

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Hans Erich Nossack. *The End: Hamburg 1943*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xxi + 87 pp. \$20.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-59556-6.

Reviewed by Ryan Berry (Department of History, University of Toronto)

Published on H-German (September, 2005)

Writing From the Abyss: Hans Erich Nossack's *The End: Hamburg 1943*

In July 1943, Hans Erich Nossack, along with his wife Misi, watched as the Allied forces bombed the city of Hamburg. For several days, vacationing in a cabin on the outskirts of the city, they witnessed the repeated air raids and the resulting fire-storm that razed the city and left the majority of Hamburg's inhabitants, at least those fortunate enough to survive the bombing, as refugees in a fire-swept wasteland. Three months later, living in London, Nossack set to work on preserving his memories in *Der Untergang*, an eyewitness account of the bombing and its aftermath. This short book is at once a dispassionate, documentary report of annihilation and total destruction, and a narrative that describes the author's immediate and personal experience with the horrors of total war. However, it simultaneously bears the metaphysical struggle of a literary mind trying to find a new language to articulate and convey the incomprehensible. As the original German title suggested, Nossack is a witness on the edge of the abyss, a spectator to the apocalyptic end. "Imagine closing your eyes for a second," he writes, "and when you open them again, nothing is left of what was there before" (p. 22).

This recent translation of *Der Untergang* comes at a fortuitous time, as the sixtieth anniversary of the German defeat, as well as the recent commemoration of the bombing of Dresden, have refocused popular (and academic) interest on the air war and German memory.[1] While the larger ongoing discussion of German memory incorporates the air war, particularly in regards to the victim/perpetrator dichotomy, it has been Jörg Friedrich's incendiary *Der Brand* (we still await its translation), and W.G. Sebald who have largely set the tone of scholarly debate on the bombings. The success of Sebald's controversial *On The Natural History of Destruction* is undoubtedly responsible for this appearance of Nossack's text in

translation. Until Sebald's text was published (as the reworked English translation of his 1997 *Luftkrieg und Literatur* lectures in Zurich), Nossack's memoir was all but forgotten in the German literary world.[2]

If we are to believe W.G. Sebald's critique of postwar German literature, Nossack stands amongst a select number of writers—Hermann Kasack, Arno Schmidt, Heinrich Böll and Peter de Mendelssohn—"who ventured to break the taboo on any mention of the inward and outward destruction" resulting from the aerial bombardment of Germany.[3] Indeed, while Sebald criticized German writers for failing to explore the inward and outward destruction of the allied bombing campaigns, he reserved for Nossack special regard, claiming that "he was the only writer of the time to try recording what he actually saw as plainly as possible," and that Nossack was "primarily concerned with plain facts." [4] Sebald is partly right. Nossack's memoir-like essay, at once part story, testimonial, and report, is a rich repository of facts outlining the destruction of the material and spiritual life-world of Hamburg and its citizens.[5] However, as Joel Agee points out in the excellent foreword to this translation, to read *The End* as a catalogue of destruction is a misreading. Sebald's analysis came dangerously close to this very type of misreading. As Agee suggests, "It is the little word 'I' at the start of his record and the presence, throughout, of a vulnerable conscience intent on being true to itself that makes all the difference between objective reporting and authentic witness" (p. xiv). It is the personal vision of destruction, the moral prescience of Nossack to bear witness that elevates this text above the recording of facts.

One element of Nossack's personal "mandate to render an account," however, constitutes a deep and significant absence within the text. Nossack describes the bombardment and destruction of Ham-

burg as the will of an ultimate power, the alignment of fate against a people abandoned to their situation. Nossack self-consciously juxtaposes Arcadia with the abyss, describing the natural “idyll on the other side of the abyss so precisely because perhaps a way can be found back from there to the past we have lost” (p. 6). It is this coupling of the “past that is lost,” the discourse of biblical fate, and the detached, apocalyptic, arbitrary “raging of the world against itself” that establishes the absence of the political context of National Socialism (p. 15). Indeed, in Nossack’s rendering of events, the bombing of Hamburg transcends the political realm and enters the realm of natural destruction; war as the revolt of nature rather than a manifestation of politics. Nossack writes that “After everything I have heard, I am coming to the conclusion that no greater contempt could have been shown to what is called the State than to treat it as something completely irrelevant that could neither be blamed for a fate such as Hamburg had suffered nor be expected to do anything about it” (p. 33). It was “unknowable forces that sought to annihilate” Hamburg and its citizens, not an enemy with political and military motives (p. 34). The only direct reference to the atrocities of National Socialism are the “convicts in striped suits” that are enlisted to clear the streets and buildings of corpses following the firestorm (p. 44). The political reality of Nazi Germany is an unsettling non-presence as a result of Nossack’s end-of-times *leitmotif*.

As an eyewitness to destruction, however, Nossack’s writing bears a greater clarity and creates a terrifying vision of the sublime, despite his penchant for “philosophical exaggeration and false notions of transcendence.”[6] As a spectator to destruction, Nossack struggled to record the ruined landscape objectively, yet continuously encounters the inability to convey the totality of his experience. In his conclusion he enlists a short story recounted to him by a survivor, and lauds the man for “his imageless language” that creates “an image such as no poet can create” (p. 63):

Then a man came into the cellar and told us, you’ve got to come out now, the whole house is burning, it is going to collapse any minute. Most of us didn’t want to, they thought they’d be safe where they were. But they all died. Some of us listened to him. But it took a lot to do that. We had to go out through a hole, and in front of the hole the flames were beating back and forth. It’s not so bad, he said, look, I came in to get you, don’t you see?

So I wrapped a wet blanket around my head and crawled out. Then we were through it. Some people keeled over in the street then. We couldn’t take care of them“ (p. 63).

Ironically, it is perhaps in Nossack’s inability to make sense of the destruction of the material world that we can best understand the totality of human loss and suffering. Descriptions of corpses “pressed together, bloated from the heat,” written with the distant language of a reporter, encounter the outer limits of representation (p. 51). It is to Nossack’s credit that he does not indulge his philosophical tendencies in his rendering of human suffering and instead writes in a quiet, detached prose. Rather, it appears that the destruction of Hamburg’s everyday life-world presented the greatest challenge to Nossack’s sensibilities; Nossack continuously struggled to comprehend what was and what now is: “And why are the chimneys still there, meaningless and without smoke? But there’s no stove left. What did we cook for? And no beds, either! Why did we sleep? Why did we sustain ourselves? Why did we collect provisions and save money?” (p. 41). Indeed, the largest portion of this short account describes Nossack, and the other survivors, who, like himself, are “wandering in a dream through the eternal wasteland” left by the firestorm, refusing to look to the past, overcome by the weight of the present (p. 42). And as Nossack writes, “how dreadfully heavy that weight was—so heavy that one dares not breathe and moves through the world only with great caution—is almost impossible to put into words” (p. 53).

This new translation represents one of those intriguing paradoxes of the publishing industry; this printing is a beautiful treatment of a terrible subject. Erich Andres’s photos, set at the back of the book, only diminish the text if one considers them to reinforce a “documentary” reading. The inclusion of Andres’ photos follows a trend established by Ernst Kabel Verlag, a Hamburg publisher who, noting the similarity between Andres’s photos and Nossack’s writing, first included them together.[7] Indeed, it is Andres’s quiet pathos for his subject that reflects the moral and aesthetic principles of Nossack’s writing; his picture of the older gentleman plugging his ears, seemingly to the deafening silence of the Hamburg wasteland, and the photos of personal inquiries written on burnt-out buildings (for example, “Hilde wo bist Du?”) attest to the themes of total loss and displacement.

While scholars and teachers may appreciate the availability of the text in English, they may wonder whether it will broaden the field of debate. As it has played a rather limited role in German scholarship until now, it is difficult to believe that this translation offers a point of departure or a new area of inquiry for scholars already immersed in research on German memory and the Nazi past. Rather, I suspect that *The End* will enjoy its Sebald-inspired renaissance and will pique the interest of the English-speaking scholar who has not had access to the original German printing. However, this all remains to be seen. Beyond the boundaries of this debate, one may regard *The End* as a piece of writing that is, as Nossack intended, an account of the terror and destruction unleashed by the Second World War. As such it both illuminates and condemns the human tendency to rain ruin upon humanity.

Notes

[1]. See H-German forum on this theme at <http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWIIbombing/WWIIbombingindex.htm>.

[2]. See Andreas Huyssen, "Rewritings and New Beginnings: W.G. Sebald and the Literature on the Air War," in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 138-157. Huyssen argues that Sebald's use of Nossack's writing, along with other literary texts of the bombings, "gives us not so much an analysis as a reinscription of the trauma by means of quotation" (p. 156).

[3]. W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* trans. Anthea Bell (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2004), p. 11.

[4]. Sebald, *Natural History*, p. 51.

[5]. See Scott Denham, "Review of Hans Erich Nossack, *Der Untergang*," H-German, H-Net Reviews, November 2003. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=222921069382237>. Denham comments on the ambiguous nature of Nossack's narrative and provides a synopsis of *Der Untergang's* publishing history in Germany.

[6]. Sebald, *Natural History*, p. 51.

[6]. Denham, "Review," p. 2.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at: <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Ryan Berry. Review of Nossack, Hans Erich, *The End: Hamburg 1943*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11125>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.