Introduction: a poem and an image

The municipal archive of the city of Kassel holds a small file that consists of different versions of a long poem. The piece is alternatively called 'Thus Died My Home Town' (*So starb meine Heimatstadt*), 'Thus Died My Home Town of Kassel', or simply 'Thus Died Kassel'.[1] The various titles refer to a particularly devastating air attack by the Royal Air Force against the North Hessian city in World War II. On 22 October 1943, 1,800 tons of high explosives and incendiaries were dropped on Kassel, producing a catastrophic conflagration that destroyed 60 per cent of the built environment. Somewhere between 6,000 and 8,000 people were killed, while 150,000 residents out of a total population of 220,000 were made homeless.[2] According to a British post-war estimate, the attack also resulted in the production loss for the German war economy of 150 heavy tanks, 400–500 locomotives and 300 heavy guns.[3]

The air raid did not strike the city out of the blue. It occurred four years into a German war of conquest and annihilation in which the (non-Jewish German) residents of Kassel, as citizens of the German Reich, had played an active part from the very beginning.[4] The area bombardment of

[1] Stadtarchiv Kassel (StAK), S8 C53, Luftangriff vom 22.10.1943. Literarische Verarbeitung. For the text plus translation see Appendix 1.

[2] Compare Dettmar, 'Kassel im Luftkrieg', pp. 18–20. The official figure of the local chief of police was 5,830. See StAK, S8 C40, 'Erfahrungsbericht', 7 December 1943. In April 1944, the mayor reported to the Nazi district leader a death toll of 6,496 'people's comrades'; 1,500 people were still unaccounted for. See Staatsarchiv Marburg, Best. 165 no. 8818, mayor to NSDAP, 4 April 1944. A report by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) from the summer of 1945 put the death toll at 7,000 (plus 500 missing). In National Archives II (NA II) RG 243 E-6 # 64 (b) k 21 (box 563). A British report from October 1945 mentioned 8,500 fatalities. Copy in StAK, S8 B13. In local memory, the death toll is usually put at around 10,000. On the raid itself see Groehler, *Bombenkrieg*, pp. 140–7; Dettmar, *Zerstörung*.

[3] StAK, S8 B13, 'The Effect of Air Attack on the City and District of Kassel', 21 October 1945, p. 5.

[4] For the importance of the town as an armaments centre in the eyes of British military planners see the entry on Kassel in the 'Bomber's Baedeker', part I (2nd edn, 1944), pp. 381–5, copy in NA II RG 243 E-6 # 39 5 (box 383). For the impact of bombing on production see the case studies by the USSBS: Munitions Division, Motor Vehicles and

22 October 1943 formed part of a strategic air offensive against Germany's urban centres that was waged by the Western allies to help bring this war to an end.[5] In a relentless campaign that reached its climax in the years 1943–5, allied air forces dropped roughly 1.3 million tons of bombs over the territory of the Reich, reducing much of Germany's urban landscape to rubble, killing half a million civilians and tying down a substantial part of Germany's war resources.[6] Nor was the raid of 22 October 1943 the only one against a city that, according to British wartime analysis, was 'one of the most important centres of German armament production'.[7] But as the one air attack that 'completely overshadowed' all other aspects of the air war in Kassel in terms of both material destruction and loss of life,[8] '22 October 1943' took pride of place in private as well as public recollections of the bombing war and, indeed, World War II as a whole.

The very existence of the poem 'Thus Died My Home Town' testifies to the hold that this particular air raid commanded over the popular imagination. Although, as a work of art, the text holds limited interest other than as an illustration of the conventions (and limitations) of popular *Heimat* verse, as a cultural artefact, the piece offers a first pathway into the processes by which lived experience was translated into cultural memory within the context of Nazism and war.[9]

Tanks Plant Report no. 7: 'Henschel & Sohn AG' (October 1945), NA II RG 243 E-6 # 85 (box 704); Ordnance Section, Munitions Division, Plant Report no. 3, 'Henschel & Sohn GmbH: plant no. 1: gun shops' (September 1945), ibid., # 104 (box 762); Aircraft Division, Aero Engine Plant Report no. 5, 'Henschel Flugmotorenwerke' (September 1945), ibid., # 19; Aircraft Division, Air Frames Report no. 8, 'Gerhard Fieseler Werke GmbH' (October 1945), ibid., # 13 (box 239).

[5] The literature on the strategic air war is vast. While the importance of the campaign as a whole is not in doubt, the relative contribution of area bombing to the defeat of the German Reich is still a matter of controversy. For concise evaluations see Childers, '"Facilis decensus averni est"'; Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, pp. 101–33; Beaumont, 'Bomber Offensive'. For recent accounts of the campaign as a whole see, in addition to the literature mentioned in footnote 2 above, the contributions by Horst Boog, Klaus A. Maier and Ralf Blank in the official German history of World War II, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg* (*DRZW*) ed., Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt; Müller, *Bombenkrieg*; Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars*. On the legal and ethical side of bombing see Messerschmidt, 'Strategic Air War and International Law'; Hays Parks, 'Air War and the Laws of War'; Garrett, *Ethics and Airpower*; Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*; Bloxham, 'Dresden as a War Crime'.

[6] Groehler, *Bombenkrieg*, pp. 446–9.

[7] StAK, S8 C39, 'Area Attack Assessment – Detailed Report Kassel', no date [October 1943], p. 2.

[8] StAK, S8 B13, 'The Effect of Air Attack on the City and District of Kassel', 21 October 1945, p. 2.

[9] This attempt to treat popular fiction as a historical document is indebted to Fritzsche, 'Volkstümliche Erinnerung'.

'Thus Died My Home Town' is an elegy of eighty or so lines that confronts the reality of death in the air war.[10] The term 'death' is used both metaphorically and descriptively, as an illustration of the wholesale destruction of the urban environment, the 'home town', and as a reminder that bombing violently terminated the lives of thousands of citizens. In focusing on death, the poem points to a central dimension of memory cultures that formed around the experience of indiscriminate bombing. Contrary to what is sometimes assumed in the scholarly literature, mass death haunted the living, and the attempts to impart meaning and to find solace occupied centre stage in local discourses on World War II area bombing.[11]

Structurally, the poem is made up of three parts. The exposition anthropomorphises the city; it depicts a woman who 'harbours in her walls unspeakable pain'. In so doing, the text not only employs a conventional trope of *Heimat* poetry, but also invokes a frame of reference that prioritises the local over the national, indigenous – albeit largely invented[12] – traditions over the context of World War II. Both the imagination of 'Frau Chasalla' and the emphasis on a 'thousand years' of urban history (l. 5) – a reference to the millennial celebration of 1913 – invoked a set of ideas that associated the city with beauty, harmony and continuity.[13] In the poem, this *longue durée* is contrasted with the catastrophic rupture of a single night, with 'annihilation' suffered despite the valiant efforts of 'German youths' 'to protect the *Heimat*' (ll. 3–24).

While the exposition sets the elegiac tone, the main body of the text recounts harrowing scenes of agony, crushed hope and death. Remarkably, individual episodes offer very little solace even when telling stories of successful rescue. On the contrary, the survival of some is inextricably linked to the death of others. Lines 42–8, for example, tell of a man who saves from a burning building a woman and a child whom he wrongly believes to be his family. By the time he finds out that 'a stranger he has carried to life', it is too late. The building has collapsed, burying 'his dearest, his happiness' underneath.

Whereas the main body of the text recounts stories from the epicentre of the attack, the conclusion expresses collective feelings, draws lessons and passes moral judgement. The poem in its early versions is

[10] The version 'So starb meine Heimatstadt Kassel', dated 'Kassel, 23 October 1943', will be used as the textual basis for the following discussion.
[11] J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, p. 61.
[12] The personification of Kassel was a late nineteenth-century invention that had gained wide popularity in the city's millennial celebration in 1913. See Schweizer, *Geschichtsdeutung*, pp. 15–20, 239.
[13] Ibid., p. 15.

unequivocal in its moral stance. It blames the disastrous events on Britain, speaking of the 'hatred' and thirst for 'retaliation' that unites a collective 'us':

> The phosphorous flames have destroyed human happiness
> As flames of hatred they will fall back [on England][14]
> The hatred born in this night
> Has finally united us as one community. (ll. 66–9)

While a close reading of the text can help to identify important themes that were central to local experiences of aerial bombing – death, despair, hatred – the archival record also allows for some first tentative remarks about the ways in which these experiences were rewritten in the decades that followed. In the weeks and months after the air attack, the text appears to have functioned as some kind of counter-memory to National Socialist propaganda. Both the fact that the poet has chosen to remain anonymous and the existence of a great number of textual variations point to informal modes of circulation. The poem was copied out by hand in order to satisfy a demand for stories about the conflagration that did not conform to the line of interpretation adopted by the state-controlled media.[15] Although there were unmistakable echoes in the poem of certain strands of Nazi propaganda, arguably more important were the differences. Dwelling on death, loss and despair, 'Thus Died My Home Town' gave expression to a sense of finality that Nazi propaganda sought to avoid at all costs.

After the war, the poem turned into a 'memory artefact' that was used by different protagonists of an evolving memory culture – journalists, city bureaucrats, ordinary residents – in order to illustrate the catastrophic dimensions of air attack. In the process, the text underwent significant rewritings, as on the tenth anniversary in 1953, when the *Kasseler Zeitung* printed a version from which all references to 'hatred' and 'retaliation' had been deleted. Beginning in the 1960s, dozens of citizens sent their personal copies from the war to the city archive or the local newspaper, often on the occasion of anniversaries of the bombing.[16] Others added new stanzas in which they warned against the catastrophic consequences of another war.[17] In 1983, the text featured prominently in a historical exhibition that was held to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the

[14] 'On England' is added in a version that carries the title 'So starb meine Heimatstadt'.
[15] StAK, S8 C53, Ms. Bernhardine N. to *Kulturamt*, 22 September 1983.
[16] The first such letter dates from 1963. See StAK, S8 C53, Karl K. to city administration, 21 October 1963.
[17] StAK, S8 C 53, Klaus Pottin, 'So starb Kassel . . . 1943', 1972.

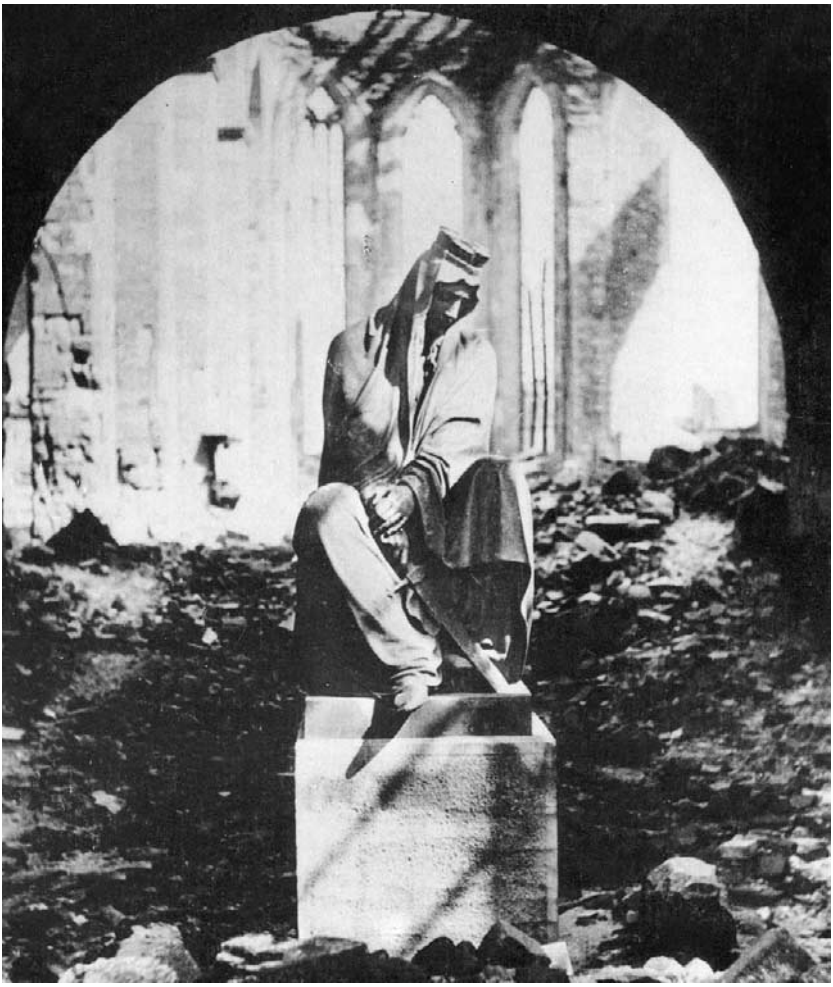

Figure 1. 'Magdeburg in Mourning' in the ruins of the Johanniskirche at war's end.

attack.[18] Even then, however, the variant on display was not identical with the text that had circulated during the war.

Whereas in Kassel the impact of aerial warfare on the locality was memorialised through the medium of lyrical poetry, 250 kilometres to the north-east, in the city of Magdeburg, similar functions were fulfilled by a photograph that showed a sculpture in the ruins of a church (Fig. 1). The

[18] StAK, S8 E9 [Textvorlagen]. Compare chapter 8 below.

sculpture carried the title 'Magdeburg in Mourning' (*Trauernde Magdeburg*); it personified the city as a woman with a bowed head and a lowered sword. The sculpture formed part of a nineteenth-century Reformation monument, which commemorated the destruction of medieval Magdeburg at the hands of Catholic troops at the height of the Thirty Years War in 1631.[19]

Situated in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1945/9 to 1990, and since unification, in the province of Saxony-Anhalt, Magdeburg offers a fascinating comparison with Kassel. Here too, in public discourse, the experience of dozens of air raids was telescoped into the memory of a single attack. On 16 January 1945, a large fleet of RAF bombers dropped around 1,000 tons of bombs on a city that allied planners considered of vital industrial and commercial importance to the German war effort.[20] The indiscriminate area attack created extensive fires, destroying 77.3 per cent of the built environment in the target area; 190,000 residents were made homeless in the raid while at least 1,930 people were killed.[21] A post-war investigation by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) spoke of the attack as a 'solar plexus blow' that served 'to cut down total factory production indirectly by keeping large numbers of workers away from their work and smashing many essential city services'.[22]

The photograph dates from the immediate post-war period, possibly from 1946.[23] It shows the sculpture of 'Magdeburg in Mourning' amidst the rubble of the Johanniskirche, Magdeburg's oldest parish church. The

[19] On the revival in the nineteenth century of public interest in the city's destruction see Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory*, pp. 141–77.

[20] NA (Kew), AIR 14/3775, K Reports Magdeburg, 15 April 1945; NA II RG 243 E-6 # 39 4 (box 383), 'City as Target', no date [1945].

[21] This is the official figure by the chief of police. See NA II RG 243 E-6 # 39 9, 'Erfahrungsbericht über den schweren Terrorangriff', 5 March 1945. As in Kassel, the precise number of deaths is heavily contested. The statistical yearbook of 1947 gives a figure of 6,000. Groehler, *Bombenkrieg*, p. 396, puts the death toll at around 4,000, while the SED elites insisted on a figure of 16,000. See *Statistisches Jahrbuch der Stadt Magdeburg*, p. 49. On the air raid see Wille, 'Tod und Zerstörung'. On the importance of Magdeburg for the German war economy in the eyes of British analysts see the entry in the 'Bomber's Baedeker'.

[22] NA II RG 243 E-6 # 39 4 (box 383), 'Physical Damage to Magdeburg as a Whole', 1945, p. 5. The same report considered negligible the effects of the area raid on the output of the city's four major industrial plants, two of which had already been effectively bombed out of operation by US Air Force precision raids. See ibid., # 39 12 (box 384), 'Report on Magdeburg', p. 3. These industrial plants were the Junkers aircraft and aero Engine works (rated 1+ in the 'Bomber's Baedeker'), the Krupp-Gruson engineering and armaments works (rated 1+), the Polte gun manufacturer (rated 1) and the BRABAG synthetic oil works (rated 2). For the effects of various types of bombing on production see NA II RG 243 E-6 # 39 3 (Junkers), # 39 2 (Krupp), # 39 1 (Polte) and # 39 10 (BRABAG).

[23] Stadtarchiv Magdeburg (StAM), Rep. 18/4, Ra 4, 'Niederschrift', 2 January 1946.

undamaged figure is framed by an archway that creates the visual impression of a halo, evoking associations of Christian martyrdom as well as of survival amidst chaos. In the immediate post-war period, the motif was popular with local photographers and the civil authorities alike, who drew on the image in their attempts to rally a dispirited population to the reconstruction effort.[24]

This changed as local self-government was eroded as part of a broader transformation of East German society along the Soviet model from 1948 onwards. By that time, the power holders of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) had lost interest in a motif that harked back to Magdeburg's past as a stronghold of Protestantism and emphasised transcendental endurance over worldly activism.[25] No more visual representations would appear in the print media, while the sculpture itself was removed from the church ruin and deposited in the backyard of a local museum. Yet there were limits to the extent to which the authorities were able to reshape the visual canon. Despite the fact that the dominant agents of public memory marginalised 'Magdeburg in Mourning' for close to forty years, the motif retained a residual hold on the popular imagination, as became apparent in the context of the 'second' Cold War of the 1980s. Against the backdrop of heightened fears over an atomic war, local residents remembered a sculpture that appeared to symbolise the destruction of their home town, and began to demand that 'Magdeburg in Mourning' be returned to its old place in the Johanniskirche.[26] Although the administration harboured serious reservations, fearing the potential of the sculpture to become a symbol of pacifism,[27] the authorities eventually gave in. In the summer of 1989, they agreed to have the sculpture returned to the church, where it has remained to the present day.[28]

Both the poem and the image are cultural artefacts that were spawned by the experience of aerial bombing. The exploration of the broader memory cultures in which these artefacts sat and through which they moved forms the subject matter of this study.

Approach

When the analysts of the USSBS published their 'summary report' on the allied air war in the autumn of 1945, they underlined the decisive

[24] See the different versions in StAM, N 754, NG 75, NG 737; E. R. Müller, 'Magdeburg, die Arbeitsstadt am Elbstrom', *Freiheit*, 7 June 1947, p. 4. See also 'Memento: Magdeburg, 16. Januar 1945', *Volksstimme*, 15 January 1948.
[25] On the context see Weber, *Geschichte der DDR*, pp. 163–223; Schmiechen-Ackermann, 'Magdeburg als Stadt des Schwermaschinenbaus', pp. 817–22.
[26] StAM, 80/4696n, 'Betr.: Plastik "Trauernde Magdeburg"', 30 September 1980, p. 1.
[27] StAM, Rep. 41/604, fos. 16f., 'Memorandum', 17 December 1987.
[28] The sculpture was relocated on 12 August 1989.

contribution that air power had made to victory in Europe. They also commented on the psychological impact of strategic bombing on German society. 'Allied air power', they wrote, had 'brought home to the German people the full impact of modern war with all its horror and suffering'. Venturing a gaze into the future, they predicted that 'its imprint on the German nation will be lasting'.[29]

Writing shortly after the end of hostilities, having toured dozens of ruined cities and conducted thousands of interviews with ordinary Germans as well as military and political leaders, the analysts of the survey took as self-evident two insights that historians have begun to appreciate more fully only recently. The first was a frank acknowledgement of the vast scale of the 'horror and suffering' that Germans had brought upon themselves; the second was that the repercussions of the war as a whole and of the air war in particular would linger on long after the dead had been buried, the streets been cleared of rubble and the cities been rebuilt. The experience of 'modern war' would shape the ways in which Germans saw themselves and the world around them for decades to come.

Since the turn of the millennium, a number of studies have appeared that have reconfigured the prisms through which the history of Germany in the second half of the twentieth century can be viewed. Sceptical of an influential current in historical writing that made 'modernisation' and 'arrival' into central analytical categories – at liberal democracy, the West or civil society in the Federal Republic;[30] at modern dictatorship, the East or a 'paralysed' society in the German Democratic Republic[31] – they have turned their attention to the abiding presence of a shared past of violence in the two successor states of the Third Reich.[32] For all their differences in emphasis and approach, these 'histories of the aftermath' share in common the assumption that, in order to understand the trajectory of German society and culture in the second half of the twentieth century[33] – the desperate quest for a return to 'normalcy' and the yearning for security;[34] the social anxieties running just below the surface of economic prosperity and social stability;[35] the tone of arrogant

[29] USSBS, *Summary Report*, p. 16.
[30] For a good discussion of the historiography see Nolte, 'Einführung', 175–82.
[31] See the concise discussion in Ihme-Tuchel, *DDR*, pp. 89–95; also Fulbrook, *The People's State*, pp. 10–17.
[32] The pioneering work is Naumann (ed.), *Nachkrieg*. See also Biess, *Homecomings*; Wierling, 'Krieg im Nachkrieg'; Gregor, *Haunted City*; Bessel, *Germany 1945*; Goltermann, *Gesellschaft der Überlebenden*.
[33] Biess, *Homecomings*, p. 10.
[34] Bessel, *Germany 1945*, p. 278; Conze, 'Sicherheit als Kultur'; Conze, *Suche nach Sicherheit*.
[35] Naumann, 'Einleitung', pp. 12f.; Schildt, 'German Angst'. Frank Biess is currently working on a project that explores the experiential foundations of proverbial German angst.

self-righteousness frequently adopted by the very people who claimed to stand in for a societal liberalisation – one must take seriously the idea that this was a society that had emerged, in Richard Bessel's memorable phrase, from 'a wave of violence almost without parallel'.[36] On this view, Germany after 1945, for an indeterminate period the duration of which was progressively pushed forward,[37] was a *post-war* society in which the many legacies of violence continued to shape the present. Such a perspective does not deny the importance of the Cold War. It also fully acknowledges the long shadow that Nazism cast over both post-war Germanys,[38] but seeks to integrate the post-history of fascism into a broader context of a post-history of war. It holds that the confrontation with Nazism and with the singularity of the Holocaust took shape within a society that struggled to make sense of the multidimensional 'shocks of violence' that it had experienced in the period 1939–45/6.[39]

This book aims to make a contribution to the perspective of the postwar (*Nachkrieg*) by examining the long-term 'imprint' that the strategic air war left on German society in east and west. By way of a comparative case study, it looks at the cities of Kassel and Magdeburg in the period from 1940 to the early 2000s. Its primary focus is neither the bombing itself nor the social legacy of the destruction, although both will play an important role in the narrative that follows.[40] Rather, the book is interested in the ways in which the air war entered the cultural inventories of the two post-war Germanys. It examines the stories that were told, the meanings that were imparted and the practices that were performed in memory of events that had exposed Germans to man-made catastrophe as never before. The validity of these stories, meanings and practices was made difficult for post-war Germans by at least two factors. For one, there was the knowledge, however imperfectly owned up to, that the events had unfolded in consequence of a war that Germany had itself unleashed. Moreover, there was the additional burden of discredited narrativisations. After all, National Socialism, the very force that bore ultimate responsibility for what had happened, had also played a dominant role in coining the idioms and shaping the discursive boundaries through which the experience of aerial bombardment was commonly expressed.

The study works from a number of assumptions that need briefly to be explicated here. Firstly, it holds that the best way to examine the cultural ramifications of the bombing is to focus on individual urban communities

[36] Bessel, 'War to End All Wars', p. 72. [37] Naumann, 'Frage nach dem Ende'.
[38] For a recent survey of the post-history of Nazism see Reichel, Schmid and Steinbach (eds.), *Der Nationalsozialismus*.
[39] Bessel, 'War to End all Wars'; Biess, *Homecomings*, p. 9; Gregor, 'Trauer und städtische Identitätspolitik'.
[40] On the social history of the bombing see Süß, 'Tod aus der Luft'.

because it was here, on the level of individual cities, that the air war had the most immediate and profound impact.[41] Secondly, the study self-consciously adopts a *longue durée* approach that stretches from the unfolding of events in the early 1940s to the early 2000s. In so doing, it becomes possible to assess the extent to which legacies of the catastrophic events lingered on after the material impact had been overcome and generational change had turned lived experience into cultural memory. Finally, Germany after 1945, of course, was not only a post-war society but also a Cold War society that was divided between the antagonistic power blocs of a bi-polar world. It is in order to make a contribution to a comparative history of the two Germanys that the two cities of Kassel and Magdeburg have been selected for this case study. Although part of central Germany before the war, the two cities found themselves on opposite sides of the inner-German border between 1945/9 and 1990, Kassel in the West and Magdeburg in the East.

A comparative case study as proposed here allows for representations of the air war to be studied within the context of the history of German division between 1949 and 1989.[42] It can make a contribution to our understanding of the asymmetrical relationship, the 'interweaving and delimitation', between the two successor states of the Third Reich. At the same time, in employing a time frame that goes beyond the history of German division, it becomes possible to assess how important the ideological confrontations of the Cold War really were for the trajectories of urban memory. Did different communities experience the bombings in different ways or were there important similarities? Were the local memory cultures propelled on to different trajectories by the emergence of antagonistic political cultures from 1945 onwards? And finally, was there a convergence of memory after unification, or did differences persist? If so, were there perhaps also other factors at work in influencing the shape of memory, such as the abiding power of local traditions or of religious ways of seeing the world?

One way to examine the emergence and trajectory of memory cultures is to focus on the 'realms of memory' where 'memory crystallizes and secretes itself'.[43] Divested of its baggage of 'cultural melancholia',[44] French scholar Pierre Nora's now classic concept of *lieux de mémoire* still offers a helpful tool for unravelling the manifestations and workings of public memory. It provides a pathway of enquiry that draws attention to

[41] For a discussion of the benefits and pitfalls of a local approach to the study of memory see Gregor, *Haunted City*, pp. 8–14.
[42] Kleßmann, 'Verflechtung und Abgrenzung'.
[43] Nora, 'Between Memory and History', 7.
[44] Kritzman, 'In Remembrance of Things French', p. ix.