ the past.<sup>296</sup> These so-called ‘freedom-destroying extremists’ are not merely wrong, they are enemies of the imagined nation.<sup>297</sup>

Gregg, once lauded as a veteran, is now reclassified as a cultural traitor: a proxy for liberal guilt, or a stooge for revisionist forces. This move resonates with what Tom Bentley describes as the ‘mnemonic battle’ at the core of Britain’s culture wars.<sup>298</sup> According to Bentley, the ‘central technique’ of conservative memory politics has been to construct a moral ‘balance sheet’ regarding Britain’s colonial history, a moral inventory that acknowledges flaws only

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<sup>293</sup> Gregg and Stroud, ‘Into the Inferno’, comment 355.

<sup>294</sup> See chapters by Alma-Pierre Bonnet, ‘The Great Divider? Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Use of Metaphors and the Emergence of the UK “Culture Wars”’, and Peter Dorey ‘The Conservative Right’s “War Against Woke”: Fighting the Latest “Enemies Within”’ in *Towards a Very British Version of the “Culture Wars”’: Populism, Social Fractures and Political Communication*, ed. by Alma-Pierre Bonnet and Raphaële Kilty (London: Routledge, 2024).

<sup>295</sup> Dorey, ‘The Conservative Right’s “War Against Woke”’, pp. 98-117.

<sup>296</sup> See Emma Bell, ‘Policing the culture wars in contemporary Britain: “More PCs, less PC”’ in Bonnet and Kilty, pp. 118-136.

<sup>297</sup> See Raphaële Kilty. ‘Conclusion’ in Bonnet and Kilty, pp. 209-214.

<sup>298</sup> Tom Bentley, ‘“Culture War”: The Contradictions of Conservative Representations in the Mnemonic Battle over the British Empire’, in *Handbook on the Politics of Memory*, ed. by Maria Mälksoo (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), pp. 334-48.

insofar as they do not outweigh, or undermine, a larger story of British virtue, sacrifice, and exceptionalism.<sup>299</sup>

Gregg's refusal to conform to this memory template renders him a symbolic threat. Rather than confront his claims, commenters reach for rhetorical devices that reaffirm group identity. One user mocked the ethical implications of Gregg's testimony with a sarcastic rejoinder: 'Shall we apologise for Columbus?...for gods creation of Adam and Eve?' [sic]<sup>300</sup> The point here is not rebuttal but ridicule. The comment collapses all moral inquiry into absurdity and reasserts the authority of a fixed, triumphalist national story. Within this worldview, to question British conduct is not only mistaken, it is profoundly unpatriotic.

In such discursive environments, whataboutism becomes a primary defence mechanism. Gregg's critique is not addressed on its own terms but displaced by references to German atrocities, the Blitz, or the bombing of Coventry. As Howell argues, the rhetorical function of whataboutism is 'to redirect attention from the specific case at hand... towards an arguably similar case or towards an opponent'.<sup>301</sup> These rhetorical strategies were then buttressed by broader forms of moral disengagement. Across the *MailOnline* comment threads, the most upvoted responses routinely reframed the bombing as necessary, minimised civilian suffering, or dehumanised the German population.

A closer examination of the Word Trees (Figure 4.13) visualises the structural function of this retributive language. Rather than branching into nuanced historical debate, phrases like 'they sowed the wind & reaped the whirlwind' or 'war is war' form prominent, abrupt nodes that operate as thought-terminating clichés. The visual data maps how these idioms are deployed as rhetorical dead-ends to aggressively shut down the 'agonistic' mode of

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

<sup>300</sup> Keay, 'Dresden Survivor Says Bombing "Turned Him into Psychopath"', comment 3.

<sup>301</sup> Tracy Howell, 'Whataboutisms: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', *Informal Logic*, 43.1 (2023) 91 - 112 (p. 91).

remembering, dismissing German suffering as an axiomatic inevitability. This structural refusal to engage with the moral complexities of the bombing flows directly into overt hostility toward those who do. Some dismissed the need for ethical concern altogether: ‘Amazing story. war is savage. snowflakes get over it. [sic]’<sup>302</sup> The term ‘*snowflakes*’ here performs a particularly telling ideological function. As Darcy Leigh argues, the snowflake figure is not merely sensitive or thin-skinned; they are infantilised, feminised, and racialised, figured as overly emotional, intellectually weak, and politically illegitimate.<sup>303</sup> A younger dissenter’s objection, Leigh notes, is routinely ‘framed as part of a generational “trend”, rather than political expression by an individual with the capacity for thought or political agency’.<sup>304</sup> The insult thus collapses dissent into weakness and emotion, marking the speaker as both unserious and undeserving of engagement.

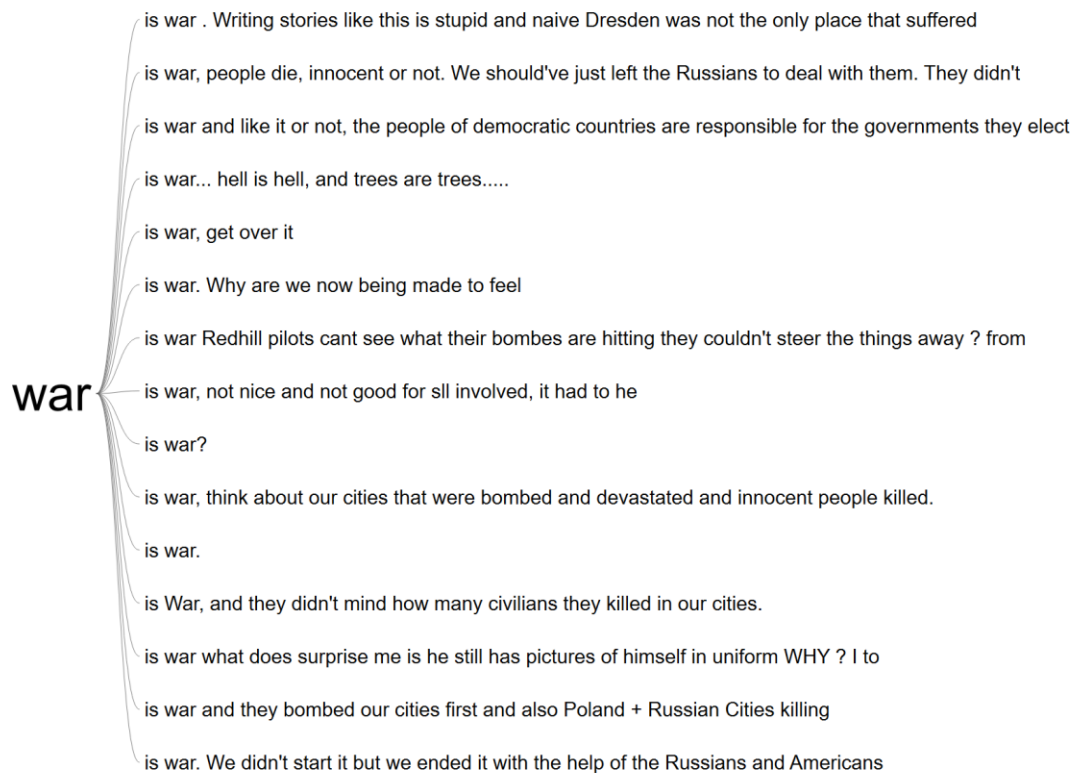
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<sup>302</sup> Gregg and Stroud, ‘Into the Inferno’., comment 463.

<sup>303</sup> See Darcy Leigh, ‘From Savages to Snowflakes: Race and the Enemies of Free Speech’, *Review of International Studies*, 49.4 (2023), 763–79.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 773.

Figure 4.13: Commenter Justifications ('Reap the Whirlwind' and 'War is War')



Crucially, however, the snowflake is not the only figure mobilised in this rhetorical economy. Their implied opposite is the supposedly hardened realist, the embittered ‘keyboard warrior’ who proclaims what others are too soft to say. If the snowflake is cast as weak and coddled, the keyboard warrior performs toughness through moral disengagement (embracing brutality as common sense and equating dispassion with insight). But this performance, too, is subject to ridicule. ‘Keyboard warrior’ functions as a pejorative term, exposing the disconnect between the posture of martial certainty and the commentator’s actual distance from risk. One user used this term to draw an explicit contrast between Gregg and his critics: ‘So here we have on the one hand a man who actually fought in the war, witnessed [its] horrors first hand ... and who says THIS should never have happened. On the other hand we have brave keyboard warriors ... who [say they] would have done it to the whole country.’<sup>305</sup> Here, the insult reverses the usual logic: not to dismiss softness, but to mock unearned aggressive bravado. This makes clear that while some positioned Gregg’s status as a prisoner of war below that of pilots in a perceived hierarchy of martial heroism, others still saw it as conferring an experiential legitimacy far greater than that of present-day commentators speaking from positions of safety and detachment.

The range of reactions to Gregg’s story elicited by the *MailOnline* thus reveal a cascading spectrum of affective investments, mobilised by both his defenders and his critics. One side foregrounded his direct experience of suffering and personal sacrifice; the other dismissed him as naïve, ungrateful, or even disloyal. In both cases, exchanges were marked by stark emotional language, critics were described as ‘stupid’, ‘disgusting’, or ‘idiotic’. These polarised responses suggest a fragmentation of memory even within the ostensibly like-minded *MailOnline* commentariat.

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<sup>305</sup> Keay, ‘Dresden Survivor Says Bombing “Turned Him into Psychopath”’ comment 87.

Yet this fragmentation also reflects a deeper structural logic. As Khlevnyuk observes, whilst the internet has increasingly facilitated ever faster means of broadcasting information, digital memory agents increasingly seek to ‘narrowcast’ their messages; they are ‘less [interested in] broadening an audience and [focus more on] catering to the specific tastes and needs of some audiences’.<sup>306</sup> In the *MailOnline*’s coverage of Gregg, this strategy was clearly visible. Whether his testimony was framed as part of a wider critique of the BBC or presented more directly in his own voice, the same emotional repertoires were activated: questions over Britain’s wartime heroism, defences of the RAF’s legacy, appeals and insults to personal or postmemories, hostility toward liberal revisionism, and disputes over Gregg’s moral legitimacy. The editorial framing may shift, but the emotional payload did not. The *MailOnline*’s strategy remained to provoke affective reaction through spotlighting a controversial aspect of the Second World War. It did not matter whether readers were reacting in defence of the BBC or against it, in support of Gregg or in condemnation, what mattered was that they *reacted*.

Wahl-Jørgensen’s concept of the ‘strategic ritual of emotionality’ helps further clarify this editorial logic.<sup>307</sup> Based on ethnographic studies of newsrooms, she argues that emotional storytelling has become a dominant journalistic norm, particularly in digital media, where feelings, not facts, drive visibility and participation. Crucially, however, this emotionality is not expressed by journalists themselves. Drawing on an analysis of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism, Wahl-Jørgensen observes that ‘in none of the stories...did journalists discuss their own emotions’.<sup>308</sup> Instead, emotional expression is channelled through others: journalists described ‘the feelings of groups and collectives’ in 43 per cent of cases, ‘story protagonists’

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<sup>306</sup> Daria Khlevnyuk, ‘Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: “Liking” Stalin in Russian Social Media’, *Media, Culture & Society*, 41.3 (2019), p. 320.

<sup>307</sup> See Karin Wahl-Jørgensen, *Emotions, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

in 22 per cent, and ‘other individuals’ in 24 per cent.<sup>309</sup> This ‘outsourcing of emotional labour’, to subjects like Gregg, and to publics who respond to them, allows journalists to stage affective drama without appearing partial.<sup>310</sup>

In the *MailOnline*’s Dresden coverage, this logic is clearly operative: the reporters and editors never comment directly on Gregg’s memories or moral judgments. Instead, his account is framed through lurid extracts and embedded within articles whose comment threads perform the real emotional work, expressing outrage, compassion, reverence, or mockery. The contradiction between Gregg’s cultural veneration and the hostility toward his critique is not an editorial oversight, it is the engine of interaction. Each article functions as a provocation, its emotional ambiguity calibrated not to build consensus, but to sustain engagement within a fragmented public by triggering predictable affective responses from distinct, ideologically primed audiences. However, engagement does not always require division. In the final section, we demonstrate how the commodification of history and pursuit of reader engagement, earlier exemplified through the reverent commemoration of figures like Captain Tom Moore, was similarly achieved in Gregg’s obituaries through a more unifying narrative, one that re-centred his authority around shared values of service, sacrifice, and national reflection.

### **Honouring a Fallen Hero: Responses to Victor Gregg’s Obituaries**

In contrast to the earlier controversies surrounding Gregg’s moral judgment of the bombing of Dresden, his obituary coverage in *The Times* and *The Telegraph* appears, at first glance, to mark a return to comforting narratives of heroism, duty, and national pride. In these articles, and the comment sections they generated, Gregg is no longer the ‘fifth columnist’ or traitor figure seen

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

in prior *MailOnline* comment threads. Instead, he is celebrated as an exemplar of courage, stoicism, and national sacrifice.

A renewed tone of awe and respect is immediately visible. Readers across both platforms described being ‘breathless’ after reading the obituary, struggling to ‘find words to praise him enough’.<sup>311</sup> The most popular *Times* commenter marvelled, ‘It’s hard to conceive how one man could have packed in so much action into one life’, while a *Telegraph* reader declared Gregg’s story ‘a gem amongst gems’.<sup>312</sup> This tone of veneration recalls the response to Captain Sir Tom Moore’s death earlier that same year. Moore was hailed by the cultural, media and political figures as a national icon, ‘a hero and fighter to the very end’, ‘the very best of British’, ‘Captain Marvel’.<sup>313</sup> His funeral and the commemorative rituals that followed, including nationwide applause, calls for a statue, and tributes from the Queen, signalled how powerfully he embodied the idealised traits of wartime Britain.<sup>314</sup>

The comparable tones used to describe Gregg suggest a symbolic reintegration: a restoration of Gregg’s status within the imagined community of legitimate veterans. Indeed, the respect shown extended beyond Gregg as an individual: his story also became representative of an entire wartime generation. ‘But for the sheer guts, bravery and sacrifices of such men, who knows where we might be now’, one comment read.<sup>315</sup> Others though were quick to link Gregg’s fortitude to contemporary insecurities, reframing his life as a lens through

<sup>311</sup> *Telegraph* Obituaries, ‘Victor Gregg’, comment 3.

<sup>312</sup> *The Times*, ‘Victor Gregg Obituary’, comment 1 and *Telegraph* Obituaries, ‘Victor Gregg’, comment 57.

<sup>313</sup> See T. Parry, ‘“Where He Walked, A Nation Followed”, *Daily Mirror*, 3 February 2021, pp. 4–5, T. Horton, ‘David Beckham Hails Captain Sir Tom Moore as the “Very Best of British”’, *Press Association Mediapoint*, 2 February 2021, and N. Parker, ‘Captain Marvel; Nation Mourns Hero Who Raised £39M Walking Round Garden and Died of Covid at 100’, *Sun*, 3 February 2021, p. 1.

<sup>314</sup> See BBC, ‘Captain Sir Tom Moore: National Clap Announced by PM for Fundraiser’, *BBC News*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-55917475> [accessed 19 May 2025], Jessica Sansome, ‘Amanda Holden Launches Petition for Captain Sir Tom Moore Statue outside Parliament’, *Manchester Evening News*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/showbiz-news/amanda-holden-launches-petition-captain-19763295> [accessed 19 May 2025], and BBC, ‘Captain Sir Tom Moore: Queen Leads Tributes for Captain Sir Tom Moore’, *BBC News*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-55908474> [accessed 19 May 2025].

<sup>315</sup> *The Times*, ‘Victor Gregg Obituary’, comment 79.

which to judge present-day values: ‘This lad could have told our younger generation a few things about anxiety and stress for a start! We’d never be able to fight a war today like this man did. Our kids just don’t have the backbone.’<sup>316</sup>

It is clear then that the same emotional investments seen in earlier coverage (admiration, nostalgia, cultural anxiety) were reactivated. Younger people are portrayed as lacking resilience compared to ‘true old school Brits’ like Gregg, and modern culture was contrasted unfavourably with wartime stoicism.<sup>317</sup> Another user lamented, ‘[t]his generation puts so many of us who have come since to shame and demonstrate how far we have fallen and failed’.<sup>318</sup> The same logic of affective narrowcasting was thus still at work, guiding readers to emotionally invest not only in Gregg’s heroism, but in a redemptive national script that implicitly casts others, those who supposedly fall short, as morally wanting.

Whilst this script still produced counter-narratives, dissenting opinions were once again stigmatised. In *The Telegraph* thread, the most replied-to comment did not come from a eulogist, but from a user who echoed Gregg’s critique: ‘The bombing of Dresden was one of the most horrific crimes against humanity that the Allies were responsible for, thanks to Bomber Harris.’<sup>319</sup> Though the sentiment aligned with Gregg’s published views, it provoked intense hostility. Replies ranged from strategic justifications of area bombing to full-throated personal attacks.

One seemingly enraged commenter accused the original poster of ‘virtue signalling’, dismissing them as part of a broader class of morally insincere revisionists (see Figure 4.14).<sup>320</sup> They declared: ‘Had we not given as good as we got... you would have been denied the

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., comment 47.

<sup>317</sup> *Telegraph Obituaries*, ‘Victor Gregg’, comment 61.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., comment 62.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., comment 36.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., comment 39.

opportunity of such intellectual masturbation in public.<sup>321</sup> The inflamed riposte concluded with the command: ‘Now shut up and get back under your bridge’.<sup>322</sup> The original poster is thus not only deemed disingenuous or disruptive, they are stripped of sincerity, agency, and dignity.

**Figure 4.14: Comment Thread: ‘Virtue Signalling’**

**RH** · NOVEMBER 24, 2021  
The Bombing of Dresden was one of the most horrific crimes against humanity that the Allies were responsible for, thanks to Bomber Harris.  
REPLY 10 REPLIES LIKE 2 0 REPORT

**PM** · NOVEMBER 24, 2021  
Reply to **Robin Hood**  
It wasn't, and neither was it the fault of Harris. It was also a completely legitimate target.  
REPLY LIKE 22 0 REPORT

**SP** · NOVEMBER 24, 2021  
Reply to **Robin Hood**  
Harris opposed it. The bombing was ordered by Churchill and Roosevelt at the request of the Russians. The USAAF attack followed the RAF.  
REPLY LIKE 13 0 REPORT

**KW** · NOVEMBER 24, 2021  
Reply to **Robin Hood**  
Don't talk such rubbish. This country was involved in what the nazis called total war, a concept they unleashed against the British people as well as those countries they crushed and occupied. They started it and they got no more than they handed out. Think of London, Coventry, Clydebank etc. But, then, you and your kind won't think of anything other than your own virtue signalling sensibilities. Consider this; had we not given as good as we got, and better, we would have lost and you - had you existed - would have been denied the opportunity of such intellectual masturbation in public. Just thank your lucky stars there were in our number those who were prepared to get their hands dirty in order to protect your basic right to exist, let alone your freedoms. Now shut up and get back under your bridge.  
REPLY LIKE 23 0 REPORT

A similar dynamic emerged in *The Times*. There, a comment describing the bombing as a ‘war crime’ and ‘cold blooded murder’, while rejecting justifications as ‘jingoist nonsense’ was again met with widespread condemnation (see Figure 4.15).<sup>323</sup> One reply offered historical

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> The Times, ‘Victor Gregg Obituary’, comment 36.

context, arguing that British bombing tactics had been learned from the Luftwaffe; another questioned the very premise of innocence in wartime. Though less vitriolic than the *Telegraph* exchange, this thread still revealed how easily moral dissent could trigger defensive responses.

**Figure 4.15: Comment Thread: ‘Jingoist Nonsense’**

**D** **Derek Kalyanvala** 14 OCTOBER, 2021  
 I realise the controversy over the bombing of Dresden but we need to remember that the Nazis did the same in Britain in the early 1940s. Having bombed industrial targets they then turned to bombing Civilian targets hoping that the British would plead with the Government to surrender which was just what the Nazis hoped would happen. Well that didn't happen because we have more backbone even under extreme pressure.  
 Reply · Recommend (6) · Share

**T** **Thomas Young** 14 OCTOBER, 2021  
 Jingoist nonsense. Dresden was a war crime, pure and simple. The Blitz had nothing of the same ferocity or will to destroy innocent civilians with phosphorus bombs. And it wasn't carried out under the conditions of complete air superiority. Dresden was cold blooded murder.  
 Reply · Recommend (3) · Share

**R** **Richard Simpson** 14 OCTOBER, 2021  
 Replying to Thomas Young  
 There was a night in the London Blitz when the capital was on the edge of a firestorm of similar proportions. Fortunately fog-bound airfields in France kept the planned last wave of bombers on the ground.  
 Pretty much everything the British knew about the area bombing of cities was learned from the G...[See more](#)  
 Reply · Recommend (4) · Share

**R** **Richard DAWSON** 14 OCTOBER, 2021  
 Replying to Thomas Young  
 What exactly is an innocent civilian?  
 Reply · Recommend (1) · Share

**D** **Derek Kalyanvala** 14 OCTOBER, 2021  
 Replying to Thomas Young  
 Hitler was responsible for the bombing of Dresden in so far that at the very end of the war even before Dresden he had refused to surrender after the carpet bombing of German cities when he must have known that it was impossible for Germany to win  
 Reply · Recommend (1) · Share

In these moments, the narrowcasting of British war memory remained highly effective. For conservative voices invested in defending the sacred story, suspicion of dissent did not disappear but was redirected. The same rhetorical mechanisms persisted: dissenters were morally delegitimised, framed as disloyal or naïve, and marked as outsiders to the imagined national community. Gregg's heroism was thus not celebrated in spite of his dissent, but by

displacing it. His legacy became palatable to commemorative culture only through strategic forgetting: his bravery was foregrounded; his judgment backgrounded. The public was invited to mourn him not as a moral witness, but as a moral symbol.

In this way, Gregg's commemorative rehabilitation did not represent an ideological reversal, but another narrative recalibration. The emotional intensity of earlier debates is preserved but redirected toward new (old) liberal targets. Readers seemingly embraced Gregg, even as they rejected those who echoed his most controversial claims. Like Captain Tom, he became a focal point for consensus, but one forged not through reconciliation or interpretive openness, but by reaffirming the boundaries of belonging.

As Wahl-Jørgensen argues, emotional expression in mediated discourse often functions as a 'strategic ritual', not merely signalling ideological boundaries, but actively reinforcing them through the choreography of feeling.<sup>324</sup> In this light, the public veneration of Gregg in responses to his obituaries can be seen as a ritualised affirmation of collective values: one that mobilised emotional intensity not to unsettle memory, but to reaffirm a comforting narrative of national resilience. By celebrating Gregg's courage while muting his moral dissent, commenters enacted a form of affective boundary-work, distinguishing between the aspects of his legacy deemed honourable and those considered transgressive. The ritual did not resolve the tensions Gregg embodied; rather, it absorbed them, repackaging a difficult voice into a palatable symbol. The result was a form of commemoration that offered the appearance of inclusivity while enforcing strict boundaries: mourning was permitted, encouraged even, but only insofar as it avoided deeper ethical reflection.

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<sup>324</sup> Wahl-Jørgensen, *Emotions, Media and Politics*.

## Conclusion

Victor Gregg's testimony did not merely challenge the strategic or moral justification of the Dresden bombing; it questioned the deeper emotional architecture of Britain's wartime self-image. His recollections, drawn from direct experience and marked by moral clarity, tested the limits of what a veteran can say without being cast outside the imagined community of the nation. As this chapter has shown, public responses to Gregg's interventions were shaped less by *who* he was than by *how* his words were read in relation to Britain's sacred story of the Second World War.

This national script, built upon tropes of sacrifice, moral virtue, and redemptive national struggle, remains emotionally resonant. As Tollerton and others have argued, British war memory functions as a form of civil religion: a framework through which national identity is secured, moral continuity is asserted, and dissent is policed.<sup>325</sup> Gregg's condemnation of Dresden as 'evil', 'demonic', and potentially a 'war crime' posed not just a factual challenge but a symbolic threat. His remarks implied a reversal of inherited moral hierarchies, Allied righteousness displaced by Allied culpability; British sacrifice overshadowed by German suffering.

In this context, Gregg's veteran status became double-edged. While the intergroup sensitivity effect predicts that ingroup members like veterans may be granted latitude to criticise, that legitimacy evaporates when their dissent is perceived as disloyal or morally destabilising. When Gregg's testimony was received as an expression of personal trauma, or as a specific critique of media or leadership, it was often tolerated. But when it functioned as a broad moral indictment of British wartime conduct the black sheep effect emerged with force. Commenters denounced him as a traitor, impugned his identity, and sought to disqualify him

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<sup>325</sup> See David Tollerton, 'Remembering (and Forgetting) COVID-19 in Britain's Religious-Secular Landscape', *CrossCurrents*, 72.4 (December 2022), pp. 323–54.

on technical or ideological grounds. His witness status became not a source of protection but the very reason for repudiation.

Yet what makes Gregg's case particularly instructive is not merely the polarity of responses, but the consistency of their underlying logic. Across comment threads and editorial framings, his testimony elicited a cascading range of emotional reactions, grief, defensiveness, reverence, contempt. But within this range, certain affective patterns remained constant. Criticism was tolerable when safely contained; when it could be reframed as apolitical reminiscence or redirected toward contemporary grievances. Once it appeared to destabilise the foundational narrative, it became subject to ritual expulsion.

These dynamics were facilitated by the digital architecture of commemoration. As Khlevnyuk argues, the internet has facilitated a shift 'from broadcasting to narrowcasting', enabling memory agents to address 'smaller audiences interested in specific narratives and agendas'.<sup>326</sup> Her study of Stalinist memory cultures in Russian social media reveals how fragmented publics form around tailored narratives, each catering to distinct political or affective needs.<sup>327</sup> In Gregg's case agents like the *MailOnline*, for instance, repeatedly recontextualised his testimony – framing him variously as heroic witness, BBC stooge, or prophetic moral critic – all tactics which provoked remarkably consistent reader engagements.

That so many readers were provoked by such tactics, and Gregg's words so easily appropriated, reinterpreted, or rejected reflects a deeper tension in contemporary commemorative culture. The veteran, so often used in appeals to national consensus and belonging, can also become a site of contestation. While Captain Tom Moore was widely celebrated as a unifying figure whose actions reinforced a redemptive wartime mythology, the media and online reaction to Gregg's memories showcase the conditionality of this veneration.

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<sup>326</sup> Khlevnyuk, 'Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online', p. 320.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 317–331.

Gregg's authority, drawn from lived experience and moral conviction, did not guarantee public endorsement. Instead, it was made contingent upon the narrowcasting utility of his words. Gregg's case illustrates how veterans are not only remembered but actively used, as symbolic resources through which media can harness, and publics rehearse, anxieties about national identity, institutional trust, and generational decline.

## Chapter Five:

### Welby was ‘Wrong’: The Archbishop of Canterbury, the *Daily Mail* and the Seventieth Anniversary of Dresden, 2015

Dresden, 13 February, 2015. As bells rang out across the old city, thousands stood in silent vigil outside the Frauenkirche, a cathedral once reduced to ashes by Allied firebombing and now resplendent in its reconstruction. It was a scene of solemnity and reconciliation, yet also one shadowed by deeper tensions. The rise of PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident), a far-right protest movement, and resurgent nationalism unsettled Dresden’s commemorative landscape. This tension was further exacerbated by what Karl-Siegbert Rehberg and Matthias Neutzner identify as the persistent 'myth' of Dresden, a narrative of the 'innocent city' that has historically served to decouple the city’s destruction from its active, systemic role in the National Socialist regime.<sup>1</sup> Into this fraught moment, where the city’s identity as a 'victim' was in danger of being reclaimed by the far-right, stepped two figures: German President Joachim Gauck and Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby.

**Figure 5.1: Dresden Residents Form a Human Chain (13/02/2015)<sup>2</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> See Karl-Siegbert Rehberg and Matthias Neutzner, 'The Dresden Frauenkirche as a Contested Symbol: The Architecture of Remembrance after War', in *War and Cultural Heritage: Biographies of Place*, ed. by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Dacia Viejo Rose (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 98–127.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Akbar, 'Remembering a City Bombed to Near-Oblivion: Thousands Form Human Chain for Peace on 70th Anniversary', *MailOnline*, 13 February 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2952892/Remembering-city-bombed-near-oblivion-Thousands-form-human-chain-peace-70th-anniversary-bombing-raid-killed-25-000-destroyed-Dresden.html> [accessed 28 March 2025].

While Gauck reaffirmed Germany's narrative of responsibility, warning against historical relativism, Welby offered 'profound regret and deep sorrow' for the events of seventy years earlier.<sup>3</sup> His address, rooted in a theological ethic of reconciliation, sought to humanise suffering on all sides without denying Allied necessity. However, to fully understand the connotations of Welby's address, one must recognise the decades-long process of state and ecclesiastical reconciliation he was participating in, wherein British and German memories had become increasingly intertwined.

Dresden's memory has long been a highly politicised site. During the Cold War, the East German state actively instrumentalised the city's destruction. As Mathias Berek outlines, the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) recruited the narrative of Dresden's victimhood to serve as a potent symbol of global 'imperialist terror' perpetrated by 'Anglo-American warmongers.'<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the Frauenkirche was left in ruins for decades; Anne Fuchs notes that the GDR preserved the site primarily as an ideological anti-war monument, a status corroborated by Tony Joel, who highlights the ruins' transformation into an arresting *Mahnmal* (warning memorial) against Western imperialism.<sup>5</sup>

Stefan Goebel explicitly contrasts this East German trajectory with the British experience, observing that while the ruins of Coventry Cathedral were immediately

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<sup>3</sup> Joachim Gauck, *Speech at the Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Destruction of Dresden*, 13 February 2015, [https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/02/150213-Dresden-englisch.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile](https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2015/02/150213-Dresden-englisch.pdf?__blob=publicationFile) [accessed 16 March 2025]. The full transcript of the Welby speech can be found at: Kevin Kallsen, 'Canterbury Offers His "Regrets" for the 1945 Bombing of Dresden', *Anglican Ink*, 14 February 2015, <https://anglican.ink/2015/02/14/canterbury-offers-his-regrets-for-the-1945-bombing-of-dresden/> [accessed 16 March 2025].

<sup>4</sup> Mathias Berek, 'Local Memories', in *Local Memories in a Nationalizing and Globalizing World*, ed. by Marnix Beyen and Brecht Deseure (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Fuchs, 'World War II in German Cultural Memory: Dresden as *lieu de mémoire*' in *The Routledge Handbook of German Politics & Culture*, ed. by Sarah Colvin (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 56; Tony Joel, 'Reconstruction over Ruins: Rebuilding Dresden's Frauenkirche', in *The Heritage of War*, ed. by Martin Gegner and Bart Ziino (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 204.

transformed by its clergy into a ‘dynamic site of reflection and reconciliation,’ the Frauenkirche remained ‘simply a gutted structure suspended in limbo for some forty years.’<sup>6</sup>

Crucially though, this divergence did not preclude a deep and enduring ecclesiastical connection. This bond was rooted in the immediate aftermath of the 1940 Blitz, when Provost Richard Howard used a BBC Christmas Day broadcast to renounce thoughts of revenge, later inscribing the words ‘Father Forgive’ behind the cathedral’s altar.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the Cold War, this ethos was codified through the Community of the Cross of Nails, an international ministry of reconciliation born from three medieval roof nails salvaged from the destruction of Coventry cathedral.<sup>8</sup> Under the leadership of Provost Bill Williams, who formalised the international network, this clerical outreach became a vital bridge across the Iron Curtain.<sup>9</sup> In 1965, the relationship with Dresden reached a significant milestone when a Cross of Nails was presented to the Diakonissenanstalt (Deaconess Institution), followed by the Kreuzkirche (Church of the Cross) in 1985.<sup>10</sup> When in the 1980s dissident civil rights activists began reclaiming the Frauenkirche ruins as an authentic site of mourning, they were building upon these decades of spiritual engagement.<sup>11</sup>

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, a local citizens' initiative launched the *Ruf aus Dresden* (Call from Dresden), successfully appealing for worldwide support to rebuild the church as a ‘Christian Centre of World Peace.’<sup>12</sup> British civil society responded enthusiastically to the call, a sentiment channelled through the British Dresden Trust, founded in 1993 to offer a hand of friendship and reconciliation.<sup>13</sup> The Trust famously raised funds to manufacture the

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<sup>6</sup> Stefan Goebel, 'Ruins of War into Memorials of Reconciliation: Coventry Cathedral and the Dresden Frauenkirche, 1940–2010', *Journal of British Studies*, 64, e14, (2025), pp. 24, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver Schuegraf, *The Cross of Nails: Joining in God's Mission of Reconciliation* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012), pp. 3–5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>11</sup> Goebel, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Joel, p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> Joel, p. 211; Goebel, p. 19.

golden Orb and Cross that now crowns the church, crafted by a British goldsmith whose father had flown in the bombing raids over the city.<sup>14</sup>

This architectural reconciliation was mirrored by decades of evolving British diplomatic gestures. In 1995, the Duke of Kent, acting as royal patron of the Dresden Trust, visited the city and stated, ‘We deeply regret the suffering on all sides in the war. Today we especially remember that of the people of Dresden.’<sup>15</sup> Queen Elizabeth II’s 2004 state visit further normalised this acknowledgement of German victimhood when she called to remember the ‘appalling suffering of war on both sides’.<sup>16</sup>

This trajectory of royal diplomacy reached a new milestone with King Charles III’s 2023 state visit. While previous royal engagements, such as the Queen’s 1992 visit to Dresden or her 2015 wreath-laying at Berlin’s Neue Wache, habitually commemorated ‘all victims’ of the conflict, Charles became the first British monarch to lay a wreath specifically dedicated to German victims of Allied air raids at the St. Nikolai memorial in Hamburg.<sup>17</sup> As Luca M. Siepmann observes, these decades of diplomatic engagement have fostered an ‘international friendship’ characterised by ‘reconciled historical memories,’ wherein acknowledging reciprocal suffering has become standard diplomatic practice.<sup>18</sup>

Welby’s 2015 sermon is a clear example of this trend. Standing in a rebuilt church crowned by a British cross, he was participating in a decades-long spatial tradition of Anglo-

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<sup>14</sup> Goebel, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Russell, ‘Dresden and the Dresden Trust’, in *Dresden: A City Reborn*, ed. by Anthony Clayton and Alan Russell (Oxford: Berg, 1999),

<sup>16</sup> Luca M. Siepmann, “‘Freundship’? The Deepening of British-German Relations from Pre- to Post-Brexit”, *German Politics and Society*, 43.3 (2025), pp. 53, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Oltermann, ‘King Charles to Lay Wreath to German Victims of Wartime Air Raids’, *The Guardian*, 29 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/29/king-charles-to-lay-wreath-to-german-victims-of-wartime-air-raids> [accessed 8 April 2026]; Siepmann, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Siepmann, p. 39.

German reconciliation. In that specific physical space, his words were the expected continuation of the diplomatic precedents set by the Duke of Kent and the Queen.

However, in her analysis of First World War centenary commemorations, Helena Power observes that the digital age fundamentally breaks down ‘traditional and more restrictive notions of space and place in memorialisation.’<sup>19</sup> Power notes that the Internet operates as a ‘non-space’ that effectively ‘removes the tangible nature of a physical space,’ thus blurring geographic boundaries and radically broadening the audience encountering the memory.<sup>20</sup>

This notion helps explain why, ultimately, Welby’s pastoral gesture was received very differently upon reaching the United Kingdom. His words were explosively reframed, especially by the *Daily Mail*, as an ‘apology’ for RAF bombing.<sup>21</sup> In the ensuing user responses on the *MailOnline*, thousands of users expressed their frustration across multiple articles, declaring Welby a ‘traitor to the Church of England and its head our Queen’.<sup>22</sup> Others demanded he be ‘de-robed for such treason’, arguing that by expressing sorrow for enemy dead, the Archbishop had defected from his primary duty: the spiritual validation of the British war effort.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Helena Power, ‘A Different Way of Remembering? Cultural Memory, Continuity, and Change in the First World War Centenary’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent, 2024), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>21</sup> See Larisa Brown and Steve Doughty, ‘Archbishop “Says Sorry” for Bombing the Nazis in Dresden Raids’, *MailOnline*, 13 February 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2952945/Archbishop-says-sorry-bombing-Nazis-Justin-Welby-attacked-bizarre-apology-Dresden-raids-makes-no-reference-RAF-heroes-killed-Hitler.html> [accessed 17 March 2025]., and the accompanying headline print article Larisa Brown and Steve Doughty, ‘Archbishop Says Sorry for Bombing the Nazis’, *Daily Mail*, 14 February 2015, p. 1, pp. 4–5.

<sup>22</sup> Amanda Platell, ‘Platell’s People: Left-Wing Bishops and Why I May Convert to Catholicism’, *MailOnline*, 21 February 2015 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2962500/PLATELL-Left-wing-bishops-convert-Catholicism.html> [accessed 26 March 2025]., comment 3.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Martin, ‘Welby "Wrong" About Dresden: MP Says Archbishop Should Not Have Expressed Regret as Bombing Helped To Save Thousands Of Lives By Ending War Sooner’, *Daily Mail*, 16 February 2015 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2956324/Justin-Welby-wrong-Dresden.html> [accessed 26 July 2025]., comment 4.

Figure 5.2: *Daily Mail* Front Page (14/02/2015)<sup>24</sup>

This chapter thus contends that the controversy surrounding Welby's speech was not a matter of rhetorical misjudgement (frequently associated with Welby). It further proposes that such angered accusations of 'treason' were not merely incoherent, undisciplined outbursts of a minority of commenters (as later described in the House of Lords), but expressions of a deep-seated expectation regarding the Church's function in national life.<sup>25</sup>

To explore this latter notion, we must understand the role the Church spent centuries cultivating: that of the 'spiritual arm' of the state, the architect of the very sacred story Welby was now seen to be dismantling. Accordingly, the chapter traces how the Church constructed Britain's civil religion, fusing Christian metaphors with national identity and embedding sacred narratives into imperial and wartime commemoration. It then examines the Church's post-war

<sup>24</sup> Brown, and Doughty, 'Archbishop Says Sorry for Bombing the Nazis', *Daily Mail*, 14 Feb. 2015, p. 1 and pp. 4–5.

<sup>25</sup> House of Lords, 'Dresden Anniversary Debate', 12 March 2015, vol 760, cols 814-826.

transformation as its institutional authority waned. It explores how the Church retained ritual presence but became interpretively marginal, caught between the demands of secularisation and nostalgia, and its own increasingly sceptical stance towards warfare.

The chapter then analyses the language of Welby's speech and the media, political and public response in more detail. The collated data captured a highly concentrated backlash, comprising 3,700 comments from February 2015. Here, the chapter uncovers how ordinary citizens participated in regulating Britain's sacred story, actively reproducing its symbolic boundaries and reinforcing its contemporary relevance, as users continually juxtaposed the bravery of Bomber Command against the perceived weakness of modern institutions. Together, these sections illuminate the broader stakes of the Dresden controversy: the moral volatility of Britain's memory politics, the fractured authority of its religious institutions, and the intensifying pressures on those who dare to complicate the past.

### **Gaining the Devil's Favour: The Church as Architect of Britain's Civil Religion<sup>26</sup>**

The concept of civil religion, first articulated by Robert Bellah to explain the quasi-sacred moral order underpinning American national identity, offers a revealing lens through which to understand Britain's sacred story of the Second World War.<sup>27</sup> As adapted by David Tollerton, civil religion in the British context does not depend on institutional belief or church attendance

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<sup>26</sup> The phrase 'Gaining the Devil's Favour' is adapted from the 'devil protection effect' (DPE) in social psychology, which describes the tendency for group members to defend or excuse a deviant member of their own group (an in-group 'devil'), rather than punishing them more harshly, as in the black sheep effect. This protective behaviour is more likely to occur under specific conditions, such as when group members must evaluate a deviant publicly and feel the need to present a 'united front' to outsiders; when the group is in a competitive relationship with an out-group, prompting members to defend their own to protect 'group pride'; or when the group has a pre-existing claim to moral superiority, which allows highly-identified members to downplay the significance of the transgression and judge the rule-breaker more leniently. For exploration of the DPE, see Joy Stratton, 'Social Identification and the Treatment of In-group Deviants: The Black Sheep Effect or the Devil Protection Effect' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2007); Mayuko Onuki, 'Black Sheep or Devil Protection?' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southern California, 2014). The role of moral superiority is explored in Aarti Iyer, Jolanda Jetten, and S. Alexander Haslam, 'Sugaring o'er the Devil: Moral Superiority and Group Identification Help Individuals Downplay the Implications of Ingroup Rule-Breaking', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 42 (2012), 141–49.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus*, 96:1 (1967), pp. 1–21.

but on the sacralisation of national narrative: the transformation of political memory into moral ritual.<sup>28</sup> It operates through collective acts of remembrance, ceremonial language, and the veneration of symbolic spaces such as the Cenotaph, where the nation worships not a deity but an idea of itself.

Within this framework, the Second World War functions as Britain's central liturgy. Annual rites like Remembrance Sunday and state-endorsed commemorations such as Holocaust Memorial Day serve the same social function as Bellah's civic liturgies: they reaffirm moral order, define the boundaries of the community, and re-enact a narrative of redemption through sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> They do not simply mourn the dead; they celebrate a covenant between the nation and its mythic forebears, offering a 'system that provides sacred legitimation to the social order'.<sup>30</sup> When politicians speak of remembrance as a 'sacred task', they reveal the extent to which political rhetoric has absorbed a religious register, turning commemoration into civic worship.<sup>31</sup>

Understanding this synthesis is vital for interpreting the 2015 Dresden controversy surrounding Archbishop Justin Welby. As the next section seeks to demonstrate, the furore represented the culmination of centuries of complex and often contradictory entanglement between the Church of England and the British state. To understand why a message of reconciliation was received as an act of betrayal, one must first deconstruct the deep historical symbiosis through which the Church became a primary architect of the nation's civil religion, particularly in the context of empire and warfare. Forged in the crucible of the Reformation and tempered in the fires of imperial expansion, the Church's role as a spiritual arm of the state created an immense reservoir of cultural authority. However, this very authority, rooted in the

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<sup>28</sup> David Tollerton, *Holocaust Memory and Britain's Religious-Secular Landscape: Politics, Sacrality and Diversity* (Oxford: Routledge, 2020). In particular see chapter 8 'Consequences of the Sacred', pp. 174–189.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

sanctification of national purpose, contained the seeds of its own crisis. It established an inherent and enduring tension between the Church's function as a national institution and its own evolving theological conscience, a friction that would ultimately place it on a collision course with the sacred memory it had helped to create.

### **The Spiritual Arm of the Empire**

The Church of England's entanglement with British warfare long predated the twentieth century. Formally embedded within the state since the Tudor Reformation, the Church functioned as the 'legitimizing spiritual arm' of imperial power.<sup>32</sup> Legal and theological adjustments, most notably the 1534 Act of Supremacy (which severed the English Church from papal authority and established the monarch as its head), and later revisions to the Thirty-Nine Articles, (the foundational doctrinal statements of Anglican belief), softened earlier restrictions on the moral legitimacy of warfare and fused royal authority with religious sanction, assuring soldiers that service to crown and country was service to God.<sup>33</sup> In return, the Church benefited materially and institutionally from imperial expansion, a relationship that often constrained sustained moral reckoning.<sup>34</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, despite the emergence of dissenting prophetic voices, the Church's dominant public role remained the provision of moral meaning for a militarised

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<sup>32</sup> Martyn Percy, *The Crisis of Colonial Anglicanism: Empire, Slavery and Revolt in the Church of England* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2025), p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> Charlotte Methuen, 'The Protestant Story: National and Territorial Churches', in *Entangling Web: The Fractious Story of Christianity in Europe*, ed. by Alec Ryrie and Mark A. Lamport (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024), p. 211.

<sup>34</sup> Missionary societies, for instance, were deeply enmeshed in the imperial system. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), a major Anglican organisation, not only received state support but also owned slave plantations in Barbados. Such entanglements reveal how the Church's spiritual mission was often subordinated to imperial interests. See Percy, *The Crisis of Colonial Anglicanism*, p. 184. See also Church Commissioners for England, *Church Commissioners' Research into Historic Links to Transatlantic Chattel Slavery* (London: Church Commissioners for England, 2023). Upon publication of the interim report, Archbishop Welby issued an immediate apology on behalf of the Church of England for its links to transatlantic slavery. See Harriet Sherwood, 'C of E paid poor 18th-century clergy with "abominable" slave trade funds', *Guardian*, 16 June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/16/church-of-england-paid-poor-18th-century-clergy-with-abominable-slave-trade-funds-justin-welby> [accessed 29 December 2025].

empire. The Boer War (1899–1902) proved a formative moment in this relationship. As casualties mounted, the Church developed a ‘commemorative grammar’ capable of sacralising death in war.<sup>35</sup> National days of intercession, special prayers for the fallen, and the growing integration of military iconography into church architecture blurred the boundaries between civic loyalty and Christian devotion.<sup>36</sup>

Anglican churches increasingly functioned as local military shrines, displaying regimental memorials and naming the dead individually, a practice that Michael Snape identifies as laying crucial groundwork for the memorial culture of the First World War.<sup>37</sup> This theology of redemptive sacrifice embedded loss within narratives of national purpose and moral endurance. Yet the Boer War also exposed the fractures that existed within the Church. While many clergy defended the conflict, figures such as Bishops Charles Gore and John Percival publicly condemned British aggression as a spiritual failure, warning that national arrogance had supplanted Christian humility.<sup>38</sup> These tensions between patriotic conformity and theological unease would resurface with greater intensity after 1914.

With the outbreak of the First World War August 1914, the Church moved swiftly to endorse the conflict as both just and sacred. Early consensus was striking. Master of the Temple H. G. Woods declared there was ‘no division of Christian opinion among us as to the righteousness of our cause’, while Archbishop Randall Davidson urged enlistment, warning that the Empire’s survival might depend upon it, and that no household would be ‘acting worthily if in timidity or self-love it keeps back’ its men.<sup>39</sup> As Shannon Ty Bontrager argues,

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<sup>35</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 396.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Allen, ‘Winchester, the Clergy and the Boer War’, in *God and War: The Church of England and Armed Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Stephen G. Parker and Tom Lawson (Farnham & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 396.

<sup>38</sup> Allen, ‘Winchester, the Clergy and the Boer War’, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014), pp. 30-32.

this enthusiasm was shaped by institutional anxiety: weakened by secularisation, declining attendance, and the erosion of ecclesiastical authority, the Church seized the war as an opportunity to reclaim cultural power.<sup>40</sup> Anglican leaders consciously positioned themselves as national storytellers, deploying chivalric and Christian mythologies to reassert moral authority within a rapidly modernising society.

Central to this mobilisation was the romanticised figure of the volunteer-soldier as a sacrificial hero. Drawing on a potent mix of Christian, chivalric, and classical tropes, the Church reframed enlistment as a sacred calling. As conscription became policy in 1916, Anglican leaders actively promoted the ‘myth of the volunteer’, portraying the British soldier as a ‘brave knight who took himself off on a crusade of chivalry and sacrifice’.<sup>41</sup> Bishop Arthur Winnington-Ingram emerged as a particularly strident voice, insisting it was the Church’s duty ‘to mobilise the nation for a holy war’.<sup>42</sup> Although some of his most infamous rhetoric has been exaggerated, the broader framing of the conflict as a righteous crusade was pervasive.<sup>43</sup> Chivalric imagery was widespread, with soldiers described as being ‘Like the legendary Knights of King Arthur’ who went ‘forth to redress the wrong’.<sup>44</sup>

This sanctified nationalism, however, was not uncontested. Echoing earlier dissent, clergy such as George Bell warned that war ultimately stood in tension with the Kingdom of God and insisted upon a higher Christian allegiance than patriotism.<sup>45</sup> Missionaries and chaplains expressed revulsion at practices such as the ‘blessing of the guns’, which they viewed

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<sup>40</sup> Shannon Ty Bontrager, ‘The Imagined Crusade: The Church of England and the Mythology of Nationalism and Christianity during the Great War’, *Church History*, 71.4 (2002), pp. 774–98.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 789. See also Ilana R. Bet-El, ‘Men and Soldiers: British Conscripts, Concepts of Masculinity, and the Great War,’ in *Borderlines: Gender and Identities in War and Peace, 1870–1930*, ed. by Billie Melman. (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 73.

<sup>42</sup> Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014), p. 253.

<sup>43</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 115.

<sup>44</sup> Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 79–80.

<sup>45</sup> Tom Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust: Christianity, Memory and Nazism* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), p. 79 and p. 99.

as incompatible with Christ's teachings.<sup>46</sup> Soldier-poets including Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves openly mocked clerical jingoism, while the 1919 Army and Religion report revealed widespread spiritual disillusionment among the troops, exposing a growing gap between ecclesiastical rhetoric and lived experience at the front.<sup>47</sup>

Yet even as belief fractured, the language of heroic sacrifice proved enduring, particularly in mourning. As Jessica Meyer shows, condolence letters regularly fused religious and patriotic idioms, presenting the fallen as martyrs, sportsmen, and noble men who had 'played the game'.<sup>48</sup> While this offered solace, it also flattened individual lives into idealised archetypes, reinforcing gendered and national norms of virtue while insulating the war's moral logic from sustained critique.<sup>49</sup>

In the aftermath of the Armistice, the Church consolidated its renewed cultural authority by shaping Britain's commemorative landscape. Anglican liturgy, scripture, and space became central to the emerging rituals of Remembrance. Churches and churchyards served as surrogate graves for the millions buried overseas, while services inaugurated in 1919 aligned the Armistice anniversary with existing Christian traditions such as the traditional season of the dead (the period surrounding All Saints' and All Souls' Days devoted to the remembrance of the departed), and the feast day of St Martin of Tours, a soldier-saint whose cult offered a powerful model of sanctified military service.<sup>50</sup> Symbolic acts, most notably the burial of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, fused national deliverance with divine providence through explicitly Anglican ritual, endorsed by both crown and clergy.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 283.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113, p. 378.

<sup>48</sup> Jessica Meyer, *Men of War*, pp. 75-83. See also Max Jones, *The Last Great Quest: Captain Scott's Antarctic Sacrifice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 228.

<sup>49</sup> Meyer, *Men of War*, p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> Ted Harrison, *Remembrance Today: Poppies, Grief and Heroism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), p. 99.

<sup>51</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 371.

This sacralised memory extended beyond Britain. Imperial memorials such as the Menin Gate at Ypres explicitly associated sacrifice with Christian militancy, while the Imperial War Graves Commission embedded biblical language, crosses, and resurrection symbolism into cemetery design.<sup>52</sup> The verse John 15:13 ('Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends') became a favoured inscription, appearing disproportionately on Anglican memorials.<sup>53</sup> Together, this 'panoply of remembrance' positioned the Church as a key custodian of national memory, underwriting a cohesive, conservative narrative of sacrifice, duty, and moral purpose.<sup>54</sup>

Yet the devastation of the Great War also provoked deep institutional unease. During the interwar years, the Church adopted a markedly pacifist tone, interpreting the conflict as divine judgment on militarism. Former advocates of enlistment, including Davidson, now denounced war in stark terms, while the 1930 Lambeth Conference declared warfare incompatible with Christ's teaching.<sup>55</sup> This mood shaped Anglican support for appeasement of Nazi Germany, with figures such as George Bell backing diplomatic solutions and the *Church Times* hailing the Munich Agreement as a 'divine deliverance'.<sup>56</sup>

That posture collapsed after the German occupation of Prague in 1939. Archbishop William Temple described it as a moral violation requiring resistance, and by the outbreak of war the Church had reconciled itself to armed conflict once more.<sup>57</sup> This time, however, support was framed less as crusade than necessity: a tragic but just 'war of ideals' against the

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>53</sup> Stuart Bell, 'The Church and the First World War' in *God and War: The Church of England and Armed Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Stephen G. Parker and Tom Lawson (Farnham & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 58.

<sup>54</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 381.

<sup>55</sup> Timothy D. Wilby, 'Attitudes to War in the Church of England, 1939 - 1983' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham University, 1987) [accessed 14 July 2025], p. 139.

<sup>56</sup> Tom Lawson and Stephen G. Parker, 'God and War: A Century in the Politics of Religion' in *God and War: The Church of England and Armed Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Stephen G. Parker and Tom Lawson (Farnham & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

existential threat of Nazism.<sup>58</sup> The oscillation between sanctification, repentance, and renewed mobilisation would leave a complex legacy, one that profoundly shaped how the war and its conduct, including the bombing of Dresden, would be viewed, remembered and morally narrated by the Church.

### **The Second World War and the Spiritual Mobilisation of the Nation**

Whilst the Church largely avoided the ‘crusading indulgences’ seen in the Great War, the Second World War nevertheless inaugurated new forms of alignment between national identity and Christian ethics.<sup>59</sup> For example, the Ministry of Information created a Religions Division to coordinate Christian propaganda which, through publications like the weekly *The Spiritual Issues of the War*, aimed to convince audiences that ‘God was on Britain’s side’ in the struggle to protect ‘Christian morality and individual liberty’ and (in the words of Eighth Army chaplain Frederick Llewelyn Hughes) the ‘British Way of Life’.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, the Church’s influence expanded through its collaboration with the BBC, royal family, and government. Programmes like ‘Lift Up Your Hearts’ and the ‘Radio Padre’ aimed to provide spiritual comfort and guidance daily to both churchgoers and non-churchgoers, whilst 3 million listeners were tuning in the BBC’s *Daily Service* by 1943.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 33, p. 267.

<sup>59</sup> Tom Lawson and Stephen G. Parker, ‘God and War: A Century in the Politics of Religion’ in *God and War: The Church of England and Armed Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Stephen G. Parker and Tom Lawson (Farnham & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 5. See also, Tom Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust: Christianity, Memory and Nazism* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), p. 79 and p. 99.

<sup>60</sup> Clive D. Field, ‘Mass Observation, Religion, and the Second World War: When “Cooper’s Snoopers” Caught the Spirit’, in *British Christianity and the Second World War*, ed. by Michael Snape and Stuart Bell (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2023), p. 99. See also Tom Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust*, p. 12., and Hannah Elias, ‘Radio Religion: War, Faith and the BBC, 1939–1948’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, McMaster University, 2016), p. 81., and Michael Francis Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 125.

<sup>61</sup> See Hannah Elias, ‘Radio Religion: The British Broadcasting Corporation and Faith Propaganda at ‘Home’ and ‘Overseas’ in the Second World War’ in *British Christianity and the Second World War*, ed. by Michael Snape and Stuart Bell (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2023), pp. 46–65.

National Days of Prayer (NDoPs), initiated by King George VI and orchestrated by Archbishops Lang and Temple also drew mass participation.<sup>62</sup> The emergency May 1940 NDoP coincided with Dunkirk and led to surging church attendance.<sup>63</sup> For their part, British politicians also frequently ‘wove religious phrases and allusions’ into their speeches and broadcasts. While Churchill’s personal beliefs were, at most, deist, and he often used ‘Christian’ in a cultural and ethical sense, these phrases were strategically deployed to reinforce public defiance, appeal for aid from the USA, and cement the Anglo-American alliance.<sup>64</sup> A prominent example is his June 1940 speech, where he declared that ‘the survival of Christian civilisation’ depended on the Battle of Britain.<sup>65</sup>

This narrative presented Britain as the ‘last redoubt of Christian civilisation in a Europe dominated by secular totalitarianism’.<sup>66</sup> Other political leaders, including Clement Attlee, also spoke of the war as a ‘spiritual contest between good and evil’.<sup>67</sup> In July 1940, Lord Halifax described Nazism as ‘the challenge of anti-Christ’.<sup>68</sup> Even after the alliance with Stalin’s atheist regime, the Church preserved this framing by repositioning Nazism as the singular moral evil. The approach involved depicting ‘Russia’ (the nation with its Christian heritage) as a moral ally, distinct from ‘Bolshevism’ (the atheist philosophy).<sup>69</sup> The *Church Times* reminded readers

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<sup>62</sup> See Philip Williamson, ‘The British State and Spiritual Mobilization during the Second World War’ in *British Christianity and the Second World War*, ed. by Michael Snape and Stuart Bell (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2023), pp. 25–45.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Snape, *A Church Militant: Anglicans and the Armed Forces from Victoria to Elizabeth II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2022), p. 214.

<sup>64</sup> Williamson, ‘The British State and Spiritual Mobilization during the Second World War’.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>66</sup> Snape, ‘War and European Christianity’ in *Entangling Web: The Fractious Story of Christianity in Europe*, ed. by Alec Ryrie and Mark A. Lamport (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024), p. 327.

<sup>67</sup> Tom Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust: Christianity, Memory and Nazism* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> Williamson, ‘The British State and Spiritual Mobilization during the Second World War’, p. 33.

<sup>69</sup> Tom Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust: Christianity, Memory and Nazism* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), p. 77.

that Russia was the ‘cradle of Christianity’ and that the war was for Christianity, ensuring the moral basis of the alliance remained intact.<sup>70</sup>

As the war developed in favour of the Allies, victory celebrations were often marked by religious services. After the victory at El Alamein in November 1942, church bells were rung across Great Britain, and Churchill announced this as a ‘call to thanksgiving and to renewed prayer’.<sup>71</sup> Similar thanksgiving prayers and national services were held following the Allied victories in Tunisia and on VE Day.<sup>72</sup> In 1945, prayers used to commemorate the end of the war were of an ‘unusually jingoistic tone’, expressing ‘By God’s grace we have been chosen to achieve Victory in this War. Trampled under our feet lie the evil powers that aimed at the overthrow of God’s rule, and before us lie the diverse paths of peace.’<sup>73</sup>

This seemingly unified moral front, however, was still complicated by an unprecedented ethical rupture: the RAF’s ‘obliteration bombing’ campaign against German cities.<sup>74</sup> Bishop George Bell emerged as the strongest critical voice from within the Church, arguing that while the war’s cause was just (*jus ad bellum*), the targeting of civilians was ‘barbarous’ and incompatible with Christian ethics (*jus in bello*).<sup>75</sup> He insisted that Britain could not defeat fascism by adopting its morally reprehensible methods.<sup>76</sup> Bell was not entirely alone; clergy like John Collins (a chaplain at Bomber Command Headquarters) described the bombings as evil.<sup>77</sup> In December 1942, Christian writers organised by Maurice Reckitt (the editor of the theological journal *Christendom*) wrote a statement of opposition to the bombing

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Williamson, ‘The British State and Spiritual Mobilization during the Second World War’.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Timothy D. Wilby, ‘Attitudes to war in the Church of England 1939 - 1983’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham University, 1987) <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/6655/> [accessed 14 July 2025], p. 139.

<sup>74</sup> See Andrew Chandler, ‘The Church of England and the Obliteration Bombing of Germany in the Second World War’, *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), pp. 920–46.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 929.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 938.

<sup>77</sup> John Broom, ‘British Christians and the Morality of Killing in the Second World War’, in *British Christianity and the Second World War*, ed. by Michael Snape and Stuart Bell, *Studies in Modern British Religious History*, 45 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2023), pp. 162–179.

policy.<sup>78</sup> Bishop Headlam of Gloucester also questioned the effectiveness of the raids in December 1943, calling the bombing campaign ‘very largely a war against civilians. It is a barbaric war.’<sup>79</sup>

There is also evidence even Archbishop William Temple, a public supporter of the war, was deeply troubled.<sup>80</sup> Temple accepted the campaign reluctantly, but only after being convinced by reassurances from military officials that civilian deaths were unintended.<sup>81</sup> At the same time, it has been noted that Temple, before his death in October 1944, ‘very consciously decided not to make [area] bombing an issue between the British government and himself’.<sup>82</sup> In March 1945 however, the *Church Times* publicly lamented the devastation in Dresden, stating that ‘if the German tale, that a million lie dead beneath the tumbled walls, is even one-tenth true, the Christian has cause to bend the knee and implore Almighty God’s forgiveness for the wickedness of civilised war’.<sup>83</sup>

By the end of the war, Church of England’s position on warfare appeared increasingly divided, if not inconsistent. On the one hand, it had spent centuries forging a symbiotic relationship with the state, becoming a key mobiliser of public support and chief architect of a national commemorative language rooted in righteous warfare and redemptive sacrifice. This gave it unparalleled authority in the rituals of remembrance. On the other hand, the moral crises of two world wars, and particularly the ethical rupture of the bombing campaign, had solidified an internal tradition of prophetic dissent. These tensions would continue to fester in subsequent

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<sup>78</sup> Andrew Chandler, ‘The Church of England and the Obliteration Bombing of Germany in the Second World War’, *The English Historical Review*, 108:429 (1993), p. 933.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Chandler, *British Christians and the Third Reich: Church, State, and the Judgement of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 357.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360. See also Chandler, ‘The Church of England and the Obliteration Bombing of Germany in the Second World War’, p. 942.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen E. Lammers, ‘William Temple and the Bombing of Germany: An Exploration in the Just War Tradition’, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 19 (1991), p. 76.

<sup>83</sup> John Broom, ‘British Christians and the Morality of Killing in the Second World War’, in *British Christianity and the Second World War*, ed. by Michael Snape and Stuart Bell, *Studies in Modern British Religious History* (Woodbridge, England: Boydell & Brewer, 2023), pp. 162–79.

decades and play a key role in defining the Church's place in postwar British culture, which can ultimately be linked to the controversy in Dresden seventy years later.

### **Losing the Devil's Favour: The Post-War Era of Symbolic Centrality and Institutional Decline**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Britain did not emerge as a secular nation in search of new civic rituals, but rather as a society still steeped in a diffuse and culturally embedded Christianity.<sup>84</sup> Historian Michael Snape argues forcefully against the dominant narrative of wartime secularisation, asserting that a 'diffusive Christianity' (an ethically based, non-dogmatic form of belief) remained the 'principal characteristic of Britain's religious landscape'.<sup>85</sup> This was a culture where Christianity infused public life and was adopted by individuals, whether they were regular churchgoers or not. Far from displacing faith, the trauma of war often served to channel the 'religious sentiments that [were] latent in many soldiers'.<sup>86</sup> For many, this meant Christianity provided a framework for understanding sacrifice and offering solace.<sup>87</sup>

This resilient religious culture not only shaped the Church of England's position in the early Cold War, where Christianity and anti-communism became 'crucial intertwined components of British national identity', but also solidified its domestic role as the custodian of national memory.<sup>88</sup> The Labour government's decision in 1946 to institutionalise the 'Christian and national' Remembrance Sunday, rather than invent a new post-war ritual, signalled the enduring power of Christian liturgy.<sup>89</sup> This spiritual dimension was physically

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<sup>84</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 249.

<sup>85</sup> Snape, *God and the British Soldier*, p. 58.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>88</sup> S. Brewitt-Taylor, 'Notes Towards a Postsecular History of Modern British Secularization', *Journal of British Studies*, 60 (2021), p. 325 cited in Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 275.

<sup>89</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 249. See also Harriet Emma Beadnell, 'Veterans of the People's War - The Representation and Identity of Second World War Veterans since 1945' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2020), p. 64.

expressed in the sacralisation of war-damaged churches. St Paul's Cathedral, its dome famously visible through Blitz smoke, became an icon of national defiance.<sup>90</sup> Coventry Cathedral, rebuilt as the Church's greatest prestige project, became a centre for international reconciliation.<sup>91</sup> The Battle of Britain Chapel, consecrated at Westminster Abbey in 1947, has been described by historian Adrian Gregory as 'probably the strongest example of the synthesis between Christian and patriotic tradition', its stained-glass window visually entwining sacrifice for the nation with sacrifice for God.<sup>92</sup>

This spectacle of symbolic centrality, however, concealed a deep and growing institutional crisis. This is what sociologist Grace Davie has termed Britain's 'persistent paradox': a post-war religious culture in which institutional decline has gone hand-in-hand with public prominence.<sup>93</sup> Despite shrinking congregations and growing theological illiteracy, the Church remained essential to the moral choreography of national life, particularly in moments of loss and reflection. Davie identifies this as a defining tension in modern British religion: the Church is wanted but not necessarily believed, expected to perform national rites without being trusted to shape their meaning. Nowhere was this paradox more visible than in the post-war treatment of church buildings.

As Denise Bonnette observes, many churches (unlike the symbolic reconstructions of Coventry Cathedral or the iconic survival of St Paul's) were left to decay.<sup>94</sup> Approximately 15,000 places of worship were bombed across Britain; in London alone, over 700 churches were damaged, and ninety-one completely destroyed.<sup>95</sup> In an age of austerity and falling

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<sup>90</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 246.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>92</sup> Adrian Gregory, 'The Commemoration of the Battle of Britain' in P. Addison and J.A. Crang (eds), *The Burning Blue* (London, Faber & Faber, 2000), p. 221. See also Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 406.

<sup>93</sup> See Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd rev. edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

<sup>94</sup> Denise Bonnette, *Redundancy, Community and Heritage in the Modern Church of England, 1945–2000: Closing the Church Door* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023)

<sup>95</sup> Clive D. Field, 'Puzzled People Revisited: Religious Believing and Belonging in Wartime Britain, 1939–1945', *Twentieth Century British History*, 19 (2008), 474.

income, many parishes suffered from underfunded repairs, often carried out by unskilled labour.<sup>96</sup> The introduction of mandatory Quinquennial Inspections in 1955 exposed widespread structural damage, and the creation of the ‘listed building’ system entrenched a hierarchy of preservation.<sup>97</sup> Older or architecturally celebrated churches were prioritised, while many Victorian and twentieth-century buildings were dismissed as ‘undistinguished’ and left to deteriorate or face demolition.<sup>98</sup>

Thus, while the Church appeared firmly embedded in public memory, its parochial presence was quietly eroding. Between 1968 and 2000, 1,567 churches were closed or partially closed, many suffering from chronic underinvestment.<sup>99</sup> To explain this paradox, Davie developed the influential concept of ‘vicarious religion’.<sup>100</sup> Davie contends that a religiously active minority (clergy, churchgoers, and ritual specialists) perform religious functions on behalf of a wider, largely passive public that nonetheless values their continued presence. The majority may not attend services regularly, but they continue to look to the Church for moral leadership, guidance during moments of crisis, and the ritual framing of life’s milestones (birth, marriage, death, and national mourning). In this view, the Church functions less as a faith community than as a ‘public utility’, called upon when the nation requires symbolic meaning, ethical language, or reassurance in the face of loss.<sup>101</sup>

Davie’s model resonates strongly with the post-war period, where Britain’s civic religion, especially around war remembrance, remained steeped in Christian liturgy and symbolism even as theological literacy declined. However, critics argue that vicarious religion risks mistaking inertia for belief. Secularisation theorists like Steve Bruce and David Voas

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<sup>96</sup> Bonnette, p. 48.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>100</sup> Davie, *Religion in Britain*, p. 6.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

contend that the Church of England is no longer upheld by a quiet majority, but rather exists as a decaying residue of a now defunct moral order.<sup>102</sup> They interpret the continued appeal of church weddings or national services not as evidence of latent religiosity, but as part of a secular yearning for ‘solemnity, tinged with nostalgia’.<sup>103</sup> In this view, reliance on the Church during national tragedies, likewise, is framed as a desire for ‘pomp and circumstance’, not a vestige of collective faith.<sup>104</sup>

Historians Callum Brown and Hugh McLeod argue for an abrupt model of secularisation. While acknowledging the persistence of Christian culture in the first half of the century, Brown’s provocative work *The Death of Christian Britain* argues that it was the 1960s that marked the beginning of the ‘death of the culture which formerly conferred Christian identity upon the British people.’<sup>105</sup> McLeod similarly points to a ‘religious crisis’ in that decade. He contends that the widespread discussion of Britain becoming a ‘secular society’ created a powerful ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’, where the very idea of religious decline, amplified in public discourse, began to accelerate the process itself.<sup>106</sup> This perspective suggests that while the post-war years represented a final flourishing of a Christian-inflected culture, the 1960s initiated a sudden and profound rupture, leading to the rapid secularisation that has defined subsequent decades.

### **The Prophetic Turn: From National Conscience to Dissenting Voice**

The ‘religious crisis’ of the 1960s (a period of declining church attendance and a revolution in social mores regarding sexuality, marriage and the overarching role of women in society) catalysed a profound shift in the Church of England’s relationship with the state.<sup>107</sup> In response

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<sup>102</sup> Steve Bruce and David Voas, ‘Vicarious Religion: An Examination and Critique’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 21.2 (2006), pp. 243–259.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>105</sup> Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, p. 193.

<sup>106</sup> Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 71.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

to this ‘moral and social revolution’, liberal Anglican leaders sought to engage with secularism by advocating for social reforms, such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the liberalisation of divorce laws.<sup>108</sup>

This new critical posture soon extended from domestic social issues to the realms of foreign policy and warfare. The ‘long 1960s’ saw an ‘unravelling’ of the historic relationship between Western Anglicans and their armed forces, driven by anxieties over nuclear weapons and the escalating Vietnam War.<sup>109</sup> The 1958 Lambeth Conference set the tone, reiterating that ‘war as a method of settling international disputes’ was ‘incompatible with the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ’.<sup>110</sup> The conference also issued a call for the abolition of nuclear bombs, declaring their use ‘repugnant to the Christian conscience’.<sup>111</sup> As the Vietnam conflict intensified, opposition within the Anglican Communion grew more vocal, particularly in the American Episcopal Church, where bishops condemned the war as ‘evil and wicked and blasphemous’.<sup>112</sup> This activism reflected a broader shift: the Church would no longer offer unquestioning support to state military action.

Internally, within the Church, Remembrance Sunday rituals began to strike a ‘jarring’ note by the 1960s, with calls for them to be ‘much more international in ethos’ and ‘realistic about the nature of man’, purged of ‘triumphalism and militarism’.<sup>113</sup> This indicates a shift in internal Church culture aligning with anti-war sentiments. The 1968 Lambeth Conference specifically addressed ‘international morality today’, condemning ‘emphatically’ the use of nuclear or bacteriological weapons and resolving ‘to oppose persistently the claim that total

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<sup>108</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 22. See also Andrew Village, *The Church of England in the First Decade of the 21st Century: Findings from the Church Times Surveys* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 120., and Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (eds.), *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), p. 15.

<sup>109</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 34.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

war or the use of weapons however ruthless or indiscriminate can be justified by results'.<sup>114</sup> Wilby notes that this stance marked a significant shift, as the bishops in 1968 were 'worried about the future of mankind', moving beyond concerns of 'what might be said to the Prime Minister'.<sup>115</sup> This successful condemnation also went beyond the less unified outcome of the 1958 Conference regarding nuclear weapons, which while condemning nuclear weapons, had accepted deterrence as a potential 'lesser evil'.<sup>116</sup>

A decade later at the 1978 Lambeth Conference, the Church would issue its 'strongest and most comprehensive anti-war statement to date'.<sup>117</sup> It denounced the international arms trade and declared that 'the use of the modern technology of war is the most striking example of corporate sin'.<sup>118</sup> This developing role as a national conscience was underpinned by a profound sociological change: the gradual civilianisation of the clergy.<sup>119</sup> While nearly 60 per cent of diocesan bishops had military experience around 1950, the end of National Service in 1963 meant that by the 2010s, very few clergy had any meaningful connection to the armed forces.<sup>120</sup> A new generation of ordinands, shaped by the anti-war ethos of the 1960s, entered ministry with a cosmopolitan ethic that was post-colonial and deeply sceptical of militarism, setting the stage for a notable estrangement between the Anglican hierarchy and Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, with the tension coming to a dramatic head following the 1982 Falklands War.

At a national service of thanksgiving in St Paul's Cathedral in July 1982, Archbishop Robert Runcie delivered a sermon that marked a stark departure from the Church's historic

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<sup>114</sup> Andrew Chandler, 'Anglicanism, the Lambeth Conferences, and International Relations in the Twentieth Century', *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 91 (2022), p. 204.

<sup>115</sup> Timothy D. Wilby, 'Attitudes to war in the Church of England 1939 - 1983', pp.30–31. Wilby conveys how at the 1958 Conference, Archbishop Fisher had reportedly been relieved at the failure of a resolution as 'it it had been passed he didn't know what he should have said to the Prime Minister.'

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>117</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 344.

<sup>118</sup> Wilby, p. 31.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218 and p. 424.

role. While praising the courage of the military, he stressed that armed conflict was ‘a sign of human failure’ and mourned the losses on both sides, reminding the congregation that God could never be claimed ‘as an asset for one nation or group rather than another’.<sup>121</sup> Whilst contemporary polls suggested 80 per cent of clergy supported Runcie’s position, the backlash from Margaret Thatcher’s government and in particular the right-wing press, who had expected triumphalism, was swift and furious.<sup>122</sup> The *Sun*, while initially expressing ‘disappointment’ with the sermon being ‘Too Gloomy’ and ‘more suited to a state funeral’, quickly escalated its tone, directly accusing the Church of England of lacking patriotism.<sup>123</sup> The *Daily Mail*, in a series of condemnations, claimed that that ‘if there should be a church of England then surely on this occasion above all it should be *with* England’ [sic].<sup>124</sup>

The ferocity of this reaction laid bare the tensions at the heart of Britain’s ‘persistent paradox’. The episode demonstrates how the ‘vicarious religion’ that underpins this paradox (the public’s demand for the Church to perform national rites) is highly conditional. The fury Runcie faced came predominantly from a Conservative government and right-wing press who expected triumphalism, not a sermon on ‘human failure’. This backlash revealed the terms of an unwritten contract: a vocal segment of the public, amplified by political and media actors, desires not prophetic critique but a performance rooted in nostalgia for the moral clarity of the good war. These types of performance can be seen in the emergence of new secular rituals. Scholar Daniel Fitzpatrick identifies this phenomenon as the ‘spectacularisation’ of remembrance, particularly evident in British football.<sup>125</sup> This process transforms military commemoration from a ritual that is observed to a spectacle that is consumed, using forms inherited from the Church like the minute silence but hollowing out their theological content

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<sup>121</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 426.

<sup>122</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 426.

<sup>123</sup> Cliff Williamson, ‘The Church of England and the Falklands War’, in *God and War*, p. 178.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>125</sup> Daniel Fitzpatrick, ‘“Football Remembers” - the Collective Memory of Football in the Spectacle of British Military Commemoration’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 16.1 (2023), p. 61.

for a liturgy of national pride. This new culture is exemplified by an ‘arms-race’ of remembrance’ between football clubs, the use of military hardware like artillery guns to commence silences, and the incorporation of fans into choreographed displays.<sup>126</sup> Football stadiums have become new sites of ‘popular sanctification’ where the ‘collective effervescence’ of the crowd is harnessed to perform and reinforce a fracturing sense of British identity.<sup>127</sup> The Church, if present at all, now merely lends gravitas to ceremonies it no longer scripts. When an archbishop does not fully indulge this culture, they are met with fury for failing to perform their expected role in the nation’s civil religion.

This dynamic has been repeated several times in the twenty-first century so far. In the aftermath of 9/11, Archbishop George Carey initially performed the expected vicarious function, framing the attacks as a cosmic battle between ‘light versus darkness’. However, the Church’s response to the ensuing ‘War on Terror’ shifted dramatically under his successor, Rowan Williams.<sup>128</sup> In November 2001, the General Synod offered only ‘muted support’ for the assault on the Taliban, stressing ‘Western Christian complicity in historical injustices in the world’.<sup>129</sup> By 2003, the Church’s response to the invasion of Iraq was ‘unequivocally negative’.<sup>130</sup> Williams ‘famously opposed the US and UK-led military action’, rooting his opposition in Just War principles and creating ‘growing tension with the government’.<sup>131</sup> While these interventions widened the public debate, forcing a justification of the war from the

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp 62–3.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 64, 70, 74.

<sup>128</sup> Nick Megoran, ‘God On Our Side? The Church of England and the Geopolitics of Mourning 9/11’, *Geopolitics*, 11:4 (2006), p.571.

<sup>129</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 419.

<sup>130</sup> Daniel Strand and Nigel Biggar, ‘Just War and the Church of England’, in *Just War and Christian Traditions*, ed. by John Ashcroft, Eric Patterson, and J. Daryl Charles (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), p. 175.

<sup>131</sup> Kenjiro Harata, ‘The Church and War: Contemporary Anglican Reflections on War and Morality’, *Journal of Political Science and Sociology*, 17 (2012), p. 1.

government, they ultimately did not alter government policy and were often dismissed by a public that had ‘come to expect the churches to take a semi-pacifist position’.<sup>132</sup>

The profound difficulty of this position was starkly illustrated at the 2009 service of commemoration for the Iraq War. As historian Michael Snape argues, Archbishop Williams faced a far ‘stickier wicket’ than Runcie had in 1982.<sup>133</sup> His dilemma was to lead the nation in mourning for a deeply unpopular and morally ambiguous conflict which he himself had consistently opposed. He was required to honour the sacrifice of the armed forces without retrospectively legitimising a war he believed to be unjust. His sermon, which focused on the human cost and moral dilemmas of the conflict, was denounced by the pro-war press as an ‘anti-war rant’.<sup>134</sup> The controversy revealed the fragility of the vicarious contract: when the Church’s moral stance diverges so sharply from the state’s and/or media’s expectations, its ability to act as a unifying national institution is seen as fundamentally compromised. As Snape conveys, ‘Rarely, if ever, has an archbishop of Canterbury been so roundly abused in the national press.’<sup>135</sup>

### **The Archbishop as Mirror: Justin Welby and the Contradictions of Modern Anglicanism**

It was this deeply fractured landscape that his successor, Justin Welby, inherited. In his tenure as Archbishop, Justin Welby embodied the contradictions that now define the Church’s place in public life. His theological commitments (to reconciliation, moral restraint, and the sanctity of human dignity) stood firmly within a long Anglican tradition shaped by war, repentance, and post-imperial responsibility.<sup>136</sup> His ministry in conflict zones informed a vision of peace-making grounded in mourning and forgiveness across national lines, echoing precedents set by

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<sup>132</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 423., and P. Towle, ‘The Anglican Church, the State and Modern Warfare’ in Helen James (ed.), *Civil Society, Religion and Global Governance* (London, 2007), p. 58.

<sup>133</sup> Snape, *A Church Militant*, p. 423.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> See Justin Welby, *The Power of Reconciliation* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), and Andrew Atherstone, *Archbishop Justin Welby* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014)

figures like George Bell, the Cross of Nails movement in Coventry, and Robert Runcie's controversial 1982 Falklands liturgy.<sup>137</sup> In this respect, Welby's public theology continued the Church's postwar arc rather than breaking from it.

However, Welby's rhetorical style marked a break from his predecessors. Where figures like Runcie and Williams adopted academic caution (with Runcie described as 'rarely effusive, rarely demonstrative, always measured, thoughtful and spare'), Welby's public communication was more charismatic, emotional, and unscripted (characterised by a tendency to shoot 'from the hip').<sup>138</sup> Welby's approach was not without theological coherence: he consistently framed contemporary crises through a narrative of moral peril, invoking the lessons of the twentieth century to warn against nationalism, complacency, ecological neglect, or the corrosion of democratic norms. Yet the informality of his delivery, together with a propensity for drawing provocative comparisons and conclusions, many of which were hastily retracted, repeatedly obscured the substance of his message.<sup>139</sup> Remarks that were pastorally framed or lightly

<sup>137</sup> Atherstone, *Archbishop Justin Welby*, p. 117.

<sup>138</sup> Mark Landler, 'For Archbishop of Canterbury, Heading Anglican Church Is "High-Wire Act"', *New York Times*, 22 December 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/22/world/europe/archbishop-canterbury-profile.html> [accessed 18 March 2025].

<sup>139</sup> Welby's tenure was marked by his use of sweeping historical analogies which repeatedly led to public controversy and subsequent apologies. For example, in 2013, a jocular comment that it was a 'miracle' the Scots cooperated with the English after '800 years of ill-treatment' was seized upon by right-wing media and Scottish nationalists ahead of the 2014 independence referendum. See Tim Merz, 'English Have Bashed Scots for 800 Years, Says Archbishop', *Telegraph*, 29 October 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scotland/10411067/English-have-bashed-Scots-for-800-years-says-Archbishop.html> [accessed 18 March 2025]. His engagement with Brexit proved particularly contentious, highlighting a significant rift between the overwhelmingly pro-Remain Anglican leadership and the laity, of whom an estimated 66% voted Leave. See Greg Smith and Linda Woodhead, 'Religion and Brexit: Populism and the Church of England', *Religion, State and Society*, 46.3 (2018), pp. 206–23. This disconnect arguably framed the reception of his interventions. In 2017, he linked Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump to a 'fascist tradition of politics', a remark the *Daily Mail* decried as 'appalling (and historically illiterate)'. See Peter Foster, 'Donald Trump Is Part of a "Fascist Tradition of Politics", Says Archbishop', *Telegraph*, 14 February 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/14/donald-trump-part-fascist-tradition-politics-says-archbishop/> [accessed 18 March 2025]; and Christopher Hart, 'To Link Brexit to Fascism Is Appalling', *MailOnline*, 14 February 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-4225810/CHRISTOPHER-HART-link-Brexit-fascism-appalling.html> [accessed 18 March 2025]. Conversely, he praised the EU as 'the greatest dream realised for human beings since the fall of the Western Roman Empire'. See Madeleine Davies, 'EU Is One of The Greatest Human Achievements, Says Welby' And That's The Truth", *Church Times*, 8 June 2018, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/8-june/news/uk/eu-is-one-of-the-greatest-human-achievements-says-welby-and-that-s-the-truth> [accessed 18 March 2025]. In August 2019 however, he then ironically urged Remain supporters to 'stop whingeing', a comment for which he later apologised after being criticised for dismissing legitimate concerns. See Edward Malnick, 'Justin Welby Calls For Remainers to "Stop Whingeing"

humorous in intention were easily clipped, sensationalised, or stripped of context; others were heard as grossly insensitive, or as an unhelpful blurring of pastoral and political registers.<sup>140</sup> Several minor and major controversies followed, such as his comparison of climate inaction to the Holocaust, which led to an unequivocal apology after backlash.<sup>141</sup>

This stylistic vulnerability was compounded by a changing media and political environment. In the 1980s, Church critiques (like the *Faith in the City* report) provoked serious

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and Accept The Result of the Brexit Referendum’, *Telegraph*, 31 August 2019 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/08/31/justin-welby-called-remainers-stop-whingeing-accept-result-brexit/> [accessed 18 March 2025]; and Kaya Burgess, ‘Justin Welby Is Sorry For Calling Remain Voters Whingers’, *The Times*, 3 September 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/uk/politics/article/justin-welby-is-sorry-for-calling-remain-voters-whingers-drvd8t7s> [accessed 18 March 2025]. Scholars have noted therefore that while Welby’s warnings aligned with Anglican critiques of Brexit’s nationalist undertones, his rhetoric often failed to bridge the theological and political divide. See Andrew Bradstock and Jonathan Chaplin (eds), *The Future of Brexit Britain: Anglican Reflections on National Identity and European Solidarity* (London: SPCK, 2020); Lukas David Meyer, ‘The God of the Brexiteers: Christian Political Theology and the Divisions of Brexit Britain’, in *The Spirit of Populism: Political Theologies in Polarized Societies*, ed. by Ulrich Schmiedel and Joshua Ralston (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 199–222. Bishop Philip North also criticised the Church’s leadership for its ‘attitude of incomprehension and condemnation’ towards Leave voters. See Centre for Anglican Studies, University of Southampton, ‘Brexit and the Anglican Tradition’ <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/ceip/lectures-and-talks/transcripts/brexitandtheanglicantradition.page> [accessed 18 February 2025]. In 2023, he cautioned against treating post-war Russia like Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, an analogy several critics again found inappropriate and historically simplistic. See Justin Welby, ‘Only by Supporting Ukraine Can We hope to Build A Lasting Peace’, *Telegraph*, 23 February 2023 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/02/23/supporting-ukraine-can-hope-build-lasting-peace/> [accessed 18 March 2025]; and Robert Tombs, ‘Welby Is Wrong To Draw Comparisons With Weimar Germany’, *Telegraph*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/02/24/welby-wrong-draw-comparisons-weimar-germany/> [accessed 18 March 2025].

<sup>140</sup> This tendency culminated in the backlash to his farewell speech in the House of Lords in December 2024, following his resignation over the John Smyth abuse scandal. His attempts at humour were described by survivors as ‘frivolous’ and ‘tone deaf’, provoking public criticism from six bishops and another apology from Welby for the hurt his words had caused. See Cahal Newman, ‘“Absolutely Not the Time for Humour”, Bishop on Welby Speech’, *Channel 4 News*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.channel4.com/news/absolutely-not-the-time-for-humour-bishop-on-welby-speech> [accessed 18 March 2025]; Andy Thompson, ‘Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby Apologises For “Hurt” After House of Lords Speech Backlash’, *Independent*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/archbishop-of-canterbury-justin-welby-speech-apology-b2660131.html> [accessed 18 March 2025]; and Andre Lamche, ‘Welby Sorry For Hurting Abuse Survivors With Lords Speech’, *BBC News*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cge9je2g5njo> [accessed 18 March 2025].

<sup>141</sup> At the global climate conference ‘COP26’ in 2021, he warned that political inaction on climate change could lead to a ‘genocide on an infinitely greater scale’ than that perpetrated by the Nazis, prompting condemnation from Jewish community leaders and a swift apology. See Kate Whannel, ‘COP26: Archbishop of Canterbury Apologises for “Nazi Climate Comments”’, *BBC News*, 1 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-59117537> [accessed 18 March 2025]; and Rosa Doherty, ‘Archbishop of Canterbury apologises for comparing climate change to rise of Nazis’, *The Jewish Chronicle*, 1 November 2021 <https://www.thejc.com/news/archbishop-of-canterbury-apologises-for-comparing-climate-change-to-rise-of-nazis-svss7wtv> [accessed 18 March 2025].

debate with government ministers.<sup>142</sup> By contrast, Welby's outspoken engagement with political and social issues, including critiques of austerity and immigration policies, often simply led to frequent accusations that he was all too willing to overstep the boundaries of his ecclesiastical role. His protests were increasingly dismissed as 'woke' posturing, particularly by right-wing media.<sup>143</sup> Crucially, Welby explicitly came out in favour of the Remain campaign prior to the 2016 EU referendum, warning against 'succumbing to our worst instincts' over immigration and stating that he would vote to stay in to avert economic damage that could harm the poorest.<sup>144</sup> He viewed the European Union as embodying principles from Jesus' teaching, such as peace, reconciliation, and love for the poor, alien, and stranger, arguing it had shaped a continent contributing to 'human flourishing' and 'social care'.<sup>145</sup> He later described the EU as 'the greatest dream realised for human beings since the fall of the Western Roman Empire', bringing peace, prosperity, compassion, purpose, and hope.<sup>146</sup> This stance, however, positioned him as a polarising figure in Britain's 'culture wars'. His background (Etonian, ex-oil executive) fuelled perceptions of elitism and hypocrisy, and he found himself caught between conservatives angered by his critiques of inequality and progressives frustrated by his hesitancy on LGBTQ+ inclusion.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Matthew Grimley, 'The Church and the Bomb: Anglicans and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, c.1958–1984', in *God and War: The Church of England and Armed Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Stephen G. Parker and Tom Lawson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 164.

<sup>143</sup> For an overview of the archbishop's political interventions, see Isabel Hardman, 'Justin Welby: Why Shouldn't Bishops Be Political?' *Spectator*, 9 March 2024, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/justin-welby-why-shouldnt-bishops-be-political/> [accessed 18 Mar. 2025]. See also Richard Kay, 'Downfall of the Woke Archbishop and One-Man Opposition to the Tories Who Saw 3,000 Churches Close on His Watch', *MailOnline*, 13 November 2024, <https://www.DailyMail.co.uk/home/article-14074455/Downfall-woke-Archbishop-one-man-opposition-Tories-saw-3-000-churches-close-watch.html> [accessed 18 Mar. 2025].

<sup>144</sup> Press Association, 'Archbishop of Canterbury Supports Remain Campaign in EU Referendum', *Guardian*, 12 June 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/12/archbishop-of-canterbury-supports-remain-campaign-in-eu-referendum> [accessed 28 July 2024].

<sup>145</sup> Justin Welby, 'Archbishop Justin Welby on the EU Referendum', *Archbishop of Canterbury*, 12 June 2016, <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/archbishop-justin-welby-eu-referendum> [accessed 28 July 2025].

<sup>146</sup> Madeleine Davies, 'EU Is One of the Greatest Human Achievements'.

<sup>147</sup> Kate Mossman, 'Justin Welby: "It's Better To Be Woke Than Asleep"', *New Statesman*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2023/10/justin-welby-its-better-to-be-woke-than-asleep-archbishop-of-canterbury-interview> [accessed 18 March 2025].

His leadership epitomised the Church's interpretive crisis: it performed centrist rituals (state funerals, remembrance services, anniversaries etc) but no longer spoke with centrist credibility. This tension came to a head in Welby's 2015 address at the Frauenkirche, a speech that, while grounded in Anglican liturgical traditions of shared mourning and reconciliation, revealed the extent to which even the most ecumenical gestures could provoke controversy when filtered through competing national narratives and the fractured moral authority of the Church he led.

### **The Frauenkirche Speeches, 2015: Media Reactions to Expressions of Hegemonic and Emancipated Narratives**

The seventieth anniversary of the Dresden bombings in February 2015 marked a further shift in the city's commemorative landscape, continuing a broader transformation that had gained momentum since 2005.<sup>148</sup> For years, Dresden had oscillated between a practice of 'stilles Gedenken' (silent, apolitical remembrance), a ritual rooted in a post-war tradition of dignified mourning that emphasised collective grief without political commentary, and increasingly assertive interventions from memory activists demanding a more critical engagement with the city's history.<sup>149</sup>

While traditional elements such as church services, candlelight vigils, and moments of silence remained central to the official commemoration, their apolitical façade had become increasingly contested. Activist groups like *Dresden Nazifrei* argued that such practices risked obscuring historical context and perpetuating a narrative of victimhood detached from the causes and consequences.<sup>150</sup> In turn, they organised the *Täterspurenmahngang* (March for

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<sup>148</sup> Stephan Petzold, 'Challenging the Politics of German Victimhood: Memory Activism and the Contested Anniversary of the Dresden Bombings Since 2005', *German Life and Letters*, 73.3 (2020), pp. 441–66.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 445–7.

<sup>150</sup> Dresden-nazifrei.com, 'Commemoration Debate' (2015) [https://archiv.dresden-nazifrei.com/index8865.html?Itemid=164&id=87&lang=en&option=com\\_content&view=category](https://archiv.dresden-nazifrei.com/index8865.html?Itemid=164&id=87&lang=en&option=com_content&view=category) [accessed 18 March 2025].

Traces of Offenders), a walking tour to sites of Nazi atrocities in the city, explicitly linking Dresden's destruction to the crimes that preceded it.<sup>151</sup> In 2015, Dresden's leadership sought to respond to these pressures. For the first time, there was no official wreath-laying at Heidefriedhof cemetery; a symbolic move away from a purely mournful, victim-centred narrative.<sup>152</sup> The accompanying conference *Gedenken in Dresden* ('Remembering in Dresden') brought together international representatives from Coventry, Wrocław, and Thessaloniki (cities with their own wartime traumas) to discuss how war memory travels across generations and borders.<sup>153</sup>

This contested terrain can be understood through the framework of James H. Liu and Denis J. Hilton, who describe social representations of history as 'historical charters' that legitimise a group's identity and values. These charters can be hegemonic (widely institutionalised) or emancipated (subcultural or local).<sup>154</sup> Dresden's tradition of *stilles Gedenken* had become an emancipated local charter, clashing with Germany's hegemonic national commitment to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (working through the past). This dynamic crystallised during the memorial service at the reconstructed Frauenkirche, where two key speeches revealed the high stakes of narrating the past. President Joachim Gauck reinforced Germany's hegemonic charter of responsibility, while the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, offered an emancipated charter of reconciliation that, while resonant in Germany, proved precarious when it reached his British audience.

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> 'Bombardierung Dresdens: Grüne beklagen „Opfermythos“', *Junge Freiheit*, 2015 <https://jungefreiheit.de/politik/deutschland/2015/bombardierung-dresdens-gruene-beklagen-opfermythos/> [accessed 18 March 2025].

<sup>153</sup> JKPeV, 'Gedenken in Dresden [2015]' (2015) [https://jkpev.de/en/portfolio\\_page/gedenken-in-dresden/](https://jkpev.de/en/portfolio_page/gedenken-in-dresden/) [accessed 18 March 2025].

<sup>154</sup> See James H. Liu and Denis J. Hilton, 'How the Past Weighs on the Present: Social representations of history and their role in identity politics', *Journal of Social Psychology*, 44 (2005), pp. 537–556.

**Figure 5.3: Archbishop Welby and President Gauck Speaking at the Frauenkirche  
(13/02/2015)<sup>155</sup>**



<sup>155</sup> Justin Welby, 'Archbishop of Canterbury's Speech at the Frauenkirche Dresden', 13 February 2015.

President Joachim Gauck's address exemplified the ongoing performance and maintenance of a hegemonic historical charter, building upon the vital post-reunification precedent set by President Roman Herzog on the fiftieth anniversary in 1995.<sup>156</sup> A nation's charter, as defined by Liu and Hilton, is the narrative of its origins and mission that provides its people with ontological security and legitimises its actions. In 1995, Herzog had laid the foundation for reunified Germany's remembrance of the bombing by explicitly forbidding any 'offsetting' (*Aufrechnung*) of German guilt against Allied destruction, declaring that one cannot draw an 'accounting balance' of wartime suffering.<sup>157</sup> Twenty years later, Gauck's speech drew its power directly from this established charter: an identity founded not on victory or victimhood, but on the ethical burden of confronting the past.

His words were designed to reinforce the boundaries of this hegemonic narrative. By stating unequivocally, 'We know who started the murderous war', and cataloguing the cities bombed by Germany (Rotterdam, Coventry, Belgrade) he performed a crucial function of a hegemonic narrative: policing the past to prevent its misuse.<sup>158</sup> This was an active intervention to ensure mourning for German losses could not be mistaken for a revisionist victimhood narrative.

The positive domestic reception highlighted the charter's stability. The left-leaning *Tageszeitung* noted that Gauck delivered 'a rather cool speech that keeps an inner distance' (eine eher kühle Rede, die inneren Abstand hält), deliberately avoiding the emotive excess that

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<sup>156</sup> Roman Herzog, 'Ansprache von Bundespräsident Roman Herzog zum 50. Jahrestag der Zerstörung von Dresden im Zweiten Weltkrieg', *Der Bundespräsident*, 13 February 1995, [https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Roman-Herzog/Reden/1995/02/19950213\\_Redde.html](https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Roman-Herzog/Reden/1995/02/19950213_Redde.html) [accessed 1 April 2026].

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Joachim Gauck, 'Rede von Bundespräsident Joachim Gauck beim Gedenkakt zum 70. Jahrestag der Zerstörung Dresdens', *Der Bundespräsident*, 13 February 2015 <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Joachim-Gauck/Reden/2015/02/150213-Dresden.html> [accessed 19 February 2025].

could feed a victim narrative.<sup>159</sup> The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* praised his warning against relativising German guilt, powerfully contrasting it with the Nazi era when ‘hateful and ideologically delusional’ sermons had been preached from the same church’s pulpit.<sup>160</sup> Observers like Angela Findlay of the *Dresden Trust* praised the overall approach as ‘apologetic, inclusive and instructive’, hailing Gauck’s remarks as emblematic of a mature desire to learn from history.<sup>161</sup>

By contrast, Archbishop Welby’s speech operated from what Liu and Hilton’s framework would identify as an emancipated position.<sup>162</sup> It proposed an alternative charter, one not tied to national identity but to a transnational, theological vision of universal suffering and reconciliation. Whilst this charter has its own long tradition, particularly within the Anglican ministry of reconciliation associated with Coventry Cathedral it exists as a subcultural narrative, lacking the institutional power of Britain’s hegemonic story of the war. The language of his speech is evidence of this alternative framing. While his expression of ‘deep sorrow’ was pastorally sensitive, specific rhetorical ambiguities made it precarious.<sup>163</sup>

Describing the attack as ‘the most controversial raid of the Allied bombing campaign’ and reflecting on how in war ‘our hearts inevitably harden’ without anchoring these reflections

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<sup>159</sup> Stefan Reinecke, ‘Der Himmel über Dresden’, *taz.de*, 2015 <https://taz.de/Jahrestag-der-Bombardierung/!5020188/> [accessed 19 March 2025].

<sup>160</sup> Stefan Locke, ‘10.000 Dresdner bilden symbolischen Schutzring’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2015 <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/10-000-dresdner-bilden-symbolischen-schutzring-13427735.html> [accessed 19 March 2025]. The article contains the following quotations: ‘Bohl nahm dabei explizit die Frauenkirche nicht aus. „Von dieser Kanzel wurde hasserfüllt und in ideologischer Verblendung gepredigt“ and ‘Ein Erinnern aber, so hatte Gauck zuvor gesagt, „das ausschließlich auf die Schuld der anderen verweist, bringt Völker gegeneinander auf, statt sie im friedlichen Dialog einander anzunähern“. Dass das bis heute eher die Ausnahme denn die Regel ist, daran ließ Gauck auch keinen Zweifel.’

<sup>161</sup> Angela Findlay, ‘Sorry Does Indeed Seem to Be the Hardest Word to Say’, *Angela Findlay Blog*, 28 February 2015, <https://angelafindlay.blog/2015/02/28/sorry-does-indeed-seem-to-be-the-hardest-word-to-say/> [accessed 19 March 2025].

<sup>162</sup> See Ray Furlong, ‘Dresden Ruins Finally Restored’, *BBC News*, 1 July 2004 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3830135.stm> [accessed 19 March 2025].

<sup>163</sup> Full transcript can be read at: Kevin Kallsen, ‘Canterbury offers his “regrets” for the 1945 bombing of Dresden’, *Anglican Ink*, 14 February 2015 <https://anglican.ink/2015/02/14/canterbury-offers-his-regrets-for-the-1945-bombing-of-dresden/> [accessed 19 March 2025].

in Germany's initial aggression, created interpretive gaps.<sup>164</sup> For a British audience, such phrases could be read as a veiled critique of Allied actions. Emancipated charters are, by nature, more vulnerable to misinterpretation when they enter a public sphere dominated by a powerful hegemonic narrative.

Divorced from the dominant sacred story, Welby's nuanced message was interpreted as a political transgression. This prompted a clarification from his communications director, who stressed that 'sorrow for loss and suffering is justified, even if one thinks the course of action was necessary at the time'.<sup>165</sup> The very need for such a statement highlights the risk: his emancipated charter of reconciliation was perceived as an illegitimate challenge to the hegemonic charter of the 'just war'.

The Frauenkirche ceremony, therefore, staged a fascinating encounter between two different types of historical charters. Gauck's speech was an act of hegemonic maintenance. Its carefully calibrated emotional restraint and clear attribution of responsibility were rhetorically stable and politically successful because they expertly mirrored and reinforced the narrative that underpins modern Germany's identity. Welby's speech was an act of proffering an emancipated, transnational charter of reconciliation. Its moral depth, expressed through rhetorical ambiguities, became a political liability when it collided with the rigid framework of Britain's national war memory. The episode demonstrates a key dynamic of memory politics: the meaning and success of a historical narrative depend not only on its content, but on the power of the charter it represents. Gauck's message was secure because it was hegemonic. Welby's, though intended to unite, became divisive because its emancipated logic was interpreted as a threat to a cherished and institutionally protected national story.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Alisa Anderson, 'Letter published in today's *Daily Mail* regarding Archbishop Justin Welby's speech in Dresden', 2015, [https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/node/714/printable/bbd\\_pdf\\_format](https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/node/714/printable/bbd_pdf_format) [accessed 19 March 2025].

## A Fierce Storm in a Teacup: The Media's War on Welby

Figure 5.4: *MailOnline's* Inflammatory Headline (14/02/2015)<sup>166</sup>

### Archbishop 'says sorry' for bombing the Nazis: Justin Welby attacked for 'bizarre apology' for Dresden raids, but makes no reference to RAF heroes killed by Hitler

- Justin Welby apologises for British bombing of Dresden in World War II
- Comments came at a ceremony to mark 70th anniversary of bomb raids
- Former defence minister criticised Archbishop of Canterbury for apology
- 'I do not hear Angela Merkel apologising for Blitz', Sir Gerald Howarth said
- Bombing of Dresden in 1945 killed an estimated 25,000 Germans
- But Archbishop made no reference to bombings of London and Coventry
- But the Church of England said Mr Welby did not apologise for bombings

By LARISA BROWN and STEVE DOUGHTY FOR THE DAILY MAIL  
PUBLISHED: 22:00, 13 February 2015 | UPDATED: 10:13, 14 February 2015



The Archbishop of Canterbury last night issued an extraordinary apology for the British bombing of Dresden during the Second World War.

In what was immediately criticised as an insult to the young men who gave their lives to defeat the Nazis, the Most Rev Justin Welby told the German people of his 'profound feeling of regret and deep sorrow' over the attack.

His comments at a ceremony in Dresden to mark the 70th anniversary of the bombings came amid a growing row about BBC coverage of the commemoration in which Britain was described as 'worse than the Nazis' over the raids that killed thousands at the end of the war.

Former defence minister Sir Gerald Howarth criticised the Archbishop,



The Archbishop of Canterbury issued an extraordinary apology for the British bombing of Dresden during the Second World War

Following the Frauenkirche service, the *Daily Mail* moved quickly. It published its provocative article under the incendiary headline: 'Archbishop "says sorry" for bombing the Nazis' at 10 PM on 13 February 2015.<sup>167</sup> The *Mail's* portrayal set the tone for much of the subsequent coverage. It emphasised Welby had 'issued an extraordinary apology for the British bombing of Dresden during the Second World War', an act they suggested was 'immediately criticised as an insult to the young men who gave their lives to defeat the Nazis'.<sup>168</sup> In other words, Welby's message of empathetic sorrow was immediately reframed as a national abasement.

<sup>166</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"'.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

Throughout 14–15 February, several British newspapers amplified a few dominant framings: that Welby had betrayed Britain’s wartime legacy, was engaging in distorted historical revisionism, and had overstepped his role. The *Sun*, *Mirror*, and *Express*, among others, echoed the *Mail’s* portrayal, creating a media firestorm built on the repeated assertion that Welby had ‘apologised’ for the RAF’s actions.<sup>169</sup> This claim, though factually incorrect, was a potent framing device. The repeated use of scare quotes around words like ‘apology’ and loaded, declarative headlines such as the *Express’s* ‘Outcry Over Archbishop’s ‘Sorry’ for Dresden Bombing’ cemented the accusation in the media’s framing. The *Mirror* went even further, asserting as fact that Welby had said ‘sorry’, a claim that was rhetorically powerful precisely because of its simplicity and inaccuracy.<sup>170</sup>

As the weekend progressed, the Church of England pushed back. Archbishop Welby, clearly stung by the distortion, posted about his ‘sadness’ at seeing the *Daily Mail* headline: ‘No honest reading of what I said... could come anywhere near such an idea [that I apologised], while his office issued its unequivocal rebuttal: ‘Any suggestion that the Archbishop was apologising is manifestly false. The Archbishop’s comments were a reflection in a solemn ceremony on the tragedy of war... [They] very carefully avoided apologising, and those present, including the President of Germany, recognised the difference.’<sup>171</sup> This clarification was later reported by *ITV News* and several religious media outlets.<sup>172</sup> The *Church Times* for example quickly jumped to Welby’s defence, foregrounding a rebuttal from the Bishop of

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<sup>169</sup> See ‘Archbishop of Canterbury provokes outcry by “apologising for Dresden bombings”’, *Express.co.uk*, 15 February 2015; and Colin Mayer, ‘WELBY “REGRET” ABOUT DRESDEN’, *Sun*, 14 February 2015, p. 18.

<sup>170</sup> ‘Welby “sorry for RAF raids on Dresden”’, *Daily Mirror*, 14 February 2015, p. 6.

<sup>171</sup> 75nzsquadron, ‘A Final Comment on Dresden, by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury’.

<sup>172</sup> ‘Archbishop: Dresden Speech Was Not an Apology’, *ITV News*, 14 February 2015 <https://www.itv.com/news/update/2015-02-14/archbishop-dresden-speech-was-not-an-apology/> [accessed 26 July 2025].

Leeds, Nick Baines, who lambasted the *Mail* for the ‘lies, misrepresentation, slander, and brain-dead ideological nonsense’ in its reporting.<sup>173</sup>

The damage, however, had been done in the mass-circulation press; the image of an apologetic Archbishop became the story’s leitmotif and these defences did little to alter the sentiments of several right-wing outlets. A *Sunday Express* editorial on the 15th February acknowledged Welby’s clarification, but still maintained there had been an insidious undertone to Welby’s remarks: ‘[B]y deliberately using emotive terms such as “brutal and devastating” and “controversial” in describing the raids, is it any wonder that it feels like our rich heritage is once again being grabbed by the scruff of the neck like an errant schoolboy and dragged to the headmaster’s study?’<sup>174</sup> A few days later, writing a wider piece criticising the Church for the *Mail*, Stephen Glover maintained that the archbishop’s original comments had been ‘unwise’.<sup>175</sup> A day later, the *Mail* replied to Welby directly:

The *Mail* is saddened that the Archbishop of Canterbury has accused us of lacking honesty in our Saturday report that he apologised to the people of Dresden for the Allied bombing of their city in 1945... Since our report, we have received thousands of responses from readers, deploring the archbishop’s remarks. Movingly, they include many from relatives of the heroes of RAF Bomber Command who sacrificed their lives in the fight against Nazism. They, and this paper, would like one question answered: if expressing “profound regret” and “deep sorrow” is not saying sorry, then what is?<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Madeleine Davies, ‘Archbishop Speaks of “Deep Wound of Dresden”’, *Church Times*, 13 February 2015 <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2015/13-february/news/uk/archbishop-speaks-of-deep-wound-of-dresden> [accessed 19 March 2025].

<sup>174</sup> *Sunday Express* Editorial, ‘No Need for Church to Apologise for the Past’, *Sunday Express*, 15 February 2015, p. 28.

<sup>175</sup> Stephen Glover, ‘Blinkered and out of its depth - the Church of England is in danger of becoming ludicrous’, *Mail nline*, 18 February 2015 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2957964/STEPHEN-GLOVER-Blinkered-depth-Church-England-danger-ludicrous.html> [accessed 26 July 2025].

<sup>176</sup> Daily Mail Comment, ‘Why Don’t the Tories Blow Their Trumpet?’, *MailOnline* [19 February 2015] <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2959446/DAILY-MAIL-COMMENT-don-t-Tories-blow-trumpet.html> [accessed 19 March 2025].

## Narrative Techniques of the Attack

The media constructed its sense of outrage through several carefully deployed narrative techniques designed to create an affective feedback loop with its audience. First, the catalyst for the controversy was not Welby's speech itself, but its mediated representation by *MailOnline*. The initial headline functioned as a proactive intervention, reflecting an editorial strategy of calculated reactivity to its audience's pre-existing sensitivities.<sup>177</sup> This act of framing can be understood through the lens of mediated prospective memory, where media orients our collective disposition towards the future, effectively creating communal 'to-do lists'.<sup>178</sup> The headline was not a neutral description; it was a forward-looking script that assigned its readers a clear task: to recognise Welby's gesture as a profound betrayal and to enact a swift moral judgment upon him. This was achieved through a deliberate process of narrative filtering. The article systematically stripped away the complexities of Welby's message; reconciliation, his pastoral role, the joint commemorative context, and reduced it to a single, inflammatory act of apology.

Second, the media carefully selected and framed critical voices, effectively mobilising political figures to act as validators of its narrative. In both their initial article and a follow-up piece on 16 February, the *Mail* quoted former Conservative Defence Minister Sir Gerald Howarth, who deployed a classic rhetorical deflection. 'I do not hear Angela Merkel apologising for the Blitz', he stated.<sup>179</sup> This rhetorical strategy is a classic example of 'whataboutism', a tactic whose function has been critically examined across multiple studies of political and media discourse. Bowell identifies its primary purpose as being to 'redirect attention from the specific case at hand', usually by implying hypocrisy.<sup>180</sup> If this aim seems

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<sup>177</sup> See Helena Chmielewska-Szlajfer, *(Not) Kidding: Politics in Online Tabloids* (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

<sup>178</sup> Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 'Bridging Collective Memories and Public Agendas: Toward a Theory of Mediated Prospective Memory', *Communication Theory*, 23 (2013), p. 97.

<sup>179</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"'.  
<sup>180</sup> Tracy Bowell, 'Whataboutisms: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', *Informal Logic*, 43.1 (2023), p. 91.

somewhat brazen in its transparency, research into corporate and political communication has consistently identified whataboutism as a key means to derail critical policy debates and reframe blame.<sup>181</sup> In this context, Howarth's remark is not a genuine historical comparison but a strategic deflection. It leverages what Kiš, analysing whataboutism in the context of the current Russo-Ukrainian War, calls the emotional and ideological resonance of a fallacy, which allows it to override its logical weakness.<sup>182</sup> By invoking the Blitz, Howarth instantly re-centres German culpability and frames Welby's reconciliatory act as a betrayal of British suffering, making nuanced reflection impossible and shoring up a simplistic, nationalist moral binary.

Third, the paper deliberately conflated Welby with the BBC by invoking the recent controversy over Victor Gregg's testimony.<sup>183</sup> As analysed in Chapter Four, Gregg is a figure who wields significant symbolic authority, rooted in his direct, harrowing experience of the firebombing. His labelling of the raid as a 'war crime' was a powerful moral indictment that, as the comments in that case study showed, also triggered a version of the black sheep effect against a venerated veteran. By discursively lumping Welby with Gregg, the *Mail* performed a strategic manoeuvre. It created a false equivalence between two very different critiques: one from a veteran whose authority is personal and experiential, and the other from a primate whose authority is institutional and theological. This conflation served to create a narrative of a coordinated attack on RAF history from a seemingly unified front of anti-patriotic elites, thereby amplifying the perceived threat.

Fourth, the *Mail* personalised and dramatised its attack by highlighting Welby's own family history. The article pointedly mentioned his great-uncle, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles

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<sup>181</sup> See for example Wilfred M. Chow and Dov H. Levin, 'The Diplomacy of Whataboutism and US Foreign Policy Attitudes', *International Organization*, 78.1 (2024), pp. 103–33.

<sup>182</sup> See Serhij Kiš, 'Should We Use Legitimate Fallacies? A Case Study of Whataboutism in the Discourse on the Russian-Ukrainian war', *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 60.3/4 (2024), pp. 265–80.

<sup>183</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"'.

Portal, who was one of the primary architects of Britain's strategic bombing campaign.<sup>184</sup> This was a powerful narrative device, transforming a complex political and theological statement into a simple, emotionally resonant story of familial betrayal. The implication was clear: Welby was not just dishonouring his nation; he was dishonouring his own bloodline.

Fifth, having established this frame of betrayal, the media's primary tactic was to mobilise veterans' voices to lend it moral and emotional gravity. By positioning the veteran as the authentic embodiment of the nation's memory, their words were used to police the boundaries of acceptable discourse. This appeal to the 'victim-hero', a concept Khlevnyuk identifies as figures who are simultaneously celebrated for their heroism and presented as victims of contemporary disrespect, endowed the media's narrative with a powerful emotional charge.<sup>185</sup> For instance, James Hampton, a Bomber Command veteran, was quoted labelling Welby a 'hindsight merchant', while Jim Dooley, the fundraising head for the Bomber Command memorial, accused Welby of demonstrating 'ignorance and disrespect'.<sup>186</sup> The media's choice of veteran voices was highly selective, highlighting a preference for what Khlevnyuk terms the 'ideal victim', who is portrayed as innocent and blameless.<sup>187</sup> By contrast, Victor Gregg from the previous chapter represents a 'complex political victim' whose critique of his own side's actions blurs moral lines, making him a more challenging figure for a simple national narrative.<sup>188</sup>

Finally, the tactic relied on the strategic omission of inconvenient context. The papers emphasised what Welby did *not* say, noting there was no mention of the 55,000 members of

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> See Daria Khlevnyuk, 'Victim-heroes in collective memory: Surviving soviet repressions heroically', *Memory Studies*, 16.2 (2023), pp. 319–32.

<sup>186</sup> David Sanderson, 'Bombing Veteran: Welby is a "Hindsight Merchant"', *The Times*, 16 February 2015; see also 'Rocket for Dresden "Apology"', *Scottish Express*, 15 February 2015, p. 2; see also Giles Sheldrick, 'David Cameron: We Owe Enormous Debt to Bomber Command', *Daily Express*, 19 February 2015, p. 2.

<sup>187</sup> Khlevnyuk, 'Victim-heroes in collective memory', p. 321.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 322.

Bomber Command who died or any reference to the Blitz.<sup>189</sup> These absences were presented as moral failures. More significantly, the coverage almost entirely omitted the vital context that Welby's speech was part of a reciprocal ceremony alongside a powerful address by the then German President, Joachim Gauck, who unequivocally acknowledged Germany's culpability. Gauck's speech received scant attention, with most outlets merely mentioning his attendance.<sup>190</sup> The *Telegraph* noted that Welby's words 'had little immediate impact in Germany... and came under no pressure from the German side', subtly reinforcing the idea that Welby's sorrow was an unnecessary, self-inflicted act of virtue-signalling.<sup>191</sup>

Similarly, the press ignored Welby's other remarks to the BBC where he had explicitly referred to the Blitz, Coventry, and the sacrifice of Bomber Command.<sup>192</sup> This selective framing was exemplified by the *Daily Mail's* reporting on complaints to the BBC. The paper foregrounded that 'at least 54 people complained', implying significant public backlash, while burying the BBC's own contextualising statement that these 54 complaints came from an audience of several million.<sup>193</sup> As Karin Wahl-Jorgensen notes, news often depends on 'engaging the emotions of audiences', and by selecting only the words of sorrow and omitting the expressions of solidarity, the press constructed a one-sided and deeply misleading image fundamental to engineering the Black Sheep Effect.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"'.  
<sup>190</sup> See for example Sheldrick, 'We Owe Enormous Debt to Bomber Command', and Jack Doyle and Tom McTague, 'Cameron lauds our RAF heroes after Welby's Dresden apology', *MailOnline*, 19 February 2015.

<sup>191</sup> Camilla Turner and Justin Huggler, 'Archbishop of Canterbury Speaks Of "Regret" Over Bombing of Dresden', *Telegraph*, 14 February 2015.

<sup>192</sup> Whilst the original blog post is no longer available online, a copy of the full post can be found at: 75nzsquadron, 'A Final Comment on Dresden, by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury', 15 February 2015, <https://75nzsquadron.wordpress.com/2015/02/15/a-final-comment-on-dresden-by-justin-welby-archbishop-of-canterbury/> [accessed 29 December 2025].

<sup>193</sup> Daniel Martin, 'Welby "Wrong" About Dresden: MP Says Archbishop Should Not Have Expressed Regret as Bombing Helped to Save Thousands of Lives by Ending War Sooner', *Daily Mail*, 16 February 2015 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2956324/Justin-Welby-wrong-Dresden.html> [accessed 26 July 2025].

<sup>194</sup> Wahl-Jorgensen, *Emotions, Media and Politics*, p. 9.

## The Affective Feedback Loop in Action: Public and Political Reaction

The media's narrative strategy proved highly effective, generating an emotionally charged public reaction that validated its initial framing. The mechanics of this success can be understood by first examining the editorial practices within outlets like *MailOnline*. Helena Chmielewska-Szlajfer's research based on direct interviews reveals that journalists at the outlet describe their own strategy as fundamentally 'reactive', involving swift adaptations to their audience's emotions.<sup>195</sup> This self-perception, however, is layered with professional cynicism; one writer admits the outlet's content is also 'opportunistic' and designed to reflect what they see as basic 'human nature', while another describes the operation as simply being 'consumer-led'.<sup>196</sup>

While the journalists may perceive their role as simply responding to audience demand, the work of Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis offers a more systemic interpretation that adds nuance to this self-perception. Their concept of the 'affective feedback loop' suggests this is not a simple one-way reaction but a co-created, cyclical process.<sup>197</sup> In this light, the journalists' 'opportunistic' and 'reactive' strategy is the crucial human-driven component that initiates the loop. Their calculated predictions about what will provoke outrage become the catalyst for a cycle where the audience's emotional reactions are captured, validated, and algorithmically fed back to them, thereby encouraging more of the same. What the journalists see as being 'consumer-led' is, in this broader framework, the cultivation of a highly profitable, self-perpetuating system where, in the 'affective economy', outrage becomes the dominant currency.

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<sup>195</sup> Chmielewska-Szlajfer, *(Not) Kidding*, p. 5.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198. and p. 220.

<sup>197</sup> Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis, 'Introduction: Propaganda by Other Means', in *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means*, ed. by Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), p. 19.

This feedback loop was clearly in action as the media's narrative generated an impassioned public response that propelled the controversy into the national political arena. The most visible evidence was in the 'Letters' pages of the national press, which overflowed with anger. On 19 February, *MailOnline* ran a special compilation titled: 'The Archbishop and apologies for Dresden: Your impassioned verdicts.'<sup>198</sup> This collection featured fourteen letters, nearly all from outraged readers. One, from 89-year-old proclaimed veteran Barry Jones, read: 'When it became my turn to be a deliverer to Germany, I was getting my own back. The Archbishop knows nothing about those days and should keep silent.'<sup>199</sup> Another from Arthur Lock, whose brother served in Bomber Command, expressed sorrow that the Church appeared to be 'running down' the men who risked everything.<sup>200</sup> Eric Ginn, who lost family in the Blitz, was incensed: 'Don't apologise on my behalf.'<sup>201</sup> Similar sentiments appeared elsewhere. Alan Brough wrote to *The Sun*, asking sarcastically, 'How about the Germans say sorry for the Blitz?'<sup>202</sup> In the *Express*, John Stewart's 'Letter of the Day' accused Welby and the BBC of betraying Britain's memory: 'Stop grovelling to a race who are arrogant and still want to rule Europe.'<sup>203</sup>

The failure of factual corrections to penetrate established and emotionally charged narratives is a well-documented phenomenon. As scholars like Pantazi et al. have shown, once misinformation aligns with pre-existing beliefs, it is notoriously resistant to correction because '[m]otivated reasoning makes people process information in a way that is partial to the conclusions they want to arrive at'.<sup>204</sup> The *Daily Mail* exemplified this by dismissing the

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<sup>198</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, 'The Archbishop and Apologies for Dresden: Your Impassioned Verdicts', *MailOnline*, 19 February 2015.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> The Sun Letters, 'Welby Wrong to Say Sorry for Dresden', *Sun*, 18 February 2015, p. 39.

<sup>203</sup> 'LETTER OF THE DAY: Britain Owes No Apology for Dresden', *Daily Express*, 16 February 2015, p. 31.

<sup>204</sup> Myrto Pantazi, Scott Hale, and Olivier Klein, 'Social and Cognitive Aspects of the Vulnerability to Political Misinformation', *Advances in Political Psychology*, 42.1 (2021), p. 276.

official clarification with their rhetorical question: 'If 'profound regret' and 'deep sorrow' is not saying sorry, then what is?'<sup>205</sup> In the 'affective economy', outrage becomes the dominant currency, and news outlets cultivate 'affective feedback loops' by selectively publishing the angriest responses, which in turn validate and encourage more outrage.<sup>206</sup>

This gave the media storm renewed impetus, carrying the controversy into the political realm. In her own *Mail* article, columnist Amanda Platell distilled the prevailing mood, accusing the Church's bishops of abandoning their spiritual mission for political theatre.<sup>207</sup> Denouncing a recent pastoral letter as a 'left-wing manifesto', she lamented their failure to address what she framed as traditional concerns like family breakdown and the global persecution of Christians. The clearest evidence of this moral misalignment, in her view, was Welby's trip to Dresden. 'What was Welby's most notable contribution this month?' she asked, before answering with biting scorn: 'A speech expressing his 'profound regret and deep sorrow' over Britain's bombing of Dresden – an act that, however brutal, helped prevent the triumph of Nazism'.<sup>208</sup>

Platell's rhetorical move was calculated: by juxtaposing Welby's remorse for German civilians with a supposed silence on persecuted Christians, she painted him as morally disoriented, more concerned with virtue-signalling to a European elite than with his pastoral duties. To bolster her argument, she invoked the voice of aforementioned veteran Arthur H. Lock, urging the Archbishop to 'stand in the East Kirkby chapel and look at the walls bearing the thousands of names of those who didn't return, then hang their heads in shame'.<sup>209</sup> Platell's endorsement ('Amen to that') and her own declaration of disillusionment ('I'm seriously

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<sup>205</sup> Daily Mail Comment, 'Why don't the Tories blow their trumpet?', *MailOnline*, 19 February 2015.

<sup>206</sup> Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis, 'Affect, Media, Movement: Interview with Susanna Paasonen and Zizi Papacharissi', in *Affective Politics of Digital Media* (2021), p. 55. See also Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis, 'Introduction: Propaganda by Other Means', in *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>207</sup> Platell, 'Platell's People'.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

contemplating becoming a Catholic. And I suspect I'm not alone') cast her frustration as emblematic of a wider social shift, reframing personal alienation as a representative moral withdrawal.<sup>210</sup>

On 19 February, during a question-and-answer session originally focused on the economy at the Port of Felixstowe, the issue became a major Westminster talking point. Prompted by a question about Archbishop Welby's remarks, Prime Minister David Cameron publicly 'defended' the actions of Bomber Command.<sup>211</sup> He lauded the RAF crews as 'heroes of our country' who were vital in saving Britain from fascism, reminding the audience that he had been 'very proud' to secure a campaign medal clasp and a London memorial for the veterans.<sup>212</sup>

Superficially, this was a straightforward tribute, but beyond any genuine respect for the veterans, the intervention was a clear act of political opportunism. As *The Times* noted, it followed 'a series of public disagreements' between Cameron and Welby.<sup>213</sup> Just days earlier, the Church of England's bishops had published a pastoral letter criticising rising inequality and policies that left the poor 'unwanted, unvalued and unnoticed', a move widely seen as a veiled critique of the government's austerity measures.<sup>214</sup> This economic context was precarious for Cameron, with austerity under fire from multiple fronts: academic studies predicted deepening poverty (including a January 2015 joint report by the LSE, the University of Manchester, and

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> See for example B. R. Smith, 'David Cameron Defends Second World War RAF "Heroes of Dresden Raid"', *Telegraph*, 15 February 2015 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/11422903/David-Cameron-defends-heroes-of-Dresden-raid.html> [accessed 21 March 2025]. See also Ben Glaze, 'Archbishop of Canterbury Dresden Comments: David Cameron Hits Back at Justin Welby to Hail "Heroes"', *Daily Mirror*, 16 February 2015 <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/archbishop-canterbury-dresden-comments-david-5193604> [accessed 21 March 2025].

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Matt Dathan, 'Welby in PM's Sights after "Regret" for Dresden Raids', *The Times*, 15 February 2015 <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/welby-in-pms-sights-after-regret-for-dresden-raids-d8kc9v6cvsp> [accessed 22 March 2025].

<sup>214</sup> Daniel Martin, 'Iain Duncan Smith hits out at Church of England for "claiming to be non-partisan"', *MailOnline*, 18 February 2015; See also Editorial, 'The *Guardian* view on the church and the election: talking sense', *Guardian*, 17 February 2015.

the University of York), Nicola Sturgeon had emerged as a prominent domestic critic, and the election of Greece's anti-austerity SYRIZA party signalled mounting European discontent with fiscal orthodoxy.<sup>215</sup>

In this environment, economic arguments were proving divisive. By pivoting to the virtues of Bomber Command (a diversion that, as one editor noted, triggered the only spontaneous applause of the event) Cameron shifted the media focus from contentious fiscal policy to the safer, unifying ground of patriotism. As Andrews notes, the 'working class soldier hero' was a potent 'unifying icon' during the austerity period.<sup>216</sup> This calculated manoeuvre also served to implicitly undermine Welby's authority. The utilisation of 'presentism', where political actors deploy historical narratives for contemporaneous objectives, was clear.<sup>217</sup> The media coverage rewarded this approach. Outlets like the *Mirror*, the *Express* and the *Daily Mail* praised Cameron for 'hit[ting] back' at the Archbishop, describing his 'defiant words' as a 'public slap down', reinforcing the narrative that Welby had offered an apology.<sup>218</sup> Even when outlets like *The Times* acknowledged that Welby had 'stopped short of apologising', they still positioned the two men in opposition, contrasting Welby's 'regret and deep sorrow' with

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<sup>215</sup> Amelia Gentleman, 'Austerity Cuts Will Bite Even Harder in 2015: "Another" £12bn Will Go', *Guardian*, 1 January 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jan/01/austerity-cuts-2015-12-billion-britain-protest> [accessed 22 March 2025]; Nigel Morris, 'Poorer Households Hit Hardest by Austerity over the Last Five Years, According to New Report', *Independent*, 30 January 2015; Ruth Lupton and others, *The Coalition's Social Policy Record: Policy, Spending and Outcomes 2010–2015*, Social Policy in a Cold Climate Research Report 4 (London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2015). For Sturgeon's opposition, see for example *BBC News*, 'Nicola Sturgeon Attacks "Westminster Austerity Economics"', *BBC News*, 11 February 2015 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-31377373> [accessed 22 March 2025]. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/poorer-households-hit-hardest-by-austerity-over-the-last-five-years-according-to-new-report-10004203.html> [accessed 22 March 2025]; See for example Tim Montgomerie, 'Don't Listen to the Deluded Anti-Austerity Lot', *The Times*, 2015 [https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/don't-listen-to-the-deluded-anti-austerity-lot-wfzrjdqbczg](https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/don-t-listen-to-the-deluded-anti-austerity-lot-wfzrjdqbczg) [accessed 22 March 2025].

<sup>216</sup> Maggie Andrews, 'Remembrance and the Working Class Soldier Hero in Austerity Britain', in *Cultural Politics in the Age of Austerity*, ed. by David Berry (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 47–66.

<sup>217</sup> For a discussion of 'presentism' in modern British politics, see David Morgan-Owen, Aimée Fox, and Huw Bennett, 'A Haunting Past: British Defence, Historical Narratives, and the Politics of Presentism', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 37.4 (2024), pp. 520–45.

<sup>218</sup> Ben Glaze, 'Archbishop of Canterbury Dresden comments: David Cameron Hits Back at Justin Welby to Hail "Heroes"', *Daily Mirror*, 19 February 2015 Sheldrick, 'We Owe Enormous Debt to Bomber Command'; Doyle and McTague. 'Cameron Lauds Our RAF Heroes'.

Cameron's 'impassioned defence' of the Bomber Command 'heroes'.<sup>219</sup> Consequently, the Archbishop's nuanced reflection became suspect, while the Prime Minister's patriotic resolve appeared morally unambiguous.

In this light the Dresden controversy represents an early skirmish in what academics Davies and Macrae have since termed the 'British war on woke'.<sup>220</sup> While they map the most intensive phase of this 'war' to the post-2016 political landscape, the 2015 Dresden controversy should be seen as an enlightening precursor. It demonstrates how the rhetorical strategies, targets (liberal establishment figures), and narratives (betrayal of national heritage) that would come to define the 'war on woke' were already being mobilised and honed by the populist press. For these outlets, Welby had come to symbolise the archetype of the liberal, meddling priest, perceived as unpatriotic and too eager to apologise for Britain's past. His words were slotted into this emerging 'anti-woke' narrative, which casts any form of critical self-reflection on national history as an attack on the nation itself. As the *Guardian* put it, the uproar was part of a 'fierce storm in a teacup', amplified because Welby had already 'enraged the Mail' on unrelated issues.<sup>221</sup>

### **Sceptical Voices and Cracks in the Narrative**

Despite the ferocity of the media campaign and the apparent success of its feedback loop, there remained significant voices sceptical of the dominant narrative. Welby and Lambeth Palace's official response was bolstered by a chorus of supportive voices. The Bishop of Leeds, the Rt Revd Nick Baines, accused the *Daily Mail* of 'lies, misrepresentation, slander, and brain-dead ideological nonsense'. The clearest institutional defence came in the House of Lords, where

<sup>219</sup> Matt Dathan, 'Welby in PM's Sights After "Regret" for Dresden Raids', *The Times*, 20 February 2015; as well as Doyle and McTague; Riley-Smith; and Sheldrick, 'We Owe Enormous Debt to Bomber Command'.

<sup>220</sup> See Huw C. Davies and Sheena E. MacRae, 'An Anatomy of the British War on Woke', *Race & Class*, 65.2 (2023), pp. 3–54.

<sup>221</sup> Michael White, 'C of E's Naive Intervention in Politics Prompts Fierce Storm in a Teacup', *Guardian*, 18 February 2015.

peers debated the anniversary on 12 March 2015.<sup>222</sup> The Bishop of Coventry, Rt Revd Christopher Cocksworth, insisted Welby's expression of sorrow was a pastoral, not political, act.<sup>223</sup> Peers from across the political spectrum, including Labour's Lord Bach and the Conservative Lord Lexden, affirmed that empathy for civilians could coexist with respect for military sacrifice.<sup>224</sup> The government's own representative, Baroness Anelay, publicly thanked Welby for his role, confirming it was 'greatly welcomed and appreciated by our German hosts'.<sup>225</sup>

A particularly robust defence came from an unlikely source: Ann Widdecombe, former Conservative MP and prominent social conservative. Writing in the *Daily Express*, she condemned the 'melodrama' of the headlines, insisting Welby had shown 'dignity and Christian charity'.<sup>226</sup> Her intervention was significant, reclaiming the terms of patriotic memory to argue that recognising grief is not betrayal, but moral maturity. Other commentators argued that Welby's message aligned with Christian just war tradition and that acknowledging tragedy is compatible with honouring courage.<sup>227</sup>

Crucially, this scepticism was not confined to elites. While many reader letters expressed outrage, some letters to regional papers showed a willingness to question the media's framing. Michael Ashton in the *Western Morning News* and Bob Brereton in the *Exeter Express and Echo* recalled the Blitz and questioned the narrative, with Brereton adding a note of doubt: 'Or has the *Daily Mail* got it wrong? I wonder.'[sic]<sup>228</sup> Another reader, writing to the *York Press*, argued that the media had weaponised Welby's use of 'regret' to suggest an apology,

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<sup>222</sup> House of Lords, 'Dresden Anniversary Debate', 12 March 2015.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ann Widdecombe, 'Welby's Words Were Taken Out of Context', *Daily Express*, 18 February 2015, p. 13.

<sup>227</sup> Joe Egerton, 'Sorrow Not Sorry: Learning from Dresden', *Thinking Faith*, 27 February 2015, <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/sorrow-not-sorry-learning-dresden> [accessed 28 December 2025].

<sup>228</sup> *Western Morning News*, 16 February 2015, p. 12; and *Express & Echo Letters*, 'Disgusted by War Apology', *Exeter Express & Echo*, 19 February 2015, pp. 34–35.

calling it a ‘linguistic bombshell’.<sup>229</sup> These letters reveal that while the feedback loop between press framing and public perception was powerful, it was not total. Some readers were willing to question whether the headlines had distorted the Archbishop’s intent.

### **Testing the Affective Feedback Loop in *MailOnline* Comments**

The existence of these sceptical currents, even within a media environment saturated with outrage, justifies a closer examination of the interplay between editorial narratives and public sentiment. To investigate these dynamics further, this chapter now turns to the online comment sections of *MailOnline*, the UK’s most-read news website in 2015.<sup>230</sup> The *Daily Mail*’s aggressive reframing of Welby’s message provides a distinct case study for exploring how editorial framing influences reader engagement. The newspaper experimented with several rhetorical strategies across its articles, tapping into different strands of its readership’s ideological concerns, from direct accusations of betrayal to broader critiques of the Church of England as a left-wing institution.<sup>231</sup> *MailOnline*’s commenting interface (with features such as upvoting and downvoting) cultivates a distinct ‘community of practice’ that shapes collective judgments.<sup>232</sup> Research suggests these comment sections significantly amplify ideological polarisation, allowing readers to actively enforce boundaries of moral and mnemonic legitimacy.<sup>233</sup> Overall, the *MailOnline*’s unique combination of scale, interactivity, and editorial strategy makes it an essential site for understanding contemporary dynamics of cultural memory, identity politics, and public emotional engagement. Consequently, the

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<sup>229</sup> York Press Reader's Letter, 'Raid Was Wrong but Pilots Did Their Duty', *York Press*, 4 March 2015.

<sup>230</sup> Dugald Baird, '*MailOnline* Soars Past 200m Monthly Browsers as Newspaper Sites Bounce Back', *Guardian*, 20 February 2015.

<sup>231</sup> Platell, 'Platell's People'.

<sup>232</sup> Sean Sutherland, 'Being Negative to be Popular: Style in Online Comments at the *MailOnline*', *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, 8.5 (2020), p. 67.

<sup>233</sup> See Harry M. Lewis and Vivian L. Vignoles, 'Construction and Contestation of Climate Activist Identities in the Comments Section of a Large UK-Based Online Newspaper', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 54 (2024), pp. 154–69.

following analysis employs MaxQDA software to examine over 3,700 comments from articles featuring Welby's Dresden appearance published between 13 and 20 February 2015 (see Table).

### **The Ritualisation of Outrage: The Affective Expulsion of Justin Welby**

The media's reframing of Archbishop Welby's Dresden speech triggered a vast and immediate public reaction. The initial *MailOnline* article, headlined 'Archbishop 'says sorry' for bombing the Nazis', accumulated over 2,500 comments within days, with the outlet reporting 'thousands of responses from readers' across its platforms.<sup>234</sup> This volume of engagement, while smaller than that generated by the largest contemporaneous celebrity scandals, significantly surpassed that of major political events like the publication of the Chilcot Report, which garnered fewer than 400 comments on the same platform.<sup>235</sup>

This asymmetry highlights the unique affective power of sacred memory. While celebrity culture may dominate the attention economy, the perceived violation of a sacralised historical narrative, central to national identity, can generate a comparable, if not more intense, level of public outrage. As Chmielewska-Szlajfer notes, celebrity culture in tabloids often eclipses political commentary by collapsing public figures into moral dramas.<sup>236</sup> Online tabloids are designed to offer a blend of 'entertainment and news' (or 'infotainment'), catering to audiences who are 'not necessarily interested in nuanced hard political news'.<sup>237</sup> They achieve this by lending politics a 'lighthearted show-business appeal', making political stories

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<sup>234</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"' and Daily Mail Reporter, 'The Archbishop and Apologies for Dresden: Your Impassioned Verdicts'.

<sup>235</sup> See the 13,000 comments amassed on Martin Robinson, Mark Duell, and Emma Glanfield, 'David Cameron Intervenes for Top Gears Jeremy Clarkson After Suspension' *MailOnline*, 10 March 2015, <https://www.DailyMail.co.uk/News/article-2988412/Top-Gear-s-Jeremy-Clarkson-suspended-BBC-fracas-producer.html> [accessed 26 Mar. 2025]. See also Simon Walters, 'Chilcot Report Will Be "Devastating" Says No 10'. *MailOnline*, 7 February 2015, <https://www.DailyMail.co.uk/News/article-2944230/Chilcot-report-devastating-say-No-10-emerges-THIRTY-firing-line-heavily-critical-Iraq-Inquiry-Blair-s-secret-letters-Bush-revealed-full.html> [accessed 26 Mar. 2025].

<sup>236</sup> Chmielewska-Szlajfer, (*Not*) *Kidding*, p. 28.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7., and p. 20

‘look more like yet another celebrity or human-interest story’.<sup>238</sup> This involves simplifying complex political issues into ‘scandal’ or ‘game frames’ that emphasise personalities and their ‘outrage-inducing traits’ rather than substantive policy debates.<sup>239</sup> The ‘scandal frame’ is a ‘tabloid specialty’ that ‘obfuscates complex political agendas’.<sup>240</sup> In this instance, Welby was transformed into a hybrid figure: part cleric, part celebrity scapegoat, cast as the principal villain in a national drama of betrayal.

To understand the specific character of this outrage, it is useful to contrast the reaction to Welby with the condemnation of Victor Gregg, the veteran whose sympathetic remarks on Dresden were discussed in Chapter Four. Gregg was largely neutralised through ridicule and ageist tropes (‘senile’, ‘should be in a care home’), which functioned as a form of symbolic containment. He was rendered harmless by being cast as a confused old man whose views were irrelevant, not a moral threat. Welby, however, as an institutional authority at the apex of the nation’s moral establishment, was consciously, and perhaps unconsciously, perceived as a far greater danger. This distinction is powerfully illuminated by the framework of Fousiani and van Prooijen, who distinguish between reactions to powerful versus prestigious ingroup offenders.<sup>241</sup> Their research suggests that powerful transgressors are sanctioned to curb their capacity to do harm, while prestigious figures (those seen to embody group values) are punished for betraying symbolic trust. As Archbishop, Welby is both powerful and prestigious, and so the public response sought not merely to criticise his stance, but to delegitimise his authority entirely. This was not a debate; it was a ritual of expulsion.

The rhetorical treatment of Archbishop Welby was thus purgative, using humour, sarcasm, and moral denunciation to police the boundaries of national memory. The

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>241</sup> Kyriaki Fousiani and Jan-Willem van Prooijen, ‘Motives for Punishing Powerful vs. Prestigious Offenders: The Moderating Role of Group Identity’, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 61 (2022) pp. 729–47.

delegitimisation was relentless. One of the most common insults in the initial article was the word ‘idiot’, which appeared in over 130 comments.<sup>242</sup> This was closely followed by the term ‘stupid’, used dozens of times to directly attack the Archbishop or his statement. Commenters branded his remarks as ‘completely and utterly stupid’, with one user exclaiming, ‘What a stupid, stupid ass this man is!’<sup>243</sup> Another commenter framed the perceived apology as a choice between malice and incompetence, asking, ‘Is he being politically correct, or is he just simply stupid?’<sup>244</sup> Often used without elaboration, these terms functioned to symbolically infantilise and disqualify him from serious consideration: ‘Welby is an idiot, he should keep his big nose out’, one user reiterated.<sup>245</sup> In a later article covering Sir Gerald Howarth’s criticism, another commenter stated simply, ‘Welby = a stupid and ignorant person living in a world of his own!’<sup>246</sup>

The anger also manifested in classed forms across the dataset, with commenters constructing an image of a privileged and detached elite figure unqualified to speak for the nation. The Word Tree analysis (Figure 5.5) vividly illustrates the syntactic structure of this alienation. He was relentlessly dismissed as an ‘out of touch’ cleric, a ‘champagne socialist’ whose thoughts were invalid because he ‘lives in a palace’ with no concept of the ‘real world’.<sup>247</sup> Furthermore, his residence at Lambeth Palace was repeatedly invoked as a potent symbol of this disconnect, transforming him from a spiritual leader into an ‘ivory tower’ apologist who should get back in his ‘box’ and stay out of political matters.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"'.  
<sup>243</sup> Ibid., comment 467, comment 881.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., comment 1346.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., comment 910.

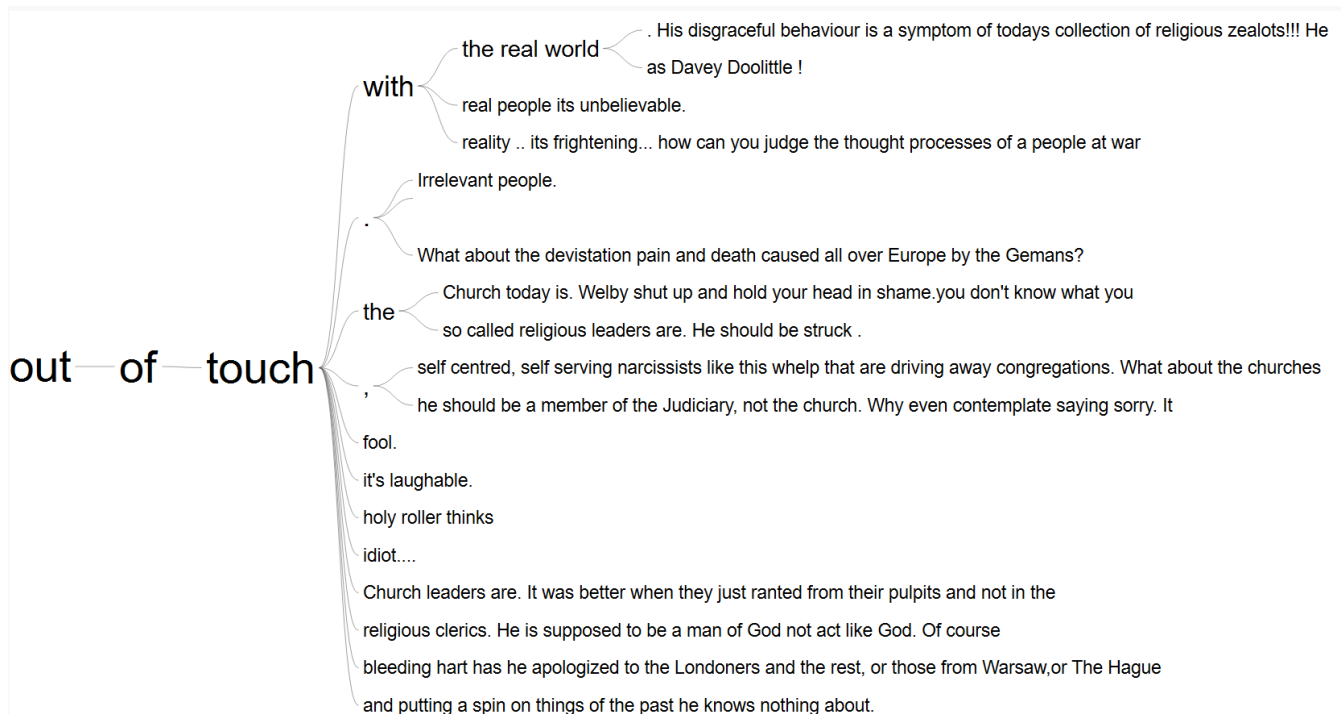
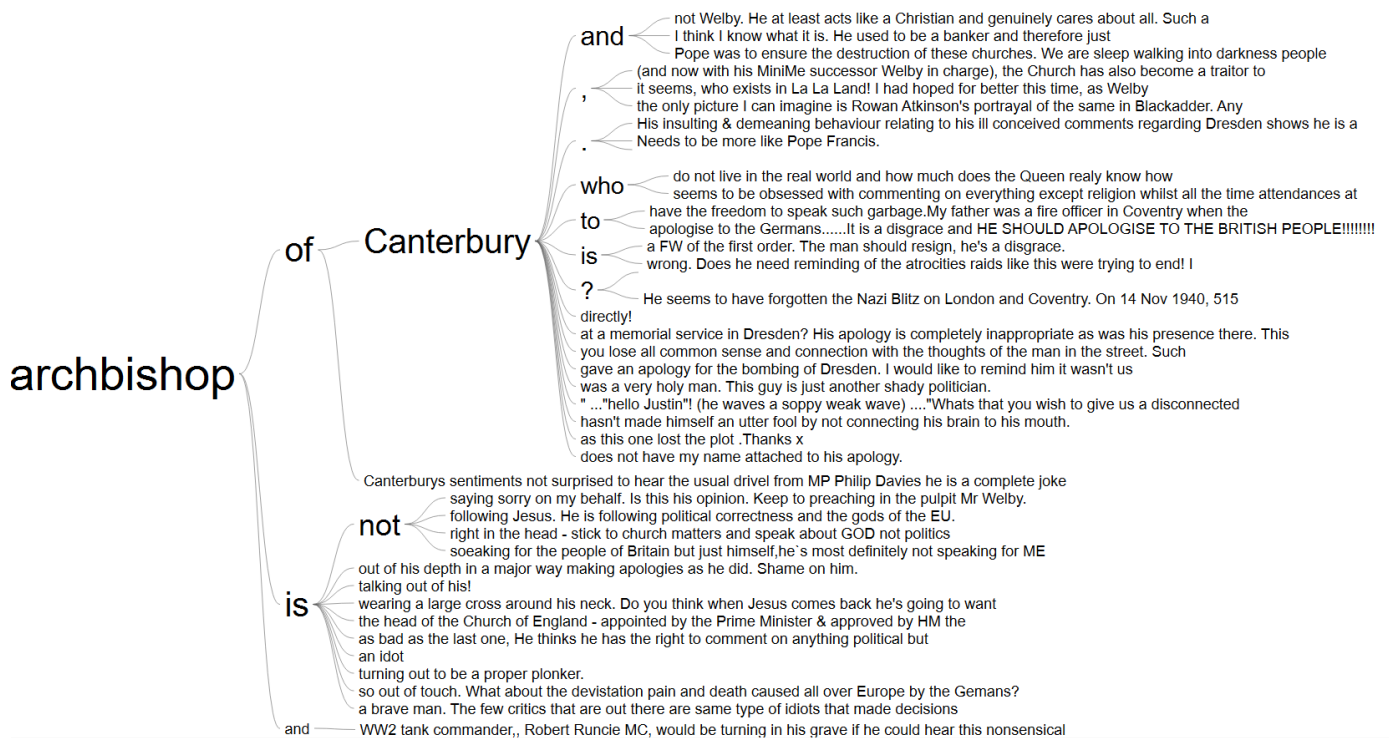
<sup>246</sup> Martin, 'Welby "Wrong" About Dresden', comment 261.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., comment 106 and Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"', comment 2261.

<sup>248</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"', comment 1938 and comment 1774.

Figure 5.5: The ‘Out-of-Touch’, ‘Fool’: Denunciations of Welby’s Dresden

Speech in *MailOnline Comments*<sup>249</sup>



<sup>249</sup> Word trees derived from comments on Martin, ‘Welby "Wrong" About Dresden’ and Brown and Doughty, ‘Archbishop “Says Sorry”’.

The collective performance of denunciation is best understood not as a chaotic outpouring of anger, but through Catherine Bell's concept of ritualisation.<sup>250</sup> Rather than treating ritual as a fixed category, a noun suggesting a universal and unchanging form, Bell urges scholars to focus on ritualisation as a strategic and culturally specific mode of action.<sup>251</sup> This shift in perspective emphasises how certain behaviours are marked out from others through stylized practices that confer meaning and authority. Ritualisation, for Bell, is a 'strategic way of acting' that differentiates select activities via features such as formality, repetition, or fixity, but can also deploy informality deliberately to signal contrast and elevate significance.<sup>252</sup> As she explains; 'intrinsic to ritualisation are strategies for differentiating itself – to various degrees and in various ways – from other ways of acting within any particular culture. At a basic level, ritualisation is the production of this differentiation. At a more complex level, ritualisation is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful.'<sup>253</sup>

In looking at online rituals of public mourning, Sasha A.Q. Scott explains how online actors, such as commenters, can form 'temporary communit[ies], bound by mediated events and their ritualised reaction to them'.<sup>254</sup> This concept of 'networked solidarity' moves beyond the idea of a passive audience to one of active participants who, despite being physically separate, are united in a shared, ritualised response to collective trauma. Through this shared reaction, disparate individuals form connections and derive 'emotional solace' and 'powerful social bonds'.<sup>255</sup> The constant negotiation between the individual and the collective is central to this process. By participating (whether through posting, sharing, or commenting) individuals

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<sup>250</sup> See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XV.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.* p. 141.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>254</sup> Sasha A. Q. Scott, 'Networked Solidarity', in *Coping Rituals in Fearful Times: An Unexplored Resource for Healing Trauma*, ed. by Jeltje Gordon-Lennox (Cham: Springer, 2022), p. 144.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

locate themselves within the collective, reinforcing the group's emotional experience and their own sense of belonging. The digital vernacular of platforms ('likes, up-votes, shares, retweets, comments, etc.') replaces the physical cues of traditional rituals, creating a sense of 'emotional proximity, presence and, therefore, solidarity'.<sup>256</sup> This form of ritualisation often circumvents traditional ritual specialists and collapses barriers of time and space, leading to 'unscripted, highly creative, and personalised ways' of engaging in collective actions like public mourning.<sup>257</sup>

In our case, the commenters are not just venting; in their use of nationalist, denunciatory language that is often formulaic and repeated across the online space they are enacting a powerful excommunicatory ritual. As Bell states, '[w]hether ritual empowers or disempowers one in some practical sense, it always suggests the ultimate coherence of a cosmos in which one takes a particular place.'<sup>258</sup> By strategically employing these elements of ritualisation, the Mailonline commenters define and defend a particular understanding of their collective history and identity. This practice serves as a coping mechanism, a way to process and respond to collective trauma through a structured, shared, and meaningful performance.

Some of the most potent expressions of this ritual involved the co-option and inversion of Welby's own symbolic language: the language of the Church. This form of humour-as-humiliation was widespread. Commenters deployed mock-prayers, blasphemous beatitudes, and twisted scripture. One user directly parodied Jesus's words on the cross to condemn the Archbishop's theological positions, stating: 'Women bishops; same-sex "marriages" – dear God, please forgive him for he knows not what he does.'<sup>259</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed by commenters who wrote, 'Will no one rid us of this meddlesome priest?' (or alternatively

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid. pp. 142, 144.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>258</sup> Bell, p. 141.

<sup>259</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"', comment 881.

“Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?”) adapting the famous line attributed to Henry II before the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket.<sup>260</sup> The Old Testament was also invoked to frame Welby’s perceived failure as a betrayal of his office: ‘The Old Testament tells us about the miracle of Balaam and his talking ass...I do believe the Archbishop is talking out of his!’<sup>261</sup>

There was thus an element of flair to this ritual of outrage, fuelled by powerful, deeply felt emotions. Welby’s speech, as framed by the media, acted as a powerful disruptive event, triggering a profound sense of deritualisation among those who saw the Church of England as a stable, unwavering guardian of national memory. J.D. Knottnerus identifies deritualisation as the ‘breakdown of expected social rituals’, a process that can be ‘confusing, uncomfortable, disorienting’ for those involved.<sup>262</sup> This sense of a shattered ritual is illuminated by the conditional nature of vicarious religion. Here, the expectation that the Archbishop, as a high priest of Britain’s civil religion, would affirm the sacred story of the war was the core of the implicit ritual contract. When this expectation was violated, the result was a profound sense of disorientation and betrayal. One of the most popular comments, receiving 1,900 likes against just 111 dislikes, captured this sense of disorientation and betrayal perfectly: ‘I watched these comments with utter disbelief. Welby was almost grovelling in his betrayal of our war heroes. Shame on this man for such comments.’ (See Figure 5.6)<sup>263</sup> This comment, and hundreds like it, reveals a deep-seated belief that Welby had violated the implicit script of his role.

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., comment 453, 521 and 2502.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., comment 648.

<sup>262</sup> J. David Knottnerus, ‘Foreword’, in *Coping Rituals in Fearful Times: An Unexplored Resource for Healing Trauma*, ed. by Jeltje Gordon-Lennox (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2022), p ix.

<sup>263</sup> Brown and Doughty, ‘Archbishop “Says Sorry”’, comment 2491.

**Figure 5.6: *Daily Mail* Comment: ‘Utter Disbelief’<sup>264</sup>**

I watched these comments with utter disbelief. Welby was almost grovelling in his betrayal of our war heroes. Shame on this man for such comments. This was a war against aggression and against a ruthless and brutal regime that threatened us all.... Lest we forget...



Click to rate

 1.9k

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This feeling of betrayal was so potent because it tapped into a deeper, pre-existing well of grief, a phenomenon that can be understood as affective digital nostalgia. As Niemeyer and Keightley have shown, online spaces can become mourning grounds, places where users express grief for lost institutions, lost identities, and lost national symbols.<sup>265</sup> For many commenters, the Church of England was no longer a sanctuary but a ghost of itself. Their anger at Welby was therefore saturated with mourning, not only for a lost piety but for a time when the Church had clearly and confidently stood for England. One commenter lamented, ‘It’s all such a shame considering the Christian upbringing people of my generation had, but now I despair at how weak and irrelevant it now is.’<sup>266</sup>

The comment section thus became a site of collective reritualisation: the creation of new rituals designed to cope with both the immediate disruption and this deeper sense of loss.<sup>267</sup> The purpose of this process, as Knottnerus explains, is to restore ‘a sense of direction, a meaningful focus, coherence... and a sense of security’.<sup>268</sup> The re-created rituals of online denunciation served as a ‘buffer to disruptive occurrences’, enabling the group to cope with the transgression of a sacred value.<sup>269</sup> The furious condemnation was a creative, albeit angry, social

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> See Katharina Niemeyer and Emily Keightley, ‘The Commodification of Time and Memory: Online Communities and the Dynamics of Commercially Produced Nostalgia’, *New Media & Society*, 22.9 (2020), pp. 1639–1662.

<sup>266</sup> Brown and Doughty, comment 160.

<sup>267</sup> Knottnerus, *Coping Rituals in Fearful Times*, p. ix.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

process, a desperate attempt to exorcise the forces seen to have corrupted a once-sacred institution and restore a moral order in the face of perceived decay. This process reveals that the affective feedback loop is not merely about amplifying anger, but about channelling nostalgic grief into a restorative, ritualised practice that reaffirms the group's core values by expelling the individual who dared to remind them of their loss.

The ritual of expulsion reached its apex in the consistent and vehement labelling of Welby and the Church of England itself as traitorous. The charge was often simultaneously direct and far-reaching in its implications. 'He is a traitor! Sack him and make Britain an athiest country! Ban religious behaviour in life and in schools!! [sic]' demanded one user, a sentiment which transformed a theological historical debate into a matter of loyalty and national security.<sup>270</sup> The sense of treachery was frequently framed using Second World War historical archetypes of betrayal. In several comments Welby was branded a 'Quisling', an insult referencing the Norwegian leader who collaborated with the Nazis, with one user warning, 'Welby is the kind of Quisling who would hand our country over to invaders.'<sup>271</sup> Another labelled him 'The new Lord Haw Haw', invoking the infamous British Nazi propagandist who broadcast demoralising messages to Britain during the war.<sup>272</sup> By placing Welby in this lineage of collaborators and propagandists, commenters performed a powerful act of historical positioning, framing his words not as an expression of Christian regret but as an act of enemy allegiance.

The betrayal was seen as twofold: a betrayal of the nation and a betrayal of his office. For many, his perceived political leanings were inseparable from his treachery. He was dismissed as a 'left wing toe rag and traitor', and a representative of a Church that has 'become

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<sup>270</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, 'The Archbishop and Apologies for Dresden: Your Impassioned Verdicts', comment 10.

<sup>271</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"', comment 1945.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., comment 187.

a traitor to all British patriots and lovers of this land'.<sup>273</sup> The logic was simple and brutal: to be left-wing was to be anti-British, and to be anti-British was to be a traitor. One user articulated this fusion of political and national betrayal explicitly: 'What would you expect from Labour's mouthpiece, like the party itself totally anti British, and redder than Edd', a pointed jibe at the then-Labour leader, Ed Miliband, who was frequently nicknamed 'Red Ed' by his opponents to suggest communist sympathies.<sup>274</sup> This political framing was crucial because it allowed commenters to situate Welby's perceived transgression within a broader narrative of institutional decay, where core national bodies (i.e. the Church and the BBC) were seen to have been captured by a hostile, 'lefty' ideology. One user wrote, 'The COE has become more left wing and anti-English than the Greens. Sometimes I feel as if there has been some great plan decided to wage war on the English people.'<sup>275</sup> By using the Green Party, often considered the UK's most progressive mainstream political party, as a political yardstick, the commenter positions them as the epitome of a left-wing ideology that they perceive as 'anti-English'. The claim that the Church of England had drifted even beyond this perceived extreme was intended to portray it as a radicalised institution, fundamentally opposed to the nation's traditional values.

### **Counter-Narratives and the Resilience of the Feedback Loop**

The affective feedback loop that amplified outrage against Archbishop Welby was powerful, but it was not an uncontested, monolithic force. Amidst the torrent of condemnation of Welby, the Church, and left-wing ideology, a persistent counter-narrative emerged from a minority of commenters who directly challenged the *MailOnline's* framing. These users attempted to disrupt the dominant narrative by employing several tactics. The first was to act as fact-

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., comment 126 and comment 561.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., comment 282.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., comment 1877.

checkers, pushing back against the central, inflammatory claim that Welby had apologised. In the initial article, one of the most-liked supportive comments, stated bluntly: ‘An expression of “profound feeling of regret and deep sorrow” is absolutely not the same thing as offering an apology. Perhaps it’s only because I used to be an English teacher that I can tell the difference. More DM meddling, and twisting words for a headline.’<sup>276</sup>

In the above example, we can also see a second related tactic, which was to reframe the debate by constructing a new outgroup. Rather than accepting Welby as the villain, these commenters positioned the *MailOnline* itself as the untrustworthy actor, accusing it of being ‘grossly misleading’ in publishing a ‘typical distorted DM headline that just stirs up trouble, which is what journalism seems to be about these days’.<sup>277</sup> This was another form of identity work, where commenters attempt to contest the dominant representation by constructing the media outlet and its loyal readers as the ‘immoral and incompetent’ outgroup for falling for manipulation, while positioning themselves as the competent, discerning ingroup.<sup>278</sup>

Similarly, a third tactic involved defending the Church’s social and cultural role by flipping the ‘ivory tower’ accusation back onto the journalists. These users framed the Church as an institution grounded in the reality of ordinary people’s lives, contrasting it with a condescending and detached media elite. One commenter powerfully articulated this reversal: ‘The Church is one of the institutions people turn to when they are struggling and times are hard... I would be more inclined to listen to the Church on this matter before I listen to an opinionated right-wing columnist who passes judgment each week from the comfort of her ivory tower.’<sup>279</sup> This view of a socially grounded Church was substantiated by others who pointed to its specific, hands-on role in tackling poverty. For example, another user argued that

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., comment 94.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., comment 246 and comment 703.

<sup>278</sup> Lewis and Vignoles, ‘Construction and Contestation of Climate Activist Identities’, p. 165.

<sup>279</sup> Platell, ‘Platell’s People’, comment 336.

the Church's political stance was rooted in its direct experience on the frontlines: 'History suggests the Church has always been political... It is also on the frontline facing the poverty faced by many and was instrumental in the growth of the food banks to which many have been forced to turn... It's all political and it's pretty naive to think otherwise.'<sup>280</sup> By presenting the Church as deeply connected to real-world suffering, this approach sought to re-establish its moral authority and compassion while simultaneously delegitimising its media critics as the truly out-of-touch commentators.

However, these counter-narratives were systematically subsumed by the resilience of the feedback loop. The attempts at correction and reframing were themselves often met with ridicule and dismissal, showcasing the loop at its most dynamic. Whilst some users distinguished 'regret' from 'apology', another user retorted: 'It does not matter what the headlines say! It does not matter how he put it! What matters is that he went there to give support to our enemy of the time...'<sup>281</sup> This reply perfectly encapsulates the loop's resilience: factual or semantic corrections were deemed irrelevant when they conflicted with the core emotional and ideological grievance. This dynamic, where counter-narratives are actively neutralised, aligns with research on online news comments, which demonstrates how these spaces can function as echo chambers. As Walter et al. argue, comment sections often serve to reinforce, rather than correct, the dominant opinion of the media outlet.<sup>282</sup> Their research on climate change denial shows how users adapt to the perceived opinion climate of a specific online space, creating 'niches of denial' where views that might be marginalised in the broader public debate are instead amplified and validated.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., comment 31.

<sup>281</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"', comment 1.

<sup>282</sup> Stefanie Walter, Michael Brüggemann, and Sven Engesser, 'Echo Chambers of Denial: Explaining User Comments on Climate Change', *Environmental Communication*, 12.2 (2018), pp. 204–17

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

The marginalisation of dissent was also enforced by the platform's architecture. Supportive or critical comments were consistently and heavily downvoted, signalling community disapproval. In another comment discussing semantics (this time highlighting the difference between 'regret' and 'apology'), the user received 18 likes but over double the amount of dislikes, giving it a negative net rating.<sup>284</sup> As media scholar Sutherland's work suggests, this is significant as the *MailOnline* space functions as a 'community of practice' where users learn to reproduce a dominant negative style to gain social validation through upvotes.<sup>285</sup> The platform's design, therefore, did not foster debate but rather policed its ideological boundaries, rewarding conformity while systematically punishing and stigmatising dissent.

The treatment of one persistent commenter provides a concrete example of these dynamics at work. Across multiple articles, 'Jules' from London resurfaced to challenge the paper's representation of Archbishop Welby's remarks and the hostile emotional economy it helped sustain. 'Jules' consistently expressed deep exasperation with what they saw as the platform's disinformation tactics, claiming for example: 'The *Daily Mail* put words in his mouth that he never spoke with its sensationalist headlines. 99.9 per cent of the over 2,000 comments didn't even watch the clip and believed the incorrect headline. This is a tabloid, doesn't deserve to be called a newspaper.'<sup>286</sup>

Crucially, 'Jules' did not merely rebut hostile interpretations but actively attempted to validate and amplify more conciliatory, unpopular interventions that cut against the dominant moral outrage, responding to a rare sympathetic comment about Dresden's civilian victims with 'Well said Wendy', and later praising another user for social courage; 'Well done for not being

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<sup>284</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, 'The Archbishop and Apologies for Dresden: Your Impassioned Verdicts', comment 189.

<sup>285</sup> Sutherland, 'Being Negative to be Popular', p. 75.

<sup>286</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop "Says Sorry"', comment 94 and comment 120.

afraid to go against the flow. I salute you.’<sup>287</sup> (See Figure 5.7) By contrast, ‘Jules’ expressed marked contempt for the apparent credulity of the *MailOnline*’s readership: ‘He has been misquoted by this rag and Gerald Howarth has fallen for it. He is not alone in that. Its readers are frequently led by the nose. Lambeth Palace has issued a correction, when will the DailyFail tell us about that? [sic]’<sup>288</sup>

**Figure 5.7: Unpopular Opinions: ‘Jules’ and Defences of Welby**<sup>289</sup>

The figure displays four screenshots of social media comments on a video titled "Archbishop Justin Welby 'says sorry' for bombing the Nazis in Dresden raids".

- Comment 1 (Happy Harry):** "I think DM again has sensationalised the facts. They reported him as saying 'profound feeling of regret and deep sorrow' - that is a million miles away from saying Sorry. Good old DM - as always why let the facts get in the way of a good story." (18 likes, 21 dislikes)
- Comment 2 (Wendy):** "Dresden was arguably the most beautiful city in Europe and we destroyed it completely, and killed 25000 innocent citizens, its ok to apologise." (31 likes, 115 dislikes)
- Comment 3 (Jules):** "Well said Wendy. Except that he didn't apologise, the headline is sensationalist." (17 likes, 46 dislikes)
- Comment 4 (Percival Plugsey):** "Much debate surrounds this most controversial raid of the allied bombing campaign. Whatever the arguments, events here 70 years ago left a deep wound and diminished all our humanity. So as a follower of Jesus I stand here among you with a profound feeling of regret and deep sorrow. Not sure I'd class that as an 'apology' exactly..." (16 likes, 25 dislikes)
- Comment 5 (Jules):** "I agree and appreciate the Archbishop apologizing on behalf of the British people. The Prime Minister should officially apologise also. A nice touch would be to create a Statue/Memorial to the innocent people who died in this terrible war crime. It should be in the heart of London to show our shame, and honour the People who died." (10 likes, 127 dislikes)
- Comment 6 (Jules):** "At last! Someone who has not believed the incorrect, sensational headline and has actually watched the clip!" (18 likes, 28 dislikes)
- Comment 7 (Jules):** "Well done for not being afraid to go against the flow. I salute you." (18 likes, 56 dislikes)
- Comment 8 (Jules):** "Quite right. The Daily Mail put words in his mouth that he never spoke with its sensationalist headlines. 99.9% of the over 2,000 comments didn't even watch the clip and believed the incorrect headline. This is a tabloid, doesn't deserve to be called a newspaper." (25 likes, 32 dislikes)

This direct challenge to both the dominant narrative and its proponents was met with significant community disapproval, enforced by the platform’s voting architecture. The latter comment again received more than double the number of dislikes to likes (69 to 31). However,

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., comment 299 and comment 285.

<sup>288</sup> Martin, ‘Justin Welby Was “Wrong” About Dresden’, comment 5.

<sup>289</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop “Says Sorry”', comment 573, comment 299, comment 285 and comment 120.

beyond the simple metric of downvotes, other readers specifically targeted the dissenter with hostile replies intended to ridicule and dismiss their attempts to expose media distortion. Responding directly to the dissenter's caution, '[d]o not believe everything you read in this rag', one commenter sought to undermine the critic by highlighting a previous inconsistency in their posts: 'well you do, because in your repetitive rants the other day, you kept telling us that Sir Charles Portal was the Grandfather of Welby, simply because you repeated what you'd read in this... "rag"'.<sup>290</sup> Another adopted a more brusquely dismissive and aggressive tone, stating simply: 'Grow a pair.'<sup>291</sup>

These interactions demonstrate how dissent was not just downvoted but actively policed through hostile social sanctions. Conversely, comments that reinforced the readership's dominant perspective were celebrated, creating a powerful and self-affirming echo chamber. In the most-liked response to the *Mail's* publication of its readers' 'impassioned verdicts' on Welby's speech, the comment applauded the overwhelming tone of condemnation, stating: 'I am loving the responses. I find it really disappointing that the young men in bomber command keep getting knocked back... they are a credit to this country. Strike Hard Strike Sure! [sic]'<sup>292</sup> This comment's validation was even more emphatic than the dissenter's repudiation, garnering 270 likes against only 10 dislikes. The starkly different receptions - where a conforming comment was celebrated with a +260 net rating while the dissenting comment was punished with a -38 rating and personal attacks, demonstrates how the platform's architecture and social dynamics worked in tandem. Together, they ensured the resilience of the initial, hostile framing by actively stigmatising dissent while rewarding the echo chamber.

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., comment 134 and 135. I cannot find any part of the prior article which refers to Portal as Welby's 'grandfather', but this may have been corrected.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., comment 85.

<sup>292</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, 'The Archbishop and Apologies for Dresden: Your Impassioned Verdicts', comment 132.

This process of boundary-policing reveals that the outrage was not just an emotional outpouring but a strategic, relational performance. The work of linguists Andreas Langlotz and Miriam A. Locher explains how conflictual language functions as ‘relational work’ to manage social affiliation and signal moral alignment.<sup>293</sup> In this context, Welby’s perceived betrayal offended the community’s collective identity, triggering what Langlotz and Locher call an ‘other-condemning’ moral emotion, such as contempt.<sup>294</sup>

The resulting vitriol was the linguistic tool for performing this moral condemnation. By attacking Welby, commenters engaged in a ritual of alignment that served a dual purpose: it punished the transgressor while reinforcing the virtue and loyalty of the ‘patriot’ ingroup. Their aggression was framed as a necessary defence of national honour, as seen in comments positioning the outrage as a sacred duty: ‘There should be no apology for what our Parents & Grandparents done, they were trying to defend what was left of Europe from a terrible dictator [sic]’.<sup>295</sup>

Ultimately, this performance of ‘impoliteness’ toward an outgroup/ingroup traitor figure (Welby) became a signal of solidarity with the ingroup (the defenders of the war dead). The linguistic ritual repaired the moral breach caused by Welby’s perceived transgression, transforming collective grief into an empowering reassertion of a sacred national story.

### **The Politician as Performer: David Cameron and the Test of Affective Sincerity**

The affective core of grief, nostalgia, and postmemory that fuelled the outrage against Welby created a powerful demand, and inviting opportunity, for a leader to perform a corrective ritual; one that would restore the sacred narrative and reaffirm the nation’s moral standing. Into this

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<sup>293</sup> See Andreas Langlotz and Miriam A. Locher, ‘Ways of communicating emotional stance in online disagreements’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44.12 (2012), pp. 1591–1606.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1600.

<sup>295</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, ‘The Archbishop and Apologies for Dresden: Your Impassioned Verdicts’, comment 5.

breach stepped Prime Minister David Cameron. By describing Welby's remarks as 'wrong' and paying homage to the 'heroes' of Bomber Command who had saved Britain from fascism, he attempted to harness this collective emotion.<sup>296</sup> For many commenters, this performance was a success; he had channelled their virtuous outrage, validated their feelings, and ritually affirmed the sacred story they sought to protect.

So potent was Cameron's appeal to this shared identity that it was capable of overriding existing political biases. One commenter, with a vote score of +50, admitted, 'Must be the only "decent" statement by Cameron in his term as PM...'.<sup>297</sup> Another confessed, 'Damn! Just when I'd decided I was going to vote against Cameron...'.<sup>298</sup> A third, with a net positive of 24, wrote, 'Well I've even shocked myself but for the first time ever "I agree with Dave"'.<sup>299</sup> These comments reveal the power of performing the correct ritual within the civil religion; by aligning himself with the sacred memory of the war, Cameron could temporarily transcend partisan divides and generate solidarity even among his fervent critics. For a moment, he was not just a Conservative Prime Minister, but a defender of the nation's story.

However, for many others, this apparent success masked a profound cynicism. His words became what Lisa McCormick, in her analysis of the UK's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, terms as a 'compromised' ritualisation.<sup>300</sup> A compromised ritualisation occurs when a leader's performance fails to generate solidarity, instead subverting its own goals by highlighting social divisions. A widely endorsed comment comparing Cameron's criticism of Welby to being 'savaged by a dead sheep' succinctly captures this dynamic, rendering his contribution politically inert and morally weightless.<sup>301</sup> According to McCormick's framework,

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<sup>296</sup> Doyle and McTague. 'Cameron lauds our RAF heroes'.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., comment 302.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., comment 8.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., comment 240.

<sup>300</sup> Lisa McCormick, 'Marking Time in Lockdown: Heroization and Ritualization in the UK during the Coronavirus Pandemic', *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 8 (2020), pp. 324–351.

<sup>301</sup> Doyle and McTague. 'Cameron Lauds Our RAF Heroes', comment 222.

a key factor in compromising ritualisation is an ‘erratic and ultimately unconvincing performance’ by authorities, which creates a perception of insincerity.<sup>302</sup>

In Cameron’s case, this perception was grounded in a pattern of past actions that seemed inconsistent with the patriotic script he was now performing. His government’s initial support for the closure of St. George’s RAF Chapel of Remembrance at Biggin Hill due to budget cuts was repeatedly invoked. In January 2015, the *Mail* had reported that this chapel, a significant monument honouring RAF sacrifices during the Battle of Britain, faced potential closure due to budgetary constraints, with the Ministry of Defence supposedly unwilling to subsidise its £50,000 annual maintenance fees.<sup>303</sup> Public outcry, notably through an online petition, led to Cameron swiftly committing to preserving the chapel, and a government response to the petition being issued (ironically) on 13 February.<sup>304</sup>

Critics were quick to point to this apparent hypocrisy. One commenter asked, ‘Is this the same PM who was quite happy for the Bomber Command memorial at Biggin Hill to close through lack of funding...?’<sup>305</sup> His 2010 historical error, stating Britain was ‘the junior partner to America in 1940’, also resurfaced as proof of his superficial grasp of the nation’s sacred past.<sup>306</sup> This episode was again used by commenters to cast doubt on his motives: ‘if he thought Britain was the junior partner to America in 1940... what would he really know about Bomber

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<sup>302</sup> McCormick, p. 343.

<sup>303</sup> See Mark Nicol, ‘MoD Abandons Memorial Dedicated to Battle of Britain Aces To Save £50k’, *MailOnline*, 3 January 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2895622/What-insult-MoD-abandons-iconic-memorial-dedicated-Battle-Britain-aces-save-paltry-50-000.html> [accessed 28 March 2025]. See also Press Association, ‘Battle of Britain Memorial Chapel Under Threat as MoD Pulls Funding’, *Guardian*, 4 January 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jan/04/battle-of-britain-memorial-chapel-under-threat-kent> [accessed 28 March 2025].

<sup>304</sup> See ‘Archived Petition: Please Don’t Close St. George’s RAF Chapel of Remembrance Biggin Hill’, *Petitions - UK Government and Parliament* <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/73191> [accessed 28 March 2025]; and Harry Yorke, ‘MoS Victory as David Cameron Steps In To Save Memorial to Battle of Britain Aces’, *MailOnline*, 10 January 2015 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2905009/MoS-victory-David-Cameron-steps-save-memorial-Battle-Britain-aces.html> [accessed 28 March 2025].

<sup>305</sup> Doyle and McTague. ‘Cameron Lauds Our RAF Heroes’, comment 95.

<sup>306</sup> BBC News, ‘David Cameron Criticised Over World War II History Slip’, *BBC News*, 22 July 2010, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-10719739> [accessed 28 March 2025].

Command? I smell Lynton Crosby at work here'.<sup>307</sup> The invocation of Cameron's election strategist framed his words as scripted political manoeuvring rather than authentic belief.

The breadth of the scepticism reveals how, just as Welby was cast as the principal villain in a national drama of betrayal, Cameron was cast into a different but equally damaging role: the inauthentic insider. The punishment he received can again be linked to several social-psychological dynamics. First, Cameron as Prime Minister held power, not just prestige.<sup>308</sup> His authority made his perceived transgression more threatening, and commenters actively sought to undermine this power through ridicule. His attempt to look 'magisterial and authoritative' was dismissed, with one user claiming 'He just looks like a rude schoolboy.'<sup>309</sup>

Compounding this status, Reese et al. demonstrate that when one's own social identity is threatened, people process information about ingroup deviants more systematically (meaning with a more 'analytic and elaborate treatment of judgment-relevant information') than information about outgroup deviants.<sup>310</sup> The result of this deeper cognitive processing is a stronger devaluation of the ingroup deviant. This deeper thinking perhaps explains why so many commenters connected Cameron's perceived inauthenticity to a pattern of past betrayals. In other examples, his words on Bomber Command were immediately contrasted with his government's perceived failure to fund military memorials while giving 'billions away in aid', leading one commenter to conclude: 'snake oil dave strikes again'. [sic]<sup>311</sup>

To call someone a 'snake oil salesman', or to label their words as 'snake oil', is to accuse them of being a charlatan who knowingly promotes something that is fake, useless, or insincere to fool people. In a political context, it implies that a leader's promises are empty and

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<sup>307</sup> Doyle and McTague. 'Cameron Lauds Our RAF Heroes', comment 86.

<sup>308</sup> Fousiani and van Prooijen, 'Powerful vs. Prestigious Offenders'.

<sup>309</sup> Doyle and McTague. 'Cameron Lauds Our RAF Heroes', comment 12.

<sup>310</sup> Gerhard Reese, Melanie C. Steffens, and Kai J. Jonas, 'When Black Sheep Make Us Think: Information Processing and Devaluation of In- and Outgroup Norm Deviants', *Social Cognition*, 31.4 (2013), p. 483.

<sup>311</sup> Doyle and McTague. 'Cameron Lauds Our RAF Heroes', comment 69.

their arguments are based on deceit rather than substance. This is significant as Abrams et al. argue that ‘in-group deviants who accentuate the difference between the in-group and out-group norm (e.g. extremists) are derogated less than deviants who attenuate that difference’.<sup>312</sup> Cameron, with his elite background and perceived political opportunism, was seen as blurring the line between the authentic, patriotic ‘people’ and the cynical establishment many commenters despised. The response thus exhibited a strong motive to incapacitate, a drive not merely to criticise, but to render him morally and politically unfit to speak for the nation, just as Welby had been ritually expelled. Several users mocked the media’s suggestion Cameron had issued Welby a ‘slap down’, retorting that being criticised by Cameron was like being ‘severely mugged by a damp lukewarm Kleenex’, a sentiment that echoed the ‘dead sheep’ jibe in rendering his authority impotent.<sup>313</sup>

### **The Logic of Populist Punishment**

The seemingly contradictory rejections of a penitent Archbishop and a patriotic Prime Minister are united by a single, powerful discursive logic: populism. While populism is an abstract concept with no single, firm definition, a widely established classification comes from Cas Mudde and Cristobal R. Kaltwasser. They consider it a ‘thin-centred ideology’ that fundamentally separates society into two uniform and opposing groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’.<sup>314</sup> This distinction is not based on class or culture but on morality, framing the conflict as one between the pure and the corrupt. This ideology argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people and stands in direct opposition to both elitism and pluralism.<sup>315</sup> It can attach itself to various host ideologies, from

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<sup>312</sup> Dominic Abrams, Giovanni A. Travaglino, Jose M. Marques, Ben Davies, and Georgina Randsley de Moura, ‘Collective Deviance: Scaling Up Subjective Group Dynamics to Superordinate Categories Reveals a Deviant Ingroup Protection Effect’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 121.4 (2021), p. 355.

<sup>313</sup> Doyle and McTague. ‘Cameron lauds our RAF heroes’, comment 262.

<sup>314</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds, *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 8.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

left-wing redistributive politics to right-wing nationalism. At its core, as Francis Fukuyama notes, populism often involves a personalistic leader seeking a ‘direct and unmediated relationship with the people’ against a distrusted establishment.<sup>316</sup>

However, while the goal may be an unmediated connection, Gunn Enli argues that this is achieved through ‘mediated authenticity’, a concept that views authenticity not as an innate quality, but as a successful performance.<sup>317</sup> The media becomes a ‘stage’ upon which the populist ‘performer’ enacts their authentic persona for the ‘audience’ of the people.<sup>318</sup> This performed authenticity is the ‘secret element’ that strengthens the populist message, especially in an era of widespread distrust.<sup>319</sup> A populist leader’s performance of authenticity allows them to claim a special relationship with ‘the truth’ and to position themselves as the ‘real’ representatives of the people.<sup>320</sup> This stands in direct opposition to a political class they frame as manipulative.

It is this binary that explains why both Welby and Cameron, despite their differing positions, were condemned as symbolic victims of populist suspicion. Both were perceived as members of a detached establishment that had betrayed the authentic will and values of the nation. The comment threads surrounding the Dresden controversy did not simply preview this populist sentiment, the commenters enacted it in their digital ritual of affective purification. Welby was cast out as a morally deviant elite, condemned as a ‘typical man of religion, totally out of touch with the real world’.<sup>321</sup> Cameron, despite invoking patriotism, was also dismissed

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<sup>316</sup> Francis Fukuyama, ‘What Is Populism?’, *The American Interest*, 28 November 2017 <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/11/28/what-is-populism/> [accessed 27 July 2025].

<sup>317</sup> Gunn Enli, ‘Populism as “Truth”: How Mediated Authenticity Strengthens the Populist Message’, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 30.1 (2025), 83–99

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>321</sup> Martin, ‘Welby “wrong” about Dresden, comment 2.

as an opportunistic performer. He had ‘the habit of grandstanding, while behind the scenes he does the opposite’, one commenter accused, pointing to cuts in the armed forces.<sup>322</sup>

This populist lens explains *how* a penitent Archbishop and a patriotic Prime Minister could both be rejected as inauthentic elites. But to understand *why* the public was so primed for this rejection, we must also understand the specific grievances that fuel the populist worldview. According to analyst Nicholas Townsend, this populist movement was not without cause but was provoked by a critical failure in mainstream political discourse.<sup>323</sup> He argues that the ‘new liberalism’ that dominated Western politics from the mid-1990s (combining economic liberalism with an egalitarian social agenda) was ‘unconsciously self-censored’.<sup>324</sup> It failed to engage with the more fundamental questions of sovereignty and national identity that animated its critics. This created a perception of a ‘liberal elite’ that saw ‘no value but only prejudice in socially conservative practices’, deepening the sense among many of being culturally ‘left behind’.<sup>325</sup> Townsend concludes that the failure of liberalism to address these deep-seated feelings provoked a powerful, and in his view, ‘quite justified’ reaction that emphasised the ‘particularities of place and history and culture, national and local’.<sup>326</sup>

These underlying pressures are the direct catalysts for the ritualisation dynamics observed throughout this chapter. They created a profound societal fragility, making the established civic ritual vulnerable to collapse (de-ritualisation) at the slightest provocation. Subsequently, they provided the raw emotional and ideological material for the furious, purgative act of re-ritualisation that erupted online. The ‘Four Ds’ framework, developed by academics Matthew Goodwin and Roger Eatwell, authoritatively maps these foundational

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<sup>322</sup> Doyle and McTague. ‘Cameron lauds our RAF heroes’, comment 306.

<sup>323</sup> Nicholas Townsend, ‘How the New Liberalism Contributed to Brexit’, in *The Future of Brexit Britain: Anglican Reflections on National Identity and European Solidarity*, ed. by Jonathan Chaplin and Andrew Bradstock (London: SPCK, 2020), pp. 49–57.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

drivers.<sup>327</sup> The comment threads on the Dresden controversy serve as a raw, unfiltered exhibition of these forces at work.

The first of these drivers is a profound distrust, which manifested in the deeply personal and class-based attacks that framed elite figures as out of touch, ignorant, and hypocritical. In addition to the other insults we have seen, Welby was frequently dismissed as a ‘fool’ and his spiritual role delegitimised with the pointed class instruction to ‘stick to being a banker son’.<sup>328</sup> ‘Snake oil Dave’ was labelled a ‘charlatan’ and a ‘hypocrite’, whose ‘actions betray what he has said’.<sup>329</sup> This sense of a class divide was also made explicit in critiques of their shared educational background, with the same commenter asking, ‘Did shallow Cameron ever study history at Eton, I don’t think so’, while another bitinglly lamented about Welby, ‘I would love to hear what Churchill would have said to this privileged, Old Etonian, Oxbridge TRAITOR to his country’.<sup>330</sup>

This personal distrust was compounded by a powerful sense of deprivation, the feeling that one’s own group is falling behind economically, culturally, and spiritually. This was expressed through a narrative of national decline where others prosper at Britain’s expense, and core institutions are perceived to be in a state of decay. One user, discussing Dresden’s reconstruction, bitterly contrasted Germany’s post-war renewal with Britain’s decay: ‘Now thanks to reparation for the war they started, they now have new modern buildings, new factories and new machinery. Until recently Britain had to put up with old factories and out dated machinery.’<sup>331</sup> This feeling of national decay was also directed at the Church, with one commenter arguing that Welby was neglecting his duty: ‘I think WELBY should spend more

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<sup>327</sup> See Matthew Goodwin and Roger Eatwell, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London: Pelican, 2018).

<sup>328</sup> Martin, ‘Welby "Wrong" About Dresden’, comment 263.

<sup>329</sup> Doyle and McTague. ‘Cameron Lauds Our RAF Heroes’, comment 13.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., comment 13, Brown and Doughty, ‘Archbishop “Says Sorry”’, comment 1695.

<sup>331</sup> Martin, ‘Welby "Wrong" About Dresden’, comment 260.

time on Church matters, which are in a dire state. The numbers are falling, there is no leadership, and when the head of the Church of England comes out with comments like this, it make you wonder if he is fit for the role.’<sup>332</sup>

This sense of decline fed directly into a more existential fear: the destruction of the nation’s very character and sovereignty. This fear of destruction had multiple facets. It was expressed as a lament for a loss of national character, with one user writing, ‘Britain has become sick, sad place blaming ourselves for other countries atrocities [sic]’ and another claiming ‘[o]nly the Brit establishment going everywhere to degrade our Nation, which our troops died to save. [sic]’<sup>333</sup> This internal decay was seen as leaving the nation vulnerable to geopolitical subservience, particularly through submission to Europe. Cameron’s perceived softness on the European Union in particular was seen as a betrayal of sovereignty, with commenters warning that the liberty ‘brave men fought and died for is being stealthily given away to the creeping, anti-democratic, Brussels-Berlin Axis’.<sup>334</sup>

The perceived surrender of sovereignty was often linked to a tangible betrayal of the military and the wartime generation. ‘My grandfather fought the Germans on the beaches of Normandy’, wrote one. ‘Now our own leaders are surrendering our country piece by piece in Brussels boardrooms.’ This betrayal was seen in concrete policy decisions, with another arguing that ‘slashing our armed forces while sending billions to the EU isn’t just bad policy, it’s a spit on the grave of every soldier who died for this country’s freedom’. This fear was often personified in German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with one user asking, ‘But who will save Europe and especially Britain, from Merkel!?’<sup>335</sup> This sense of a nation being destroyed from within by a complicit elite was then linked to external threats like terrorism. ‘He’ll be

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., comment 59.

<sup>333</sup> Brown and Doughty, 'Archbishop “Says Sorry”’, comment 1695 and comment 21.

<sup>334</sup> Doyle and McTague, ‘Cameron Lauds Our RAF Heroes’, comment 306.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., comment 80.

saying sorry to the beheaders next!’ one highly rated comment warned, creating a direct line from Welby’s sermon to the contemporary terrorist threat of ISIS.<sup>336</sup> The threat was thus framed as critical: a nation being destroyed by cultural self-loathing, geopolitical submission, and terrorist enemies.

The cumulative political consequence of this profound distrust, deprivation, and fear of destruction was a widespread de-alignment from established institutions. This was evident in the rejection of the modern Conservative party, which was deemed to have abandoned its principles. ‘All the Tories are lefties’, one user stated, while another argued that Cameron’s ‘modern public-relations comes from the same school of thought as the cultural-Marxist theories that dominate the left’.<sup>337</sup> For these users, this disillusionment was so profound that even alternative institutions offered no escape. In response to columnist Amanda Platell suggesting she might become a Catholic, the latter commenter retorted, ‘The Catholic Church is in a similar crisis, with the progressive Pope quoting Freud and saying Marxists were alright.’<sup>338</sup>

### **The Church, Brexit, and the ‘Anywhere’ Elite**

As intimated above, these powerful currents of Distrust, Deprivation, Destruction, and De-alignment frequently converged on a single, unifying political target: the European Union. Vote Leave strategist Suzanne Evans, a practising Anglican and Deputy Chair of UKIP from 2015 to 2017, argues that the populist revolt against the EU was rationalised as a matter of justice, claiming it was ‘the poor and marginalised... hit hardest by EU policies’.<sup>339</sup> By contrast, in the populist imagination, Archbishop Welby was a perfect symbol of the domestic ‘Anywhere’

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<sup>336</sup> Martin, ‘Welby "Wrong" About Dresden’, comment 258.

<sup>337</sup> Platell, ‘Platell’s People’, comment 393 and comment 390.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., comment 390.

<sup>339</sup> See Sal Brinton, Suzanne Evans, and Dominic Grieve, ‘Responses from Anglican Politicians’, in Chaplin and Bradstock (eds), *The Future of Brexit Britain*, pp. 180-187.

elite. This group tends to have ‘achieved’ identities, where their sense of worth ‘comes from their educational and career success’.<sup>340</sup> This identity is portable, something they can ‘carry around with them’, which ‘makes them less sensitive to where or among whom they live’.<sup>341</sup> Their loyalties were thus considered transnational and hostile to the national ‘Somewhere’ community. ‘Somewhere’ communities are defined more by their ‘ascribed identities’, meaning their identity ‘derives from bonds of place or group’ (Goodhart cites ‘northern working-class pensioners’ or ‘Home Counties market town *Daily Mail* readers’).<sup>342</sup> These groups are ‘more likely to feel disturbed by rapid change’ and saw the archbishop’s perceived betrayal of national history as symptomatic of the wider elite’s betrayal of the nation to Europe.<sup>343</sup>

The research of Greg Smith and Linda Woodhead confirms that this cultural anxiety transformed into political action, finding that 66 per cent of Anglicans voted Leave in the Brexit referendum a year later.<sup>344</sup> They suggest that for many, the ‘Church of England’ served as a proxy for ‘born English’, making the vote a defence of cultural-ethnic identity.<sup>345</sup> Their data showed respondents valued the Church primarily for its role as ‘part of our heritage’.<sup>346</sup> These sentiments were explicitly conservative: 60 per cent of Anglicans surveyed believed it was ‘better to live in Britain when more people shared a common culture’, an identity they perceived as being under threat.<sup>347</sup>

In this light, the populist digital outrage against Archbishop Welby’s Dresden speech provides a striking case study in the transformation of public religion. The controversy reveals a public relationship with the Church that is no longer primarily spiritual, but transactional,

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<sup>340</sup> David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017), p. 115.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., p. 115 and p. 4.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> See Greg Smith and Linda Woodhead, ‘Religion and Brexit: populism and the Church of England’, *Religion, State & Society*, 46.3 (2018), pp. 206–23.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

possessive, and governed by the logic of the consumer marketplace. Beneath the surface lies a unifying symbolic logic: an attachment to the memory of the Second World War, which now functions as a sacred cultural ‘brand’ of Englishness. Within this framework, the Church of England is enlisted not as a moral guide, but as the brand’s custodian, a heritage accessory expected to supply the ceremonial products through which the nation performs its myth of wartime virtue. The outrage at Welby’s remarks was therefore less about doctrine and more about a perceived betrayal of brand identity.

This dynamic radically transforms the terms of Davie’s ‘vicarious religion’. The old covenant, between an active religious minority and a consenting secular majority, has been replaced by something more akin to a National Trust membership. The public pays a cultural subscription of passive affiliation and in return expects the Church to act as a custodian of national memory, preserving it in a static, idealised state. Like a Trust member, they feel a sense of ownership over the ‘property’ but remain indifferent to the complex ‘back-office’ work of theology or doctrine; they simply expect the final, reassuring ceremonial product to be available on demand.

This is not merely a metaphor; the National Trust itself has become a primary battleground in the ‘culture wars’ for precisely these reasons. For decades, the Trust cultivated an ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’, a simplified, idyllic vision of country houses and landscapes, emotionally reassuring and largely apolitical.<sup>348</sup> This created a powerful sense of ownership among members who expected the properties to be preserved in a state of nostalgic perfection. When the Trust, prompted by research into its properties’ links with colonialism and slavery, attempted to present a more complex history, it was met with a furious backlash.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Gregory Judges, ‘England’s Heritage in the Post-Truth Era: Emotion, Affect and the Appropriation of the Past in Social and Political Discourse’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Leeds Beckett University, 2023), p. 10.

<sup>349</sup> Corinne Fowler’s research on the National Trust revealed connections between Trust properties and colonialism, slavery, and the exploitation of indigenous peoples. In 2020 Fowler’s work was decried in 138 mainstream news articles in 21 weeks, whilst this campaign was accompanied by a distressing level of abuse,

Campaign groups like ‘Restore Trust’ accused the organisation of becoming political and ‘woke’, demanding it return to a narrow mission of preserving beautiful buildings.<sup>350</sup>

This reframing helps make sense of a final paradox of the Welby affair: whilst numerous users lamented the Church’s perceived failure of its ceremonial obligations, many simultaneously ridiculed the Archbishop’s theological standing. Comments mocked him as a delusional seer who ‘wears a dress and talks to his invisible friend’.<sup>351</sup> On the surface, such derision appears to confirm the views of Davie’s critics. However, this is precisely the kind of evidence Davie argues is misinterpreted. She contends that critics take a concept designed to explore religious subtlety and turn it into something ‘far more rigorously defined’ than intended, which is then tested in a way that is ‘not appropriate’.<sup>352</sup>

For Davie, analysing this paradox requires a ‘developed sociological imagination’.<sup>353</sup> She points to the end-of-life choices made by the reality television star Jade Goody as an ‘almost perfect example’ of vicarious religion in action.<sup>354</sup> Davie describes Goody as ‘a young woman whose life-style was a million miles from the respectabilities of traditional Anglicanism’.<sup>355</sup> Yet at the end of her short, highly publicised life, Goody ‘turned to the church repeatedly’ for baptisms, her wedding, and her funeral.<sup>356</sup> For Davie, this demonstrated that something ‘more profound was going on’ than simply hiring a ‘master of ceremonies’.<sup>357</sup> It was a moment where the implicit, latent function of the church became explicit. The fury directed at Welby is the negative image of this same phenomenon. If the public turn *towards* the Church

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including hate mail and security threats. Corinne Fowler, ‘Empire and Heritage’ [Webinar], University of Leicester, 3 March 2021.

<sup>350</sup> Judges, p. 31.

<sup>351</sup> Brown and Doughty, ‘Archbishop “Says Sorry”’, comment 528.

<sup>352</sup> Grace Davie, ‘Vicarious Religion: A Response’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, deposited in Open Research Exeter, <http://hdl.handle.net/10036/3186> [accessed 28 July 2025]., p. 3.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. See also Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd rev. edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), p. 84.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

in the case of Jade Goody revealed a positive vicarious connection, the violent public turn *against* the Archbishop for a perceived betrayal reveals the same connection, just as powerfully. Both reactions, one of affinity, one of outrage. are moments when the submerged part of the iceberg becomes visible, when the ‘implicit becomes explicit’.<sup>358</sup>

### **Believers, Citizens, or Consumers?**

In this new dispensation, the Church is caught in a symbolic double bind, trapped between two irreconcilable expectations. On one side is its own prophetic turn, the post-imperial, justice-oriented Christianity embraced by leaders like Runcie, Williams, and Welby. On the other is the public’s demand for it to perform its vicarious role as a custodian of national memory, providing comfort and cultural reassurance rather than critique. If the Church pursues its prophetic mission, as Welby did in Dresden, it is condemned by the populist ‘Somewhere’ public as a traitorous ‘Anywhere’ elite. If it were to abandon this mission simply to affirm the national narrative, it would not only betray its own theological conscience but also reject a growing scholarly and moral consensus demanding a reckoning with its colonial past. Martyn Percy argues the Church must now face its legacy as the ‘spiritual arm of the British Empire’ and its deep complicity in slavery, classism, racism, sexism and homophobia.<sup>359</sup> Percy warns that continued failure to confront this past has led to a state of ‘degeneration’ and a ‘loss of place, status, respect and reputation’.<sup>360</sup>

Recent surveys seem to affirm the growing disconnect between Church and nation. A 2024 report found that only 33 per cent of Britons believe religious leaders should comment on social or political issues.<sup>361</sup> A separate report found that while 62 per cent of respondents

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>359</sup> Percy, *The Crisis of Colonial Anglicanism*, p. 15.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Matthew Smith, ‘Is It Time to Disestablish the Church of England?’, *YouGov*, 14 November 2024 <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/50933-is-it-time-to-disestablish-the-church-of-england> [accessed 17 March 2025].

acknowledged the historical importance of Christian heritage in the UK, only 36 per cent saw religion as a force for good in society, with non-religious respondents particularly sceptical.<sup>362</sup> By 2025, support for disestablishment had risen to 50 per cent.<sup>363</sup> These sentiments align with demographic and financial decline: as of the 2021 census, England became a minority-Christian country (46.2 per cent), the Church had lost 278 parishes since 2016, and donations had dropped 40 per cent over the previous decade.<sup>364</sup>

In response, a contrasting vision has been proposed by Anglican figures like Sam Norton, who criticises what he sees as a ‘profoundly materialistic and secular understanding’ within the Church hierarchy, leading to an episcopal class ‘ashamed of their own nationality’.<sup>365</sup> Norton argues for a ‘full-blooded Incarnation’, contending that to serve Christ effectively, the Church must be embedded ‘within place and time, culture and nation’.<sup>366</sup> This requires a serious theological engagement with English national identity, treating the nation as a ‘spiritually real’ entity whose soul must be attended to.<sup>367</sup> He asserts that ‘the people of England are crying out for a Church willing to love them’, and that by failing to honour distinctively English virtues, the Church alienates the very people it is called to serve.<sup>368</sup>

This approach though would most likely require the Church to adopt a more consumer-driven, reactive stance, mirroring the rhetorical posture of outlets like *MailOnline*. But the decade since the Dresden controversy suggests that the Church remains either unwilling or

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<sup>362</sup> Institute for the Impact of Faith in Life, ‘The Hidden Positive Reality of Multi-Faith Life in the UK’, *IIFL Blog*, 7 September 2024 <https://iifl.org.uk/blogs/the-hidden-positive-reality-of-multi-faith-life-in-the-uk/> [accessed 17 March 2025].

<sup>363</sup> YouGov, *Church of England and State Relations Survey* (Unpublished internal document, Church of England, 3 February 2025).

<sup>364</sup> Ben Butcher, ‘How Church of England Attendance Crumbled Under Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby’, *Telegraph*, 12 November 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/11/12/church-attendance-falls-justin-welby-archbishop-canterbury/> [accessed 17 March 2025].

<sup>365</sup> Sam Norton, ‘Patriotism and Theology Will Have to Come Together Again: Royal Consciousness and the Church of England’, in Chaplin and Bradstock (eds), *The Future of Brexit Britain*, pp. 32-40.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*

unable such a populist pivot. The backlash to Welby's Dresden speech was thus not an anomaly; it was a flashpoint that revealed a Church too prophetic to comfort the nation, too ceremonial to challenge it, and increasingly adrift in its role – unsure whether it serves believers, citizens, or consumers.

## Conclusion

The intense public backlash against Archbishop Welby's Dresden speech revealed a profound tension rooted in the Church of England's own complex history. As this chapter has traced, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Church journeyed from being the spiritual architect of Britain's civil religion, sanctifying empire and forging a commemorative grammar of redemptive sacrifice, to a prophetic critic increasingly at odds with the state. This long, complex history helps explain the symbolic double bind the Church now faces. On one side is its own post-imperial conscience; on the other, the demands of a populist media and its readership, exemplified by the *MailOnline* and its commenters analysed here.

Conditioned by a patriotic liturgy the Church itself helped create, this community insists the Church perform its vicarious, ceremonial role as custodian of a sacred national memory. The online ritual of denunciation that followed Welby's speech, ignited by a hostile press and fuelled by its readers, was an act of affective purification, driven by this group's deep-seated populist suspicion of a 'corrupt elite' that had abandoned its post. Within this digital arena, the moral binary was so potent that it rejected both the penitent Archbishop and the patriotic Prime Minister as inauthentic establishment figures. For this community, the Church's primary role appears to have shifted from that of a moral guide to something more akin to a heritage brand, expected to supply reassuring ceremonial products on demand. Any deviation from this script, as Welby's pastoral gesture proved, is met not with debate, but with ritualised expulsion.

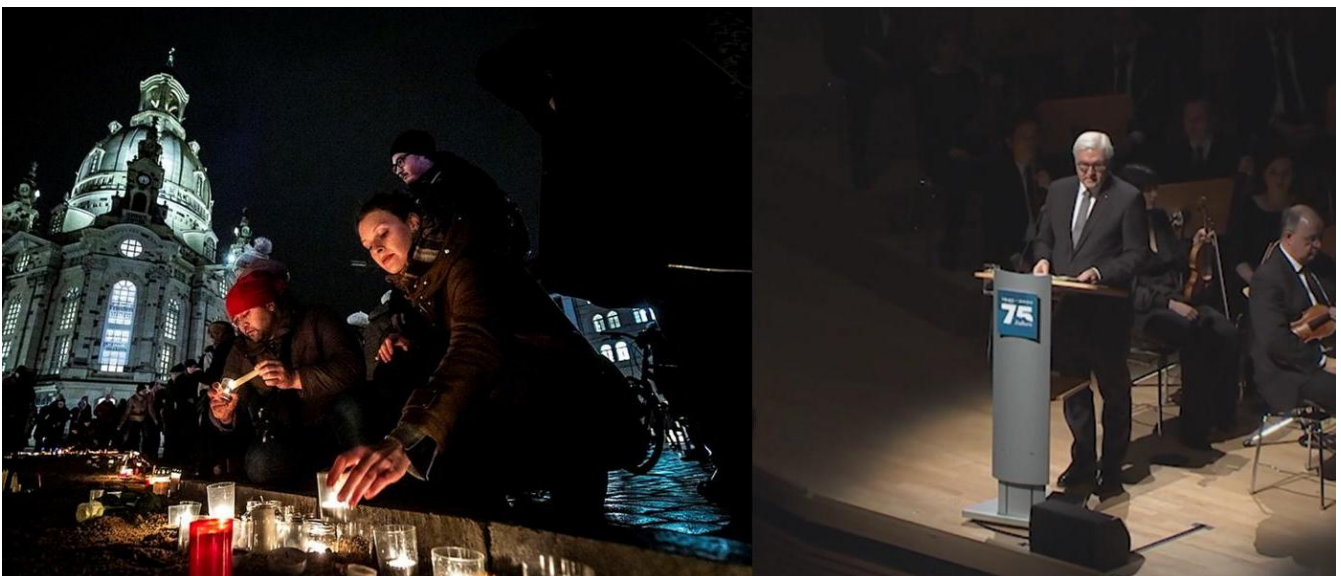
This raises a critical and pressing question. If an insider from the heart of the establishment, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is subjected to such a ferocious ritual of denunciation for a nuanced pastoral gesture, what happens when a different kind of expert, the journalist turned popular historian, enters this same volatile digital arena? Is historical expertise, with its claims to evidence-based method and scholarly objectivity, treated as a potential source of truth capable of navigating these treacherous waters? Or is it simply another form of ‘elite’ discourse to be deconstructed, delegitimised, and consumed by the same mechanisms of righteous outrage and populist suspicion? The analysis of the public reception of historian Sinclair McKay’s work on Dresden, undertaken in the next chapter, will seek to answer this question, exploring whether the authority of the archive can withstand the affective politics of the algorithm.

## Chapter Six:

### The Expert and the Algorithm: Sinclair McKay and the Digital Memory of Dresden

Five years after Archbishop Welby’s controversial address, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Dresden bombing saw a city continuing its struggle to define its legacy. Outside the Kulturpalast, around 11,000 people joined hands to form a human chain encircling the city centre. For the eleventh year in a row this civic ritual of peace and reconciliation took place in a ‘relaxed, peaceful, and familiar atmosphere’ shaped by choirs, volunteers, and local associations – a public rejection of far-right appropriation and a reaffirmation of Dresden’s determination to face its past together.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 6.1: Dresden, President Steinmeier Speech (13/02/2020)<sup>2</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> Sabine Volk, ‘Commemoration at the Extremes: A Field Report from Dresden 2020’, *Cultures of History Forum* (11 March 2020) <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/commemoration-at-the-extremes-a-field-report-franalogiom-dresden-2020> [accessed 25 August 2025].

<sup>2</sup> Images taken from: Ryan Fahey, ‘Germans Gather to Remember 25,000 Victims of Allied Bombing Raids in Dresden’, *MailOnline*, 13 February 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8001417/Germans-gather-remember-25-000-victims-Allied-bombing-raids-Dresden.html> [accessed 25 August 2025]; and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, ‘Gedenkrede zum 75. Jahrestag der Bombardierung Dresdens am 13. Februar 2020, Kulturpalast Dresden’, *Bundespräsident*, 13 February 2020, <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2020/02/200213-Dresden-Gedenken-Bombardierung.html> [accessed 25 August 2025].

Inside, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier delivered an address that moved beyond simple warnings against the far-right's use of history for 'ideological and political means'.<sup>3</sup> Echoing the national charter of responsibility articulated by his predecessor, Joachim Gauck, five years earlier (see Chapter Five), he voiced a more challenging path for remembrance, one that rejected simplistic and competitive narratives. Steinmeier argued against the impulse 'to offset one thing against another', cautioning that any discussion of Allied actions leads 'down the wrong path when it is asked in order to downplay German guilt'.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, he condemned those who 'ignore or trivialise people's suffering... who say the bombing was a "deserved punishment" or make a travesty of gestures of mourning'.<sup>5</sup> In place of these extremes, he called for a form of remembrance that 'focuses on the suffering of the victims and survivors, while also asking what caused this pain'.<sup>6</sup> His speech articulated a complex, anti-populist model of historical empathy, one that acknowledges profound suffering without creating a competitive martyrology.

In this landscape of consistent German commemorative practice, the British public intervention was notable for its change in character. In 2015, British media attention surrounding Dresden was focused on an institutional authority. In 2020, after the firestorm of five years prior, Archbishop Welby issued no further statement. Although the Duke of Kent again joined the human chain alongside the German President, and Coventry's Lord Mayor Linda Bigham took part in a reconciliation congress in the Frauenkirche with her counterparts from Dresden and Wrocław, such gestures were exceptions.<sup>7</sup> The broader pattern was one of

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<sup>3</sup> Frank-Walter Steinmeier, *Speech on the 75th Anniversary of the Bombing of Dresden during the Second World War, at Kulturpalast, Dresden, on 13 February 2020* (Berlin: Bundespräsidialamt, 2020), English version, [https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2020/02/200213-Dresden-Gedenken-Bombardierung-Englisch.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile](https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2020/02/200213-Dresden-Gedenken-Bombardierung-Englisch.pdf?__blob=publicationFile) [accessed 25 August 2025].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

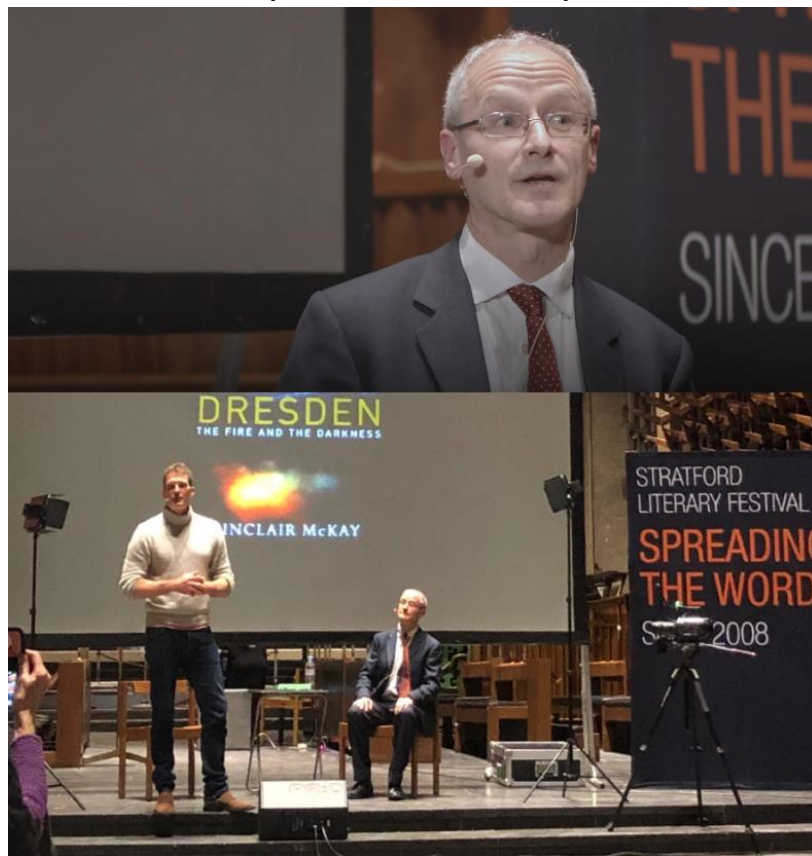
<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See The Royal Family, 'The Duke of Kent Joins Commemorations to Mark the 75th Anniversary of the Bombing of Dresden', *royal.uk*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.royal.uk/duke-kent-joins-commemorations-mark-75th-anniversary-bombing-dresden> [accessed 25 August 2025]., and Mayors for Peace, "International Congress on Cultures of Remembrance marking 75th anniversary of Dresden bombing," 13 February 2020

institutional silence. The UK government failed to comment on the anniversary, a decision the Peace Pledge Union criticised as indicative of a ‘narrow and partial remembrance’ that overlooked civilian suffering.<sup>8</sup> Into this relative public vacuum stepped a different kind of authority: not institutional, but expert, as Sinclair McKay’s *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* (published a week earlier on 6 February 2020 by Penguin Books in the UK) became the focal point for the British media’s engagement with the anniversary.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 6.2: Sinclair McKay Public History Talk on Dresden’s 75th Anniversary at Coventry Cathedral, February 2020<sup>10</sup>**



(published 16 March 2020), *Mayors for Peace* (Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation), accessed 25 August 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Peace Pledge Union, ‘UK Government Ignores 75th Anniversary of Dresden Bombing’, *Peace Pledge Union*, 13 February 2020, <https://www.ppu.org.uk/news/uk-government-ignores-75th-anniversary-dresden-bombing> [accessed 25 February 2024].

<sup>9</sup> Sinclair McKay, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* (London: Viking, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> History Hit, ‘The Bombing of Dresden, 75 Years On’, *Facebook*, 8 February 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=285774716010425> [accessed 21 December 2025]; Angela Findlay, ‘75th Anniversary of Dresden Bombing’, *Angela Findlay Blog*, 18 February 2020, <https://angelafindlay.blog/tag/75th-anniversary-of-dresden-bombing/> [accessed 21 December 2025]; Josh Layton, ‘Dan Snow and Sinclair McKay mark 75th anniversary of Dresden at Coventry Cathedral’, *Coventry Telegraph*, 5 February 2020, <https://www.coventrytelegraph.net/news/coventry-news/dan-snow-sinclair-mckay-mark-17694001> [accessed 21 December 2025].

Sinclair McKay is best understood as a popular historian and cultural journalist, whose authority derives from long experience translating history for general audiences rather than from institutional credentials. He spent many years at the *Daily Telegraph*, rising to senior editorial roles, and has since contributed regularly to the *Telegraph*, the *Mail on Sunday*, and the *Spectator*.<sup>11</sup> Alongside this, he has established himself as a prolific reviewer and writer of history books, biographies, and historical television. He has authored and reviewed several works on the Second World War, MI5 espionage, and special operations forces, while also contributing cultural commentary on film, television, and urban life.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, in his review of the 2010 relaunch of *Doctor Who*, he wrote that adjusting to a new actor is like ‘anointing a new Archbishop of Canterbury’.<sup>13</sup> His writing has resonated widely with the public; several of his previous works, most notably *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park*, became *Sunday Times* bestsellers, cementing his status as a trusted narrator of twentieth-century history for a mass readership.<sup>14</sup>

This background is significant for two reasons. First, it places McKay firmly within the ecosystem of popular historical mediation rather than professional academic debate. His writing is addressed to readers who encounter history primarily through newspapers, book reviews, documentaries, and anniversary journalism, not through scholarly monographs.

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<sup>11</sup> Information on McKay’s journalism background can be found at: Claire Cozens, ‘First wave of voluntary redundancies hits Telegraph’, *The Guardian*, 18 February 2005 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/feb/18/thedailytelegraph.pressandpublishing> [accessed 15 December 2025] and more recently, ‘IWM In Conversation: Writing Churchill’, *Imperial War Museums*, 19 November 2025 <https://www.iwm.org.uk/events/iwm-in-conversation-writing-churchill> [accessed 15 December 2025].

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Sinclair McKay, *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park* (London: Aurum, 2010); Sinclair McKay, *The Spies of Winter: The GCHQ Codebreakers Who Fought the Cold War* (London: Aurum, 2017); Sinclair McKay, *The British Spy Manual* (London: Aurum, 2014); Sinclair McKay, *The Secret Life of Fighter Command* (London: Aurum, 2015). For his cultural commentary, see Sinclair McKay, *The Man with the Golden Touch: How the Bond Films Conquered the World* (London: Aurum, 2008); Sinclair McKay, *A Thing of Unspeakable Horror: The History of Hammer Films* (London: Aurum, 2007); Sinclair McKay, *Berlin: Life and Loss in the City That Shaped the Century* (London: Viking, 2022); and Sinclair McKay, *The Mile End Murder* (London: Aurum, 2017). He also contributes regularly as a literary critic to *The Telegraph*, *The Mail on Sunday*, and *The Spectator*.

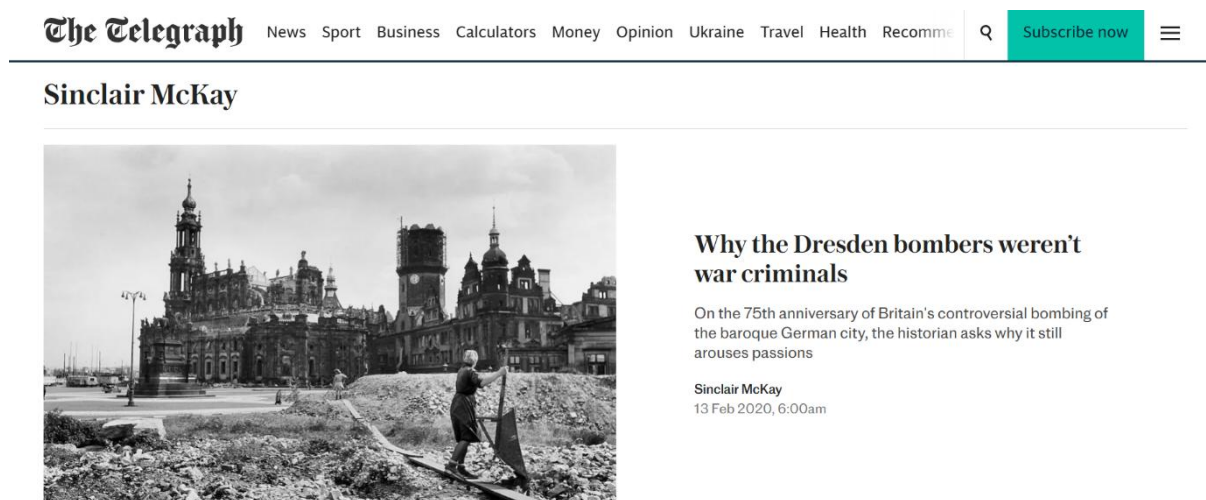
<sup>13</sup> See ‘New Doctor Who Gets Thumbs Up’, *ABC News*, 5 April 2010 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-04-05/new-doctor-who-gets-thumbs-up/391460> [accessed 15 December 2025].

<sup>14</sup> McKay, *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park*.

Second, and crucially for this case study, McKay has long written for the same media environments, particularly the *Telegraph* and the *Mail*, in which backlash against ‘revisionism’, ‘wokeness’, and elite expertise is frequently articulated.

Accordingly, while McKay is often presented to the public simply as a ‘historian’ (a label that may still render him somewhat ‘alien’ or elite to a populist readership suspicious of experts), he is in fact a figure uniquely well-versed in that readership’s preferences. He represents instead a hybrid form of authority: culturally proximate to conservative audiences, fluent in their idiom, and familiar from trusted outlets, yet unwilling to perform the moral certainty demanded by the sacred story. It is this combination of proximity and refusal that renders study of his *Dresden* work especially revealing.

**Figure 6.3: Presenting Sinclair McKay as a ‘Historian’**



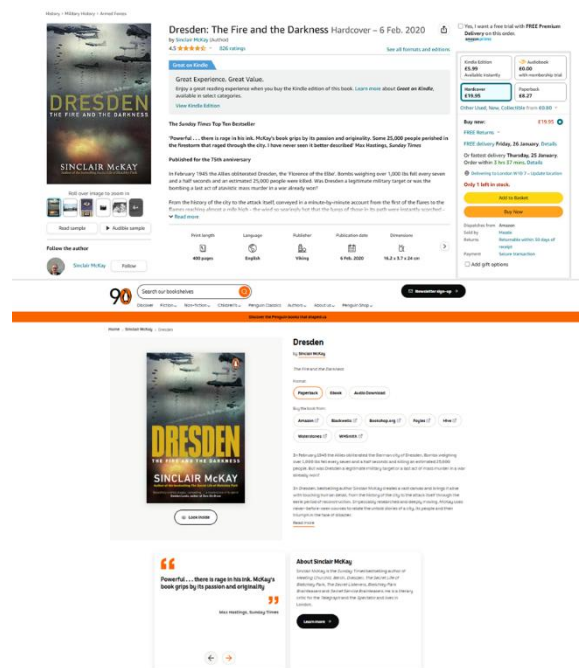
The screenshot shows the top of a web page from The Telegraph. The navigation bar includes 'The Telegraph' logo, links for 'News', 'Sport', 'Business', 'Calculators', 'Money', 'Opinion', 'Ukraine', 'Travel', 'Health', and 'Recommen', a search icon, and a 'Subscribe now' button. Below the navigation bar, the author's name 'Sinclair McKay' is displayed. The main content area features a black and white photograph of a person walking through a rubble-strewn street in Dresden, with the city's baroque architecture in the background. To the right of the photo is the article title 'Why the Dresden bombers weren't war criminals' and a sub-headline: 'On the 75th anniversary of Britain's controversial bombing of the baroque German city, the historian asks why it still arouses passions'. The author's name 'Sinclair McKay' and the date '13 Feb 2020, 6:00am' are listed below the sub-headline.

In many ways, McKay’s work on Dresden directly enacted the reconciliatory remembrance Steinmeier prescribed. It pursued a dual aim: first, to protect the past on what McKay frames as a ‘battlefield’ of remembrance so that it could not be ‘hijack[ed]’ by extremists ; and second, to foster a deeper empathy by choosing to ‘listen to the voices of those

who were there’, using archival testimonies to present a ‘kaleidoscopic portrait’ of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders alike.<sup>15</sup>

However, the book’s marketing adopted a different tone. Online retailers bore popular historian Max Hastings’ potent endorsement: ‘Powerful... there is rage in his ink’ (See Figure 6.4).<sup>16</sup> Such framing promised passion, outrage, and moral clarity, qualities far removed from the book’s actual content. McKay’s own accompanying article in the *Telegraph* similarly bore the definitive headline ‘Why the Dresden bombers weren’t war criminals’, though the article itself was careful, empathetic, and complex.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 6.4: Amazon.co.uk Advertisement of *Dresden: The Fire and The Darkness*<sup>18</sup>**



<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. xxiv-xxv.

<sup>16</sup> Max Hastings, ‘*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* by Sinclair McKay Review - an Orgy of Destruction’, *The Times*, 2 February 2020 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dresden-the-fire-and-the-darkness-by-sinclair-mckay-review-an-orgy-of-destruction-svvd0mdhv> [accessed 28 March 2025].

<sup>17</sup> Sinclair McKay, ‘Why the Dresden Bombers Weren’t War Criminals’, *Telegraph*, 13 February 2020 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/dresden-bombers-werent-war-criminals/#:~:text=They%20were%20wholly%20prepared%20to> [accessed 21 January 2024].

<sup>18</sup> Images taken from: *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, Penguin UK, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/312743/dresden-by-mckay-sinclair/9780241986011> [accessed 25 August 2025]; *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, Amazon.co.uk, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Dresden-Fire-Darkness-Sinclair-McKay/dp/024198601X> [accessed 25 August 2025].

Correspondingly, the comment sections responding to these articles quickly transformed into a tribunal on historical method. Users dismissed the historiographical effort as applying ‘modern sensibilities to the events of several generations ago’, whilst other readers lectured both Hastings and McKay that they lacked a ‘grasp of the scale of World War 2’. Accordingly, this chapter investigates the erosion of epistemic authority in the algorithmic public sphere. It contends that for many online communities, ‘history’ functions less as a process of inquiry than as a repository of identity and moral capital. When public historians introduce complexity—by nuancing casualty figures, questioning inherited moral narratives, or refusing the rhetoric of total vindication—they are not read as adding knowledge, but as subtracting from the nation’s symbolic credit.

The resulting backlash, framed as resistance to ‘revisionism’, shows digital publics actively policing the sacred story against the very experts tasked with curating it. By tracing these dynamics, from the institutionalisation of the ‘war on woke’ to the specific reception of McKay’s work, this final case study utilises a corpus of 1,394 comments to demonstrate how an anti-populist attempt at historical reconciliation was appropriated and unravelled by the mechanisms of the algorithmic public sphere.

### **Populism and the Social Dynamics of Expertise**

The backlash against Archbishop Justin Welby’s 2015 Dresden speech exposed the mechanics of a populist media logic. A year later, political sociologist Timothy Peace argued that Britain was an ‘infertile breeding ground for populists wishing to use religion to advance their cause’, given its secularisation and the Church’s largely symbolic political role.<sup>19</sup> Yet the Welby case

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy Peace, ‘Religion and Populism in Britain: An Infertile Breeding Ground?’, in *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, ed. by Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy (London: Hurst & Co, 2016), p. 107.

complicates this claim by showing how even in a secularised society the Church still embodies a symbolic authority charged with ritual expectation. As Chapter Five argued, Christianity may be fading as personal belief, but its civil-religious residue, what Rogers Brubaker terms *Christianism*, remains embedded in Britain's commemorative culture.<sup>20</sup>

Brubaker defines *Christianism* as a secularised, identitarian reference to Christianity that stresses belonging over believing, culture over faith, and style over substance, lacking doctrine, worship, or organised ritual. For him, its rise is not a reversal but a confirmation of secularisation.<sup>21</sup> However, in the context of wartime remembrance, *Christianism* does acquire ritual force: it operates as a key part of a wider ceremonial performance of history, fusing religion-as-identity with the sacred national narrative of the Second World War. In Dresden, Welby was expected to embody this ritualised *Christianism* as the Church's ceremonial head. By offering instead a prophetic Christian ethic that mourned with the German 'other' rather than affirming patriotic memory, he unsettled the sacralised role still demanded of the Church and, in the process, appeared to confirm another powerful interpretive frame: the cultural trauma grand narrative. As Toomey and Shepherd argue, this narrative casts Britain's post-war trajectory as one of repeated humiliation and decline (marked by the loss of empire and symbolically entrenched by subservient membership of the European Union) while portraying the people as betrayed by a cosmopolitan elite.<sup>22</sup> Within this lens, Welby's gesture of reconciliation was not heard as pastoral care but as deference to Europe, aligning him with the very elite accused of undermining the nation.

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<sup>20</sup> Rogers Brubaker, 'Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40, 8 (2017), pp. 1191–1226.

<sup>21</sup> See the discussion of Brubaker's terminology in Ulrich Schmiedel, 'Introduction: Political Theology in the Spirit of Populism - Methods and Metaphors', in *The Spirit of Populism: Political Theologies in Polarized Times*, ed. by Ulrich Schmiedel and Joshua Ralston (Leiden: Brill, 2022), p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Toomey and Alistair J. K. Shepherd, 'Cultural Trauma, Populist Grand Narratives, and Brexit', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3 (2023) 1–12.

The resulting media backlash focused on denying Welby's legitimacy to speak. With his pro-European stance and background as an Old Etonian and oil executive, Welby was positioned by conservative media as part of a detached 'Anywhere' elite. 'Experts' from this globalised class, particularly those involved in academia or government, are frequently framed as 'remote and self-serving elites disengaged from the everyday lives and concerns of ordinary citizens'.<sup>23</sup> In this register, Welby's training in reconciliation and international conflict-resolution was reframed as further proof of elite detachment, his 'profound regret and deep sorrow' deemed 'values masquerading as expert judgments'.<sup>24</sup> Media commentary thus ensured that his sermon appeared to exemplify what legal scholars Russell and Patterson identify as the flawed habits of elite culture: condescension (the presumption that ordinary citizens are too ignorant to judge and that benevolent elites are acting in their best interests), technocratic paternalism (the belief that facts, rather than values, can resolve political disputes), and intellectual tyranny (the assumption that dissent stems from ignorance or bad faith).<sup>25</sup> The success of this framing created fertile ground for 'participatory' or 'citizen generated' populism from below, as commenters reasserted their own patriotic 'common sense' as more authentic than the Archbishop's rarefied expertise.<sup>26</sup>

The Welby case thus illustrated a broader truth: expertise is never simply a body of knowledge but a socially conferred status. As the science and technology professor Reiner Grundmann summarises, expertise is 'something delivered at the request of someone else who

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<sup>23</sup> Cara Reed and Michael Reed, *Enough of Experts: Expert Authority in Crisis* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023), p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> Jacob Hale Russell and Dennis Patterson, *The Weaponization of Expertise: How Elites Fuel Populism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2025), p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>26</sup> See Daniel Tobias Thiele, 'Populism From Below. A Computational Analysis of Populist Communication in User Comments on News Media Facebook Pages' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Vienna, 2024)., Daniel Thiele, 'How COVID-19 and the News Shaped Populism in Facebook Comments in Seven European Countries. A Computational Analysis.', *Computational Communication Research*, 6.1 (2024), pp. 1–31 and Belén Fernández-García and Susana Salgado, 'Populism by the people: An analysis of online comments in Portugal and Spain', in *International Conference on Social Media and Society (SMSociety '20)* (New York: ACM, 2020), pp. 210–19.

wants it'.<sup>27</sup> Kennedy elaborates by describing expertise as 'special knowledge made real as authority in struggle'.<sup>28</sup> For him, global order is not a stable system but the 'frozen settlement of earlier debates', sustained through constant conflict over the distribution of wealth, power, and status.<sup>29</sup> Expertise is the primary weapon in this struggle: experts engage in what he calls 'background work', interpreting the world for decision-makers, translating decisions into action, and framing outcomes as reasonable, necessary, or factual. In doing so, they 'rule by articulation', turning arguments into realities and victories into rights.<sup>30</sup>

Expert authority is therefore never fixed because its legitimacy depends on recognition across multiple, unstable fronts. It is contested by rival experts in jurisdictional battles over who has the right to define truth; it is dependent on political endorsement yet always vulnerable to co-optation or populist rejection; it relies on public trust that must be actively cultivated; and it is constrained by managerial and market pressures that erode professional autonomy. In this way, authority, like cultural memory, is not a stable inheritance but a dynamic process, continually made, unmade, and remade through practices of recognition and contestation.<sup>31</sup> As sociologists Cara and Michael Reed explain, '[c]onsensus around shared rules of interpretation and application can and do emerge, but they are always subject to challenge and revision as new and unforeseen situations arise that open them up to further interrogation and re-appraisal.'<sup>32</sup>

When that recognition collapses, the expert ceases to be a neutral mediator. Risk analyst Paul Slovic notes that trust is 'typically created rather slowly, but it can be destroyed in an

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<sup>27</sup> Reiner Grundmann, 'The Problem of Expertise in Knowledge Societies', *Minerva*, 55 (2017), p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> David Kennedy, *A World of Struggle: How Power, Law, and Expertise Shape Global Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 108.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7 and p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> See Reed and Reed, *Enough of Experts* and Cara Reed and Michael Reed, 'Expert Authority in Crisis: Making Authority Real Through Struggle', *Organization Theory* 3, 2022, pp. 1–21.

<sup>32</sup> Reed and Reed, *Enough of Experts*, p. 201.

instant – by a single mishap or mistake’.<sup>33</sup> Echoing the ideas surrounding the intergroup sensitivity effect discussed in Chapter Four, this idea is central to Robert P. Crease’s acoustic model of expertise, in which a single ‘discordant note’ can unravel the melody of trust that sustains expert authority.<sup>34</sup> To illustrate, Crease points to the film *Jaws*, where townsfolk ignore scientific warnings about shark attacks to protect tourism, and Henrik Ibsen’s nineteenth century play *An Enemy of the People*, in which a doctor’s discovery of poisoned public baths is rejected by townspeople unwilling to endanger their livelihoods.<sup>35</sup> In both cases, the same expert finding is refracted through divergent commitments as publics, stakeholders, or states interpret authority according to their own interests. In such moments, the expert is no longer heard as a neutral guide but is reclassified as a suspect voice, a contaminated actor whose authority collapses into political struggle. Welby’s speech became such a discordant note: once judged politically suspect, his authority was reclassified as contamination rather than guidance.

### **The historical persistence of anti-intellectualism**

As Crease’s dramatised examples imply, this dynamic is not confined to religion, nor to the present. Anti-intellectualism, which political scientist Eric Merkley defines as ‘the generalised suspicion and mistrust of experts and intellectuals’, has at least three distinct dimensions: anti-rationalism, a dismissal of critical thinking in favour of practical knowledge and common sense; unreflexive instrumentalism, the devaluing of long-term payoffs for the sake of short-term, material gain; and anti-elitism, the resentment and disparagement of experts, who are seen as a privileged societal elite aiming to exploit ordinary people through their positions of power.<sup>36</sup> Populist rhetoric, which frames political conflict as a struggle between ‘ordinary

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Slovic, 'Trust, Emotion, Sex, Politics, and Science: Surveying the Risk-Assessment Battlefield', *Risk Analysis*, 19.4 (1999), p. 697.

<sup>34</sup> See Robert P. Crease, 'Mistrust of Experts by Populists and Politicians', in *The Oxford Handbook of Expertise and Democratic Politics*, ed. by Gil Eyal and Thomas Medvetz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 155–80., and Gil Eyal and Thomas Medvetz, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Expertise and Democratic Politics*, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Crease, 'Mistrust of Experts by Populists and Politicians', p. 166.

<sup>36</sup> Eric Merkley, 'Anti-Intellectualism, Populism, and Motivated Resistance to Expert Consensus',

citizens' and 'a privileged societal elite', is particularly effective at mobilising this third, anti-elitist component. Merkley's empirical studies show that exposing audiences to populist cues, even those not directly about experts, can prime them to reject expert consensus on issues from climate science to genetically modified organisms.<sup>37</sup>

This tension has deep historical roots. In classical Athens, Socrates railed against the Sophists, who boasted they could win a patient's trust better than a doctor, an early sign that rhetorical persuasion could trump specialised knowledge.<sup>38</sup> In nineteenth-century Britain, Lord Salisbury cautioned against trusting experts without 'a very large admixture of simple common sense'.<sup>39</sup> In the same century in the United States, the 'Know-Nothing Party' embodied populist anti-expert sentiment, while in the 1960s foundational populism scholar Richard Hofstadter traced the country's enduring suspicion of abstract knowledge to a belief in the 'omnicompetence of the common man'.<sup>40</sup>

Such examples underline that hostility to expertise is not new, though its expression adapts to each political moment. Today, however, societies confront a paradox: they 'need experts more than ever' yet regard them as 'less credible than ever'.<sup>41</sup> Modern life is sustained by socio-technical systems far too complex for individuals (or politicians) to navigate without expert mediation, especially when facing 'wicked problems' such as climate change and pandemics.<sup>42</sup> But public reliance has been repeatedly tested by perceived failures, nuclear

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*Public Opinion Quarterly*, 84.1 (2020), p. 26., and Daniel Rigney, 'Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter', *Sociological Inquiry*, 61.4 (1991), pp. 434–51.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Merkley.

<sup>38</sup> See Jayson Harsin, 'Post-truth Politics and Epistemic Populism: About (Dis-)Trusted Presentation and Communication of Facts, Not False Information', in *Post-Truth Populism: A New Political Paradigm*, ed. by Saul Newman and Maximilian Conrad (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), pp. 39–81.

<sup>39</sup> Joe Moran, 'The Fall and Rise of the Expert', *Critical Quarterly*, 53.1 (2011), p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Aurelien Portuese, 'Populism and the Economics of Antitrust', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, ed. by Michael Oswald (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 236 and Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Eyal and Medvetz, 'Introduction', p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Denis Fischbacher-Smith, 'Addressing the Risk Paradox: Exploring the Demand Requirements around Risk and Uncertainty and the Supply Side Limitations of Calculative Practices', in *The Oxford Handbook of Expertise and Democratic Politics*, ed. by Gil Eyal and Thomas Medvetz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 411.

accidents, misguided wars, economic crises, and public health mismanagement, which have deepened scepticism. As Peter Weingart observes, expertise is undermined by its entanglement in politics: political actors increasingly compete for expert endorsement, producing ‘experts and counterexperts’ whose disputes magnify uncertainty.<sup>43</sup> Dependence and distrust thus advance together. As Maya Goldenberg concludes in looking at vaccine hesitancy, the resulting impasse is not a breakdown of knowledge but a profound ‘crisis of trust’.<sup>44</sup>

Even these contemporary diagnoses echo concerns raised nearly a century earlier. In 1931, then prominent scholar Harold J. Laski had already warned that while modern public problems had become too complex for the ‘plain man’ alone, giving experts final authority was fraught with risk.<sup>45</sup> In a modern introduction to the essay, Leslie Lenkowsky frames Laski’s argument as a diagnosis of the expert’s ‘occupational disabilities’.<sup>46</sup> Laski observed that the expert, immersed in a technical ‘mystery’, often lacks the ability to understand or persuade the very public their decisions will affect.<sup>47</sup> For Laski, a state where experts held ultimate power was bound to become a bureaucracy, pushing its ‘private nostrums in disregard of public wants’ and losing touch with the people it governed.<sup>48</sup> His proposed solution was for experts be kept ‘on tap, but not on top’; for their advice to be mediated by statesmen possessing the ‘supreme common sense’ to grasp the ‘limits of the possible’ as defined by public sentiment.<sup>49</sup>

Numerous politicians have since attempted to take up this mantle. In recent decades, ‘common sense’ has increasingly been wielded as a political weapon against experts portrayed as aloof, obstructive, or as constraining the ambitions of ordinary citizens. In 2011 for example,

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Weingart, ‘Trust and Distrust of Scientific Experts and the Challenges of the Democratization of Science’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Expertise and Democratic Politics*, ed. by Gil Eyal and Thomas Medvetz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 35.

<sup>44</sup> Maya Goldenberg, *Vaccine Hesitancy Public Trust and the War on Expertise* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021), p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Harold J. Laski, ‘The Limitations of the Expert’, *Society*, 57 (2020), p. 371.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371.

cultural historian Joe Moran argued that distrust of expertise in modern Britain was not a spontaneous public reaction but the result of deliberate political strategy.<sup>50</sup> He traced its roots to Margaret Thatcher's government, which had waged a *Kulturkampf* (culture war) against the professional class. Thatcher attacked both the 'left-liberal Oxbridge elite' of 'armchair theorists' and the 'supposedly impartial professional specialists' who ran public services.<sup>51</sup> In their place, she championed what she framed as 'Methodist, lower-middle-class common sense' against the 'fanciful, impractical ideas of intellectuals'.<sup>52</sup>

This anti-expert stance was later institutionalised under New Labour through what Moran terms 'populist centralism'.<sup>53</sup> Professional groups that had long influenced government policy were increasingly sidelined, as expertise was recast as 'outmoded and elitist', tainted by both 1960s liberalism and entrenched opposition to market reform.<sup>54</sup> In this new political culture, citizens were treated less as active participants and more as 'sovereign consumers', their voices mediated by a centralised state claiming to embody the popular will.<sup>55</sup> Blair's embrace of 'meritocracy' exemplified the shift: stripped of associations with expert elites, it became a language of unlocking the hidden talents of ordinary people, celebrated in the idiom of talent shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* or *The X Factor*.<sup>56</sup> As Moran observes, this 'monist' conception of democracy sought to channel the will of the people into a single expression, leaving little room for pluralist mediation by independent experts.<sup>57</sup>

Moran argued this carefully cultivated political atmosphere meant that when the 2008 financial crisis occurred, it was readily absorbed into this same narrative of general expert failure. This prompted broadcaster Melvyn Bragg to lament that the word 'expert' had become

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<sup>50</sup> Joe Moran, 'The Fall and Rise of the Expert', pp. 6–21.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

so meaningless it should be ‘expunged from the dictionary’.<sup>58</sup> This sentiment found a perfect cultural expression in a controversy surrounding *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2009. When the public repeatedly voted to save a notoriously clumsy dancer, the media framed the affair as a showdown between ‘the People’s Hooper’ and ‘the Dance Experts’.<sup>59</sup> For Moran, this episode revealed how the word ‘expert’ had become a ‘repository for a range of different cultural meanings and anxieties’.<sup>60</sup>

In the decade and a half since 2011, this erosion of trust has only continued to deepen in the ‘post-truth’ era. While discussions related to the concept of ‘post-truth’ date back to theoretical considerations in 1992, the ‘post-truth’ era gained significant public and academic attention in 2016.<sup>61</sup> This was largely propelled by events such as the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election, which also led to its designation as the Oxford Dictionaries’ ‘Word of the Year’.<sup>62</sup> According to Oxford’s definition, ‘post-truth’ denotes ‘circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.<sup>63</sup>

Researchers have further clarified that post-truth does not mean truth is ‘discarded completely’ but rather refers, instead, to the ‘blurring’ of the distinction between truth and falsehood.<sup>64</sup> Kalpokas argues that in this condition, ‘something becomes true because people believe in it and act as if it was true because they would like it to be true’.<sup>65</sup> This is a form of ‘co-created fiction’, which can lead to the creation of ‘affiliative truths’ capable of mobilising

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Constance de Saint-Laurent et al., ‘Collective memory and social sciences in the post-truth era’, *Culture & Psychology*, 23.2 (2017), p. 148.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘post-truth’, July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3755961867> [accessed 30 August 2025].

<sup>64</sup> Ignas Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

audiences.<sup>66</sup> This transformation means that ‘the meaning of truth seems to be changing from one based on strict correspondence with facts to a more verisimilitudinal one, in which the most important thing is that a proposition makes sense in the environment within which it is uttered’.<sup>67</sup>

This dynamic has fostered what Kalpokas calls a ‘truth market’, where ‘the most attractive (enjoyment-maximising) proposition lures in the most customers’.<sup>68</sup> Narratives are ‘informed by a careful analysis of the target audience, determining in advance its feelings, tastes, anxieties, preconceptions, and stereotypes’, allowing them to be ‘moulded in accordance with everybody’s liking’.<sup>69</sup> This creates a personalised reality where information is filtered based on emotional connection and experienced pleasure, ensuring that ‘if something makes sense emotionally, or experientially, it also makes sense evidentially’.<sup>70</sup>

As a result, the post-truth era has been profoundly shaped, facilitated and accelerated by the architecture of the digital world. The internet and social media have democratised publishing and blurred the lines between professional and amateur knowledge, while unleashing a deluge of information that overwhelms human cognitive capacities. In 2017, Tom Nichols linked the ‘death’ of expertise to the collapse of traditional journalism, the rise of ‘edutainment’, the internet’s flattening of knowledge hierarchies, and a narcissistic cultural shift where ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge’.<sup>71</sup> Nichols argues that this constitutes ‘the death of the ideal of expertise itself, a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople’.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>71</sup> See Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

Within this chaotic ecosystem, misinformation and disinformation can spread faster and persist longer than verified facts. Social media algorithms are designed not to promote truth but to maximise engagement, creating ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’ that reinforce existing beliefs and shield users from dissent.<sup>73</sup> Facebook’s algorithm, for instance, ‘tends to prioritise content that keeps users engaged, regardless of its veracity or its potential to incite controversies’.<sup>74</sup> This aligns with a ‘hypercompetitive attention economy that rewards virality over veracity’.<sup>75</sup> The consequence has been an exacerbation of ‘tribal’ divisions, where citizens can inhabit ‘alternative realities’.<sup>76</sup> Populist communicators are able to exploit this increasingly fragmented landscape, bypassing traditional gatekeepers to deliver divisive, anti-expert messages directly to their audience. Moreover, bans on popular extremist content by mainstream platforms often act less as a brake than a catalyst for such messaging, with researchers recording ‘explosive growth’ in conspiratorial communities on emerging messaging apps (e.g. Telegram) following these removals.<sup>77</sup>

Taken together, the political, cultural, and technological shifts outlined above have created a volatile environment for public intellectuals. What we have established is not that mistrust of expertise is new, but that its latent presence in society has been increasingly targeted and channelled, as successive crises and technological innovations have brought suspicion into direct confrontation with historical, scientific, and cultural authority. To fully understand the reception of Sinclair McKay’s *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, therefore, we must also trace how these dynamics were sharpened in Britain between 2015 and 2020, when the Brexit referendum, populist attacks on institutions, and polarised media cultures redeployed mistrust

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<sup>73</sup> Kalpokas, p. 28.

<sup>74</sup> Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 121.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>76</sup> David S. Caudill, *Expertise in Crisis: The Ideological Contours of Public Scientific Controversies* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023), p. 1 and p. 47.

<sup>77</sup> Alexandre Bovet and Peter Grindrod, ‘Organization and evolution of the UK far-right network on Telegram’, *Applied Network Science*, 7 (2022), p. 3.

in multiple arenas. This trajectory created the acute condition of epistemic insecurity into which McKay's book was released during the emotionally charged 75th anniversary commemorations of the bombing.

### **The Reshaping of Expert Authority in Britain since 2015**

Just months after the Welby controversy, the populist surge that propelled Jeremy Corbyn to the Labour leadership offered a distinctly left-wing expression of the wider revolt against expertise. His triumph was framed not just as a rejection of austerity economics but as a repudiation of a corrupt establishment: he would later promise to defeat a 'cosy cartel at the heart of British politics' and insisted it was Labour's 'historic duty to make sure that the people prevail' over a ruling elite of politicians, financiers, and tax-dodgers.<sup>78</sup> His leadership was built on this populist foundation, having been elected with wide member support but 'opposed by most of the party's parliamentary elite'.<sup>79</sup>

He fostered an 'intellectually fertile' Labour Party that saw the 2008 financial crisis as an opportunity to 'make a decisive break with past orthodoxies' and explicitly rejected neoliberal assumptions.<sup>80</sup> Corbyn's economic programme, soon labelled 'Corbynomics', posed a direct challenge to the technocratic consensus that had underpinned Labour's post-Thatcher trajectory.<sup>81</sup> The proposals provoked an immediate and public schism within the economic establishment, fought through competing open letters in the press. First, a letter from 41 economists was published in the *Observer* in support of Corbyn's anti-austerity policies.<sup>82</sup> This

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<sup>78</sup> William James, 'Labour's Corbyn Sets Election Tone, Targeting British Establishment', *Reuters*, 20 April 2017 <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/labour-s-corbyn-sets-election-tone-targeting-british-establishment-idUSKBN17L30D/> [accessed 1 September 2025].

<sup>79</sup> Luke Martell, 'Corbyn, populism and power', *Hard Times*, 101 (2018), p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Patrick Diamond, 'New Jerusalems? The Labour Party's Economic Policy-Making in Hard Times', *The Political Quarterly*, 92.2 (2021), p. 264.

<sup>81</sup> Svenja O'Donnell and Hannah Murphy, 'What Is Corbynomics and What Might It Mean for Britain?', *Bloomberg*, 14 August 2015 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-14/what-is-corbynomics-and-what-might-it-mean-for-britain-> [accessed 1 September 2025].

<sup>82</sup> Daniel Boffey, 'Jeremy Corbyn Wins Economists' Backing for Anti-Austerity Policies', *Guardian*, 22 August 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/22/jeremy-corbyn-economists-backing-anti-austerity-policies-corbynomics> [accessed 1 September 2025].

was swiftly followed by a counter-letter to the *Financial Times* from 55 academics across the political spectrum, who warned that his plans were ‘likely to be highly damaging’ and far from mainstream economic thinking.<sup>83</sup> To bolster their credentials, Corbyn’s team appointed their own panel of internationally renowned experts, including Joseph Stiglitz and Thomas Piketty, to devise a ‘coherent alternative’ to austerity.<sup>84</sup> What is notable here is that Corbynism did not reject expertise wholesale; it contested the legitimacy of established authority by drawing on alternative expert voices.

Equally striking, however, was the majority who chose not to take part. As the *Financial Times* observed, many economists avoided signing either letter, perhaps mindful of ‘the fate of the 364’ (economists) who had wrongly opposed Geoffrey Howe’s 1981 Budget, a fiasco that lingered as a reminder of the reputational risks of collective pronouncements (that letter, signed by almost the entire academic establishment, had wrongly predicted Margaret Thatcher’s tough budget would ‘deepen the depression’ at the very moment the economy began its recovery).<sup>85</sup> This caution foreshadowed the anxious intellectual climate in which the Brexit campaign would later unfold, when scepticism of economists and other intellectuals was pushed much further and weaponised into an outright assault on expertise.

Where Corbynism had relied on counter-experts to challenge economic orthodoxy, the Leave campaign during the Brexit referendum adopted a more radical dual strategy: amplifying heterodox voices while simultaneously repudiating the authority of mainstream expertise altogether. The Remain campaign centred its case on Treasury forecasts, Bank of England warnings, and endorsements from the IMF, OECD, and global leaders such as Barack Obama.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Chris Giles, ‘Academics Lash “Damaging” Corbynomics’, *Financial Times*, 2 September 2015 from LexisNexis [accessed 1 September 2025].

<sup>84</sup> Stephanie Boland, ‘Who is Advising Jeremy Corbyn on Economics?’, *New Statesman*, 28 September 2015 <https://www.newstatesman.com/business/economics/2015/09/who-advising-jeremy-corbyn-economics> [accessed 1 September 2025].

<sup>85</sup> Giles, ‘Academics Lash “Damaging” Corbynomics’.

<sup>86</sup> John Clarke and Janet Newman, ‘People in this Country Have Had Enough of Experts’: Brexit and the Paradoxes of Populism’, *Critical Policy Studies*, 11.1 (2017), p. 110.

In effect, its message ‘centred overwhelmingly on technocratic, economic concerns, principally highlighting the material risks of leaving the European Union’.<sup>87</sup> This lack of ‘emotional heft’ is noted as one of the core reasons for its failure to mobilise the same support as the Leave campaign.<sup>88</sup> Leavers swiftly dismissed these warnings as ‘Project Fear’, a pejorative label repurposed from the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, where it had been used to describe the unionist campaign’s focus on negative messaging.<sup>89</sup> Reintroduced by Boris Johnson, the term was widely circulated to condemn the Remain side for what Leavers branded as unjustified scaremongering.<sup>90</sup>

Justice Secretary Michael Gove’s declaration that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’, prompted by economists’ failure to foresee the 2008 crash, has become synonymous with populist rejections of professional authority.<sup>91</sup> Labour MP Gisela Stuart, also of Vote Leave, echoed the point more bluntly: ‘There is only one expert that matters, and that’s you, the voter.’<sup>92</sup> For his part, Leave figurehead Nigel Farage suggested many of the so-called independent experts were actually in the pay of government or Brussels.<sup>93</sup> Together, these interventions cast doubt on the legitimacy of expertise itself, reminding voters of past errors and reframing trust around popular intuition rather than institutional authority. As Clift and Rosamond observe, the referendum’s plebiscitary form ‘downgraded’ technocratic authority, creating a low-knowledge environment where fringe forecasts could compete on equal terms with institutional ones.<sup>94</sup> The debate was thereby shifted from reasoned, evidence-based claims

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<sup>87</sup> Steve Kettell and Peter Kerr, ‘The Ghost in the Machine: Brexit, Populism, and the Sacralisation of Politics’, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 23.1 (2022), p. 39.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Simona Dianová and Monika Brusenbauch Meislová, ‘Scaring for the Greater Good? Discursive Construction of Fear Appeals in the Brexit Referendum Campaign’, *British Politics* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-024-00267-0> [accessed 1 September 2025].

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Clarke and Newman, ‘Brexit and the Paradoxes of Populism’, p. 111.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Ben Clift and Ben Rosamond, ‘Technocratic Reason in Hard Times: The Mobilisation of Economic Knowledge and the Discursive Politics of Brexit’, *New Political Economy*, 29.6 (2024), p. 889.

to emotive appeals that valorised ordinary experience and urged voters to place their faith in the promise of a post-Brexit ‘golden age’ rather than heed the ‘prophets of doom’.<sup>95</sup>

These dynamics also extended decisively into the realm of history, as the Brexit debate became a contest over Britain’s past. The Leave campaign invoked a romanticised national story, centred on the Second World War, which framed Brexit as a new act of liberation. Nigel Farage’s discourse combined ‘nationalistic pride of British history’ with disdain for political elites.<sup>96</sup> He frequently referred to leaving the EU as ‘the Great Escape’, an allusion to the 1963 film about Allied prisoners escaping a German POW camp, and even played the movie’s theme music at campaign events.<sup>97</sup> Farage also mocked the President of the European Commission with the catchphrase, ‘Who do you think you are kidding Mr [Jean-Claude] Juncker?’, a direct reference to the theme song of the popular wartime sitcom *Dad’s Army*.<sup>98</sup> References to the ‘Dunkirk spirit’, the Blitz, and Britain ‘standing alone’ against tyranny were used to cast the EU as an ‘existential threat to the liberty and prosperity of the British nation’, responsible for a multitude of domestic problems, from pressures on public services to the implementation of austerity.<sup>99</sup> This sentiment was echoed by the *Daily Mail*, which invoked the famous anti-appeasement cry, ‘Who will speak for England?’, declaring that in the forthcoming referendum, Britain’s ‘destiny as a sovereign nation’ would be at stake.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Kettell and Kerr, ‘The Ghost in the Machine’, p. 35.

<sup>96</sup> See Joel Bertilsson, ‘History as an Argument for the Future: A Study of Nick Clegg’s and Nigel Farage’s use of History during the United Kingdom’s 2016 EU Referendum’ (unpublished Master’s thesis, Lund University, 2019)

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Williams, ‘Mobilizing the Past: Germany and the Second World War in Debates on Brexit’, *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, 19.51 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.13019> [accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Kettell and Kerr, ‘The Ghost in the Machine’, p. 24.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Who Will Speak for England?’, *Daily Mail*, 4 February 2016 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3430870/DAILY-MAIL-COMMENT-speak-England.html> [accessed 2 September 2025].

Figure 6.5: *Daily Mail*: ‘Who Will Speak for England?’ (04/02/2016)<sup>101</sup>

This call was famously taken up by Boris Johnson, who compared the European Union’s aim to create a superstate with past attempts at continental hegemony by Napoleon and Hitler.<sup>102</sup> Johnson’s allies defended the comparison, with Iain Duncan Smith suggesting it was simply ‘a historical fact of life’.<sup>103</sup> At the same time, the narrative of ‘Britain standing alone’ was intertwined with ‘British exceptionalism’, highlighting how Britain ‘won the war singlehandedly’ and how ‘Britannia ruled the waves’.<sup>104</sup> This populist history was reinforced

<sup>101</sup> Who Will Speak for England?, *Daily Mail*, 4 February 2016., p. 1.

<sup>102</sup> Tim Ross, 'Boris Johnson: The EU wants a superstate, just as Hitler did', *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 May 2016 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/14/boris-johnson-the-eu-wants-a-superstate-just-as-hitler-did/> [accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>103</sup> Williams, 'Mobilizing the Past'.

<sup>104</sup> Alistair Jones, 'Getting Brexit Done and the Future of the UK-EU Relationship', in *Populism, the Pandemic and the Media: Journalism in the age of Covid, Trump, Brexit and Johnson*, ed. by John Mair and others (Bury St Edmunds: Abramis, 2021), p. 259.

by ‘Historians for Britain’, a group led by figures such as David Abulafia and David Starkey which argued that Britain’s ‘uninterrupted’ tradition of common law and parliamentary sovereignty, amongst other factors, set it apart from Europe.<sup>105</sup> This interpretation was challenged by an open letter from numerous historians, and later a separate message signed by over 300 historians was published, warning that a Leave vote would ‘condemn Britain to irrelevance’.<sup>106</sup>

Pro-EU campaigners also attempted to reclaim the wartime past, arguing that European integration had preserved peace since 1945. For instance, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown appeared in a campaign video filmed in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral to emphasise this point.<sup>107</sup> David Cameron echoed this view, insisting Britain had ‘always been a European power’.<sup>108</sup> In one speech, he invoked the memory of Winston Churchill, arguing that while Churchill decided to fight on against Hitler in 1940, ‘He didn’t want to be alone... He didn’t quit on Europe’.<sup>109</sup> The shift from ‘highlighting economic risks to targeting voters’ hearts and minds’ reflected a sound reading of the electorate, yet in practice it was Leave that harnessed emotion most effectively.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Gideon Rachman, ‘Rival Historians Trade Blows over Brexit’, *Financial Times*, 13 May 2016 from LexisNexis [accessed 2 September 2025]; See also Paul Hemmer, ‘Brexit and the Battle for the Past: A Study of Historian’s Involvement in the Brexit Debate’ [sic] (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Bergen, 2018), pp. 39–45.

<sup>106</sup> See Various Authors, ‘Fog in Channel, Historians Isolated’, *History Today*, 18 May 2015 <https://www.historytoday.com/fog-channel-historians-isolated> [accessed 2 September 2025]., and Heather Stewart, ‘Vote to Leave EU Would “Condemn Britain to Irrelevance”, say Historians’, *Guardian*, 25 May 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/25/vote-to-leave-eu-will-condemn-britain-to-irrelevance-say-historians> [accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>107</sup> Williams, ‘Mobilizing the Past’.

<sup>108</sup> David Cameron, ‘PM Speech on the UK’s Strength and Security in the EU’, *GOV.UK*, 9 May 2016 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-the-uks-strength-and-security-in-the-eu-9-may-2016> [accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>109</sup> ‘David Cameron EU Question Time: PM Attacks “Untrue” Leave Claims’, *BBC News*, 19 June 2016 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36570766> [accessed 2 September 2025]. See also Williams, ‘Mobilizing the Past’.

<sup>110</sup> Heather Stewart, ‘Leaving EU Would Threaten UK’s Peace and Stability, Says Cameron’, *Guardian*, 9 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/09/pm-draws-on-history-to-bolster-eu-remain-campaign> [accessed 2 September 2025].

In the referendum itself, emotion proved far more decisive than rationality. Lord Ashcroft's polling found that almost half of Leave voters were motivated above all by the principle of national self-determination and a third by immigration, while only 6 per cent cited economic benefit.<sup>111</sup> In another study, when asked how they would cast their vote, only 17 per cent of respondents said they would vote entirely with their 'head', while 35 per cent balanced 'head and heart' and 5 per cent admitted voting entirely with their 'heart'; more tellingly, only 24 per cent said that experts, economists or academics influenced their decision.<sup>112</sup> Survey data also indicated that those preferring the 'wisdom' of ordinary people to experts were far less likely to believe Brexit would harm the economy: only 22 per cent of this group expected the economy to worsen if the UK left, compared with 58 per cent of those who trusted experts.<sup>113</sup> The same study found that only about a quarter of voters trusted David Cameron's statements on the EU, whereas Boris Johnson, who relied heavily on emotive historical references, was more trusted.<sup>114</sup> Unsurprisingly then, emotional messaging also outperformed reasoned argument in the online sphere: analyses of Brexit campaign tweets demonstrate that passionate appeals and attacks on opponents generated far higher engagement than factual claims.<sup>115</sup>

Far from settling the matter, the referendum result instead unleashed a new wave of attacks on expert knowledge. Throughout the period following the 2016 referendum, and notably in 2019 leading up to Boris Johnson's election victory, the 'Will of the People' was

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<sup>111</sup> Lord Ashcroft, 'How the United Kingdom Voted on Thursday... and Why', *Lord Ashcroft Polls*, 24 June 2016, <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/> [accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>112</sup> Hannah Marshall and Alena Drieschova, 'Post-Truth Politics in the UK's Brexit Referendum', *New Perspectives*, 26.3 (2018), pp. 98–9. See also What UK Thinks: EU, 'Whose Opinions Have Influenced Your Decision on How to Vote in the Referendum?', <https://www.whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/whose-opinions-have-influenced-your-decision-on-how-to-vote-in-the-referendum/> [accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>113</sup> John Curtice, *The Economics of Brexit in Voters' Eyes (or, Why the Remain Campaign Failed)* (London: NatCen Social Research, 2016), p. 9.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>115</sup> Jorge Martins Rosa and Cristian Jiménez Ruiz, 'Reason vs. Emotion in the Brexit campaign: How Key Political Actors and Their Followers Used Twitter', *First Monday*, 25.3 (2020) <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/9601/9402> [accessed 2 September 2025].

repeatedly invoked by a dominant faction of the Leave campaign.<sup>116</sup> This meant elevating the Leave vote to an ‘almost sacred process’ that was ‘beyond any formal opposition or reproach’.<sup>117</sup> Authoritative opponents of Brexit, including High Court judges, were labelled ‘Enemies of the People’.<sup>118</sup> The *Daily Mail*, for instance, ‘blazoned’ this headline across photos of the three judges who heard the initial Article 50 case (regarding the legal mechanism for leaving the EU), denigrating them on both personal and professional grounds.<sup>119</sup> The attacks portrayed the judges not as impartial arbiters, but as ‘out of touch’, pro-European ‘activists’ from ‘rarefied backgrounds’ engaged in a ‘judicial coup to overturn the will of the people’.<sup>120</sup>

Academics, too, became caught in the same logics. In October 2017, Conservative MP Chris Heaton-Harris even wrote to every university vice-chancellor demanding the names of lecturers teaching Brexit and copies of their course materials.<sup>121</sup> Universities denounced the request as ‘McCarthyite’, ‘sinister’, ‘idiotic Leninism’, and likened it to Orwellian Thought Police or Newspeak.<sup>122</sup> The *Daily Mail* followed by accusing universities of ‘anti-Brexit propaganda’ and even invited readers to report examples of ‘bias’ in teaching, a campaign widely condemned in higher education as political harassment.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflmann, ‘Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 0 (2021), p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> Kettell and Kerr, ‘The Ghost in the Machine’, p. 24.

<sup>118</sup> Homolar and Löfflmann, ‘Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives’, p. 7. See also Ruth Breeze, ‘“Enemies of the People”: Populist performances in the *Daily Mail* reporting of the Article 50 case’, *Discourse, Context & Media*, 25 (2018), pp. 60–67.

<sup>119</sup> Breeze, ‘“Enemies of the People”’, p. 60. See also James Slack, ‘Enemies of the People: Fury over “Out of Touch” Judges who have “Declared War on Democracy” by Defying 17.4m Brexit voters and who could Trigger a Constitutional Crisis’, *Daily Mail*, 4 November 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3903436/Enemies-people-Fury-touch-judges-defied-17-4m-Brexit-voters-trigger-constitutional-crisis.html> [accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>120</sup> See Breeze, ‘“Enemies of the People”’ and Slack, ‘Enemies of the People’.

<sup>121</sup> Anna Fazackerley, ‘Universities Deplore “McCarthyism” as MP Demands List of Tutors Lecturing on Brexit’, *Guardian*, 24 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/24/universities-mccarthyism-mp-demands-list-brexit-chris-heaton-harris> [accessed 3 September 2025].

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Daniel Martin, Tom Witherow, and John Stevens, ‘Our Remainer Universities’, *Daily Mail*, 26 October 2017, <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5PT8-9141-JCBD-D1BC-00000-00&context=1519360> [accessed 3 September 2025]., and Daniel Martin, Tom Witherow, and John Stevens, ‘Our Remainer Universities (Pt II)’, *Daily Mail*, 27 October 2017, <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5PTG-8711-DYTG-41G2-00000-00&context=1519360> [accessed 3 September 2025]. See also David Matthews, ‘“Anti-Brexit Bias”?’

Figure 6.6: *Daily Mail*: ‘Our Remainer Universities’

At the time, philosopher Carl Fox argued that such interventions were not simply about accountability but constituted an attempt to intimidate and silence.<sup>124</sup> By treating dissenting academics as fair game for political bullying, he warned, the campaign degraded public debate and hastened the erosion of trust in expertise. The message was unmistakable: scholars who failed to show Brexit their ‘full-throated support’ risked being denounced.<sup>125</sup> As Fox put it, the moment felt like an academic echo of Martin Niemöller’s confessional: ‘Then they came for the experts.’<sup>126</sup>

The experience of individual scholars bore out this warning. University of Liverpool law professor Michael Dougan, who produced a viral video explaining the legal and economic risks of Brexit in June 2016, was inundated with more than 20,000 hostile messages in latter

Guilty as Charged, Scholars Tell *Daily Mail*’, *Times Higher Education*, 30 October 2017, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/anti-brex-it-bias-guilty-charged-scholars-tell-daily-mail> [accessed 3 September 2025]., and Stefan Collini, ‘Brexit Witch-Hunt against Universities Reveals the Right’s Paranoid Thinking’, *Guardian*, 31 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/31/brexit-witch-hunt-universities-heaton-harris-stefan-collini> [accessed 3 September 2025].

<sup>124</sup> Carl Fox, ‘Then They Came for the Experts: How the *Daily Mail* Is Threatening How You Think’, *The Conversation*, 31 October 2017, <http://theconversation.com/then-they-came-for-the-experts-how-the-daily-mail-is-threatening-how-you-think-86569> [accessed 3 September 2025].

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

half of the year.<sup>127</sup> The abuse included threats against his children and racist slurs telling him to ‘fuck off back to paddyland’.<sup>128</sup> At the same time, Leave campaigners sought to discredit him by circulating the false claim that he was an EU ‘paid agent’.<sup>129</sup> What began as a dispute over Britain’s place in Europe thus became a wider struggle over national identity. These episodes foreshadowed the culture wars of the late 2010s, when Britain’s imperial past emerged as a new frontline and the historian’s craft of nuance and contextualisation increasingly collided with the absolutes demanded by populist memory.

As documented by a King’s College London/Ipsos report, media mentions of the term ‘culture wars’ in a UK context exploded from just 21 in 2015 to 534 in 2020, with the most significant increase occurring in these immediate post-referendum years.<sup>130</sup> By 2019, UK-specific coverage of culture wars surpassed references to other countries, and the term became common in journalistic language to describe various cultural divides. This period saw a concerted derision of historical, social and cultural expertise.

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<sup>127</sup> ‘EU Law Expert Responds to ‘Industrial Dishonesty’ as Video Goes Viral’, *University of Liverpool News*, 20 June 2016, <https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2016/06/20/eu-law-expert-responds-industrial-dishonesty-video-goes-viral/> [accessed 3 September 2025].; Michael Dougan, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in idem (ed.), *The UK after Brexit: Legal and Policy Challenges* (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2017), p. 7.

<sup>128</sup> Dougan, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, p. 7.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>130</sup> Bobby Duffy and others, *Culture Wars in the UK: How the Public Understand the Debate* (London: The Policy Institute, King’s College London, and Ipsos MORI, 2021), p. 4.

**Figure 6.7: Explosion in UK Media Coverage of Culture Wars<sup>131</sup>****There has been an explosion in UK media coverage of culture wars in recent years**

There has been a huge surge in media coverage mentioning “culture wars” in recent years, with 808 articles published in UK newspapers talking about culture wars anywhere in the world in 2020 – up from 106 in 2015.

Even more strikingly, the number of articles focusing on the existence or nature of culture wars *in the UK* has gone from just 21 in 2015 to 534 in 2020.

When the term first appeared in UK newspapers, most articles related to culture wars in the US – and the influence of the US continued to be visible in the 2000s, with spikes in the number of reports mentioning culture wars following the American presidential election cycle.

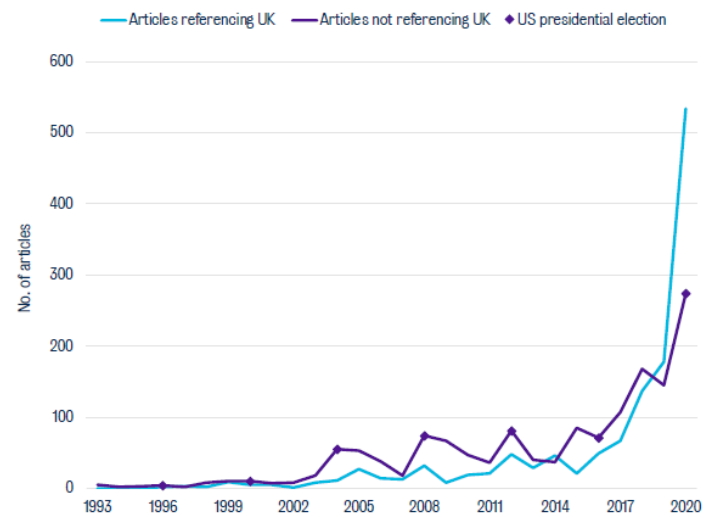
Since the mid-2000s, the idea of UK specific culture wars began to gain some attention. And since 2016, coverage of the UK culture wars has taken off – surpassing the number of references to other countries in 2019 and becoming a term that has entered the journalistic vernacular to describe a wide range of cultural divides in the UK.

In recent years, use of the term in UK newspapers has also broadened in geographical scope beyond the US. Since 2015, Australia has also featured prominently, as did Brazil after the 2018 election. And there is growing discussion about culture wars across Europe, particularly in France, Italy, Ireland, Germany, Turkey and Poland.



Culture wars in the UK | May 2021

Number of articles mentioning “culture wars” in UK newspapers, by those referencing the UK or other countries



Source: Nexis (n=2,762). Country of focus primarily identified by headline; where it was not possible to determine geography from the headline, the full text was checked to determine location. The count for articles referencing the UK also includes some articles where other countries are discussed alongside the UK.

5

The pejorative weaponisation of the term ‘woke’ became the primary vehicle for the escalation of the culture war. As Davies and Macrae detail in their analysis of the ‘war on woke’, this was an ‘intensive ideological campaign against social justice movements’ that mobilised ‘far-right tropes and conspiracy theories within mainstream British political discourse’.<sup>132</sup> Public figures like Meghan Markle became targets, framed by the right-wing press as avatars of a dangerous, progressive ideology.<sup>133</sup> The online environment in particular, including the comments sections of right-wing news articles, became sites of ‘discursive violence’ against experts.<sup>134</sup> Academics, especially women, racialised, and LGBTQ+ individuals, faced unprecedented levels of online abuse, which was ‘staged by newspapers’

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Huw C. Davies and Sheena E. MacRae, ‘An Anatomy of the British War on Woke’, *Race & Class*, 65.2 (2023), p. 3.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>134</sup> See Charlotte Galpin and Patrick Vernon, ‘Post-Truth Politics as Discursive Violence: Online Abuse, The Public Sphere and the Figure of ‘The Expert’’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 26.2 (2024), pp. 423–43.

and designed to frame their bodies as ‘incompatible with academic expertise’.<sup>135</sup> Their research and analysis were recast as a political project aimed at undermining ‘common sense’ and traditional British identity.<sup>136</sup>

This dynamic was amplified by a fundamental shift in the British press. As Julian Petley argues, it is no longer sufficient to describe Britain’s press as ‘Tory’: it is better understood as a ‘populist press’, even an ‘authoritarian populist press’.<sup>137</sup> In his account, longstanding titles like the *Sun*, *Mail*, *Express*, *Times* and *Telegraph* have become ‘viewpapers’ that prioritise affect over verification, valorise ‘common sense’ over expertise, and frame opponents as existential enemies of the people.<sup>138</sup> While such practices have long been evident in the tabloid idiom, for instance in the 1980s campaigns against the ‘loony Left’, digital platforms have amplified and refined such tactics.<sup>139</sup>

The *MailOnline*’s evolution illustrates this trajectory especially clearly. Since 2006, it has operated with its own staff of reporters and editors, mixing articles specifically written for the online platform with ‘reprints’ from the *Daily Mail*.<sup>140</sup> Launched in 2003, it was originally described as ‘more liberal’ than the parent *Daily Mail*.<sup>141</sup> An early strategy was to be ‘less partisan’, focusing on consumer issues like the energy crisis or petrol costs, and aiming to write ‘straight’ stories about both Labour and Tory parties.<sup>142</sup> Editors even pitched *MailOnline* to Members of Parliament as ‘almost nonpolitical’.<sup>143</sup> However, since then the site has decisively shifted towards scale and engagement. Audience growth has been pursued through a three-

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 423.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 435.

<sup>137</sup> Julian Petley, ‘The Populist Press: Conservatism, “Common Sense” and culture wars’, in *Populism, the Pandemic and the Media: Journalism in the age of Covid, Trump, Brexit and Johnson*, ed. by John Mair and others (Bury St Edmunds: Abramis, 2021), p. 290.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., pp. 290–298.

<sup>139</sup> See James Curran, ‘Rise of the “Loony Left”’, in *Culture Wars: The Media and the Left in Britain*, 2nd edn, ed. by James Curran, Ivor Gaber, and Julian Petley (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 5–25.

<sup>140</sup> Chmielewska-Szlajfer, (*Not*) *Kidding*, p. 44.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

pronged strategy: maximising Google visibility with search-engine-optimised headlines (which can be more than 5 or 6 lines in length); sustaining a continuously refreshed homepage that delivers two-thirds of traffic; and exploiting social media, especially Facebook.<sup>144</sup> The site has also intensified tabloids' historic reliance on imagery. Whereas print editions had long used oversized pictures to provoke emotion, online articles now predominantly feature dozens of images, sometimes up to sixty, with 42 per cent embedding video.<sup>145</sup> Editors acknowledge that some stories are 'only about the pictures', with text serving as 'dressing'.<sup>146</sup> Stylistic changes reinforced this visual emphasis: bullet-point intros cater to shorter attention spans, while extensive hyperlinking keeps readers circulating within the site to maximise 'dwell time'.

The comments section represents *MailOnline's* most distinctive investment in digital engagement. Editors describe it as 'an integral part' of the site's success, with thousands of comments per story serving as a visible marker of popularity and commercial value. Dedicated moderators maintain a 'harmonious environment' by rejecting abusive or defamatory language while allowing highly negative opinions to stand.<sup>147</sup> This ensures that hostile emotional reactions remain central to the site's interactive ecosystem. Comments also function as a two-way channel: readers contribute experiences, connect with journalists, and even influence the news agenda when high volumes prompt editorial follow-ups.

These strategies have locked the site into the 'outrage economy'.<sup>148</sup> Alison Phipps describes this as a media environment operating within a broader 'economy of visibility', where the primary currencies are views, clicks, likes, and shares.<sup>149</sup> Within this model, trauma narratives and real injustices are treated as a form of 'investment capital', used to garner public

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<sup>144</sup> Xiangyi He, 'British Digital Tabloids in the Twenty-First Century: Continuity or Transformation?' (PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2023), p. 100, 108, 121, 185.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169,

<sup>146</sup> Chmielewska-Szlajfer, (*Not*) *Kidding*, p. 198.

<sup>147</sup> He, 'British Digital Tabloids', pp. 113, 114.

<sup>148</sup> See Alison Phipps, 'The Outrage Economy', in *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 82–108.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

attention.<sup>150</sup> This emotional response becomes a valuable commodity because the media market is ‘nihilistic’: as long as engagement generates visibility and revenue, the reason for the outrage, whether from supporters or critics, is irrelevant.<sup>151</sup> Keyword-stuffed headlines, image-saturated stories, heated comment sections, and Facebook teasers all work to provoke outrage, curiosity, or excitement. The editors’ operational loop precipitates an affective feedback loop: emotional content generates high engagement, metrics register this as commercial success, and newsrooms treat it as validation of populist framing, commissioning further stories that intensify the cycle.

This was the volatile and hostile climate of public discourse into which Sinclair McKay’s book on Dresden was marketed in early 2020; a moment when the very idea of nuanced, expert-led conversation was under sustained assault. The escalation of these trends in the months that followed demonstrated just how precarious the reputation of experts had become. Just weeks after the 75th anniversary of Dresden, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests supercharged the war on expertise, with new fronts opening against the realms of science and public heritage.<sup>152</sup>

The government’s handling of the pandemic saw epidemiological advice simultaneously instrumentalised and undermined, while the toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol in June 2020 revealed a new battle line around ‘history’ itself, with counter-protesters ‘defending’ the city’s Cenotaph a week later.<sup>153</sup> What had begun as a protest against

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid. pp. 36, 91.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>152</sup> See for example Robert Bevan, *Monumental Lies: Culture Wars and the Truth About the Past* (London: Verso, 2022); Gil Eyal and Thomas Medvetz, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Expertise and Democratic Politics*.

<sup>153</sup> See also John Mair, ‘The Vaccine May Be Working on the Population, But What About the Health of the Media?’, in *Populism, the Pandemic and the Media: Journalism in the age of Covid, Trump, Brexit and Johnson*, ed. by John Mair and others (Abramis, 2021), pp. 125–128; Flossie Caerwynt and others, 'Divisive Nostalgia: How do Dialogues of National Nostalgia Impact on Civil Society's Relationship with Populism?', *Journal of Dialogue Studies*, 12 (2024), p. 104; Kate Wilson and Jasper King, “‘We are NOT FAR RIGHT’ - Large Group Gather at Cenotaph for Protest,” *Bristol Post*, 14 June 2020, updated 14 June 2020,

slavery and systemic racism was reframed by some ministers and commentators as ‘mob rule’ and an attempt to ‘edit history’.<sup>154</sup> In this narrative, statues became sacred historical records whatever their colonial connotations, and anyone challenging that view risked being cast as an enemy of the nation’s past. The treatment of Professor Corinne Fowler epitomised the renewed scrutiny of historians, as she was targeted in 138 mainstream news articles in 21 weeks.<sup>155</sup> Like Dougan, her research on the National Trust’s colonial connections was reframed as a partisan agenda, subjected to abuse, and attacked by politicians.<sup>156</sup>

Stephen Legg has argued such hostility cannot be met by factual correction alone but demands recognition of why certain truths are felt to be offensive.<sup>157</sup> Historians therefore face stark choices about how to communicate in this antagonistic cultural field. Some have embraced a conversational, accessible ‘new orality’, evident in successful podcasts such as *The Rest Is History* and *History Hit*.<sup>158</sup> By consciously avoiding a ‘polemical agenda’, these platforms have built trust with listeners who were, in the words of co-host historian Dominic Sandbrook, ‘tired of being lectured from one side or another’.<sup>159</sup> In print, this has translated into numerous grand, unifying stories, such as *The Rest is History* founder Tom Holland’s *Dominion* (2019), which constructed Western values as a Christian inheritance.<sup>160</sup> Still others have leaned into polarisation, with Matthew Goodwin’s *Values, Voice and Virtue* (2023)

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<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/live-updates-all-lives-matter-4223655> [accessed 4 September 2025].

<sup>154</sup> Flossie Caerwynt et al., p. 108. See also Will Taylor, ‘Colston Statue: “You Can’t Edit History Like Your Wikipedia Entry”, Boris Johnson Says’, *LBC News*, 6 January 2022 [https://www.lbc.co.uk/article/edward-colston-statue-bristol-DWz7Fy\\_2/](https://www.lbc.co.uk/article/edward-colston-statue-bristol-DWz7Fy_2/) [accessed 4 September 2025].

<sup>155</sup> Corinne Fowler, (2021, March 3). *Empire and Heritage* [Webinar]. University of Leicester.

<sup>156</sup> See Stephen Legg, ‘How to Talk About British Colonialism in the Middle of a Culture War’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 84 (2024), 154–59.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Christer Johansson, ‘YouTube Podcasting, the New Orality, and Diversity of Thought: Intermediality, Media History, and Communication Theory as Methodological Approaches’, in *Digital Human Sciences: New Objects-New Approaches*, ed. by Sonya Petersson (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2021), pp. 253–84; *History Hit*, YouTube, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/@HistoryHit>; *The Rest Is History*, YouTube, accessed 4 September 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/@restishistorypod>.

<sup>159</sup> Joe Heim, ‘Asked & Answered: An Interview with “The Rest Is History” Podcasters’, *Washington Post*, 17 May 2025, Lifestyle section, accessed 4 September 2025,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2025/05/17/rest-is-history-podcast-sandbrook-holland/>.

<sup>160</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

turning grievance politics into bestseller success.<sup>161</sup> By contrast, McKay's book pursued a different course. Neither conversational in tone, nor mythic in scope, nor polemical in style, it sought instead to navigate a reconciliatory path, protecting remembrance from extremist appropriation while fostering empathy through its democratisation of perspective. The following section examines how this strategy was constructed, before turning to the ways in which it was received and reshaped by the populist media ecosystem.

### ***Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* as Carefully Crafted Narrative, or Reconciliatory Intervention?**

*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* provides a detailed and vivid account of the bombing of Dresden by the Allies in February 1945.<sup>162</sup> The book offers a comprehensive exploration of the events leading up to, during, and following the bombing, delving deeply into the historical, cultural, and personal dimensions of the events. The narrative raises questions about the ethics of wartime actions, comparing Dresden's suffering to other cities and exploring the broader impact of the bombing on Europe. For example, McKay asks whether '[b]y acknowledging the suffering of all those many thousands of people that night – children, women, refugees, the elderly – and in the years afterwards, do we diminish the hideous crimes that had been committed all around them since the rise of the Nazi Party?'.<sup>163</sup> In doing so, McKay frames 'remembrance itself' as an active 'battlefield' and warns that the past must be 'protected' from extremists who sought to hijack it for their own ends.<sup>164</sup>

As a result, McKay's authorial strategy can be read as a deliberate answer to the historian's dilemma in an age of populist cultural warfare. His intention, as laid out in the book's preface, was to 'listen to the voices of those who were there', assembling a

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<sup>161</sup> Matthew Goodwin, *Values, Voice and Virtue: The New British Politics* (London: Penguin, 2023).

<sup>162</sup> McKay, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

‘kaleidoscopic portrait’ that included victims, bystanders, and perpetrators alike.<sup>165</sup> This approach seemingly represented a practical application of the ‘reconciliatory turn’ in Bomber Command history detailed in Chapter Three. Like institutions such as the International Bomber Command Centre, it sought a balanced and inclusive narrative that incorporated a plurality of voices to navigate the bombing’s complex legacy.

In the *Fire and the Darkness*, readers encounter the city through the eyes of Victor Klemperer, a Jewish professor chronicling daily humiliations, Dr. Albert Fromme, a medic struggling to maintain order in his hospital, and Winfried Biels, a teenager whose stamp collecting was suddenly overtaken by the war.<sup>166</sup> In the case of Margot Hille, a seventeen-year-old employed at the Felsenkeller brewery, McKay traces her ordeal through multiple stages of the bombing: huddling with her mother in a communal shelter as the first wave of bombs fell; tending to concussion after being struck by falling glass when she emerged; and later, relocating with her family into the brewery’s tunnels, which became a sanctuary against subsequent raids.<sup>167</sup> Such testimony situates civilian life at the granular level, evoking both the routines of work and the randomness of survival.

In the same vein, RAF crews are not presented as faceless agents of destruction but as ‘intelligent and often sensitive and reflective young men’ who were ‘exhausted, empty, freezing and profoundly afraid’, more than 55,000 of whom were ‘blasted out of the sky’.<sup>168</sup> McKay vividly evoked what airmen called the ‘Eighth Passenger’ on every mission, the invisible, ever-present companion of fear, and reminded readers that these young men lived under the constant threat of stigma for ‘lack of moral fibre’ and the trauma of bringing home the torn remains of dead crewmates.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., pp. xxiv-xxv.

<sup>166</sup> McKay, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, p. 135, p. 149, p. 161.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 172, p. 183, p. 224, p. 226, p. 243, p. 250, p. 256, p. 284.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 111, 115.

This empathetic lens was consistently applied, collapsing binaries of hero and villain, civilian and combatant. McKay did not shy away from graphic description but always grounded it in sensory human experience: a woman and her pregnant mother clinging together in a cellar; a boy mistaking the explosions for his city's own defences; or Hille's account of how a single accident, being knocked unconscious by a falling window, prevented her from volunteering as a first aider in the Altstadt, something she later believed had saved her life.<sup>170</sup>

By juxtaposing terror in the skies with terror on the ground, McKay created a shared landscape of suffering in which both bomber and bombed appeared as victims of the 'nauseous gravity' of total war.<sup>171</sup> By compelling readers to inhabit multiple perspectives, he denied them the comfort of a single nationalistic narrative. His structural choice aligns closely with Rothberg's concept of 'multidirectional memory', placing the experiences of British airmen and German civilians in dialogue to foster remembrance that is at once more complex and more reconciliatory. It also echoes Stephan Jaeger's observation that writing the air war demands forms beyond a singular 'bird's-eye' synthesis.<sup>172</sup> Because bombing is 'de-materialised and de-localised', riddled with gaps and ambiguities, Jaeger argues, no master narrative can authoritatively settle questions of guilt, responsibility and suffering.<sup>173</sup> Only hybrid texts, those combining testimony, narration, and reflection, can sustain multiple, conflicting voices in productive tension, cultivating what he terms 'infinite closures'.<sup>174</sup> Read through this lens, McKay's polyphonic method, interweaving German civilians, Jewish diarists, medical staff, and RAF crews, has historiographical value even where it makes no new empirical claim: it

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>172</sup> Stephan Jaeger, 'Infinite Closures: Narrative(s) of Bombing in Historiography and Literature on the Borderline between Fact and Fiction', in Wilfried Wilms and William Rasch (eds), *Bombs Away! Representing the Air War over Europe and Japan*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p. 65.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

furnishes a narrative architecture capable of sustaining moral difficulty without collapsing into verdict.

A useful foil here is Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand*.<sup>175</sup> Like McKay, Friedrich assembled a montage of perspectives and vivid ground-level scenes to describe the bombing of Dresden. Yet the book quickly became the focus of controversy for how it represented German victimhood. Critics argue that although Friedrich draws on multiple viewpoints, his authorial stance ultimately channels them into a collective narrative of suffering. His rhetoric, often shading into Holocaust analogies, has been faulted for narrowing context and for blurring the boundary between historical analysis and moral indictment.<sup>176</sup> A closer comparison of how Friedrich and McKay treat similar subjects makes the contrasts clear.

Both describe the firestorms in visceral terms, but Friedrich's prose veers into the sensational. He casts the Dresden raid as a grim theatrical spectacle, calling it the 'performance' that followed the 'rehearsal' in Darmstadt.<sup>177</sup> The raid itself is framed as a methodical process of slaughter: the logic of the 'double blow' attack is said to aim at 'inescapable mass extermination', with three 'extermination centres' where civilians were trapped: the city's cellars, the grassy riverbanks, and the overcrowded train station.<sup>178</sup> Friedrich lingers on the horrific aftermath of the raid, turning in particular to the mass cremation of corpses on funeral

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<sup>175</sup> Jörg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945*, trans. by Allison Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>176</sup> See Daniel Fulda, 'Abschied von der Zentralperspektive. Der nicht nur literarische Geschichtsdiskurs im Nachwende-Deutschland als Dispositiv für Jörg Friedrichs *Der Brand*', in Wilms and Rasch (eds), *Bombs Away!*, pp. 45–64; Brad Prager, 'A Collection of Damages: Critiquing the Violence of the Air War', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 41, 3 (2005), pp. 308–319; Helmut Schmitz, 'Catastrophic History, Trauma and Mourning in W.G. Sebald and Jörg Friedrich', in *Beyond Political Correctness: Remapping German Sensibilities in the 21st Century*, ed. by Christine Anton and Frank Pilipp (Amsterdam - New York, NY: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 27–50; Heinz-Peter Preußner, 'Regarding and Imagining. Contrived Immediacy of the Allied Bombing Campaign in Photography, Novel and Historiography', in *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present*, ed. by Helmut Schmitz (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 141–60; Jamie Zelechoski, 'Emplotting the Air War: Jörg Friedrich's *Brandstätten* (2003)', *Focus on German Studies*, 22, 2015, pp. 52–68; Peter Süß, 'Memories of the Air War: Jörg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43.2 (2008), pp. 335–37.

<sup>177</sup> Jörg Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945*, trans. by Allison Brown, p. 311.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 314–315.

pyres in the Old Market square. Here he introduces the testimony of Theodor Ellgering, head of the interministerial committee on air-war damages, not as a Nazi official but as a sympathetic eyewitness.<sup>179</sup> Friedrich recalls Ellgering joining a young woman searching for her parents, entering a ruined air-raid shelter where they found ‘thirty to forty people, mostly elderly, women, and children...dead, sitting on the benches against the wall’.<sup>180</sup> He then cites Ellgering’s haunting conclusion: ‘These funeral pyres at the Old Market in Dresden represent a blemish in the history of our century that we will be hard put to find another example of in the future. Whoever witnessed it will never forget that horrible scene as long as they live.’<sup>181</sup>

By contrast, McKay contextualises the same witness, noting Ellgering’s high rank, his closeness to Goebbels, and his use of forced labour for the cleanup.<sup>182</sup> By omitting this context, Friedrich presents Ellgering as a neutral observer, allowing his words to stand as the voice of violated humanity rather than of a compromised bureaucrat. This lends weight to the image of the Dresden pyres as a singular atrocity. The woman Ellgering helped is said to have eventually discovered her parents in a ‘pile of 108 corpses’ trampled to death while fleeing through underground passages.<sup>183</sup> The very image of a ‘pile’ echoes Holocaust testimony, in which bodies were frequently described in such terms. Friedrich amplifies this analogy explicitly by noting that Karl Streibel, the SS officer who oversaw the Dresden cremations, had ‘learned of cremation procedures from Treblinka’.<sup>184</sup> Furthermore, terms such as ‘crematoria’, his description of the 5th Bomber Group as a *Massenvernichtungsgruppe* (mass destruction group), and even the title *Der Brand*, with its echoes of the Greek origins of ‘holocaust’, repeatedly import the semantics of extermination into accounts of German suffering.<sup>185</sup> Prager

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 377.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>182</sup> McKay, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, pp. 257–259.

<sup>183</sup> Friedrich, *The Fire*, p. 378.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. p. 379.

<sup>185</sup> Jaeger, ‘Infinite Closures’, p. 71; Brad Prager, ‘Air War and Allegory’ in Wilms and Rasch (eds), *Bombs Away!*, p. 32.

summarises that Friedrich's framing encourages readers 'to ignore the question of German culpability' and to imagine Germans as 'divested of the taint of Nazism'.<sup>186</sup>

Whilst McKay does embrace literary flourish in depicting horror, portraying the bombing as an 'infernal night' and quoting a young witness who said the bombs 'opened the gates of hell', alongside Kurt Vonnegut's image of 'corpse mines', his use of metaphors are also tellingly grounded and nuanced in their symbolism.<sup>187</sup> His description of corpses 'shrunk to the size of marionettes' exemplifies this method.<sup>188</sup> Rather than a gratuitous metaphor, it is anchored in Dresden's own cultural history: Saxony's renowned puppet-making tradition, celebrated for its 'exquisite' craftsmanship and 'large, unblinking, staring eyes'; the city's literary explorations of the uncanny, such as E. T. A. Hoffmann's fragment *The Automata*; and the satirical uses of marionettes by Dresden's modernist artists, and crucially, how they were later appropriated and corrupted by the Nazis in grotesque antisemitic puppet plays.<sup>189</sup>

Thus, McKay is always sure to embed such imagery within a wider frame that integrates Nazi culpability, Allied strategy, Jewish testimony, and the experiences of RAF crews. Where Friedrich's method veers toward a closed narrative of German victimhood, McKay's diligently resists any narrow focus, keeping in view the entangled perspectives necessary to sustain the moral complexity of Dresden. He draws on the story of Erich Isakowitz, a dentist who moved to Dresden in the 1920s to escape antisemitism elsewhere.<sup>190</sup> Through the recollections of his granddaughter, the artist Monica Petzal, McKay recounts the family's initial sense of refuge, the difficulties of assimilation, and their eventual emigration to England after paying a 'considerable ransom to the Nazi Party' to be allowed to leave.<sup>191</sup> McKay places Isakowitz's

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<sup>186</sup> Prager, 'A Collection of Damages', p. 312.

<sup>187</sup> McKay, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, p. xx, p. 258, p. 259, p. 290.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24,

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–3.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

trajectory alongside the diaries of Victor Klemperer to illuminate a ‘recurring philosophical and religious fault line in Germany’.<sup>192</sup> Both men had ‘served bravely in the First World War and risked their lives for their country’, yet their loyalty and belonging were continually questioned, underscoring the precariousness of Jewish identity in interwar Germany.<sup>193</sup> This narrative arc, from wartime service to exclusion and forced exodus, exemplifies how Nazi policies systematically dismantled Jewish life in a city once perceived as a haven.

McKay also includes the testimony of Michal Salomonivic, a Czech Jewish slave labourer near Dresden, who remembered watching the ‘rich amber sky’ during the raids and feeling a ‘wave of exultation’ that the war might finally be ending.<sup>194</sup> In addition, he highlights the ordeals of hundreds of Jewish women from Flossenbürg, Auschwitz, and Ravensbrück forced into labour at the Zeiss Ikon plant in early 1945, enduring ‘icy cruelty’ and chronic exhaustion in overcrowded dormitories.<sup>195</sup> By weaving these Jewish perspectives into his broader tapestry of victims, bystanders, perpetrators, and Allied personnel, McKay ensures that ‘the city’s remorselessly persecuted Jews’ remain central to his ‘kaleidoscopic portrait’ of Dresden.<sup>196</sup> In doing so, he advances his stated aim of ‘humanising the past through empathetic storytelling, while carefully exposing and correcting the myths that had long distorted it’, resisting simplification and preserving the event’s necessary moral complexity.

At the same time, McKay remains careful not to cede ground to myth. Survivor testimony, such as Hille’s, who many years later described the American daylight raid as a ‘crime against humanity’ and repeated stories of Allied planes strafing refugees, is presented with empathy but corrected where necessary.<sup>197</sup> By the time the reader encounters her

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. xxv.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

recollection of these rumours, she is no longer an anonymous voice but a recurring witness whose survival has already been narrated in detail. McKay thus demonstrates that acknowledging the force of memory does not require endorsing its distortions. By weaving her testimony into the narrative and then gently refuting its errors, he fulfils Legg's injunction: recognising the affective power of memory while guiding readers towards a more responsible account.

The most delicate test of this reconciliatory method came in his treatment of the 'war crime' question. McKay consistently refused to provide a definitive verdict, not to minimise the horror of Dresden but because he regarded the label as a legal and political instrument that short-circuited the deeper ethical reflection he sought. He devoted particular attention to Harold Nicolson's 1963 *Observer* review of David Irving's early work, in which Nicolson condemned the attack as brutal, unnecessary, and comparable to Hiroshima. Nicolson even described Dresden as 'the single greatest holocaust caused by war', a claim McKay argued was written 'in the ecstasy of his anger'.<sup>198</sup> For McKay, this was not simply a misjudged flourish: 'Even if he had used the term lazily, it was a wildly tasteless and stupidly provocative thing to write', one that entered 'the territory that was later to give such succour to neo-Nazis'.<sup>199</sup> Here the irony is acute. Max Hastings would later advertise McKay's book by insisting 'there is rage in his ink', yet McKay's critique of Nicolson demonstrates the opposite. His entire point was that anger distorts historical judgement and fuels the very populist misuse he aimed to resist.<sup>200</sup>

McKay instead placed Dresden alongside Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a 'totem to the obscenity of total war', acknowledging the severity of the event while also situating it within a larger historical narrative. The comparisons are intended to provide depth and context, not to

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Hastings, 'Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness Review'.

provoke or sensationalise.<sup>201</sup> By referencing the concept of total war, he seeks to evoke an understanding of the Dresden bombing as part of the wider, complex dynamics of the Second World War, rather than as an isolated or uniquely horrific incident. This has a twofold effect: it acknowledges the scale of destruction, while the ‘total war’ umbrella abstracts individual responsibility. It suggests that such horrific events were somewhat inevitable in this context, thereby cushioning potential criticisms of the RAF’s decisions.

However, this principled refusal to provide a simple verdict had a significant and, perhaps, unavoidable consequence. By leaving the ‘war crime’ question deliberately unanswered, McKay created a narrative vacuum that both the academic and media ecosystem proved unable to tolerate (or resist). While his book meticulously worked to demonstrate the inadequacy of such a simplistic binary, the very existence of the question became the central focus of its public framing. This dynamic was immediately evident in the book’s marketing. While McKay’s text was characterised by personal stories and empathy, its publishers positioned it as an emotionally charged account asking piercing questions. With popular historian Max Hastings’ *Sunday Times* summation, ‘Powerful . . . there is rage in his ink’, placed at the forefront of the advertising, the framing teased an intense, judgmental narrative.<sup>202</sup> This was compounded by online retailers posing the binary question directly: ‘Was Dresden a legitimate military target or was the bombing a last act of atavistic mass murder in a war already won?’ (Figure 6.8)<sup>203</sup>. This framing, promising a decisive verdict McKay’s book deliberately withheld, created a fundamental tension between the author’s reconciliatory intent and the media’s commercial logic.

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<sup>201</sup> McKay, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, p. xxi.

<sup>202</sup> Hastings, ‘*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* Review’.

<sup>203</sup> *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, Amazon.co.uk, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Dresden-Fire-Darkness-Sinclair-McKay/dp/024198601X> [accessed 25 August 2025].

Figure 6.8: *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* Cover and Blurb


**Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness** Hardcover – 6 Feb. 

2020  
by [Sinclair McKay](#) (Author)

4.5 ★★★★★ (914) [See all formats and editions](#)

**The *Sunday Times* Top Ten Bestseller**

'Powerful . . . there is rage in his ink. McKay's book grips by its passion and originality. Some 25,000 people perished in the firestorm that raged through the city. I have never seen it better described' Max Hastings, *Sunday Times*

**Published for the 75th anniversary**

In February 1945 the Allies obliterated Dresden, the 'Florence of the Elbe'. Bombs weighing over 1,000 lbs fell every seven and a half seconds and an estimated 25,000 people were killed. [Was Dresden a legitimate military target or was the bombing a last act of atavistic mass murder in a war already won?](#)

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This tension was further reflected in the article McKay himself wrote for the *Telegraph*, published under the definitive headline: ‘Why the Dresden bombers weren’t war criminals’.<sup>204</sup> The title clashed starkly with the complex and empathetic tone of the article itself. While promising a consideration of ‘why [Dresden] still arouses passions’, McKay maintained a nuanced narrative that mirrored the book’s multifaceted approach.<sup>205</sup> He provided a detailed description of the damage, emphasising that ‘some 25,000 women, children, grandparents, soldiers and refugees were killed in a firestorm’.<sup>206</sup> By including ‘soldiers’ in the list of victims, he deviated from a conventional narrative, portraying the bombing as a tragedy that affected all strata of society and blurred the neat lines between civilian and combatant. He once again fortified the RAF’s legacy by humanising the bomber crews, drawing on their diaries and memoirs to portray them not as ‘monsters’ but as ‘intelligent and often sensitive and reflective

<sup>204</sup> McKay, ‘Why the Dresden Bombers Weren’t War Criminals’.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

young men' who had to live with the 'darkest trauma'.<sup>207</sup> This portrayal reinforced a vision of British forces reluctantly embroiled in a morally complex war, protecting the sacred story of the RAF as an institution of heroism rather than aggression. His argument culminated not in a legal verdict, but in a shift towards modern commemoration, where 'the accent is on reconciliation, and friendship, and ensuring that such horror cannot happen again'.<sup>208</sup>

Yet, despite McKay's reconciliatory narrative, the headline framed the piece as a decisive verdict, casting him as arbiter in the very dispute he sought to transcend. This demonstrates how, even when historians aim to foster complexity and empathy, their work can be appropriated by the outrage economy and reinserted into the polarising binaries that drive engagement. McKay's own *Telegraph* article did at least call those who deemed Dresden a war crime 'wrong', but as we will see, other thumbnails and headlines were even more inflammatory in relation to the discussions they condensed. This dynamic anticipated the prospective memory rituals traced in Chapter Five, in which media framing scripts a communal 'to-do list' of outrage.

### **Media Reframing and Ritualisation**

The reception of *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* shows how Britain's press reworked familiar commemorative scripts for the digital age. As Chapter Four demonstrated, Victor Gregg's testimony was framed as heroic, his veteran authenticity celebrated even when his words jarred against the national story; criticism largely surfaced only in the comment sections. By contrast, as Chapter Five showed, Archbishop Welby's reconciliatory Dresden sermon was cast as betrayal, unleashing cycles of de-ritualisation and re-ritualisation. McKay's book sat uneasily between these poles. It was not condemned for undermining Britain's sacred story but, strikingly, faulted by some reviewers for being insufficiently severe. While affirmatory

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

reviews folded his work back into narratives of national heroism, others, most notably in the *Spectator* and *The Times*, pressed him on the ‘war crime’ question. That such critiques appeared in outlets normally invested in defending Britain’s wartime legitimacy (and indeed, in outlets to which McKay himself is a regular contributor as writer and best-selling author) is especially noteworthy in light of Chmielewska-Szlajfer’s findings. She observes that ‘if a piece, even a highly popular one in terms of clicks, veers from the usual editorial style – for instance, a *MailOnline* article less pro-Brexit than usual during the EU referendum campaign – many commenters are quick to reject the argument. But this, too, generates more clicks and, hence, revenue.’<sup>209</sup> The rarity of such deviations, she argues, shows that the ‘reactive’ nature of online tabloids is not purely data-driven but rooted in shared assumptions between journalists and readers about what the outlet should represent.<sup>210</sup>

From this perspective, the decision of the *Spectator* and *The Times* to foreground the ‘war crime’ debate suggests two possibilities: first, that the ‘human aspect’ of journalism can sometimes tilt towards controversy and profit over ideological consistency, especially in the framing of headlines and social media promotion; and second, that no single grand narrative of Dresden prevails, but rather a shifting terrain in which competing logics of commemoration, profit, and ideology continually intersect.<sup>211</sup> It is these intersecting logics that structured McKay’s reception into two clusters, one affirmatory, one more critical, whose dynamics the following analysis examines in detail.

The first cluster of reviews broadly affirmed McKay’s framing, acknowledging Dresden’s immense human suffering while ultimately preserving the legitimacy of Britain’s war effort. The *Express* offered a five-star review titled ‘*Dresden: a necessary evil?*’ that graphically described how ‘bodies were sucked into a fiery whirlwind’ and people were

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<sup>209</sup> Chmielewska-Szlajfer, (*Not*) *Kidding*, pp. 197–198.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

‘burned alive’, only to reframe the devastation through celebratory portrayals of RAF crews as ‘the bravest of the brave’.<sup>212</sup> Strategic justification was provided by casting Dresden as ‘a transport hub and a site of German war industry’, with its Nazi affiliations underscored by recalling the destruction of the synagogue in 1938.<sup>213</sup> Simon Griffith’s *MailOnline* review adopted a similar formula.<sup>214</sup> While describing ‘brutally effective bombing raids’ and ‘scenes of devastation’, it quickly stressed that Dresden was ‘a functioning cog in the Nazi war machine’.<sup>215</sup> Griffith praised McKay’s ‘masterful’ book for showing ‘another side’, but drew a rhetorical firewall by rejecting analogies with the Holocaust: ‘There is only one Holocaust and a word should not be appropriated for anything else.’<sup>216</sup> Like the *Express*, his review humanised the crews by emphasising their attrition rates were ‘higher than at the battle of the Somme’.<sup>217</sup>

Sir Max Hastings, the most prominent reviewer (having authored over thirty books on military history, including Second World War histories *Bomber Command*, *Overlord*, *Armageddon*, *Nemesis*, and *All Hell Let Loose*), reinforced this pattern in the *Sunday Times*.<sup>218</sup> Notably, Hastings has long been forthright about the ethical failures of Allied bombing. He has written that ‘by this last phase, the moral cost of killing German civilians in unprecedented numbers outweighed any possible strategic advantage. The wholesale destruction of some great cities, Dresden foremost among them, could have been averted, even if attacks on urban rail

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<sup>212</sup> J. L. Stempel, ‘Dresden: A Necessary Evil?’, *The Express*, 14 February 2020, pp. 34–35.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> Simon Griffith, ‘Dresden and *The Crew* Reviews: Two Masterful and Sobering WWII Books’, *MailOnline*, 1 February 2020 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/event/article-7947195/Dresden-Sinclair-McKay-Crew-David-Price-reviews-Two-masterful-sobering-WWII-books.html> [accessed 28 March 2025].

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Hastings, ‘*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* Review’, Max Hastings, *Bomber Command* (London: Michael Joseph, 1979); *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1984); *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944–1945* (London: Macmillan, 2004); *Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944–45* (London: HarperPress, 2007); *All Hell Let Loose: The World at War 1939–1945* (London: HarperPress, 2011).

centres had continued.’<sup>219</sup> In his review of McKay, this broader critique framed his response: he praised the book’s lyrical reconstruction of Dresden prior to its destruction and acknowledged the scale of civilian suffering. He reiterated that Dresden marked a ‘fall from grace’ for the Allies and criticised Harris’s obstinacy, arguing he should have been sacked. However, he still insisted that the bombing of Dresden could not be weighed ‘in any moral balance against the genocidal crimes of the Nazis’.<sup>220</sup> Hastings thus exemplifies the reconciliatory logic at its most authoritative: deeply empathetic to human loss, caustic about leadership failures, yet ultimately reaffirming the moral distinction between Allied conduct and Nazi atrocity.

Other military historians like Saul David, writing in the *Telegraph*, looked again at the case of Harris in particular.<sup>221</sup> Like Hastings, he praised McKay’s ‘carefully researched, finely written and moving account’ and paid tribute to the ‘brave men of Bomber Command’.<sup>222</sup> He acknowledged the value of bringing such a sensitive subject before a British readership. Yet David found McKay’s refusal to deliver a verdict unsatisfactory. The suggestion that the raids were ‘desperate reflexive attacks’ was, in his view, ‘too generous’, a framing that ‘fudges the question of whether Dresden was a war crime or not’.<sup>223</sup> Harris, he noted, never regretted Dresden and continued to insist that its destruction had ‘fatally weakened the German war effort’.<sup>224</sup> For David, this was less a reason to condemn Harris than a reason to criticise McKay for sidestepping the war-crime question.

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<sup>219</sup> Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944–1945* (London: Pan Books, 2005), p. 355.

<sup>220</sup> Hastings, ‘*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* Review’.

<sup>221</sup> Saul David, ‘Was the Bombing of Dresden Legitimate - or a War Crime?’, *Telegraph*, 9 February 2020 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/bombing-dresden-legitimate-war-crime/> [accessed 28 March 2025].

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

The consistency of this stance becomes clearer when set alongside David's review of Malcolm Gladwell's *The Bomber Mafia* the following year.<sup>225</sup> There, he attacked Gladwell's 'gross oversimplification' of the bomber campaign into a binary of precision good versus area bad, and defended Harris against caricature, stressing that Churchill, Portal and others oscillated between strategies.<sup>226</sup> Read together, the two reviews reveal that what David wanted from McKay was not a harsher judgment on Harris but a firmer statement that Dresden, while tragic, did not amount to a war crime. In both cases he advocated nuance as a way of resisting charges of criminality, insisting that the complexity of wartime decision-making precluded easy verdicts of guilt.

Second World War specialist Gary Sheffield agreed with David that this hesitancy to pass judgment restricted the book's potential to advance historical understanding.<sup>227</sup> He deemed that by not engaging deeply with the moral implications of the term 'atrocities' or thoroughly exploring the complex decisions behind the bombing, McKay's work, though rich in narrative and personal accounts, fell short of providing a definitive academic analysis. Sheffield pointed out that a more decisive stance on these ethical questions, supported by more thorough academic referencing, could have elevated the book's contribution to the scholarly discourse on the Dresden bombing. Sheffield claims he can 'understand [McKay's] desire to avoid wading too deeply into highly complex moral judgements', but ultimately describes the book as an 'impressive, elegiac popular history that adds plenty of colour to the existing picture without materially advancing the scholarship'.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Saul David, 'Malcolm Gladwell's *The Bomber Mafia* is misleading history-lite', *Telegraph*, 25 April 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/malcolm-gladwells-bomber-mafia-misleading-history-lite/> [accessed 11 September 2025].

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> Gary Sheffield, 'Smash the Jewel Box: Contributions to the History of the Bombing War of 1939–1945', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 May 2020, no. 6110.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

This may explain why McKay himself, in his own *Telegraph* article, placed the war crime question so prominently in its headline and framing.<sup>229</sup> Yet as Chapter Three observed, historiography of the bombing has long oscillated between apologetic, reconciliatory, and condemnatory registers. If McKay's book had offered little new empirically, his broader methodological choice held value in Jaeger's terms: by embracing narrative hybridity he positioned his work within a strand of historiography that seeks to integrate multiple voices rather than issue definitive verdicts. McKay's initial reluctance to label Dresden a crime can thus be read less as evasion than as a conscious historiographical intervention, aligning with a reconciliatory mode that prioritises empathy and plurality over categorical judgment. An editorial review in the *Economist* surmised that 'Mr McKay's purpose [was] neither to condemn nor condone, but to record what happened and why. Eschewing easy moralising, he prefers to reflect on Dresden's intensely moving annual ceremony of remembrance and the episode's place in collective memory'.<sup>230</sup>

However, demands for moral clarification and sharp judgment also characterised a second cluster of reviews which contested McKay's framing more critically. Richard Overy, another scholar of the bomber campaign, wrote in the *Financial Times* that the raid was 'certainly not strategically necessary since it did little to help the Soviet advance, while the railways were running again within hours'.<sup>231</sup> A.N. Wilson, a literary biographer and columnist famed for his iconoclastic historical takes, in the *Spectator*, pressed McKay more forcefully than any other reviewer on the 'war crime' question.<sup>232</sup> Wilson, though not a Second World

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<sup>229</sup> McKay, 'Why the Dresden Bombers Weren't War Criminals'.

<sup>230</sup> The Economist, 'The Destruction of Dresden, the "Florence of the Elbe"', *Economist*, 6 February 2020 <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2020/02/06/the-destruction-of-dresden-the-florence-of-the-elbe> [accessed 21 January 2024].

<sup>231</sup> Richard Overy, 'Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness - Was 1945's Bombing an Atrocity?', *Financial Times*, 21 February 2020 <https://www.ft.com/content/8aabe0c2-4e8c-11ea-95a0-43d18ec715f5> [accessed 28 March 2025]. See his book, Richard Overy, *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe, 1940-1945* (London: Penguin, 2014).

<sup>232</sup> A.N. Wilson and Sinclair McKay, 'Did Britain Commit a War Crime in Dresden? A Conversation', *Spectator*, 8 February 2020 <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/did-britain-commit-a-war-crime-in-dresden-a-conversation/> [accessed 28 March 2025].

War specialist by trade, is an established figure in British letters, renowned for works on Victorian history and biography. His style often tends toward the provocative and contrarian; for example, his 2017 biography of Charles Darwin was criticised as ‘unreliable and inaccurate’, a ‘cheap attempt to ruffle feathers’.<sup>233</sup> Here, Wilson argued that in 1945 ‘it was a crime to deliberately kill non-combatants’, and provocatively suggested that Churchill himself might have been tried at Nuremberg alongside Bomber Command leaders such as Charles Portal and even Clement Attlee.<sup>234</sup> Throughout their conversation, Wilson introduced arresting images: pregnant women in Hamburg set ablaze, civilians scorched in canals, the Great Fire of London (invoked as a precedent for incendiary destruction), to underscore his sense of Allied culpability.<sup>235</sup> Whilst Wilson suggests the RAF airmen were ‘lied to’ about the strategic significance of the raid, he even tentatively questions the morality of the bomber crews themselves, as he suggests they were committing ‘crazy and – by ordinary human standards – utterly immoral’ actions driven by the circumstances of the time.<sup>236</sup>

McKay resisted such outright condemnation, emphasising that ‘war crime’ was a legal category ill-suited to moral reasoning, and insisting that Dresden did have military significance as a railway hub and centre of war production.<sup>237</sup> He also defended the humanity of the crews: ‘they weren’t cruel, they weren’t sadistic, they were intelligent, sensitive young men. You wouldn’t begin to say that any of those crews were war criminals.’<sup>238</sup> Wilson conceded this point, ‘No, I wouldn’t say that, of course’, but redirected his ire toward Harris, whom he declared deserved daily public humiliation: ‘I wish I could constantly pour slurry and paint

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<sup>233</sup> Kathryn Hughes, ‘*Charles Darwin by A.N. Wilson review - how wrong can a biography be?*’, *Guardian*, 30 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/30/charles-darwin-victorian-mythmaker-an-wilson-review> [accessed 11 September 2025].

<sup>234</sup> Wilson and McKay, ‘Did Britain Commit a War Crime in Dresden? A Conversation’.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

over his head every single day of my life!’<sup>239</sup> The dialogue revealed the layered moral economy surrounding Dresden. Wilson pushed for sweeping condemnation, extending culpability from Harris to the highest levels of British leadership, while McKay sought to tether the debate to the contingencies of war, the psychology of decision-making, and the limits of legal categories. The exchange epitomised the tension between moral absolutism and historical contextualisation, a tension that framed much of the book’s reception.

For example, Christopher Priest, also in the *Spectator*, described Dresden as ‘the deliberate destruction of a major city, a beautiful and historic place the size of Manchester, one that had little or no military value’.<sup>240</sup> While acknowledging McKay’s refusal to apply the ‘war crime’ label, Priest underscored the moral stakes by calling the second raid ‘purposeful cruelty... planned to be cruel’.<sup>241</sup> Like Wilson, he placed responsibility with leadership, RAF and USAAF controllers, and ultimately Churchill, who ‘gave the go-ahead’ with knowledge of the likely civilian toll.<sup>242</sup> However, the most uncompromising rejection of the bombing’s rationale came from historian Gerard DeGroot.<sup>243</sup>

Writing for *The Times*, DeGroot opened by describing Dresden as a city of ‘sacred beauty’, a place seemingly too perfect to destroy, in order to highlight the irrationality of what followed.<sup>244</sup> He argued that Dresden’s destruction marked the transformation of Allied bombing from a failed attempt at precision to a ‘cynical strategy of terror’, a moral slide where ‘killing kids became acceptable, as long as they were German’.<sup>245</sup> His review is notable for its omission of any gestures towards bomber crew heroism, focusing instead on the futility of the

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Christopher Priest, ‘Was Dresden a War Crime?’, *Spectator*, 1 February 2020 <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/was-dresden-a-war-crime/> [accessed 28 March 2025].

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Gerard DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review - A Totem to the Obscenity of Total War’, *The Times*, 5 February 2020 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dresden-the-fire-and-the-darkness-by-sinclair-mckay-review-a-totem-to-the-obscenity-of-total-war-vcjv97n13> [accessed 28 March 2025].

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

raid, noting that Germans ‘carried on much like Londoners during the Blitz’, and its horrific human cost.<sup>246</sup>

In doing so, DeGroot deployed McKay’s most graphic descriptions of the firestorm as a ‘multifaceted method of killing’.<sup>247</sup> He recounted how victims’ ‘shoes melted on the bubbling pavement’, how some were ‘roasted in the cellars, rendered into tiny, desiccated figures like macabre marionettes’, and how others were ripped apart, with ‘arms and legs’ left ‘dangling from trees’.<sup>248</sup> He included the most harrowing details, such as: ‘Pregnant women were found with their bellies burst and the foetus exposed... a woman, struggling to escape, had her baby ripped from her grasp and sucked into the flames.’<sup>249</sup> This unflinching detail was used not to evoke tragic necessity, but to strip away any lingering utilitarian justification. In DeGroot’s hands, Dresden’s legality was not a debate to be had, but a verdict to be delivered.

### **Mediatised Contestation**

Regardless of their positions, reviews of Sinclair McKay’s book were swiftly recontextualised within the outrage economy of digital journalism. As detailed earlier, this environment is driven by market pressures and platform mechanisms, where content is often simplified and emotionally charged to enhance engagement. Journalists adapt content to audience needs and monitor online data, often lifting stories from other sources and prioritising speed. Headlines and visual elements like thumbnails are crafted to provoke attention and engagement rather than to accurately reflect the full argument. At *MailOnline*, for instance, reporters have recorded that headlines are frequently drafted by editors *before* the article is written, with instructions flowing from the top down and shaped by search-engine priorities.<sup>250</sup> The headline, together with the accompanying image, is in turn designed not only to attract clicks but also to

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Chmielewska-Szlajfer, (*Not*) *Kidding*, p. 222.

embed a moral stance, providing direction on how the story should be understood in terms of ‘good and evil, justice and injustice’.<sup>251</sup>

As Blassnig et al. demonstrate, such cues do not simply colour how readers interpret a piece, they ‘hit a nerve’, activating in-group and out-group identifications and eliciting strong emotions such as anger, fear, hope, or pride.<sup>252</sup> Sensationalist, dramatised, or moralised headlines are particularly effective at producing this affective resonance, encouraging higher levels of engagement regardless of how nuanced the underlying text may be. The Dresden anniversary, a complex and emotionally charged topic, offers a near-perfect occasion for this dynamic: controversy can be guaranteed, engagement ensured, and traffic maximised, as contentious narratives are especially likely to be amplified online.

These insights help us understand why the promotional frames systematically foregrounded the most confrontational elements of both McKay’s book and its critical reception. DeGroot’s review, for instance, immediately evoked McKay’s morally layered line ‘a totem to the obscenity of total war’; whilst Max Hastings’ nuanced discussion was condensed to ‘An orgy of destruction. Righteous anger drives this gripping new study’.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Sebastian Blassnig, Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, and Frank Esser, ‘Hitting a Nerve: Populist News Articles Lead to More Frequent and More Populist Reader Comments’, *Political Communication*, 36, 4, (2019), pp. 629–651.

<sup>253</sup> DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’; Hastings, ‘*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* Review’.

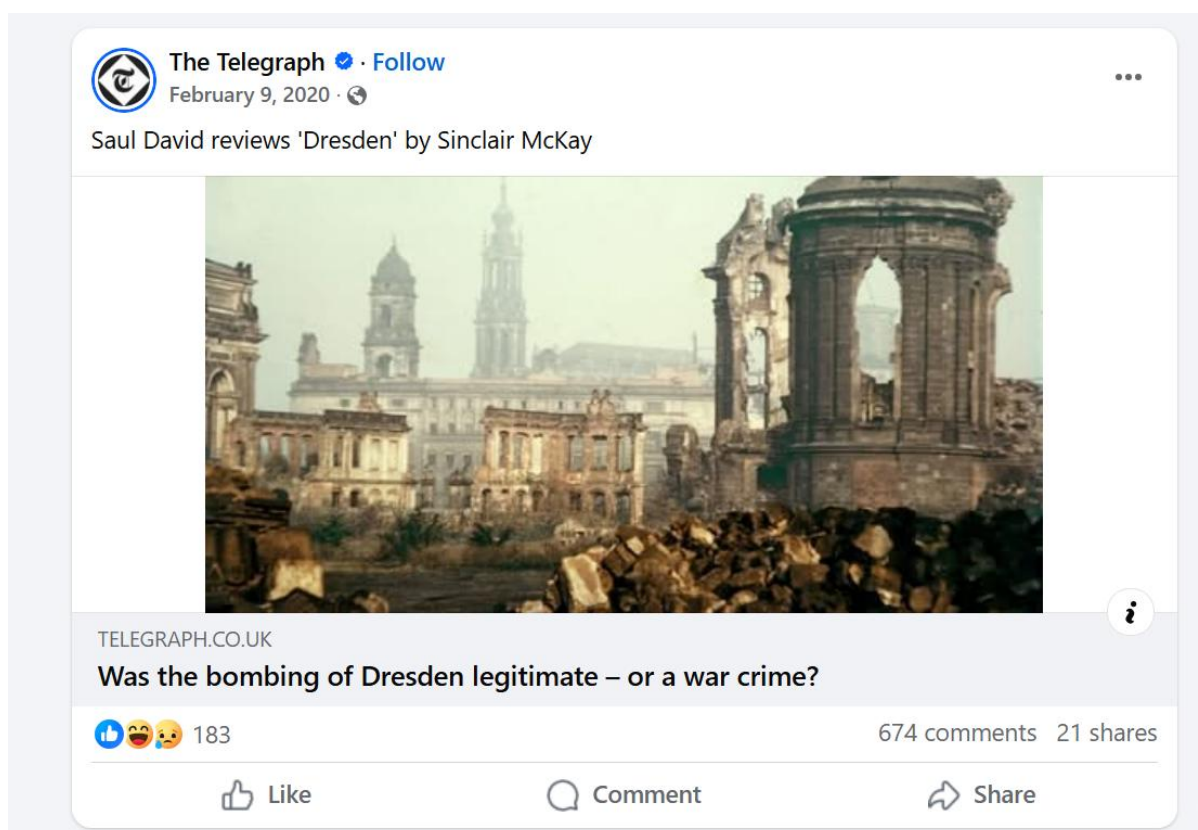
Figure 6.9: *The Times* Review Headline: ‘An Orgy of Destruction’



On social media, where headlines and thumbnails often serve as the main (and sometimes only) point of contact with content, this reduction became even more pronounced. Christopher Priest’s article circulated as the blunt question, ‘Was Dresden a war crime?’; while Saul David’s appeared as ‘Was the bombing of Dresden legitimate – or a war crime?’.<sup>254</sup> In David’s case, the headline echoed his opening gambit that ‘the argument still rages’, yet tellingly never clarifies between whom. The effect was to conjure an atmosphere of live controversy, regardless of whether such a dispute persisted among historians, veterans, or simply in the press itself.

<sup>254</sup> *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2020/02/was-dresden-a-war-crime/> [accessed 11 September 2025]; *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/bombing-dresden-legitimate-war-crime/> [accessed 11 September 2025].

**Figure 6.10: The *Telegraph* Facebook post: ‘Legitimate – or a War Crime?’**



Other outlets deployed the same tactic: Richard Overy’s *Financial Times* piece asked the loaded question ‘When does strategy descend into atrocity?’<sup>255</sup> Together, these headlines implied that Dresden remained an open moral trial, keeping the ‘debate’ alive through framing even as McKay’s book itself sought a reconciliatory register. Such strategies exemplify what Shin, DeFelice, and Kim define as rage bait: content designed to arouse strong emotions to drive interaction.<sup>256</sup> Rage bait explicitly seeks to incite negative emotions like anger and disgust, leveraging these as effective strategies for driving virality and boosting algorithmic rankings. It often involves attributing blame to an ‘outgroup’ to mobilise energy to correct a perceived injustice.<sup>257</sup>

<sup>255</sup> Richard Overy, ‘When Does Strategy Descend into Atrocity? Personal Stories from Dresden Add Poignancy to the Debate over the Contentious 1945 Bombing’, *Financial Times*, 22 February 2020, p. 9.

<sup>256</sup> Jieun Shin, Chris DeFelice, and Soojong Kim, ‘Emotion Sells: Rage Bait vs. Information Bait in Clickbait News Headlines on Social Media’, *Digital Journalism* (2025), p. 3.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

In doing so, media outlets also activate the ‘confrontation effect’.<sup>258</sup> This term describes how users become more motivated to engage with content that contradicts their pre-existing ideological views. This strategy leverages a well-documented bias, where individuals are psychologically predisposed to select and engage more strongly with negative information.<sup>259</sup> Mochon and Schwarz explain that outrage, despite being an unpleasant feeling, generates ‘approach motivation’ leading individuals to ‘stand up and fight back’ against the perceived source of the negative emotion.<sup>260</sup> Online interactions are particularly conducive to this effect, as they require low effort, reduce the likelihood of retaliation, and elicit lower empathic distress compared to in-person confrontations.<sup>261</sup> Users typically respond by counterarguing, denigrating the source, and writing negating comments, which tend to be longer and express more negative sentiment.<sup>262</sup> The confrontation effect is especially pronounced for topics deemed important by the individual and when messages are framed in a threatening manner.<sup>263</sup>

The impact of these tactics is intensified by changing patterns of news consumption. As Collier, Dunaway, and Stroud show, mobile and social referrals produce far lower click-through rates than homepage visits on PCs, since they involve more incidental and passive encounters with news.<sup>264</sup> Social feeds encourage rapid, heuristic processing, while small screens foster fatigue and discourage sustained reading.<sup>265</sup> The presence of paywalls for articles like those by Priest and David can further reduce full-article readership, creating an additional

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<sup>258</sup> See Daniel Mochon and Janet Schwartz, ‘The Confrontation Effect: When Users Engage More with Ideology-Inconsistent Content Online’, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 185 (2024), pp. 1–14.

<sup>259</sup> See Mei Zhang, Haotian Wu, Yang Huang, Ruibing Han, Xinyuan Fu, Zhizhi Yuan, and Shuer Liang, ‘Negative News Headlines Are More Attractive: Negativity Bias in Online News Reading and Sharing’, *Current Psychology*, 43 (2024), pp. 30156–69.

<sup>260</sup> Mochon and Schwartz, ‘The Confrontation Effect’, pp. 1–2.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>264</sup> See Jessica R. Collier, Johanna Dunaway, and Natalie Jomini Stroud, ‘Pathways to Deeper News Engagement: Factors Influencing Click Behaviors on News Sites’, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 26 (2021), pp. 265–83.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 267, 268.

layer of separation between the audience and the content. For many, the headline and thumbnail effectively undoubtedly *were* the article, serving as the primary, and often only, source of information. This means that the ideological and emotional cues embedded in the promotional material, not the nuanced reasoning of the review (and even less likely the book itself), often set the terms of debate. By the time audiences arrived in the comment sections, the promotional framing had already cast the historian as either betraying or defending sacred wartime memory, priming the ritualised contestation.

To explore how the online public responded, the analysis will now narrow in on four key reviews: by Saul David, Gerard DeGroot, Max Hastings, and Christopher Priest. The focus is on the reactions to these four articles for two primary reasons. Firstly, not only were they some of the most commented-on articles surrounding the 2020 anniversary (along with the Gregg articles analysed in Chapter Four), but by examining their reception, we can also see how the historical expertise of the reviewers themselves is challenged and affirmed alongside McKay's. This offers a more comprehensive analysis of the 'crisis' or 'death' of expertise as it unfolds in real-time digital discourse in relation to the 'grand narrative' of the Second World War.

### **Rage Against the Machine: Populist Anger and the Absent Historian**

Across the four comment sections generated by the reviews of Sinclair McKay's *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, the initial and overwhelming wave of public engagement was not with the book itself, but with the incendiary question posed by the media platforms that hosted the discussion. The headlines and thumbnails accompanying these reviews did not simply frame the interpretation of the text, but actively invited confrontation. In the resulting replies, a significant portion of the engagement consisted of blunt, even single-word replies that responded directly to the binary framing of the headlines.

The Word Cloud mapping the most common word combinations across these reviews (Figure 6.11) provides striking visual confirmation of this dynamic. Because this type of data visualisation scales text size directly to the frequency of its occurrence within the dataset, the overwhelming visual dominance of the phrase 'war crime' demonstrates that it was the single most utilised word combination in the corpus of comments. This high volume of usage is theoretically significant. While McKay made deliberate efforts to construct a reconciliatory and multidirectional narrative, this visual evidence confirms that his historical nuance was largely overshadowed. Rather than engaging primarily with the complexities of his work, the audience was pulled directly into a polarised debate over historical criminality, ensuring that debate over the parameters and meaning of the term 'war crime' remained the absolute focal point of the digital memory of Dresden.

Figure 6.11: Word Cloud: Most Common Word Combinations Across Reviews



For instance, under the *Spectator* headline, numerous comments simply stated ‘No’ or ‘No it wasn’t’.<sup>266</sup> While such curt denials may not in themselves convey indignation, other terse replies (‘Ask a Jew!’, ‘Payback for the Blitz’) make clear the offence taken.<sup>267</sup> For these commenters, whilst the question was not worth asking (‘What a load of bollocks... Was London’ [sic]), the post was clearly worth refuting (‘Never, ever look at history with modern eyes’).<sup>268</sup> In the responses to Saul David’s review for the *Telegraph*, this pattern was even more pronounced. Shorter comments under ten words were strikingly prominent, constituting over 40 per cent of the total comments.<sup>269</sup> These sharp interventions cut in both directions. On one side, categorical defence (‘ffs war is war [sic]’ or ‘legitimate’) signalled a moral certainty that required no elaboration.<sup>270</sup> On the other, declarations such as ‘It was a war crime, plain and simple’, or ‘all war is a crime ! [sic]’ likewise dismissed complexity.<sup>271</sup> Both stances relied on broad, declarative statements rather than any engagement with David’s actual framing of McKay’s book.

The dominant mode of remembering thus remained fiercely antagonistic, built upon a rhetorical strategy of deflection and counter-accusation. One of the most prevalent arguments, deployed relentlessly across all four datasets, took the familiar form of an almost compulsive invocation of the Blitz. ‘Does anyone ask if bombing London was ok?’ demanded one commenter in the Saul David thread, while another asked simply, ‘Was Coventry?’.<sup>272</sup> These rhetorical questions retained their recurring motif, a symbolic trump card intended to silence debate. The most liked comment similarly asserted, ‘War is not handbags at dawn. What about Warsaw, Rotterdam, Coventry etc. etc. They sowed the wind, so did they reap the

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<sup>266</sup> *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 1, 65.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 12, 64.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 57, 59.

<sup>269</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 12, 37.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 119, 185.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 283, comment 17.

whirlwind.<sup>273</sup> The implication remained just as clear as in previous chapters: suffering caused by German bombing sanctified subsequent Allied actions, rendering any ethical scrutiny of the bombing of German cities illegitimate and insulting.

Comments that recycled these established tropes were consistently rewarded with likes. In the responses to the DeGroot review, the trend is particularly clear: of the ten most-recommended comments, eight relied on one of the established typologies identified in earlier chapters. The single most popular contribution, endorsed by 44 users, again invoked Harris's famous biblical warning to 'sow the wind and reap the whirlwind', while appeals to vicarious veteran authority were almost as successful: one commenter, introducing himself as 'the son of a Lancaster bomber bomb aimer', gained 38 recommendations, while a reply from the son of a Wellington crew member attracted 11.<sup>274</sup> Assertions of collective culpability also resonated powerfully, with 32 recommendations given to the claim that 'the German people stood by, complicit, whilst the little men of the Nazi party systematically brought genocide to central and Eastern Europe', echoed by other highly-rated comments stressing that Germans were 'happy to help the Nazis' or that revenge was simply 'just retribution'.<sup>275</sup> Even the most laconic responses carried weight: 'They started it', or 'We were at war, Hitler would not surrender, the Dresden bombing was understandable [sic]', each gathered 23 endorsements.<sup>276</sup>

This aligns with Jung et al.'s findings that easily legible, affectively charged signals, including features associated with clickbait, tend to generate higher levels of engagement than substantive or novel content.<sup>277</sup> This dynamic can transform comment sections from potential sites for deliberation into arenas for what Daniel Thiele terms 'citizen-generated populism'.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., comment 15.

<sup>274</sup> DeGroot, 'Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review', comment 1, comment 10, comment 11.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., comment 18, comment 21, comment 15.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., comment 26, comment 2.

<sup>277</sup> See Anna-Katharina Jung, Stefan Stieglitz, Tobias Kissmer, Milad Mirbabaie, Tobias Kroll, 'Click Me...! The Influence of Clickbait on User Engagement in Social Media and the Role of Digital Nudging', *PLOS ONE*, 17.6 (2022), pp. 1–22.

<sup>278</sup> See Thiele, 'COVID-19 and the News', pp. 1–31.

Thiele argues this populism is often a reactive response, triggered by ‘activating cues’ within the news posts themselves, such as mentions of the government, experts, or other elite groups.<sup>279</sup> In this environment, recognisability and emotional charge prove more valuable than nuance, reinforcing the ritualised and affective character of the exchanges, as seen in the Dresden debates. Among the top fifteen most recommended comments on the Hastings review, for instance, there was just one riposte to the rejections of Dresden’s moral complexity.

The lone dissenter, posting under the name ‘Zookeeper’, argued for a more empathetic historical understanding, suggesting that the passage of time should in fact allow for a more nuanced and critical view of historical events:

I find it deeply depressing that even seventy five years after the event, the resistance among some people – who were not there – to look at those events in an honest, critical way and to come to a broader understanding of history, is still so deeply ingrained. The ‘they started it’ argument does us no credit at this distance in time. If you can shrug off the deaths of some 600,000 German civilians, many of whom were not committed Nazis but just trying to survive in a cataclysm brought about by their leaders, what sort of person does that make you? The holocaust was a monstrous crime. But what sort of justice requires the incineration of a ten year old German girl in Hamburg or Dresden to pay for the actions of her country’s leaders? Especially when it was clear the attack would do little to speed the end of the war, and was primarily done to please Stalin.<sup>280</sup>

This comment not only questioned the morality of the Allied bombing campaign but also challenged the notion that the actions of the past should be uncritically justified by the standards of their time. By invoking both the scale of civilian deaths and the specific image of a ‘ten year old German girl’, the commenter underscored the importance of empathetic and

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>280</sup> Hastings, ‘*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*’ Review, comment 24.

critical historical analysis that recognises the varied and often tragic experiences of individuals caught in the tumult of war. The explicit acknowledgment of the Holocaust as a ‘monstrous crime’ served both to affirm the gravity of Nazi atrocities and to home in on the question of proportionality in the Allied response. In this way, the comment posed a direct challenge to the ethics of retributive justice, asking whether the deliberate incineration of civilians could ever be considered legitimate.

Such moral reflection was swiftly rejected. One reply dismissed the very form of the argument with the curt admonition: ‘If you ever find yourself writing: “The holocaust was a monstrous crime. But” – just don’t.’ [sic]<sup>281</sup> This prohibition sought to close down the space for comparative moral reasoning by rendering any attempt to weigh Allied conduct against Nazi atrocities as inherently illegitimate. When ‘Zookeeper’ contested the notion of Dresden as just retribution in another thread with the pointed question ‘Retribution on mostly civilian women, old men and children? It’s that simple, is it?’, the replies again worked to delegitimise empathy.<sup>282</sup> One user was indignant in their reply: ‘Curiously women were Hitler’s most fervent supporters. Just look at the newsreels. What about the women sent to the gas chambers with their children? Retribution!’<sup>283</sup> The reference to newsreels claimed an evidentiary basis for the argument, suggesting that women’s visible enthusiasm for Hitler undermined their innocence, while the emphatic exclamation ‘Retribution!’ reaffirmed the legitimacy of collective punishment. Another reply turned to *tu quoque* comparison: ‘It was “mostly civilian women, old men and children” who were killed in German air raids on London, Liverpool, Portsmouth, Hull, Bath, York, Coventry... and half a hundred British towns and cities.’<sup>284</sup> This

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., comment 25.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., comment 42.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., comment 43.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., comment 44.

move did not engage with the morality of the Dresden raid directly but sought to relativise it by placing British suffering at the centre of the narrative.

These sequences illustrate how empathy and critical distance were not debated but overwritten through patterned scripts. The lone cosmopolitan appeal to reflect on the ethics of civilian bombing was met with strategies of silencing (prohibition), reattribution of blame (women as fervent Nazis), and palliative comparison (the Blitz). Such exchanges therefore exemplify not a deliberation over history but a form of what Woods et al. identify as ‘collective symbolic coping’.<sup>285</sup> Drawing on the work of Wagner and Kronberger, they use this concept to describe ‘the collective activity of a group struggling to maintain the integrity of its worldview which is also crucial for social identity’, an identity often constituted through a shared relationship with a particular media outlet and its political outlook.<sup>286</sup>

To reiterate, these practices are best understood as digitalised ritual performances. They may look like spontaneous bursts of fury, but in practice they follow rehearsed routines of mnemonic defence, drawing on ‘culturally and socially shared ways of expressivity and symbolism’ to signal belonging.<sup>287</sup> Haverinen terms such gestures a ‘ritualised act of solidarity’.<sup>288</sup> In her study of online mourning she stresses that not every contribution is recognised as authentic ritual: gestures perceived as too effortless, such as clicking ‘like’ or posting a virtual candle, risk being dismissed as inauthentic or ‘thin’, unable to convey the gravity of grief.<sup>289</sup> By contrast, more deliberate acts, selecting a song, poem, or image, carry

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<sup>285</sup> Ruth Woods, Sharon Coen, and Ana Fernández, ‘Moral (Dis)engagement with Anthropogenic Climate Change in Online Comments on Newspaper Articles’, *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 28 (2018), p. 254.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. See also Wolfgang Wagner and Nicole Kronberger, ‘Killer tomatoes! Collective symbolic coping with biotechnology’, in *Representations of the social-Bridging theoretical traditions*, ed. by Kay Deaux and Gina Philogene (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 149.

<sup>287</sup> Anna Haverinen, ‘Facebook, Ritual and Community: Memorialising in Social Media’, *Ethnologia Fennica*, 42 (2015), p. 8.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

added authenticity precisely because they require more effort, lending greater ritual significance to the message.<sup>290</sup>

In the Dresden debates, however, authenticity was judged differently. Here, both brief and substantiated replies could resonate as ritual, provided they aligned with the sacred wartime story. Short, emphatic assertions, ‘No’, ‘They started it’, ‘Payback for the Blitz’, were accepted as powerful affirmations of solidarity, even though they lacked elaboration.<sup>291</sup> At the same time, more developed interventions, invoking the Blitz in detail, citing Dresden’s industrial role, or stressing Soviet requests for continued Allied bombing, were understood as demonstrations of deeper commitment, comparable to Haverinen’s ‘added effort’ gestures.<sup>292</sup> The crucial distinction was not between ‘thin’ and ‘authentic’, but more fundamentally between belonging and not belonging: contributions that reinforced the sacred story were absorbed into the community’s ritual repertoire, while those that challenged it marked the speaker as an outsider.

This logic extended to links and external references. As Haverinen notes, content otherwise profane (such as unrelated YouTube clips) can become ritualised when recontextualised within remembrance practices.<sup>293</sup> The Dresden threads displayed the same dynamic. Commenters embedded archival photographs of bombed British cities, wartime statistics, or vintage footage as ritual objects of mnemonic defence. One user drew on family memory to bolster authority, recounting a grandfather’s survival of the Coventry Blitz and accompanying the story with a YouTube link to a British Pathé newsreel of the destruction,

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

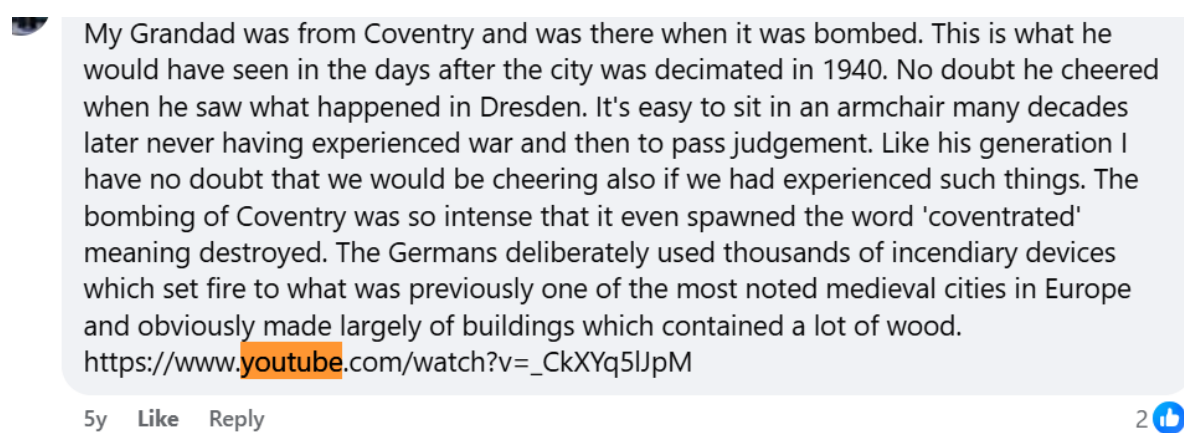
<sup>291</sup> *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 1 (‘No’) and comment 64 (‘Payback for the Blitz’) and DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 26 (‘They started it’).

<sup>292</sup> For developed interventions, see DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 41 (“If it is true that Dresden was a major transport hub...”), comment 12 (industrial role), comment 32 (“Not a mention of why the policy came into being...”), comment 34 (“At Yalta...”), and comment 64 (“At Yalta, Stalin and Stavka wanted a demonstration...”); *ibid.*, comments 1, 2, 5, 6, 38 and 57 (detailed Blitz invocations, including Coventry, London, and V-weapon attacks); and *Spectator* review, comment 2 (“Dresden was bombed at the request of the Soviets and because it was an industrial hub”).

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

reinforcing the claim that cheering Dresden's fate was a natural response.<sup>294</sup> These gestures exemplify how links functioned as ritualised appeals to authority: encyclopaedic sources like Wikipedia offered a veneer of factual objectivity; YouTube footage supplied pre-packaged interpretive authority; whilst intra-platform links to articles invoked the newspaper's own prestige as reinforcement. In each case, the act of linking was less about opening debate than about reinscribing the sacred story in visual and textual form.<sup>295</sup> This ritualised recycling of the wartime story parallels what Yabancı describes as the sacralisation of politics: the infusion of political narratives with religious-like qualities.<sup>296</sup> Through the constant repetition of 'myths, rites, and symbols that galvanise group solidarity', the Dresden comment community transformed itself into a self-perceived 'elect community', bound together by loyalty to the sacred wartime narrative and defined in opposition to those who challenged it.<sup>297</sup>

### Figure 6.12: Comment Thread: 'My Grandad was from Coventry'



For the vocal minority opposing these narratives, their comments followed the same ritualised logics. Their central claim was unambiguous: 'A war crime. [sic]' declared one unequivocal post in the Saul David thread, echoed in refrains such as 'A war crime without

<sup>294</sup> *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 56.

<sup>295</sup> For appeals to encyclopaedic authority, see the DeGroot review, comment 140 (Wikipedia). For intra-platform reinforcement, see the link to the A.N Wilson interview in the same comment section, comment 108.

<sup>296</sup> See Bilge Yabancı, 'Fuzzy Borders between Populism and Sacralized Politics: Mission, Leader, Community and Performance in 'New' Turkey', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 22.2 (2021), pp. 92–112.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

doubt. [sic]’ and ‘Deliberately killing thousands of innocent civilians is always a war crime. End of discussion.’<sup>298</sup> Another inverted the Blitz invocation with the charge: ‘That night WE were the Huns.’<sup>299</sup> Such moves illustrate that counter-rituals were not spontaneous gestures of empathy but deliberate performances that harnessed familiar repertoires: repetition of recognisable tropes, external links to authenticate claims, and the affective weight of absolutes.

These interventions often borrowed the same techniques of resonance as their opponents. One commenter, discrediting the palliative comparison between Dresden and Coventry, insisted ‘Just remember we’re talking vastly different casualties here’, appending links to Historic Coventry and Britannica pages.<sup>300</sup> However, these counter-rituals did not simply affirm humanitarian law or empathy; they also often enacted more accusatory and destabilising rituals of moral equivalence and vilification, casting Harris, the RAF, and even Britain itself as perpetrators of barbarism. In this way, cosmopolitan dissent mirrored the dominant ritual economy but inverted its moral compass, producing ritualised attacks rather than ritualised defences. Even blatant distortions, such as use of the inflated casualty figures of ‘100,000 to 135,000 deaths’, long discredited in scholarship, worked ritually: their very recognisability gave them mnemonic power as shorthand symbols of outrage.<sup>301</sup>

Because these counter-rituals directly challenged the sacralised national narrative, they inevitably collided with the majority’s rituals of justification. The result was not dialogue but confrontation: duelling performances of condemnation and defence locked in symbolic combat. One exchange began with a relatively mild criticism: that the raid on Dresden had been militarily pointless and had cost the lives of both bomber crews and civilians in vain.<sup>302</sup> Almost immediately, a user posting under the name John Noel Hughes-Wilson intervened with a stern

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<sup>298</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 1, comment 237, comment 285.

<sup>299</sup> DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 163.

<sup>300</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 23–5.

<sup>301</sup> DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 163.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 12.

rebuke: ‘Rubbish! And ill informed, as are so many of these asinine comments... Harris did what he was asked to do and his brave air crews took the casualties; all 55,000 young men killed. Let the record show the truth. Facts are so much more important than opinions, don’t you think?’<sup>303</sup>

Colonel John Hughes-Wilson is a retired British Army intelligence officer and a military historian, known as the author of *Military Intelligence Blunders, Blindfold and Alone*, and *A Brief History of the Cold War*.<sup>304</sup> Whilst the *Times.co.uk* platform does not provide biographical information on commenters, the attribution remains plausible. His public persona makes the connection credible: in lectures he habitually warns against ‘fashionable modern interpretations of history’, denounces ‘deliberate lies and distortions of historical facts’, and insists that ‘facts don’t change but fashions do’.<sup>305</sup> The tone of his Dresden intervention closely echoed this persona: a corrective style built on sharp contrasts between objective ‘fact’ and subjective ‘opinion’, coupled with the claim to speak as a custodian of military truth.

Not all replies to Hughes-Wilson accepted this sacralisation of Harris. One commenter stressed that ‘barbaric things were done on both sides’, suggesting that Harris ‘possibly got off lightly then compared to some of his German counterparts’.<sup>306</sup> This more relativist line again provoked swift pushback: further replies denounced the suggestion of equivalence, reaffirming Harris as a ‘hero’ and the Germans as irredeemable ‘barbarians’.<sup>307</sup> The polarisation of the

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., comment 13.

<sup>304</sup> John Hughes-Wilson’s work is characterised by a focus on uncovering ‘hidden’ truths and ‘secret’ histories. See, for example, John Hughes-Wilson, *A Brief History of the Cold War: The Hidden Truth About How Close We Came To Nuclear Conflict* (London: Robinson, 2006); Cathryn Corns and John Hughes-Wilson, *Blindfold and Alone: British Military Executions in the Great War* (London: Cassell Military, 2001); John Hughes-Wilson, *Military Intelligence Blunders and Cover-Ups*, rev. and updated edn (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004); John Hughes-Wilson, *The Puppet Masters: Spies, Traitors and the Real Forces behind World Events* (London: Cassell Military, 2005); John Hughes-Wilson, *Eve of Destruction: The Inside Story of Our Dangerous Nuclear World* (London: John Blake Publishing, 2021); John Hughes-Wilson, *JFK: An American Coup d’État: The Truth Behind the Kennedy Assassination* (London: John Blake Publishing, 2014).

<sup>305</sup> Andrei Sakharov Research Center, *John Hughes-Wilson (UK) Putting Historical Events in the Correct Context*, YouTube, uploaded 27 September 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rn6Rqnthw0I> [accessed 15 September 2025].

<sup>306</sup> DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 14.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., comment 15.

exchange illustrates how Harris's name functioned as a symbolic trigger. For defenders, he embodied national willpower, courage, and the hard necessities of 'total war'. For detractors, he personified the moral costs of a strategy that blurred the line between combatant and civilian.

What is striking in this debate is how quickly the language of professional military history ('Yalta', 'rail hub of the eastern front', '55,000 young men killed') bled into a vernacular of moral absolutes: 'retribution', 'barbarians', 'war hero'. However, if the Harris thread showed how technical defences could bleed seamlessly into moral scripts; in other engagements, even this initial mirage of rational debate was lost, and the discussion began and ended in categorical denunciations. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in an exchange on the *Spectator*'s Facebook page. The spiral began when one user rebutted the claim that the 'mass killing of civilians, definitely was a war crime' with: 'You have to be bloody stupid to use today's standards on historical events.'<sup>308</sup>

From there, the thread quickly devolved into reciprocal name-calling, with participants trading insults such as 'snowflake', 'ignorant old man', 'triggered idiot', 'moron', and 'pseudo-superior patronising traitorous commentary'.<sup>309</sup> Rather than engaging with Dresden itself, commenters focused on belittling each other's intelligence, age, grammar, and even appearance. The 'snowflake' exchange was especially revealing: the initial pro 'war crime' commenter appropriated the pejorative and turned it back on his denouncers, disrupting its usual left-liberal connotations and using it instead to ridicule defenders of the sacred war story. The thread soon veered off-topic entirely, dragging in Brexit, Scottish independence, and caricatures of 'remoaners' and 'Brexiteers'.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 2, comment 2-1.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, comments 2-1-2-22.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

**Figure 6.13: Comment Thread: ‘Mass Killing of Civilians’**

Comment Number: 2 (Alex Turner, 6 recommendations) "Mass killing of civilians..."

- └─ 2-1 (Blake Morris, 4 recs) "You have to be bloody stupid..."
- | └─ 2-4 (Alex Turner, 0 recs) "Blake Morris ignorant old man :)"
- | └─ 2-6 (Blake Morris, 1 rec) "Boom. Triggered idiot..."
- | └─ 2-7 (Alex Turner, 0 recs) "Blake Morris yawn, pleasure..."
- └─ 2-2 (Dylan Smith, 2 recs) "Alex Turner yup I'm afraid that Alex..."
- | └─ 2-3 (Alex Turner, 1 rec) "Dylan Smith aw did I upset you?"
- | └─ 2-10 (Dylan Smith, 2 recs) "Alex Turner ~~hahaha~~ ha a snowflake!"
- | | └─ 2-11 (Alex Turner, 1 rec) "Dylan Smith sorry, snowflake..."
- | | └─ 2-13 (Alex Turner, 0 recs) "Dylan Smith ~~obb~~, going all high school..."
- | | └─ 2-14 (Dylan Smith, 0 recs) "Still terribly funny..."
- | └─ 2-12 (Dylan Smith, 2 recs) "Blake Morris tragic..."
- └─ 2-5 (Ethan Grant, 2 recs) "Alex Turner must try harder :)"
- └─ 2-8 (Fiona Brown, 0 recs) "Alex Turner: that saying had it's 15 minutes..."
- | └─ 2-9 (Alex Turner, 0 recs) "Fiona Brown which one?"
- └─ 2-15 (Alex Turner, 1 rec) "Dylan Smith why you so bothered about your age..."
- └─ 2-16 (Blake Morris, 2 recs) "Its EXACTLY this kind of stupid rude arrogant..."
- | └─ 2-17 (Dylan Smith, 1 rec) "Charlie Johnson the best part..."
- | └─ 2-18 (Blake Morris, 0 recs) "Especially spelling and grammar..."
- | └─ 2-19 (Blake Morris, 2 recs) "Obviously never done a damn thing..."
- └─ 2-20 (Alex Turner, 0 recs) "Dylan Smith I do actually..."
  - └─ 2-21 (Grace Hall, 1 rec) "Alex Turner what about the mass killing..."
  - └─ 2-22 (Alex Turner, 0 recs) "Grace Hall yes? what about them?"

\*Note the above usernames here have been adjusted to maintain anonymity\*

Seen through the lens of Chapter Five, these digressions are not surprising. They exemplify the same populist logic in which historical disputes are absorbed into wider scripts of betrayal, sovereignty, and cultural survival. Just as Welby's Dresden sermon was reframed as an elitist act of submission to Brussels, the 'war crime' question here was absorbed into a narrative of patriotic authenticity versus elite treachery, lived experience versus naïve and out of touch virtue signalling: 'Its EXACTLY this kind of stupid rude arrogant pseudo superior patronising condescending traitorous commentary that got us all to vote leave in the first place! This puerile idiot is the best ad for leave ever, but he's too dumb to realise it! Trot on sonny, go and learn about life and history before you learn to shave. [sic]'<sup>311</sup>

Yet, in this ferocious, binary, and emotionally charged debate, one figure was absent: Sinclair McKay. While his book was the nominal reason for the discussion, he and his work were almost entirely ignored. In a stark contrast to the preceding case studies, where the testimonies of Victor Gregg and Justin Welby functioned as the catalysts for debate, provoking

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., comment 2–16.

fierce praise and fury even when the commenters' focus shifted to other targets, McKay as a figure was rendered so peripheral that he failed to provoke the same 'black sheep' dynamics directed at the insider-critics of the previous chapters. A handful of comments, as we shall see in the next section, criticised him, but largely in the context of the reviews themselves. The vast majority showed no indication of having read the book, or even the reviews, beyond the headline. They did not engage with McKay's arguments, his use of survivor testimony, or his narrative structure. His authority as a historian, his meticulous research, and his attempt to write a human-centred account of the tragedy were all rendered irrelevant.

Instead, the rage was triggered less by McKay himself than by the framing of the debate. Other commenters may have fuelled tempers, but they had not posed the incendiary question. The provocation, 'Was Dresden a war crime?', originated outside the book and its author. This leaves us with a crucial question that frames the next section: did commenters recognise who was provoking them? Who did the majority think they were defending the sacred story from?

### **'Traitors', 'Twaddle' and 'Woke Views': Targeting the Media and the Revisionist Historian**

The outrage that McKay's book inadvertently provoked, while leaving the author himself largely unscathed, was not without a target. Commenters largely channelled their frustration towards a series of more generic, yet deeply resonant, populist foils. The primary targets were twofold: first, the very media outlets that platformed the discussion, who were seen as betraying or deliberately inflaming their readership; and second, a vaguely defined but potent constellation of 'revisionist' historians, 'woke' elites, and 'bleeding heart' liberals accused of deliberately undermining Britain's national story.

For many readers, the very act of raising the 'war crime' question was the principal offence. One commenter declared: 'What a sickening question. But it is posed by the media.'

The gutless media who only attack with the pen. They judge others whilst knowing very little of what really went on... When we are in a War situation, the media are not welcome.’<sup>312</sup> The intervention shows no awareness of McKay’s book or its reconciliatory intent. Instead, it collapses the discussion into a wholesale denunciation of ‘the media’, which is cast not as a mediator but as an illegitimate intruder, unqualified to judge wartime sacrifice. This dismissal was often absolute, with blunt claims that the media have ‘no interest in perspectives or truth just pure insane hatred of we English’, and warnings that journalists were ‘trying to influence those who know no better’.<sup>313</sup> Other comments expressed exasperation, with disengaged refrains such as ‘Let it go FFS [sic]’, ‘Let it go it’s history’, ‘not that old chestnut again’, and ‘it’s old history now’ reinforcing a posture of dismissal.<sup>314</sup> As Bugaeva and Sidorchenko’s concept of ‘defeated expectancy’ suggests, readers approached trusted outlets expecting affirmation of established truths, only to experience irritation when confronted with apparent revisionism.<sup>315</sup>

This sense of betrayal was particularly sharp against the *Telegraph*. One highly rated intervention asked sarcastically: ‘Is this the part where the Allies are expected to apologise for not losing the war? Well I don’t know quite what has come over the editors at The Telegraph to make them all so wet and pathetic.’ [sic]<sup>316</sup> Another demanded bluntly: ‘Who are these traitors at people the telegraph?’ [sic]<sup>317</sup> A further comment accused editors of actively ‘taking our history out and trashing it’, indulging the voices of ‘guilt-ridden nobodies like professor Saul David’.<sup>318</sup> The sense of defeated expectancy was no doubt heightened by the *Telegraph*’s long-standing role in defending Bomber Command memory: its readers had raised substantial

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<sup>312</sup> *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 11.

<sup>313</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 250.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 191, comment 82, comment 207, comment 170.

<sup>315</sup> Irina Vladimirovna Bugaeva and Kirill Mikhailovich Sidorchenko, ‘Article Headlines as a Means of Manipulation in Online Media’, *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences* (2020), p. 1.

<sup>316</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 233.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 194.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 20.

funds for the Bomber Command Memorial unveiled in 2012, and its ‘History Defended’ video series continued to present Sir Arthur Harris as a hero unjustly maligned.<sup>319</sup>

Crucially though, this reaction rested on a fundamental misreading of Saul David’s review. His actual complaint was that McKay had ‘fudged’ the issue and failed to state definitively that Dresden was *not* a war crime. Far from being revisionist, David’s argument sought a clearer absolution for Bomber Command. Yet many commenters interpreted his intervention as an act of self-flagellation. To them, David epitomised the type of academic ‘snowflake sounding all apologetic about the past’ who would soon ‘be asking for a bill to rebuild the place’.<sup>320</sup> The gap between authorial intent and reader reception illustrates how comment cultures often collapse nuance into binary cues. In this outrage economy, the headline became the article, and even arguments designed to defend the RAF could be reframed as ideological betrayal once filtered through a populist lens: ‘It was war, a concept the author clearly decides is alien to his self-absorbed woke view.’<sup>321</sup>

If the media was the treacherous platform, the second target was the perceived ideology it was platforming: a distinctly left-wing historical revisionism. A single intervention typified this move: ‘More twaddle from the revisionists... Better spend their time looking at what affect Corbyn’s love of terrorists has had on the Labour Party.’<sup>322</sup> Here, disdain for revisionist historians was folded seamlessly into contempt for the contemporary Labour left, equating academic critique of the war with political sympathy for enemies of Britain. Others made the political linkage equally explicit, castigating ‘SJWs [social justice warriors]’ for ‘peeping down

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<sup>319</sup> See for example Daniel Capurro, ‘Bomber Command Memorial “Has Allowed Veterans to Speak of Their Sacrifices”’, *Telegraph*, 26 June 2022 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/06/26/bomber-command-memorial-has-allowed-veterans-speak-sacrifices/> [accessed 23 January 2024] which reflects on the tenth anniversary of the Bomber Command Memorial’s unveiling, and the role of *Telegraph* readers in its construction. See also their defence of Sir Arthur Harris on *YouTube*, in their ‘History Defended’ series: *Telegraph*, ‘Bomber Harris Was a War Hero, Not a War Criminal | History Defended’, *YouTube*, 12 November 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvbsuXb26Gg> [accessed 23 January 2024].

<sup>320</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 150.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 109.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 177.

on [us] from the safety of the high moral ground'.<sup>323</sup> This accusation of condescension dovetailed with the broader charge that critics were 'whining' 'bleeding hearts' or insufferable 'snowflakes': 'All these bloody self-righteous Snowflakes giving there opinion, they not born at the time. [sic]'.<sup>324</sup>

In each case, moral reflection was framed as a posture of privilege, the preserve of those insulated from danger, and thus a decadent luxury afforded only by peace. To reflect ethically was to detach oneself from the brutal necessities of total war, and so to forfeit any authority to judge them. Historical critique was thereby recast as an ideological pathology; as one commenter, having dismissed David's article as 'pseudo-moralistic virtue signalling', declared: 'The single, most dangerous failing of humanity in the 21st century is our inability to make the radical left see the ideological blindness of their hypocritical contradictions.'<sup>325</sup> Another user on the *Spectator* page expressed 'genuine surprise' at the 'Marxist drivel being propagated'.<sup>326</sup>

This anxiety was sharpened by fears that such left-wing revisionism was installing a new, anti-British orthodoxy. As one contributor complained: 'What is it about the British and their need for continued self-flagellation? ... We are now taught that the German people, far from being complicit, were victims themselves of the Nazis, therefore they were just more innocent bombed by the nasty RAF.'<sup>327</sup> Another warned against an 'emerging new German equalising storyline', stressing that 'the war was a war with Germany, not a war with Adolf Hitler alone'.<sup>328</sup> Here, anxieties about education, cultural politics, and national identity surfaced directly: schools and media were accused of feeding the next generation a distorted, 'leftist'

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<sup>323</sup> Hastings, 'Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness Review', comment 6.

<sup>324</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 259–1., *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 8.

<sup>325</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 163.

<sup>326</sup> *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 41.

<sup>327</sup> DeGroot, 'Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review', comment 27.

<sup>328</sup> Hastings, 'Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness Review', comment 31.

version of the war ('This is what you get when your education establishment is a leftist breeding ground.').<sup>329</sup> Some even extended the logic of wartime retribution into the present, folding it into Brexit-era language of sovereignty and betrayal: 'It was bang on legit and we'll be back if they and the EU try and destroy our country. You've been warned.'<sup>330</sup>

Such comments underscore that the populist critique is not simply a rejection of knowledge per se, but of a particular kind of knowledge; one perceived as relativist, decadent and politicised. By framing nuance, empathy, or legal reflection as ideological betrayal, commenters positioned historians and their sympathisers as a treacherous class who had forfeited their authority. Even well-known popular historians such as Max Hastings were only conditionally respected. His operational clarity was praised ('few can match him') and one lauded his review as 'excellent', albeit agreeing most with his reminder that Nazi crimes contextualised Allied bombing.<sup>331</sup> Yet this respect evaporated the moment Hastings suggested that Arthur Harris should have been dismissed for his dogmatic reliance on area bombing.

For many, this failed the authenticity test. His judgment was derided as 'repulsive...bourgeois guilt', while one commenter accused him of glaring inconsistency, citing his own book on the final stages of the Pacific War, *Nemesis*.<sup>332</sup> The charge was that Hastings condemned Harris for abandoning precision bombing while recounting, without censure, the American firebombing of Tokyo that killed 'over 100,000 people in one night'. By inflating the Tokyo toll to four times Dresden's, the commenter repositioned Hastings as hypocritically harsh on Britain while indulgent toward the United States:

Somewhat surprisingly, given his knowledge, Hastings says Harris should have been sacked for not going for specific targets. However, he knows it was not deliverable. He

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<sup>329</sup> *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 29.

<sup>330</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 62.

<sup>331</sup> Hastings, 'Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness Review', comment 30, comment 19

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 47., Max Hastings, *Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944–45* (London: HarperPress, 2007).

knows that it was so undeliverable the US who arrived with their Norden Bomb Sight and the belief that they could pick out a barrel secretly gave up and resorted to area bombing without Presidential approval. How does Hastings know that? Because he referred to it in his book *Nemesis* where he describes Curtis Le May's 'success' with the Superforts by fire bombing Tokyo in March 1945 and killing over 100,000 people in one night. You cannot half fight a war. The Germans put civilians in the target first in WWI with Zeppelins and then repeated it in 1940. We became better at it. It is no good putting up cosy post-war horror. The times were very different.<sup>333</sup>

Yet this reading fundamentally distorts Hastings' argument. In *Nemesis*, Hastings does not ignore the failure of American precision bombing; he documents it in painstaking detail as the prelude to firebombing. He describes the B-29 as a 'mechanic's nightmare', highlights the havoc wrought by the newly discovered jetstream, and notes that by winter 1944 only 2 per cent of bombs fell within a thousand feet of their targets.<sup>334</sup> Far from glossing over this failure, he presents it as the very reason for the deliberate shift to incendiary raids; a shift foreshadowed by tests on mock Japanese villages in Utah and formalised by USAAF reports acknowledging the collapse of precision.<sup>335</sup> Nor did Hastings merely recount the Tokyo raid as a 'success'. On the contrary, he devotes pages to the harrowing testimony of survivors: children, mothers, and ordinary civilians burned alive (such as the terror of nine-year-old Haruyo Wada, who saw 'mothers in flight, apparently oblivious of the fact that the babies on their backs, the children whose hands they grasped, were on fire'), a narrative choice that functions as a profound moral indictment.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Hastings, 'Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness Review', comment 15.

<sup>334</sup> Hastings, *Nemesis*, p. 307., p. 311.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., p. 305., p. 319.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

He also questions the strategic rationale, arguing that Japan's economy was already collapsing under blockade, and concludes that the raids 'contributed little towards the destruction of Japan's war-making powers, though much towards punishing the Japanese people'.<sup>337</sup> Finally, Hastings explicitly rejects any double standard: he treats Harris and LeMay alike, linking both to the institutional logic of strategic bombing and insisting that ultimate responsibility lay not with the commanders alone but with the political leaders who authorised them: 'It seems quite mistaken to nominate either officer as a sin-eater for the mass slaughter of civilians, a policy for which responsibility rightly belongs to their superiors.'<sup>338</sup>

DeGroot came under fire for similar reasons. If Hastings was condemned as hypocritical for censuring Harris while supposedly excusing LeMay, DeGroot was castigated for describing Dresden as a 'sacred city' of art, a phrase read not as rhetorical flourish but as aestheticising enemy suffering.<sup>339</sup> To critics, this was treachery: a willingness to elevate German cultural value while ignoring German crimes. One user blasted his review as 'one-sided recrimination' that failed to explain why the bombing policy had come into being, accusing him of erasing the strategic context.<sup>340</sup> The commenter invoked Albert Speer's testimony that the raids accelerated the collapse of German industry, and stressed that tying down anti-aircraft divisions was 'worth several divisions to Russia on the Eastern Front'.<sup>341</sup> In this framing, DeGroot's omission of such facts was not scholarly choice but evidence of ideological bias. His moral condemnation of Dresden as 'a cynical strategy of terror' was countered with further arguments that it was a strategic necessity, an imperfect but vital 'second front' before D-Day.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>339</sup> DeGroot, 'Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review'.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., comment 33.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

The ridicule extended to his adoption of McKay's reconciliatory phrasing. DeGroot approvingly labelled McKay 'unique among those who have tried to analyse the logic of Dresden' in refusing to focus blame, accepting that 'in war, individual agency is overwhelmed by the terrible momentum of killing'.<sup>343</sup> To at least one commenter, this was not insight but cliché. They dismissed this notion as 'absurd', insisting that *almost everyone*, 'except those who specialise in abusing the freedom the sacrifice of others preserved', already accepted such self-evidence.<sup>344</sup> What DeGroot and McKay presented as a profound moral reflection was recast as pretentious repetition, a hollow truism dressed up as scholarship. Here, DeGroot was accused not only of anti-British bias but of intellectual vacuity: indulging in pseudo-philosophical statements that added nothing new while undermining patriotic memory. Another dismissed Hastings' focus on 25,000 dead as numerically trivial: 'many more than 25,000 died EVERY DAY OF THE WAR'.<sup>345</sup> Together, such interventions inverted the hierarchy of authority, presenting the historian as another naïve outsider while anonymous commenters assumed the role of arbiters of scale, proportion, and national truth. To be deemed authentic and thus truthful, what mattered was not the historian's evidential reasoning but his willingness to affirm a shared narrative of resilience and utilitarian retribution.

### **The Transformation of Expertise in the Dresden Debates**

At first glance, the comment sections beneath reviews of Sinclair McKay's *Dresden* appear to exemplify Tom Nichols' 'death of expertise'.<sup>346</sup> Other journalists and scholars such as Max Hastings and Gerard DeGroot introduced morally complex and carefully hedged judgments, only to be ridiculed or dismissed. Their credentials were treated as mere appeals to authority, and their nuanced contextualisation was drowned out by the certainty of lay participants. In

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<sup>343</sup> DeGroot, 'Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review'.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., comment 161.

<sup>345</sup> Hastings, 'Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness Review', comment 49.

<sup>346</sup> Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*.

this dynamic, the tentative notes of scholarship clashed with the resounding certainties of popular judgment.

However, a closer look reveals that what followed was not an epistemic collapse but a reconstruction. The absence of deference to historians or the historical process did not create a vacuum; it triggered a rapid reoccupation of the epistemic field by alternative authorities and hybrid forms of knowing. Gil Eyal's analysis of the 'crisis of expertise' provides a more fitting framework.<sup>347</sup> Crises, he argues, are not voids but recursive struggles where the very act of drawing boundaries generates further contestation.<sup>348</sup> Commenters in the Dresden threads repeatedly insisted on the boundaries between 'fact' and 'opinion', yet these distinctions themselves became battlefields.

Lisa Stampnitzky extends this, arguing that such crises should be seen as the *transformation* of expert regimes.<sup>349</sup> Expertise is never simply knowledge; it is relational, grounded in institutions and audience legitimacy. When one regime loses authority, it is displaced by another. The Dresden debates show this process in action. If we look closely at the data, historical idioms were everywhere, redeployed in the construction of new hierarchies of 'counter-knowledge'.<sup>350</sup> Commenters did not reject expertise wholesale; they reconstructed it.

A key strategy was the selective appropriation of credentialed figures, who were stripped of nuance and redeployed as tokens of authenticity. This dynamic parallels Ruth Breeze's study of COVID-19 vaccine debates, where groups legitimised their stance by citing

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<sup>347</sup> Gil Eyal, *The Crisis of Expertise* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

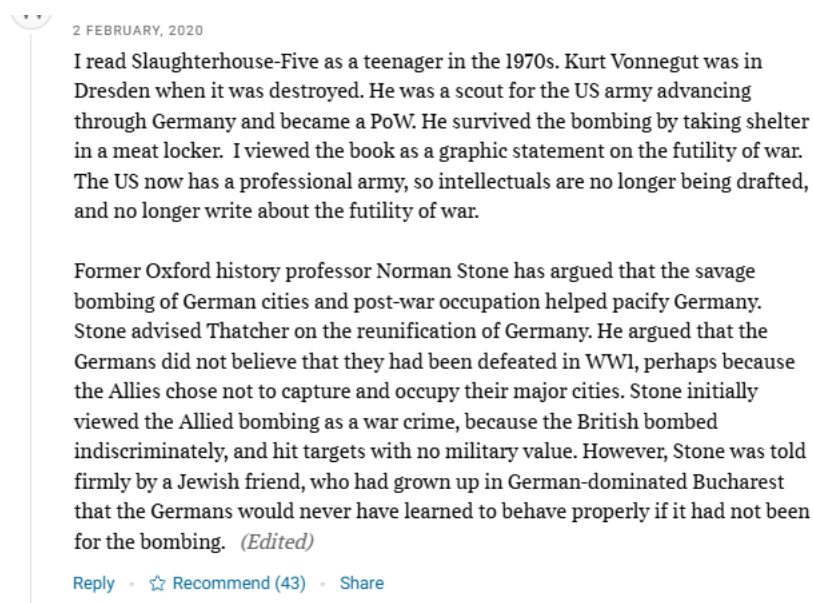
<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>349</sup> Lisa Stampnitzky, 'Rethinking the "Crisis of Expertise": A Relational Approach', *Theory and Society*, 52 (2023), pp. 1097–1124.

<sup>350</sup> Alberta Giorgi and Hande Eslen-Ziya, 'Populism and Science in Europe', in Hande Eslen-Ziya and Alberta Giorgi (eds) *Populism and Science in Europe*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 10.

‘our’ scientists while rejecting others as corrupt.<sup>351</sup> In the Dresden threads, commenters on both sides of the issue brandished their chosen experts, transforming complex scholars into convenient soundbites. For example, the former Oxford professor Norman Stone was fashioned into a powerful symbol of hard-headed realism. One commenter recounted Stone’s career as a conversion story: a journey from a youthful, naïve condemnation of the bombing to a mature recognition of its necessity to ‘teach the Germans to behave properly’.<sup>352</sup> A well-known historian and Thatcher adviser, Stone combined academic capital with a reputation for provocative contrarianism, making him an ideal figure for this narrative.<sup>353</sup>

**Figure 6.14: The Authority of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Norman Stone and a ‘Jewish Friend’**



The reality of Stone’s views was far more tangled. His popular histories were sometimes criticised by peers for reflecting ‘personal political prejudices rather than deep

<sup>351</sup> Ruth Breeze, ‘“Not One of Our Experts.” Knowledge Claims and Group Affiliations in Online Discussions of the COVID-19 Vaccine’, in *Digital Scientific Communication: Identity and Visibility in Research Dissemination*, ed. by Ramón Plo-Alastrué and Isabel Corona (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 33–52.

<sup>352</sup> Hastings, ‘*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* Review’, comment 1.

<sup>353</sup> Telegraph Obituaries, ‘Norman Stone, colourful historian and contrarian who loved rattling academic cages and revelled in controversy - obituary’, *Telegraph*, 19 June 2019 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2019/06/19/norman-stone-colourful-historian-contrarian-loved-rattling-academic/> [accessed 17 September 2025].

historical insights’, as Richard J. Evans noted.<sup>354</sup> His stance on the bombing was equally contradictory. In a 1995 *Daily Mail* article, he called the Dresden raid an ‘act of gratuitous sadism’ and a ‘war crime’.<sup>355</sup> Yet in the same piece, he floated the ‘teach them to behave’ argument, later attributing it to his Jewish friend Lionel Bloch, who had grown up under German domination in Bucharest.<sup>356</sup>

However, Stone himself never fully endorsed this ‘brutal’ argument for pacification.<sup>357</sup> In his 2012 book *World War Two*, he highlighted a different strategic justification, noting his surprise when Albert Speer defended the bombing on the grounds that it ‘diverted much of the German effort away from the fighting fronts’.<sup>358</sup> Yet, elsewhere in both his 1995 and 2012 writing, Stone forcefully dismissed the bombing campaign’s military effectiveness, arguing it consumed a third of the British war effort that, if used differently, could have ended the war a year earlier.<sup>359</sup>

In the end, Stone’s stance was less a conversion than a somewhat consistent tangle of contradictions, offering fragments of ammunition for opposing camps. Nevertheless, from this complex record, the commenter fashioned a rhetorically potent arc. His reputation as a polemicist, combined with his willingness to present ‘hard’ truths like the Bloch anecdote, made him a perfect figure for appropriation. By foregrounding Stone’s initial moral objections and then pivoting to the single visceral justification from Bloch, the narrative distilled his

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<sup>354</sup> Richard J. Evans, “Norman Stone obituary: Historian and controversial media commentator who taught at Cambridge, Oxford and in Turkey”, *Guardian*, 25 June 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/25/norman-stone-obituary> [accessed 17 September 2025].

<sup>355</sup> Norman Stone, ‘Dresden: An Atrocity or a Justifiable Act of War?’, *Daily Mail*, 11 February 1995, p. 9.

<sup>356</sup> Stone mentioned Bloch in ‘Nasty, brutish - and not short enough: Norman Stone on Mark Mazower’s beautifully constructed account of life under the horrifying Nazi empire, *Hitler’s Empire*’, *Guardian*, 14 June 2008

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/14/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview28#:~:text=I%20remember%20protesting%20and%20being,So%20had%20Genscher.> [accessed 17 September 2025]., and Norman Stone, *World War Two: A Short History* (New York: Basic Books, 2012)., p. 121.

<sup>357</sup> Stone, ‘Dresden: An Atrocity or a Justifiable Act of War?’.

<sup>358</sup> Norman Stone, *World War Two: A Short History* (New York: Basic Books, 2012)., p. xxiv.

<sup>359</sup> Stone, ‘Dresden: An Atrocity or a Justifiable Act of War?’.

contradictions into a linear tale of toughening-up: a shift from soft-hearted scruples to hard-headed realism. In the process, the multifaceted, albeit credentialed, provocateur was transformed into a usable symbol, an ‘authentic’ expert whose apparent journey validated the commenter’s own worldview.

The decorated soldier and eminent historian Sir Michael Howard was invoked in a similar, yet arguably more potent, way. As noted earlier, Colonel John Noel Hughes-Wilson had already intervened in the DeGroot thread to defend Harris as the custodian of ‘facts’ against the ‘opinions’ of revisionist critics. The same user(name) reinforced this position in the Hastings comment section by drawing on the recently passed Howard’s authority, quoting the injunction: “‘You cannot criticise the actions of the past by the standards of the present. Where do you stop? Admiral Byng? Mary Queen of Scots?’” Professor Sir Michael Howard, MC, Oxford.<sup>360</sup> The explicit naming of Howard’s military decoration and Oxford affiliation was not incidental. It signalled that this was not merely a passing quotation but the mobilisation of perhaps Britain’s most eminent military historian as an unimpeachable witness. If Stone was a useful provocateur, Howard represented the heart of the British establishment: Britain’s most influential military historian, a Regius Professor of History at Oxford, and the driving force behind the creation of the War Studies department at King’s College London and the International Institute for Strategic Studies.<sup>361</sup> His authority was immense, and his work was defined by a deep-seated rejection of simplistic, battle-centric narratives. As his student Lawrence Freedman recalled, Howard taught that military history must be the study of entire societies, approached with nuance and ‘without disregard for the suffering involved’.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Hastings, ‘*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* Review’, comment 14.

<sup>361</sup> King’s College London, “In Memory of Professor Sir Michael Howard”, *King’s College London News*, 3 December 2019 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/in-memory-of-professor-sir-michael-howard#:~:text=At%20King%27s%2C%20he%20pioneered%20a,remain%20with%20King%27s%20in%20perpetuity> [accessed 17 September 2025].

<sup>362</sup> Lawrence Freedman, “Michael Howard: A Reminiscence”, *War on the Rocks*, 17 December 2019 <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/michael-howard-a-reminiscence/> [accessed 17 September 2025].

This made his appropriation profoundly ironic. Howard did indeed warn against presentism, insisting that historians ‘must be careful to apply a realistic standard in judging the actions and decisions of the past’ and ‘make full allowance for the limits set by contemporary circumstances to any course of action’.<sup>363</sup> However, he consistently opposed the idea that historical understanding should preclude moral judgment. For Howard, the Holocaust was the ultimate test case; he questioned whether it was possible, or even desirable, to describe Auschwitz as dispassionately as a sixteenth-century burning at the stake.<sup>364</sup> He believed history was not an exercise in vindication or ‘escapist nostalgia’ but the only means by which societies could truly gain self-knowledge.<sup>365</sup>

His interpretation of the strategic bombing campaign reflected this ethical seriousness. He defended its military necessity, arguing that with the German army fighting desperately on all fronts, the Allies had to hit the ‘many-headed monster which just would not die’ with everything they had.<sup>366</sup> Yet he did not shy away from its consequences. ‘There can be very little doubt, with hindsight, that we did much more damage than was strictly necessary, and the reaction of almost everybody who went into Germany in the immediate aftermath of the war was one of utter horror’ he wrote, adding ‘Dresden was the paradigm of that horror’.<sup>367</sup>

In the commenter’s hands, however, Howard’s exhaustive reflections were stripped of this context. A call for rigorous, empathetic reconstruction was transformed into a rhetorical cudgel designed to foreclose ethical inquiry. Like Stone, Howard was flattened into a convenient soundbite. His nuanced historiographical method was reduced to a single,

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<sup>363</sup> Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy*, vol. 4, *August 1942-September 1943*, History of the Second World War: United Kingdom Military Series (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1972), p. 289, p. 284. See also Brian Holden Reid, ‘Michael Howard and the Evolution of Modern War Studies’, *The Journal of Military History*, 73.3 (2009), p. 889.

<sup>364</sup> Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 195.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>366</sup> Michael Howard, ‘Ethics, Deterrence and Strategic Bombing’, *The Journal of the Royal Air Force Historical Society*, 14 (1995), p. 18.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*

decontextualised command, mobilised not for his historical insights but as an authoritative mascot for a particular worldview.

A parallel move appeared in the selective mobilisation of the philosopher A.C. Grayling, but here in service of a critique of the bombing. In one sub-thread, a pro-bombing commenter framed the raids as a necessary part of defeating a uniquely evil enemy, a cause for which his father, an ‘unsung hero of bomber command’, had risked his life.<sup>368</sup> A critical response followed, drawing a sharp distinction between legitimate strikes on the ‘German war machine’ and the policy of ‘area bombing’.<sup>369</sup> The reply described Operations Thunderclap and Gomorrah as ‘civilian apocalypses’ and recommended Grayling as the authoritative account for anyone seeking an ‘informed view’.<sup>370</sup>

The choice was significant. In *Among the Dead Cities*, Grayling acknowledged that Allied actions could not be equated with Axis crimes and that responsibility lay with the ‘principal decision makers’ rather than aircrews.<sup>371</sup> Nonetheless, after surveying the German and Japanese campaigns, he concluded that deliberate raids on civilian areas failed the tests of necessity and proportionality, branding area bombing a ‘moral crime’ akin to terrorism.<sup>372</sup> Once again, the comment did not wholly misrepresent this conclusion: Grayling remains one of the most critical academic voices on the subject.<sup>373</sup> What was lost in mobilising his voice to support the view that the bombing constituted ‘civilian apocalypses’ however, were Grayling’s careful distinctions and philosophical framing.

Grayling heeded Howard’s advice by ensuring his enquiry intended to ‘take fully into account the circumstances of the time, the intentions and the state of knowledge of the principal

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<sup>368</sup> DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 102.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid. comment 106.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> A. C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan*, 1st U.S. edn (New York: Walker & Company, 2006), p. 10.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>373</sup> DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 102.

decision-makers'.<sup>374</sup> In an ideal world, he argued, airmen should have refused to conduct area-bombing raids, insisting instead on striking strictly military or industrial targets.<sup>375</sup> Yet he recognised that such choices were impossible in wartime. Many crews believed, or chose to believe, they were doing precisely that, and those who knew otherwise accepted it, suffered silently, or regretted it.<sup>376</sup> They were sustained by the hatred of the enemy fostered by war, by the conviction that they were fighting a just cause, and by the backing of their commanders and publics, all of which made possible the extraordinary courage demanded by such missions.<sup>377</sup> In the populist arena of the comment section, however, his complex ethical inquiry again functioned merely as a token of verdict. His work became a badge of scholarly confirmation that the bombings were indeed crimes. In all three cases, Stone, Howard, and Grayling, the expert was still present. But their method, contextual nuance, the weighing of evidence, and moral ambivalence were stripped away. They became mascots of authenticity, pressed into service to authorise pre-existing conclusions.

### **Performing Authority: Idiom and Postmemory**

Beyond appropriating named experts, commenters performed historical authority through style. They mimicked the idiom of the operational historian, deploying lists of aircraft, whether Lancasters or P-51 Mustangs, and invoking operations such as Thunderclap and Gomorrah.<sup>378</sup> Such commenters often reached for statistics and technical detail, citing '3,900 tons of high explosives and incendiaries dropped', '25,000 dead', or elaborate calculations such as 'nine thousand tons of explosives ... incinerated eight square miles of central Hamburg, the resulting inferno creating a 150-mile-an-hour wind burning at 800 Celsius, killing 37,000'.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 10.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>378</sup> See DeGroot, 'Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review', comment 10, comment 65, comment 106. See also *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 15.

<sup>379</sup> *Telegraph*, Facebook, 9 February 2020., comment 72, *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 45–1, DeGroot, 'Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review', comment 106.

Commenters also rehearsed operational reasoning, noting that the ‘[t]he amount of manpower and artillery equipment the Germans needed to keep inside Germany for anti-aircraft reasons was worth several divisions on the Eastern Front.’<sup>380</sup> Many used specific dates and details to press the point that the war was not yet over, that Dresden was fought under conditions of uncertainty: ‘the last V2 attack, killing 131 people, ... was on the 27th March 1945. The last V1 attack was on the 28th March 1945’; ‘the first V2s hit London on March 17 1945, a month after the Dresden raids.’<sup>381</sup>

Others developed the same argument by insisting that Germany remained a potent adversary, stacking examples across all branches of its forces. One commenter pointed to ‘the German Army and Luftwaffe, not to mention the Kriegsmarine with their U-Boats’ as evidence that the Wehrmacht still posed a serious threat, citing not only the ‘Battle of the Bulge’ but also ‘Operation Bodenplatte’ on 1st January 1945, when the Luftwaffe was able to mount a surprise assault on Allied airfields.<sup>382</sup> A different strand of operational idiom placed Dresden within longer histories of aerial war (‘Guernica (1937), Warsaw (1939), Liège (1914)’) to insist that Britain was responding in kind to a practice the Germans had themselves pioneered.<sup>383</sup> The same logic worked in reverse: ‘The Report of the Joint Relief Commission of the International Red Cross, 1941–1946 estimated that 275,000 had died in the raids on Dresden. Yes, you read that correctly. 275,000.’<sup>384</sup>

This quotation appears to derive from page 104 of the Joint Relief Commission’s final 1948 report, where the authors repeat wartime estimates that ‘275,000 people were reported to have been killed’.<sup>385</sup> However, the report did not produce this figure through its own

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<sup>380</sup> Hastings, ‘*Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* Review’, comment 61.

<sup>381</sup> DeGroot, ‘*Dresden* by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 10., comment 7, comment 39.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 6.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 107.

<sup>384</sup> *Spectator*, Facebook, 1 February 2020, comment 26.

<sup>385</sup> Joint Relief Commission of the International Red Cross, *Report of the Joint Relief Commission of the International Red Cross 1941–1946* (Geneva: International Red Cross Committee, League of Red Cross Societies, 1948), p. 104.

investigations but merely relayed numbers circulating at the time, which were the product of a deliberate propaganda offensive from Berlin. This was what Taylor calls the ‘numbers game’, a strategy orchestrated by Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels to generate outrage in neutral countries.<sup>386</sup> A key part of this strategy involved leaking a doctored police document, *Tagesbefehl Nr. 47*, to the foreign press.<sup>387</sup> In this version, an extra zero had been added to the official figures, turning the 20,204 dead so far recovered into 202,040, and inflating the predicted total from 25,000 to a quarter of a million.<sup>388</sup> It was these wildly inflated, officially manipulated figures that gained currency in the neutral press and were subsequently repeated, in good faith, by organisations like the Red Cross.

The comment factoids were thus presented without citation, context and were often inaccurate, but their rhetorical power lay in their form, not their precision. As Ruth Breeze observes, such performances rely less on empirical authority than on stylistic mimicry: participants borrow ‘expert or technical language or a specifically scientific tone’ to ‘implicitly assert their knowledge’, or adopt what she calls an ‘empiricist repertoire’ that makes their claims appear to ‘follow unproblematically and inescapably’ from the facts themselves.<sup>389</sup> Read through this lens, the Dresden commenters’ litany of bomb tonnage, casualty figures, and operational codenames did not simply transmit information; it enacted expertise by presenting interpretation as if it were the only conclusion the data could yield.

This stylistic performance was often infused with invocations of postmemory, the inheritance of familial testimony. Comments frequently began with phrases like, ‘Speaking as the son of a Lancaster bomber bomb aimer’, or ‘I live in Coventry and my parents often talked of the bombing.’<sup>390</sup> This use of familial testimony created a powerful, self-legitimizing voice

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<sup>386</sup> Frederick Taylor, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 369.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>389</sup> Breeze, “Not One of Our Experts.”, pp. 41–2.

<sup>390</sup> DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 10., comment 2.

that exemplifies the ‘hybrid interlanguage’ Au and Eyal identified in their own study of an online COVID-19 patient community.<sup>391</sup> They noted that a credible performance of lay expertise required users to ‘switch freely between personal and scientific registers, finding and creating resonances between the two’.<sup>392</sup> One extended intervention exemplified this dynamic. The commenter began: ‘My father was called up into Bomber Command in 1942, eventually qualifying as a pilot... Harris apparently had a recruitment line in which he thanked the men... informed them that maybe 20 per cent of them would survive, and that it was a great and noble cause.’<sup>393</sup> Recounting Harris’s words underscored both the danger faced by crews and Harris’s callous fatalism. From there, the post pivoted to moral judgment: ‘Of course Hitler had to be defeated, but the incineration of thousands of civilians in Dresden... was an act of revenge and was immoral.’<sup>394</sup> Here, familial testimony secures authority, but rather than using it to sanctify Bomber Command, the commenter turns empathy for the aircrews into an indictment of the leadership that commanded them. Operational detail (Harris’s rhetoric and survival rates) becomes evidence of cynicism rather than heroism. In this way, the hybrid mode of postmemory plus operational history could be inverted, mobilised not to enshrine Harris as a national hero but to expose him as emblematic of the moral bankruptcy of area bombing.

It is clear then that these strategies were not confined to one side of the debate. Both defenders and critics of the bombing leveraged the same toolkit. Both sides appropriated historians, performed operational idioms, and mobilised postmemory to construct what can be termed ‘counter-knowledge’: alternative epistemic systems that claim greater authenticity than professional history. The fusion of postmemory and operational language let commenters speak as both witnesses and analysts. This hybrid authority carried an emotional weight that

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<sup>391</sup> See Larry Au and Gil Eyal, ‘Whose Advice Is Credible? Claiming Lay Expertise in a COVID-19 Online Community’, *Qualitative Sociology*, 45 (2022), pp. 31–61.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>393</sup> DeGroot, ‘Dresden by Sinclair McKay Review’, comment 101.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*

professional detachment could not match, and it proved equally usable for opposing conclusions.

Defenders drew on figures like Howard and Stone, coupling their authority with operational detail to argue strategic necessity, while sanctifying the campaign through postmemory of Coventry's suffering and the heroism of Bomber Command crews. Critics deployed a mirror strategy. They invoked their own expert mascots, most notably Grayling, but also the discredited David Irving, who one commenter insisted had done the 'donkey work' that later historians merely polished.<sup>395</sup> They too leaned on operational language and grounded their authority in familial testimony of the bombing's human toll. To amend Caudill's phraseology regarding scientists, the struggle was not between historians and 'anti-historians', but between rival communities, each claiming historical authority.<sup>396</sup> The battle was not over the value of history, but over its ownership, with each side convinced its own chosen experts held the authentic key to the past.

Populist epistemology thus structured the entire debate. This analysis helps explain why Sinclair McKay himself was virtually absent from the discussions, and why his reviewers were so easily dismissed. The journalist had assumed a historian's role, with all its careful craft, archival reconstruction, moral ambivalence, and contextual nuance. This did not fit the epistemic logic of the comment culture, which instead privileges 'I-pistemology', where truth is derived from individual experience and opinion.<sup>397</sup> As representatives of a professional discipline, they were framed as part of the 'incumbent regime' of experts, cast as the 'intellectuals' whom populist rhetoric pits a glorified 'people' against.<sup>398</sup> The idiom of history was everywhere, but as a performance, not a discipline. Both defenders and critics mobilised

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<sup>395</sup> Hastings, 'Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness Review', comment 76.

<sup>396</sup> Caudill, *Expertise in Crisis*, p. 55.

<sup>397</sup> Giorgi and Eslen-Ziya, 'Populism and Science in Europe', p. 10.

<sup>398</sup> Liv Sunnercrantz and Tefik Murat Yildirim, 'The Role of Experts in Populist Politics: Toward a Post-foundational Approach', in *Ibid.*, p. 60.

‘our experts’, re-enacted the operational historian’s style, and fused it with the affective power of postmemory. In this dispensation, historians remain ‘experts’ only so long as they ratify the story the community wants to tell about itself and its past. Populist publics do not so much abandon expertise as reconstruct it on terms that validate their own identities and worldviews. This construction of an alternative epistemic order is what Samuel Bennett terms mythopoetic legitimation: the selective use of historical narratives to legitimise a worldview.<sup>399</sup> By appropriating establishment figures, constructing hybrid authority from personal testimony and operational detail, and shaming credentialed experts who deviate from the script, commenters were engaged in populist myth-making. They were not simply debating the past; they were actively sustaining (or challenging) Britain’s wartime narrative. History was rendered irrelevant.

## Conclusion

The reception of Sinclair McKay’s book, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*, illustrates the precarious terrain that public historians now occupy.<sup>400</sup> McKay’s refusal to deliver a simple verdict through his insistence on reconciliation, nuance, and empathy was a principled rejection of the moral binaries demanded by populist discourse. Yet, once refracted through the outrage economy, his narrative was stripped of complexity and reinserted into the very binaries he sought to transcend. The book’s mediation through headlines, reviews, and comment sections shows how nuance itself becomes a liability when expertise is understood not as a possession of knowledge, but as a social performance contingent on public approval. McKay sought to fulfil a contract based on empathetic complexity; the populist public sphere demanded a

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<sup>399</sup> See Samuel Bennett, ‘Mythopoetic Legitimation and the Recontextualisation of Europe’s Foundational Myth’, *Journal of Language and Politics*, 21.2 (2022), pp. 370–89.

<sup>400</sup> McKay, *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness*.

ceremonial one, the affirmation or rejection of a sacred national story. His refusal to perform this role meant he had breached their terms.

The comment sections thus became a stage for a public struggle over authority. For many readers, the moral ambiguity introduced by McKay and his reviewers acted as the ‘discordant note’ described in Crease’s ‘acoustical model’.<sup>401</sup> The moment a historian was deemed to have questioned the bombing’s necessity or foregrounded German suffering, the ‘acoustic field’ of trust collapsed. Crucially though, our analysis complicates Nichols’ influential diagnosis of a wholesale death of expertise.<sup>402</sup> Nichols identifies many of the same symptoms: hostility to credentialed knowledge, narcissistic rejection of correction, the internet’s amplification of misinformation, and a corrosive mistrust of institutions. The McKay case confirms these tendencies. Yet, where Nichols sees collapse, this study finds transformation. What emerges in the Dresden debates is not the abolition of expertise but its populist remaking. The commenters do not simply embrace ‘everyone’s opinion as equally valid’.<sup>403</sup> Instead, they actively construct a rival epistemic order.

This alternative order only allocates highly conditional deference to historians, with a preference toward figures deemed more authentic. At its apex stand veterans and their descendants (the embodiment of postmemory), followed by ‘common-sense’ patriotic citizens, and selectively curated establishment figures like Norman Stone and Sir Michael Howard, canonised only insofar as they pass the test of authenticity. Academics or journalists who insist on ambiguity are cast to the bottom, their work framed as an ideological pathology.

Through processes of *mythopoetic legitimation* and *ritualised expulsion*, these digital communities ultimately turn historical debate into a collective performance of identity. Their

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<sup>401</sup> Crease, 'Mistrust of Experts by Populists and Politicians'.

<sup>402</sup> Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*.

<sup>403</sup> Breeze, "Not One of Our Experts.", p. 49.

rehearsed routines of mnemonic defence protect Britain's sacred wartime narrative, recasting historical argument as an existential battle over belonging. McKay's reconciliatory text thus stands as both an intervention and a case study. It demonstrates that in the algorithmic public sphere, historical authority is not a stable possession but a fragile, performative status, perpetually vulnerable to reappropriation by the politics of outrage and belonging.

## Conclusion

Britain's Second World War memory has long functioned as a cornerstone of national identity, described by historian Alec Ryrie in 2020 as 'the defining moral event of our times, the sacred story of a secular age'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Ryrie suggests that this moral universe, founded on an 'appalled fascination with the Nazis', is beginning to fracture.<sup>2</sup> Post-war generations, he argues, have been raised on mythic, purified versions of that struggle, on stories that offer moral certainty in a world that rarely does. These tales, transposed from history into timeless battles between good and evil, have shaped the moral compass of the post-Christian West. But Ryrie warns that this compass is faltering. In his view, our inherited narratives still teach us how to recognise evil (Hitler, fascism, tyranny) yet they offer little guidance on how to discern or confront the more insidious crises of the present: climate change, inequality, or pandemic. He argues the recurring invocation of wartime tropes such as the 'Blitz spirit' during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed not the strength of this mythology but its exhaustion: a culture fighting the last war, summoning ghosts of moral clarity to confront enemies that no longer wear uniforms.

This thesis directly addresses and challenges this prognosis. While acknowledging Ryrie's observations about the changing landscape, it argues that the Second World War narrative is not fading but rather demonstrating its resilience through adaptation. It posits that the war story functions as a powerful and versatile 'empty signifier' (Broecker) within Britain's collective memory. Far from being exhausted, its continued application to new crises in fact represents an ongoing process of 're-securitisation'. In this process, the myth's core moral grammar (emphasising resilience, unity, sacrifice, and defiance against existential threats) is

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<sup>1</sup> Alec Ryrie, 'Our Dangerous Devotion to the Second World War', *BBC History Magazine*, Christmas 2020 (26 November 2020), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Alec Ryrie, *The Age of Hitler and How We Will Survive It* (London: Reaktion Books, 2025), p. 9.

actively reapplied, renewing its hegemonic authority by framing contemporary issues within its familiar, emotionally resonant terms.

In constructing this argument, the thesis explored how this sacred story continues to flourish in the digital age. Chapter One detailed the research methodology, justifying the case study approach focused on the bombing campaign and outlining the method of tracing discourse from authoritative articulation through media mediation to vernacular reception in online comment threads. It also explained how I would approach online discourse as a data source, using MaxQDA to balance qualitative depth with computational insights.

Chapters Two and Three established how Britain's Second World War narrative functions as a hegemonic sacred story and traced the historical evolution of Bomber Command's moral rehabilitation, the case studies that followed revealed how these same dynamics are performed and enforced in the digital sphere. Chapter Three also provided essential historical context by tracing the specific public memory of RAF Bomber Command and its strategic bombing campaign. It demonstrated why this legacy represents an insightful moral dislocation within Britain's sacred story. It showed how the campaign's methods, particularly area bombing targeting civilian centres, but also internal coercive practices like the 'Lack of Moral Fibre' policy directly challenge the hegemonic narrative's core moral grammar of a purely righteous, unified 'People's War'. This inherent contradiction creates a rupture that cannot be easily assimilated into the simpler heroic script. At the same time Chapter Three argued that while the campaign's memory has long been marked by ambivalence and critique, it has paradoxically become increasingly sanctified in recent decades. This very sanctification, however, makes the underlying moral dislocation acutely sensitive. It means any attempt to revisit the campaign's nuances or ethical complexities is now vulnerable to being framed as sacrilege, provoking mediatised hostility and ritualised defence, particularly in the digital 'age of outrage'.

The subsequent chapters turned to detailed case studies that brought the bombing campaign into the media spotlight between 2010 and 2020. Together, these chapters revealed how moral authority, ritual, and populism intersect in digital arenas to police the boundaries of Britain's wartime myth, exposing the emotional and rhetorical mechanisms through which national identity is defended and re-secured in times of perceived moral threat.

Chapter Four first looked at the case of Victor Gregg, a Second World War veteran whose description of the Dresden bombing as a 'war crime' represented a striking act of internal dissent. His memoir and media interviews challenged not the enemy's guilt but Britain's own moral self-image, positioning him as a troubling insider critic of the newly sanctified Bomber Command narrative. The chapter did not begin with an expectation of ritualisation; rather, it identified ritual retrospectively as a recurring structure in online discourse, observable in the repetition, affective intensity, and symbolic acts through which commenters sought to reaffirm moral order when it appeared threatened. Drawing on Durkheim and Catherine Bell, ritual was conceptualised as the patterned performance of collective belief and boundary maintenance in the face of moral disturbance.

To explain why Gregg's challenge provoked such visceral policing, the analysis employed the intergroup sensitivity effect and black sheep effect, demonstrating how criticism from a valued in-group member can elicit stronger condemnation than similar remarks from an outsider. Gregg's veteran status granted him initial legitimacy but ultimately magnified his transgression. Significantly, mainstream media outlets generally refrained from attacking him personally, often framing his comments with respect or curiosity, but commenters performed the work of correction and exclusion on their behalf. They enacted ritualised acts of mnemonic defence and expulsion, branding him as naïve, senile, or disloyal, thereby restoring the moral equilibrium that journalists hesitated to disturb. By contrasting this treatment with the near-liturgical veneration of Captain Tom Moore, the chapter showed how Britain's digital

commemorative culture both venerates and disciplines its veterans, demonstrating how ritual operates simultaneously as commemoration and social control within Britain's civil religion.

Chapter Five extended this analysis to a different form of authority: the institutional and moral authority of the Church of England. The chapter first established the Church's complex historical role as both a primary architect and custodian of Britain's civil religion, the system that sacralises the sacred story through national ritual. It then traced the Church's post-war 'prophetic turn' toward a more critical, cosmopolitan theology, which created a 'persistent paradox': the public still expected the Church to perform its vicarious ceremonial role, while the institution itself was increasingly challenging the nationalist myths it had helped create.

The 2015 backlash to Archbishop Justin Welby's Dresden sermon was examined as the explosive result of this collision. In contrast to Gregg, whose veteran status insulated him from direct media hostility, Welby was granted no such rhetorical indulgence. The press, particularly *MailOnline*, reframed his pastoral appeal for reconciliation as a political 'apology', presenting it as a betrayal of the national story. Welby's perceived violation of ceremonial norms (speaking of shared sorrow rather than righteous victory) produced what the chapter conceptualised as de-ritualisation, a breakdown of symbolic order marked by public confusion and anger.

Commenters responded with re-ritualisation, performative acts of denunciation and mock prayer designed to restore moral clarity and reassert the sacred hierarchy of victor and vanquished. Situating these reactions within frameworks of mnemonic securitisation and populist discourse, the chapter showed how ritual defence of the sacred story fused with wider anti-elite sentiment. Media framing, algorithmic amplification, and the 'Somewhere versus Anywhere' divide intensified the outrage, creating an affective feedback loop in which authenticity was measured through emotional fervour rather than theological reflection.

Building on this analysis, Chapter Six investigated the very nature of authority and expertise in a populist age. The chapter first explored the theoretical underpinnings of this dynamic, examining concepts like the ‘acoustic model of expertise’ where a single ‘discordant note’ can shatter trust, and the deep roots of ‘historical anti-intellectualism’ to establish how expert authority is the product of a fragile social consensus rather than a fixed status. It then applied this framework to show how the populist-affective feedback loop reshaped the reception of historical expertise through the case of Sinclair McKay’s *Dresden: The Fire and the Darkness* (2020). Whereas Chapter Five had shown how emotional outrage became a ritual means of restoring moral order, this chapter revealed how the same dynamic operated epistemically, transforming a nuanced, reconciliatory narrative into a binary moral contest.

Through algorithmic optimisation and headline compression, McKay’s careful narrative was reframed into precisely the moral binary he had sought to avoid. Retail listings and newspaper thumbnails reduced his book to the question: ‘Was Dresden a legitimate military target or a war crime?’, the same populist framing that had driven outrage around Welby’s sermon five years earlier. In this process, the affective feedback loop converted scholarly moderation into a catalyst for renewed controversy, rewarding outrage and simplification over reflection and complexity. By collapsing McKay’s nuanced account into a divisive headline, the digital economy of attention made him a target of the very polarisation he had sought to transcend. Readers positioned him uneasily between the moral poles of the debate: to some, too sympathetic to the Germans; to others, too deferential to the Allied cause. In both cases, his refusal to conform to the expected moral script rendered him suspect, illustrating how the same populist mechanisms that punished Welby’s theological ambiguity now turned upon the historian’s intellectual restraint.

In the comment sections, this reduction reached its fullest expression. Users repeatedly re-centred the discussion on the ‘war crime’ question, collapsing McKay’s multidirectional

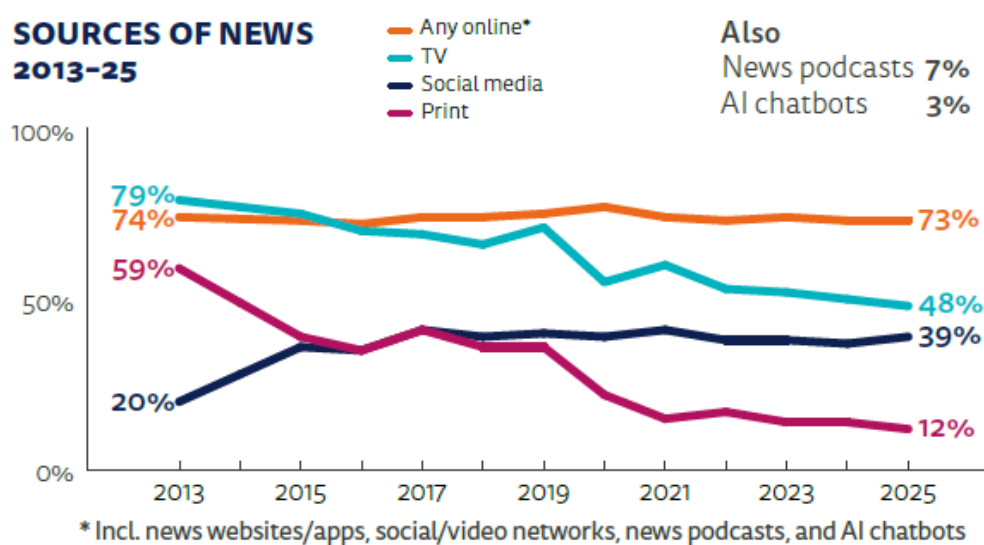
memory into the antagonistic binaries of guilt and innocence, heroism and barbarism. Some re-enacted the familiar rituals of mnemonic defence, insisting that the bombing was ‘justice for Coventry’ or ‘war, nothing more’; others advanced an inverted moral populism that condemned Allied leaders as murderers. Across both camps, affect replaced argument as the measure of authenticity. Commenters asserted their own authority through what the chapter terms a populist epistemology; a way of knowing grounded in anecdote, postmemory, and emotional conviction rather than archival or analytical reasoning.

This epistemology constituted the final stage of the populist-affective feedback loop first traced in Chapter Five. Where Welby’s sermon exposed a populist struggle over moral authenticity, McKay’s reception revealed a corresponding struggle over truth itself: the transformation of historical debate into a zero-sum contest of feeling. The historian’s caution and polyphony, intended as a model of reconciliatory remembrance, were thus not refuted but submerged-absorbed into the outrage economy and overwritten by its binary logic. In demonstrating this process, Chapter Six completed the thesis’s empirical arc—showing that the same mechanisms that police the moral boundaries of Britain’s sacred story also determine the limits of historical understanding in its digital retellings.

Across these case studies, a clear trajectory emerged. Each examined figure (the veteran, the cleric, and the historian) embodied a distinct form of authority: experiential, institutional, and intellectual. Each posed a different kind of challenge to the sacred story, and each provoked ritualised efforts to neutralise that challenge. All the case studies however testified to the continuing potency of Britain’s sacred story, continually re-enacted through digital performance. They further demonstrated that remembrance in the digital age operates not as passive commemoration but as an active, affective system of belief maintenance, a civil religion continually renewed through acts of contestation.

The conclusions of this research are necessarily framed by certain methodological limitations, most arising from its reliance on online comment data and the shifting dynamics of digital platforms. As discussed in Chapter One, comment sections offer rich, ‘naturally occurring’ data (Skey 2022) but are not statistically representative of wider public opinion. It should also be recognised that this project also captured a specific phase in Britain’s digital news ecology (namely 2010–20). While online news consumption has become increasingly dominant as television news and print media declines (96 per cent of UK adults now have internet access and 73 per cent access news online), the modes of that online engagement have changed markedly.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 7.1: Reuters Digital News Report 2025: UK Sources of News<sup>4</sup>**



According to the 2025 Ofcom and Reuters data, Facebook remains the single most-used social platform for news among UK adults (30 per cent), though this figure has plateaued after

<sup>3</sup> Nic Newman and others, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025), pp. 66–67.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

a steady decline from its 2018 peak above 40 per cent.<sup>5</sup> YouTube and TikTok have become the fastest-growing gateways to news, reflecting a decisive shift toward video- and personality-led formats. Across global markets, the share of audiences consuming news through video has grown from 52 per cent in 2020 to 65 per cent in 2025—a shift that reflects not just a change in format but in authority, as audiences increasingly turn to individual presenters, vloggers, and short-form creators rather than institutional newsrooms.<sup>6</sup> YouTube now reaches roughly 13 per cent of UK adults for news, while TikTok (used by just 1 per cent of adults for news in 2020) has grown to reach 11 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, a new ecology of intermediaries has come to dominate how Britons encounter the news. In this context, ‘intermediaries’ refers to the expanding range of platforms that mediate access to journalism without producing it, from social networks and search engines to aggregators and, increasingly, AI-driven interfaces. Their defining function is not the creation of news but the curation, ranking, and recirculation of it. In the UK, six in ten adults (60 per cent) now use such intermediaries as their primary gateway to news, with Meta services (Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and WhatsApp) reaching 39 per cent of adults and Google services 34 per cent.<sup>8</sup> Direct access to publishers’ websites or apps now accounts for only 11 per cent of the average daily time spent consuming news, compared with 31 per cent captured by third-party platforms.<sup>9</sup>

This structural dependence on intermediaries has far-reaching implications for both measurement and attribution. When news is encountered passively, surfaced by an algorithm, embedded within a social feed, or presented in an AI-generated summary, users are often

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<sup>5</sup> Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK: 2025* (2025), pp. 5, 11; Newman and others, *Digital News Report 2025*, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Newman and others, *Digital News Report 2025*, pp. 10–11, 17, 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 67; Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK: 2025*, pp. 5, 10–11.

<sup>8</sup> Ofcom, *News Consumption in the UK: 2025*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

unaware of the original source. Those accessing stories via Apple News, Google News, or TikTok may frequently attribute them to the platform itself, or not at all.<sup>10</sup> The consequence is a profound reordering of informational power: publishers continue to generate the content that anchors public debate, yet it is intermediaries that increasingly determine if and how that content is encountered.

Yet these transformations have not displaced the participatory dynamics this study examines, they have merely relocated them. Moreover, recent industry data show that traditional UK publishers are not passive observers in this new environment but actively seeking to evolve to survive. The *Daily Mail*'s portfolio of TikTok channels generated more than a billion engagements in 2024 and accounted for roughly seventy-five per cent of all UK publisher interactions on the platform; its main YouTube channel surpassed four million subscribers the same year and has since expanded into a network of eight channels, including the 2025 launch of the '*Crime Desk*' brand integrating TikTok, YouTube, and podcast audiences.<sup>11</sup> The *Telegraph* likewise reported in 2024 that its YouTube channel had become 'the news publisher with the highest number of subscribers worldwide', exceeding 5.2 million, while the *Guardian*'s combined YouTube network now reaches over 6.3 million subscribers across its documentary and explainer channels.<sup>12</sup> Such figures illustrate a deliberate migration of comment-driven interaction from the foot of text articles to video threads, live-chat feeds, and cross-platform communities.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 3; Newman and others, *Digital News Report 2025*, pp. 10, 17, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict Nicholson, 'How the *Daily Mail*'s TikTok Dominates UK Publishing Engagement', *Newswhip*, 26 November 2024 <https://www.newswhip.com/2024/11/daily-mail-tiktok-uk-publishers/> [accessed 2 November 2025]; InPublishing, '*Mail Hits 4 M YouTube Subscribers*', *InPublishing*, 25 September 2024 <https://www.inpublishing.co.uk/articles/mail-hits-4m-youtube-subscribers-24578> [accessed 2 November 2025]; InPublishing, '*Daily Mail Launches The Crime Desk*', *InPublishing*, 27 October 2025 <https://www.inpublishing.co.uk/articles/daily-mail-launches-the-crime-desk-25916> [accessed 2 November 2025].

<sup>12</sup> Telegraph Media Group, 'TMG Subscription Numbers - January 18 2024', *Telegraph Media Group*, 18 January 2024 <https://telegraphmediagroup.com/2024-01-18/#:~:text=,2m%20subscribers> [accessed 2 November 2025]; *The Guardian Annual Report 2024/25* (The *Guardian*, 2025), p. 9.

Furthermore, despite the decline of some on-site comment sections, participatory engagement remains central to how audiences evaluate, contest, and re-narrate the news. Ofcom's *Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report 2025* finds that half of adults read comments to gauge a story's credibility, and a similar proportion consult peer reactions before forming an opinion.<sup>13</sup> As Chapter One argued, such dynamics make comment threads both partial and powerful-affective barometers of perceived public sentiment. The venues of discussion may evolve, but the impulse to comment, contest, and collectively interpret the news persists. Analysing these interactions therefore remains central, not peripheral, to understanding how civic discourse and collective memory are negotiated within Britain's evolving digital public sphere.

Overall, this thesis provides a combination of historical, theoretical and methodological insights. It intervenes directly in the contested memory of RAF Bomber Command, moving beyond the traditional 'hero vs. war criminal' binary to reframe the campaign as a foundational 'moral dislocation' within Britain's sacred story. The thesis argues that the paradox of the bombing campaign, with its combination of profound sacrifice and profound moral ambiguity, has been made acutely volatile by Bomber Command's twenty-first century sanctification. Having established this, the thesis's primary contribution is to identify the precise digital and affective mechanisms used to police its legacy.

This thesis thus provides an original and integrated framework for analysing how hegemonic narratives are defended in a populist digital age. It treats online comments seriously, demonstrating how specific platforms and their affective economies actively stage memory. By synthesising social psychology, media theory, and cultural memory studies, it shows how ritualised online behaviours, populist epistemology, and mnemonic securitisation function as a

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<sup>13</sup> Ofcom, *Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report 2025* (2025), p. 11.

powerful, networked system for policing the moral boundaries of national identity. The thesis's most significant contribution is its identification of a clear trajectory of populist delegitimisation, showing how this system can sequentially dismantle experiential (the veteran), institutional (the cleric), and finally intellectual (the historian) authority. In doing so, it connects the memory of the Second World War to a crisis of trust that has moved from policing moral authenticity, to contesting the nature of truth itself.

Methodologically, this thesis demonstrates the interpretive and practical value of analysing large-scale online commentary without resorting to automation or sentiment algorithms. Its combination of manual data collection, Python-assisted structuring, and abductive thematic analysis within MaxQDA provides a replicable yet flexible framework for handling 'big' qualitative data. In other words, for individual researchers, the project illustrates that it is possible to examine thousands of digital texts in depth while preserving contextual nuance and hermeneutic sensitivity. In this sense, it bridges the gap between computational scale and qualitative richness, offering a model for future work on digital memory and discourse.

Future research could extend this thesis's framework to other volatile digital ecologies. For example, how are the same mechanisms of re-ritualisation and populist epistemology performed in visual-first platforms like TikTok, meme cultures, or influencer commentary, which may rely on different affective registers than headlines and thumbnails for example? Further investigation is also warranted into how platform architecture, algorithmic curation, and moderation practices either foster or inhibit the affective feedback loops identified here. In addition, as generative AI begins to shape online information, a critical future question will be how these systems learn, replicate, and potentially automate the very processes of ritualised outrage and mnemonic defence this thesis has documented.

In conclusion, this thesis reaffirms the enduring potency of Britain's Second World War memory, not as static inheritance but as a living, contested narrative, continually re-enacted in digital space. By following the discursive chain from authoritative articulation to media circulation and vernacular reception, it has shown how Britain's sacred story is actively maintained through ritualised practices of outrage, defence, and expulsion – patterns that both reflect and reinforce broader crises of trust in expertise and authority. While digital platforms and modes of expression will continue to evolve, the struggle over who defines the moral meaning of the past, and thus the moral identity of the nation, remains central to understanding Britain's present and its imagined futures.

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