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“Bombs Fell from Unimaginable Height”

The End: Hamburg 1943

Hans Erich Nossack

Trans. and Foreword by Joel Agee

Photographs by Erich Andres

The University of Chicago Press

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by Jeff Bursey

This economical memoir about the July 1943 bombing of Hamburg, referred to as Operation Gomorrah by the Allies, is a work of horrifying beauty. Nossack displays an acute sensitivity about how the citizens responded to the attack, yet he never descends into vulgar sentiments or angry judgments. Joel Agee’s concise introduction tells how this work, a classic in Germany since its publication in 1948, proved uninteresting to English-language publishers. He had translated it partly for his own reasons, reflecting that he was drawn back to it during the Vietnam war because of its “windless calm,” a sharp and welcome contrast to the government language filling the airways and papers. Agee submitted his translation but was told that, apart from the fact that foreign fiction sells poorly in the US, “Americans just weren’t prepared to sympathize with a German description of the suffering of Germans in World War Two.”

W.G. Sebald, born in 1944, is “one of those who remained almost untouched,” as he put it in *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2003), “by the catastrophe then unfolding in the German Reich.” He goes on to say that Germans had not generally, or in a wide and deep enough way, incorporated the events of the Second World War in fiction:

“In spite of strenuous efforts to come to terms with the past, as people like to put it, it seems to me that we Germans today are a nation strikingly blind to history and lacking in tradition... And when we turn to take a retrospective view, particularly of the years 1930 to 1950, we are always looking and looking away at the same time. As a result, the works produced by German authors after the war are often marked by a half-consciousness or false consciousness designed to consolidate the extremely precarious position of those writers in a society that was morally almost entirely discredited. To the overwhelming majority of the writers who stayed on in Germany under the Third Reich, the redefinition of their idea of themselves after 1945 was a more urgent business than depiction of the real conditions around them.”

In an article in *The New Yorker* in 2002 (part of *Destruction*), Sebald credited Nossack for being one of the few writers to discuss the effects of the Second World War with honesty and directness. It took that influential mention for *The End* to be published in English.

There are few events in this short and sorrowful work of reportage. While vacationing in a cabin just outside Hamburg, Nossack and his wife, Misi, are woken up by “the sound of

eighteen hundred airplanes approaching Hamburg from the south at an unimaginable height... This sound was to last an hour and a half, and then again on three nights of the following week.” Misi chooses the shelter of the cellar; Nossack witnesses what happened the first night.

“Numerous flares hung in the air above Hamburg; they were popularly known as Christmas trees. Sometimes ten, sometimes just two or one, and if at some point there were none at all, you would begin to draw hope that perhaps it was over—until new ones were dropped. Many disintegrated as they sank, and it looked as if glowing drops of metal were dripping from the sky onto the cities. In the beginning, you could follow these flares until they extinguished themselves on the ground; later they vanished in a cloud of smoke that was lit red from below by the burning city.”

Fleeing refugees give conflicting reports on the totality of the destruction. Writing four months after the bombardment, Nossack reports there was “an attempt to banish the dead by means of numbers,” where the toll starts at 40,000, jumps to 300,000, and eventually is estimated at between 60,000 and 100,000. “All the rules of logic were invoked to prove that it couldn’t have been more. Someone had opened hostilities against the dead... But the dead did not wish to be conquered by logic.” Some survivors return to Hamburg in a truck, Nossack and Misi among them:

“We were like a group of tourists; the only thing missing was a megaphone and a guide’s informational chatter... Where once one’s gaze had hit upon the walls of houses, a silent plain now stretched to infinity. Was it a cemetery? But what sort of creatures had interred their dead there and planted chimneys on their graves? Solitary chimneys that grew from the ground like cenotaphs, like Neolithic dolmens or admonishing fingers. Did those who lay beneath inhale the ethereal blue through those chimneys? And there, among those strange shrubs, where an empty façade hung in the air like a triumphal arch, was that the resting place of one of their lords and heroes? Or were these the remains of an aqueduct such as the ancient Romans had built? Or was all this just scenery for a fantastic opera?”

Sebald supplies details on the effect of the bombing, which included the creation of a firestorm which swept through Hamburg “at a speed of over a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour... The water in some of the canals was ablaze. The glass in the tram car windows melted; stocks of sugar boiled in the bakery cellars. Those who had fled from their air-raid shelters sank, with grotesque contortions, in the thick bubbles thrown up by the melting asphalt.” The unauthorized photographs taken by Erich Andres, which come after Nossack’s text, are affecting in their own narrative about the devastation.

Upon the return of Nossack and Misi to Hamburg, the depiction of wartime moves from the “unimaginable height” from where the bombs came to a blasted scenery, with the focus on how citizens dealt with being refugees, widows, widowers, orphans, strangers in what they had, days before, called home. Nossack worries about their apartment, which they find in ruins. “Where is the heavy old table with the lindenwood top? And the chest?... If there had been such a little something, how we would have caressed it; it would have been imbued with the **/18/** essence of all the other things. And when we walked out, we left a vacuum behind.” They meet

others similarly robbed of family, friends, possessions, livelihoods, and also those whose homes were untouched. The relationship between the victims and those who are not is uneasy. Here Nossack's emotional receptivity to the stories of other inhabitants mingle with his own feelings, enabling him to describe how these divided people view the world. For the victims cannot look around and see what they did before. The offer of a small object, perhaps nothing more than a curio, cannot replace what they have lost, of course, but more crucially, there arises a short question wrung from their souls: what value can there be, anymore, in having such a curio? That remark would seem ungrateful, and a victim might be asked to explain what he felt, as would the giver of the token object, guiltily aware that he has not lost what the other is missing. "So it came to pass that people who lived together in the same house and ate at the same table breathed the air of completely separate worlds. They tried to reach out to each other, but their hands did not meet. Which of them, then, was blind? They spoke the same language, but what they meant by their words were entirely different realities. Which of them, then, was deaf?"

To explain the abyss people are in danger of sliding into, Nossack comes up with short "fairy tale", as he calls it. "There once was a creature that was not born of a mother. A fist struck it naked into the world, and a voice called: Fend for yourself! Then it opened its eyes and didn't know what to make of its surroundings. And it didn't dare to look back, for behind it there was nothing but fire." It is the immediate aftermath of this grisly birth that Nossack relates so clearly, with piercing insight into current conditions and a quiet dread about what the future will bring that is eerie in its restraint. "Have people made themselves lighter so as to make the heaviness more bearable? Sometimes someone will say: This is just the beginning. Someday we'll look back on this with nostalgia. There will be famines, epidemics, and whatnot. Only a quarter of us will survive. Nothing can be done about it. You have to be lucky." Luck, or a malignant power, reigns over Hamburg. "...I have not heard a single person curse the enemies or blame them for the destruction... A much deeper insight forbade us to think of an enemy who was supposed to have caused all this; for us, he, too, was at most an instrument of unknowable forces that sought to annihilate us." There can be no relief from the onslaught of this incomprehensible force—not in possessions, in family, in friends, or drawn from the past. Even music is painful. "There is something consoling in it, but it is precisely this consolation that makes us feel naked and helpless, at the mercy of a force that wants to destroy us."

Reviewing Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction*, the poet Charles Simic, who as a child lived through bombing in Yugoslavia during the Second World War, concluded: "So much intellect, capital, and labour go into planning of destruction, one can count on excuses being found in the future for some inadvertent slaughter. The ones who survive will again be faced with the same problem: how to speak of the unspeakable and make sense of the senseless." In these years of war, with their shock and awe campaigns, *The End* is an eloquent and timely work.

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