

Rebuilding Dresden's Frauenkirche: a symbol of conflict resolution

On the night of 13 February 1945 the German city of Dresden was attacked by fleets of British and American bombers. The attack was devastating. The city was crowded with refugees who were escaping from the advancing Russian army. In the packed streets of the old city a firestorm developed which destroyed thousands of houses and other buildings. 35,000 people were killed: so many that the authorities had to cremate some of the bodies in public squares in order to reduce the risk of disease.



Dresden was the capital of the eastern region of Saxony. During the eighteenth century the city had been filled with beautiful buildings. It was generally regarded as one of the finest cities in Europe. Indeed, many Germans had believed that Dresden would not be attacked for this very reason. They were mistaken.

One of the few buildings to survive the firestorm was the Frauenkirche [Church of Our Lady]. This huge building, constructed in the 1740s, had, for two centuries, been a symbol of all that was best in Dresden. Two days after the bombing, however, the central dome of the church collapsed. For the next fifty years the Frauenkirche remained a pile of rubble. The communist authorities who governed the city after 1945 wished it to remain that way, as a permanent reminder of the brutality of the western allies.

In 1990 Germany was reunited, and the communist government fell from power. Discussions began very quickly about what should happen to the Frauenkirche. Many people wished it to remain in ruins, and to continue to serve as a war memorial. They



pointed out that only about 20% of the stonework survived, so that it would not really be a rebuilding but creating a copy. Would such a copy really serve much purpose in the 21st century?

Despite this, groups of volunteers began to raise money for the rebuilding project, which got under way in 1994. The volunteers argued that the rebuilt church would restore the historic beauty of Dresden's skyline. Just as important, it would stand as a symbol of reconciliation, and humanity's ability to recover from even the worst disasters. A lot of

money came from Britain, where the attack on Dresden had always been controversial. The cross for the top of the new Frauenkirche was also made in Britain – by a man whose father had been a bomber pilot in the 1945 raid!

By 2004, the exterior of the Frauenkirche had been rebuilt at a cost of 300 million Euros. This cost has also been criticised. Work on the interior was scheduled to finish the following year, and the Frauenkirche will be rededicated in October 2005.

A useful website can be found at www.frauenkirche-dresden.org/ which shows the rebuilding at various stages over the past ten years, and includes video clips. Remember to click on the English language symbol!

- How was the Frauenkirche destroyed?
- What reasons, apart from those mentioned above, might people have for wishing to leave the Frauenkirche in ruins?
- How convincing do you find the arguments in favour of rebuilding the Frauenkirche? Explain your answer.
- Do you think it is important to have a symbol like this to show that a conflict has been resolved? Explain why.