

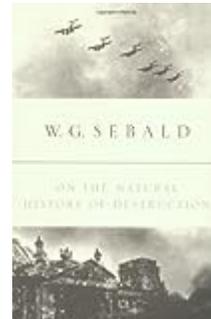
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Winfried G. Sebald. *Luftkrieg und Literatur.* Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2001. x + 205 pp.
EUR 9.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-596-14863-9.

Winfried G. Sebald. *On the Natural History of Destruction.* New York: Random House, 2003. x + 202 pp. \$23.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-50484-6.



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I have been invited to contribute to this H-German forum on the air war specifically from the perspective of a literary scholar. Thus, I view my comments as a means to generate a discussion about the topic, and will therefore not provide a literary review in the typical sense. Let me begin my comments by outlining what I view as the most salient points of Sebald's essay.

In *Air War and Literature*, W.G. Sebald examines the provocative issues of how and to what extent the atrocities suffered by German civilians in the years 1942-1945 have been remembered. He questions four distinct issues about post war Germany: the role of memory, specifically questions of what and how is remembered; the role of collective consciousness in the Federal Republic of Germany and the way that official memory dictates that consciousness; the way that certain events related to the war have been exploited, in particular for the purposes of rebuilding Germany after the war; and finally, the lack of literary engagement with the topic of the air war.

Let me first explain why I find Sebald's essay so

provocative. My initial reaction was one of astonishment. I find unfathomable the extent, to which the sufferings of German civilians during World War II have been ignored, especially in literary texts. This is all the more astounding when one considers the substantial amount of paper, which authors, critics and scholars alike have devoted to the topic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the last two decades in particular. Secondly, and perhaps more poignant and cogent, is the fact that until reading Sebald, I as a literary scholar, had been relatively unaware of this gap. This is all the more distressing to me, because I taught an advanced twentieth century literature seminar in spring 2003 with the topic: *Deutschlands schwierige Vergangenheit* [Germany's difficult past].

Thus, Sebald's essay and this forum now afford me the opportunity to try to understand the nature of the gap in my own literary readings. My scholarly focus for the last fifteen years has been the study, analysis, and interpretation of literature from the former GDR. I could claim, in my defense, that the immediate impact of World War II on civilian Germany was an area of limited interest to me. This answer however, does disservice to

the greater issue at hand, namely, that historians, political scientists and literary scholars have been one-sided in our approach to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. As Sebald put it, for the period of 1930-1950, there is perhaps a “fear of looking” and more importantly, a habit of “looking away.” He goes so far as to accuse Germans, as a nation, of blindness towards history. Much of Sebald’s critique appears to be directed at the Federal Republic of Germany. Yet, I also must conclude that the air war was not a topic of interest in the German Democratic Republic. Despite my expertise in that area, I can recall no direct literary treatment of either the air war or the civilian casualties.

In examining Sebald’s text more closely, it is clear that his analysis extends beyond that of mere literary criticism, for his essay reads as an indictment of West Germany’s post war development. In terms of historical memory, we can assert that Western Germany succeeded in eliminating many reminders of its past. The rebuilding program after the war served, for example, to obliterate history, particularly in those instances where old buildings were not rebuilt, but modern edifices instead took their place. In Sebald’s view, this type of erasure makes it much simpler *not* to reflect on the past. Thus, memories of the air war were not a significant factor in the development of public consciousness in the Federal Republic, except in those instances where such memories benefited and encouraged reconstruction. The other side of this coin, however, is the shame and guilt that the Germans had for their part in the war. One could view the air raids as a justifiable punishment or even as retribution. Thus, a natural reflex would be to “look the other way” and not engage with the immediate past.

For literary communities following the war, the issue can be considered even more complex. Those writers who chose to remain in Germany during the Third Reich faced the task, following the end of the war, of trying to redefine themselves. A logical step was to avoid discussion of all aspects of the war, and forge a break with the past. For decades, we have referred to this as the “Stunde Null,” a period when Germany could start over and therefore throw off the confines of the terrorist regime. It seems, however, that this so-called “Stunde Null” has afforded writers and scholars the chance to avoid reflection on those events immediately past. The resultant “Trummerliteratur” fell victim to a type of self-censorship, as writers struggled to steer clear of any reminders of the Third Reich. Such avoidance of uncomfortable themes in literature is the single major contributor to the formation of a collective amnesia, that Se-

bald so vigorously condemns. Furthermore, because so many writers had lived in exile during the war years, they were not qualified to comment on them. Confronting the immediate past could only be done by those who had witnessed the atrocities; the scenes that many had witnessed, however, were more gruesome and horrendous than the average soul could comprehend, much less try to articulate. Sebald brings to light several authors who attempted to break this unspoken taboo. Whereas Hermann Kasack approached the topic as a type of archivist interested in preserving memory, Sebald dismisses his account because Kasack invokes Far Eastern philosophies and resorts to symbolism. Hans Erick Nossack, on the other hand, is the only writer who tried to record what he saw, though Sebald criticizes, he resorted to abstractions. Peter de Mendelssohn received the most scathing critique, for not only did Sebald accuse him of an ego-maniacal viewpoint, but likened his melodramatic depictions to those offered by Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang in their 1920s epic film *Metropolis*.

Like the Federal Republic, the GDR had its own agenda for post war literature. The majority of exiles returning to the GDR were communists who had sought refuge in the Soviet Union. This group of writers very clearly desired to move beyond the fascist heritage and looked to Soviet literature as a model. Once Socialist Realism, with its positive hero and emphasis on building a productive society, had cemented itself as the aesthetic norm, there was no longer a need to reflect on the atrocities of the war years. Even those texts that somehow did address the war years, did so from the perspective of the antifascist resistance. Franz Fühmann’s novella *Kameraden* (1955) and Bruno Apitz’ novel *Nackt unter Woelfen* (1958) count among the most well-known post war texts, though they too leave the topic of civilian casualties woefully untouched.

Now that the division of Germany is a matter of historical record, it seems that literature is more concerned with processing the historical, social and cultural changes that unification has brought. Even in those instances when contemporary writers try to address the past (most recently Guenter Grass’ *Im Krebsgang*; but even the notoriety of Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser* can be counted here), there is a tendency to focus on the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. In 2002, *Der Spiegel* even questioned whether texts such as Grass’ or Schlink’s actually serve to diminish the Germans guilt (*Der Spiegel* 15/2002; pp. 178-181). Even a novel such as Dieter Forte’s *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* (1995), which presents the bombing of Duesseldorf from the per-

spective of a child witness, has not been left unscathed by criticism. Indeed, it was the publication of Sebald's Zurich lectures in 1997 that prompted critics to examine Forte's novel more closely.

What struck me most in my reading of Sebald's essay is the realization that the self-imposed silence about the air war is a phenomenon not limited to literary works of the time. Sebald documents the deficit of attention to the topic in autobiographical and historical accounts, and even notes its absence in family histories. Furthermore, it is all the more puzzling that, even as historical interest

has increased, this interest has not furthered additional literary investigations. Perhaps, with this H-German forum, we can take the first steps toward closing this critical gap.

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