

Luftkrieg und Literatur

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Between 1942 and 1945 the German heartland was subjected to massive bombings. Some of those bombings had legitimate war-aims, such as military installations or industries devoted to the production of weapons or simply infrastructure, such as railroads and harbours, necessary to the waging of war. But in war everything is permitted as the purpose of war is to prevail, and if ends may ever justify means, war is the prime example¹. Besides the notion of infrastructure can be given a wide latitude of interpretation, and one of the interpretations is to include the civilian population. Thus the avowed purpose of the terror bombings was just terror. To break the morale of the German people and in particular that of the industrial worker. The bombings were a massive undertaking, the Royal Air Force alone flying 400'000 missions. The damage done was considerable, as the ruined cities of Germany can testify, and it caused the death of some 600'000 people. Tremendous as that carnage was as measured on an absolute scale, relatively it was not as important as one may be tempted to believe. It did not in any significant way either break the morale of the population at large, nor inhibit the German war effort. And, as it later would transpire, it left large tracts of the industrial infrastructure intact and ameliorated the modernization of that which was not, as testified by the rapid recovery after the war. Thus one may in retrospect question the resources brought to bear on a project whose spurious advantages stood in no proportion to the moral cost. Just pausing on the statistics offered above to make some comparisons and simple arithmetical operations, which are seldom done, not least in the book under review, one concludes that on the average each mission killed one enemy civilian. Thus for the purpose of such a limited objective, disregarding for the moment the morality of such objectives in the first place, a plane had to be supplied with fuel, loaded with explosives, flown back and forth putting a large crew at considerable risk. Furthermore to maintain such capabilities, planes had to be manufactured en masse, as well as an extensive infrastructure constructed involving many new air-fields². Sebald speculates whether the undertaking had grown to such proportions that it would have been seen as an irresponsible waste of investment not to continue what in effect amounted to nothing more than a boost to domestic morale³.

While it traditionally has been customary to exalt the achievements of the victors and neglect the sufferings of the vanquished, the second world war effected a change in sensitivities, when starting with the plight of the Jews, victimhood became the ennobling quality above all others. Thus it is now considered somewhat distasteful to bring up the issue of German victimization, after all, did not the Germans provoke the vengeance visited

¹ Often the overriding aim is peace, and peace remains the most common justification of war.

² Most of those air-fields were situated in East Anglia, (where incidentally the author has spent thirty years teaching), and remain to this day as overgrown relics.

³ The English public had to be shown that the country was in fact engaging in a fight.

upon them, and would not the Germans have been more than willing to effect the same kind of destruction, and more⁴ had they had the necessary resources? This is of course true, and just as it would be perverse to compare the suffering of the German population with the Holocaust, it would be morally wrong to equate the allied war effort, as one basically of survival, with that of the German of naked aggression⁵. But atrocities do primarily involve people as individuals, only secondarily as members of collectives. In fact it is doubtful on philosophical grounds whether collectives can be subjected to hurts at all, pace the present preoccupation with such concerns. The firestorms that struck Hamburg, reaching levels of that of hurricanes, subjected its hapless population to horrors comparable to a nuclear holocaust. As fires raged, people were suffocated and ultimately carbonized. In ruined cities there was a terrible stench, and such a profusion of rats and flies, that often made 'cleaning operations' impossible. Forensic men could later provide in factual detail the absurd conditions of many of the corpses, for which regular autopsies were impossible, so mixed were clothes with body, so deformed the interior organs.

Regardless of guilt, those were horrendous experiences, deeply scarring a surviving population⁶, yet there is nevertheless hardly any documentation of it, let alone any literary. The point of Sebald is not that German victims should finally get a voice, but the far more existential one, that human experience, especially such a deeply disturbing one, should always be given a testimony, and his concern is thus ultimately literary. How do you articulate the most extreme experience⁷ of which humans have been subjected to? Sebald ruefully notes that the prevailing attitude was one of denial. That it was too extreme to be fashioned into the quotidian reality⁸, and that the few documentary reports that have survived in most cases are nothing but cliches, which is another way of stating that they were not intended as expressions of reality but expressions of denials of the same. What Sebald looks for are the telling stories, those which give the significant detail. As the subject is not as morally and emotionally laden, as that of the rise of Nazism or the destruction of the Jews, it does lend itself to a purely factual account, the way one would describe the phenomena of the natural world.

Sebald initially presented his call for attention in a Zürich paper. A call for attention,

⁴ Sebald makes those points, somewhat unnecessarily in my opinion, referring to a table conference with Hitler and Göring at the stern, fantasizing about the destruction of London. Hitler remarking that the streets were so narrow and the buildings so close to each other, that once a few fires would get a foothold they would invariably spread and overwhelm the whole city, leading Göring to the correct conclusion that firebombs would be more to the point than mere explosives.

⁵ The Soviet soldiers invading Germany at the end of the war, supposedly could not contain their amazement. Germany was so rich, compared to what they were used to, and they simply could not understand what they had wanted in their own country.

⁶ Sebald refers to stories, supplied by independent sources, of refugees, carrying their dead children in suitcases.

⁷ The same also holds for camp literature, keeping in mind that you can only expect to get accounts for the lucky ones, those who drank the bitter cup to the full, never survived to tell the tale, and in case they did so against all odds, what remained would be incapable of any accounting at all

⁸ And Sebald gives a few examples of the human urge to reduce life to the mundane, reporting on housewives washing windows in houses reduced to rubble

whose point, as presented above, was not to allow the voice of the German victims, but to exhort the same to give their voices, in order to finally bring about a closure. He did get a variety of responses, most of which had missed the point. True, there were treatments of the ordeals, that Sebald had never come across, in particular some childrens books; on the other hand, as he remarked, what could you expect of literature on the topic addressed to children? Many of those who responded to his Zürich article were right-wing cranks, and Sebald remains puzzled how some of those people, seemingly contemporary with himself, could maintain such views when never subjected to the regime at all. Some of the respondents were more helpful, but they all testified to not to be equal to the challenge. The subject is difficult, because as Sebald admits, its horrors entail a fascination, which is akin to the voyeurism of the purely pornographic one⁹. Yet the experience is part of the history of every German, and to deny it, in a desperate blinkered concentration on the future, is tantamount to running the risks of depriving yourself of your history. In fact, although the author was barely born at the end of the war, the ruined townscapes became part of his inheritance, as we all are imprinted by the events of the recent past prior to our birth.

The book concludes with a portrait of an obscure German writer. Reading such a piece one is unsettled by the suspicion that the author might have made everything up, and if so, by breaking a fundamental contract, the interest of the story evaporates. In this case it refers to a certain Alfred Andresch, whose huge ego and above all ambition, stood in no relation to his intrinsic talent. Sebald presents the questionable standing of his subject during the war, in spite of a brief initial imprisonment by the Nazis and temporary marriage to a Jewish woman. His books are subjected to harsh analysis, and so it ends with the untimely death of the protagonist. One wonders what point there is to its conclusion in the present book.

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⁹ and indeed the author refers to a report of a postwar child who came across a well-thumbed collection of pictures from after the Hambrug fire blizzards. obviously perused as so much pornography.