

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Hans Erich Nossack.** *Der Untergang.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996. 81 pp. EUR 10.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-518-01523-0.

**Jens Rehn.** *Nichts in Sicht.* Frankfurt am Main: Schöfferling Verlag, 2003. 141 pp. EUR 18.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89561-147-6.

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## I. Context

As I write the first lines of this review essay I am sitting in the car waiting to pick up kids from school, laptop on my knees, under tall sycamores just across the park from the main city cemetery in the city of Wuerzburg (where I am spending two years directing Davidson College's German study abroad program). On my left across the street is the Siebold-Gymnasium, formerly Kaiserliches, then after 1918 Staatliches Realgymnasium. One of the teachers there, Theo Memmel, resigned his teaching post to become the Nazi mayor of Wuerzburg in 1933, which he remained until 1945 (Rockenmaier, p. 244). Just behind me at one end of this section of the beautiful Ringpark is the war memorial, built in 1932 to honor the several hundred Wuerzburg soldiers killed in World War I. It had a shockingly fascist aesthetic already then, with massive Breker-like figures carrying a dead comrade, all Stahlhelme, trench coats, grim faces, all from the light grey limestone that lies under this part of Franconia.

Plaques of names stand behind them, each with a year chiselled in it. Seven comparatively reserved crosses stand to the sides with dates 1939 to 1945 plus two plaques put up by a *Vertriebenenverband* and the local sport club commemorating the loss of life and *Heimat*, these all added later. A couple hundred meters across the park from the school is, before the gates of the cemetery, the memorial to those killed in the bombing of the city on March 16, 1945. It is dark stone with a sculpture of a family lying dead on the ground surrounded by dark stone crosses. The style is Ernst Barlach. Every time I've been by this memorial there have been fresh flowers. Some 4000 people were killed in the bombing of Wuerzburg, which was one of the last big raids of the war. 3000 of those

dead are buried in a mass grave here. Each March 16th the bells in the city toll between 9:20 and 9:40 p.m. to mark the bombing (Domarus, p. 166).

There is no marker or memorial, but on April 26, 1942, along the street between the war memorial and the bombing memorial—at the time the Hindenburg-Ring, now the Friedrich-Ebert-Ring—a photo was taken of a large group of Jews from Wuerzburg and surrounding towns who were forced to march to the trains that carried them to the East. Most of these 842 people deported on that day were killed in Belzec and Sobibor (Rockenmaier, pp. 150, 153). Readers of this discussion list probably know this photograph from the Wuerzburg *Main-Post* Archive: a long line of people in winter coats carrying bags and suitcases, moving from back left to front right across the picture, trees in the background on the right, police standing on the sidewalk to the left. It has been reproduced often. On June 17, 1943, the last 57 Jews from Wuerzburg and the region were sent away. The train went directly to Auschwitz. Some 1,200 Jews from Wuerzburg were deported and killed. A room in the town hall houses a permanent exhibit about the destruction of Wuerzburg. There used to be a small plaque marking the place of the city synagogue in the Domerschulstrasse, but a new building is going up on the vacant lot where the synagogue once stood and the plaque is gone now.

History is thick in this town. The connections between, for example, the WWI dead, the Nazi schoolteacher turned mayor, the deported and murdered Jews, and the destruction of Wuerzburg, are easy to make, as I just have, but, as we know, difficult to explain and more difficult to understand, in one's head and in one's heart. I drive past the war memorial, the school, the bombing memorial and then down

the Friedrich-Ebert-Ring every day. On some days, like today, this is a very strange experience.

## II. Why now?

Thanks to a new generation of historians and to a new generation of curious readers, and to publishers who have reissued long-forgotten documentary histories and fiction, we now have a lot of material to help us confront these inevitable connections more thoughtfully and responsibly. Given the numerous reviews already of Grass's novel and of Friedrich's history, I have decided to discuss below two lesser-known, but re-issued books of literature, first Hans Erich Nossack's *Der Untergang* (1948) and then Jens Rehn's *Nichts in sicht* (1954). Both have become modestly successful again following W.G. Sebald's claims that German writers didn't do a very good job of representing the bombings and Joerg Friedrich's bestseller *Der Brand*. Not quite a flood, but certainly a table-top full of new titles greet one in any good bookstore in Germany these days: Joerg Friedrich's *Der Brand*, Grass's *Im Krebsgang*, Sebald, Nossack, and Rehn; but also now big picture books like Christoph Kucklick's *Feuersturm* and Friedrich's newest book *Brandstaetten* (both recently reviewed by Ralf Blank on the H-Soz-Kult list), as well as Lothar Kettenacker's fine collection of essays and newspaper reviews on Friedrich's *Der Brand* and a *Spiegel* collection, journalistic but very interesting, edited by Stephan Burgdorff and Christian Habbe. Kettenacker's book is especially useful and should be on any reading list designed to explore the discussion at hand. Friedrich's newest book has already provoked a new wave of reviews.

## III. Hans Erich Nossack's *Der Untergang*

The memoir-like essay is referred to by Nossack as both a "story" (*Erzaehlung*) and a "testimonial" (*Bekanntnis*) and by critics variously as a memoir, essay, report (*Bericht*), "a mixture of the fictional and the documentary" (Weiss), and story; it has appeared in four editions in Germany:

"Der Untergang," in *Interview mit dem Tode* (Hamburg: Wolfgang Krueger Verlag, 1948).

*Der Untergang* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1961).

"Der Untergang," in *Interview mit dem Tode* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1963).

*Der Untergang*, illus. with photographs by Erich Andres (Hamburg: Ernst Kabel Verlag, 1981).

Total print run of the various editions seems to be in the 75,000 range (Czerwionka, 282).

The publication history of *Der Untergang* through 1981 shows two sides of the kind of reporting on German victimization present in postwar Germany: first a kind of high-brow, bourgeois (Nossack: "buergerlich") view as present in places like the staid and sometimes provocative conservative journal *Merkur* and the Langen-Mueller Verlag on the one (right) hand and in Heinrich Boell and the Gruppe 47 on the other (left). In this case, it is the highbrow publisher Suhrkamp that legitimizes the presentation of German victimization, mainly by reissuing the piece in 1961.[1] Second, there is a low-brow, *kleinbuergerlich* outlet, on the one hand as a kind of local history, as was the case all across Germany in hundreds of small, local memorial publications for victims of allied bombing (see Friedrich), and on the other as what Nossack called disdainfully "Bahnhofs-literatur," the kind of books (often militaria) sold at train station kiosks, sensational, "Landserhefte," possibly pornographic or right-wing: cheap. The 1981 edition by the Ernst Kabel Verlag seems more the latter to me. Erich Andres was a photographer for the Wehrmacht, went on after the war to work as a commercial photographer, and apparently took these photos of his hometown during a leave from his job as photographer in a *Wehrmacht Propagandakompanie*. From what I can find, he shot the Hamburg photos illicitly and hid them until after the war. This seems plausible. It appears as if the local Hamburg publisher Ernst Kabel Verlag saw the serendipitous similarity in the two native Hamburgers' work—Andres's documentary photographs and Nossack's documentary report on the bombing of Hamburg—and moved to produce the synthetic portrait of Hamburg's demise in July 1943. Despite the whiff of *Bahnhofs-literatur* surrounding the Ernst Kabel Verlag edition, it is a compelling book. Nossack's text is given real power through Andres's photos, and vice-versa. None of the previous editions of *Der Untergang* had any illustrations at all. I know that one U.S. press is currently considering an English edition of Nossack's memoir, possibly with photographs.

Critics cite *Der Untergang* unanimously as the Nossack title that made him famous (Haase, Weiss, Vollmann, for example) and alongside a few other titles ("Unmoegliche Beweisaufnahme," in *Spirale* [1956], *Bereitschaftsdienst* [1973]), it served and serves as the identificatory text for Nossack, whom critics name nearly always alongside Camus and Cor-

tazar outside Germany, and in the same breath as the other “internal immigrants” in the German context: Ernst Juenger, Elisabeth Langgasser, Marie Louise Kaschnitz, Walther von Molo, Frank Thiess, Peter Bamm, and Hans Carossa, among other authors of those books “your grandmother read” (Vollmann) in the fifties and sixties. In this list, too, belongs Jens Rehn, but more on him below. Nossack is a realist of the occasionally magical sort, a minimalist, a nihilist. He’s a serious, unfunny, solid, obvious character. He claimed to hate publicity and success, but at the same time (as his correspondence shows), he carefully furthered his literary success and sought every opportunity for public exposure and publication. In fact, he claimed repeatedly that the Hamburg bombing was the critical moment for him, his new beginning (at 42 years old), his awakening as an author. He said on several occasions that all his earlier works had been lost in the fires. Yet several new studies show that this was not the case. Rather, Nossack had lost only his diaries; all but two of his plays, most of his poems, and much of his correspondence was saved, either in the fireproof safe in his Hamburg office or with friends in other places. Nossack actually tried hard to use the pre-war material (mostly dramas) through the early fifties, but by about 1952 had found that his post-*Untergang* prose writing was being received better than his pre-war plays, two of which flopped in Wiesbaden in the early 1950s (see Dammann and Czerwionka). Still, he continued to claim that the bombing was his new beginning and it has become just that in his own literary biography and for the popular imagination. Most surveys claim that Nossack was a communist (yes, but he was also in the right-wing paramilitary Freikorps for a year as a student in Jena); that he was censored by the Nazis (he wasn’t; on the contrary, in 1942 he asked for and received permission from the NS state to publish); that the Hamburg bombing was his literary and personal “Zero Hour” (literary, not: he sought for the next seven years to publish and have produced his pre-war plays; personal, yes in some ways, but he didn’t seem to realize this until a decade or more after the fact, when he began making the point in interviews).

Nossack sought in right and left-wing political circles for ways to reject his bourgeois-mercantile upbringing as a young man (as did millions of others at the time). As an adult he “escaped” into the family coffee firm as a way of avoiding contact with the Nazi state (he had been in the KPD, after all). After the war he remained an outsider. He referred to himself

once as “the best-camouflaged author in Germany.” He won prestigious writing prizes and awards and has been the subject of a dozen dissertations. He wrote and published prodigiously: a handful of novels, several collections of stories, collections of speeches and essays, lots of occasional prose in journals and papers, interviews, letters, diaries. With the exception of a few recent volumes and papers interested in a critical revision of Nossack’s self-portrait, there has not been any very good work on Nossack in the last decade. He is not on German departmental reading lists. He seems a period piece, an acquired taste for contemporary readers (along the lines of Ernst Juenger), and is of interest now only because he is a good example of early attempts to describe and digest the trauma of the war.

Nossack is back on the front burner now for two reasons: first, he had his hundredth birthday in 2001, and German papers and cultural institutions are notoriously active about such anniversarial events. A dozen or so major newspaper articles marked his centenary. Even more important, though, is the debate about Germans-as-victims, opened most prominently by W.G. Sebald in his essay “Luftkrieg und Literatur,” given as the Zurich Poetics Lectures in 1997 and published as *Luftkrieg und Literatur* in 1999 (*On the Natural History of Destruction*, Random House, 2003). Here Sebald accused German literature of not adequately portraying German victimization, and especially of repressing the trauma of the destruction of German cities through the bombings. German authors had abdicated some kind of responsibility to their own German victims, he argued. One of the few exceptions, for Sebald and others – in the hasty search for Germans who had treated *German* rather than *Jewish* or other victims in their fiction – was Hans Erich Nossack in his piece *Der Untergang*. So all of a sudden everyone (or the few hundreds or so who cared) went to the library and read Nossack’s *Untergang*, having never heard of it before Sebald. (Sebald actually got hold of Nossack, Hermann Kasack, and Alexander Kluge, two others who pondered impact of total war on Germans, much earlier. See his scholarly essay in *Orbis Litterarum* from 1982.) With perfect timing, then, came Guenter Grass’s wonderful new novella *Im Krebsgang* (2002) (*Crabwalk* [2003]), which situated the world’s worst maritime disaster in the complicated context of Germans as victims, Germans in war, Germans making memories, and Germans trying to figure out how and what to think about the grim images of innocent women and chil-

dren dying at the hands of the allies. Nossack's *Untergang* is named in several reviews of Grass's book.

I find much in Nossack's other works to be dated, heavy-handed, tendentious, and very serious. He was influenced by Kafka, surrealists, expressionist themes; he sometimes reminds me of Schopenhauer. *Der Untergang* represents the experience, or better, the state of \*destruction\* well, and without the irrational abstraction or psychologization (Hofsommer) of Kasack's *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* (1947) or the social commentary of Boell's *Der Engel schwieg* (written 1949-50; published posthumously 1992). Nossack's slight "report" should be read by more than just the readers of the H-German discussion, now that we're concerned again (in the context of the Iraq war) with the nature of air war and what bombs do to cities and people.

Schreibverbot?

Several critics mention that Nossack was prohibited from writing ("unter Schreibverbot") under the Nazis.[2] Yet I find no evidence for this. The National Socialist *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (Reich Chamber of Writers), a wing of the *Reichskulturkammer*, required that all published authors be members of the party "writers guild." Nossack, through a chance encounter with Hermann Kasack, editor at the Suhrkamp Verlag, sought to publish a book of poems with Suhrkamp. In order to do this, he had to seek permission from the state by way of an application for membership in the *Reichsschrifttumskammer*, which he did (Dammann, p. 227ff.). Until this point, in October 1942, Nossack had published nothing, nor tried to, though he was already a prolific writer—poetry, plays, and diaries. He was not prohibited from writing, nor from publishing under the Nazi state. On the contrary, the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* gave Nossack explicit permission to publish by way of an "exemption from necessary membership" in the chamber since his planned publication was "only occasional and of modest size" (228). So, from what we know from the archives, Nossack was not of interest for the Nazi state, which didn't even know he was writing until this request (which was granted) of 1942. While most biographical accounts of Nossack mention prominently his membership in the communist party for a few years in the mid-1920s and again from 1930 to 1933, almost none mention his membership in a right-wing Freikorps unit and in a conservative university fraternity in the early 1920s (see Dammann

and Nossack, "Jahrgang," p. 136).

#### IV. Jens Rehn's *Nichts in sicht*

Reading this war book, originally published in 1954 and just republished, can add to and complicate our knowledge of how German literature represented the experience of the war. Although World War Two is hardly present in the story and shows up only as a kind of contextual frame for the minimal plot, the book has been (and will continue to be) read as a German war story. The novella is a period piece, a wonderful existentialist exercise, with clear, precise, and direct language that reminds me of Camus or Raymond Carver or of film noir or Hemingway. The story is basic: two men stuck on a life raft in the Atlantic. Both die, first one, then the other, over the course of a few days. My ideas about the book here are not so very different from those of most of the German reviewers, though in the current context of renewed interest in the literary and historical representation of German suffering in WWII, this book has a newly-inspired relevance. Clearly the publisher seeks to market the novella in the context of this renewed interest, which is why I think it is relevant to discuss Rehn's book here.

The story opens with the basic dramatic scene: flat ocean, burning sun, drifting life raft, two men, the "one-armed man" and "the other man," never named, sitting opposite each other on a rubber life raft in the middle of the Atlantic. The narrator uses declarative sentences, brief, direct. One man watches the horizon without pause; one sleeps. All is past tense, heterodiegetic, third-person presentation; uncomplicated. Later the narrator focuses more on the characters' psyches, including retrospective memory flashbacks and hallucinations, including stories of women, which is a common and complicating factor for both characters, but for now, things are distant and factual. On the horizon there was "nothing in sight." The title phrase comes back as a kind of refrain throughout the book at regular intervals after its invocation at the end of the first paragraph. (This technique reminds war novel readers of Vonnegut's "So it goes" in *Slaughterhouse 5*.) Following the first refrain, the reader gets a factual description of the progress of how a shot-up arm, wounded and rotting, gets amputated. The description is clinical, impersonal, almost like an encyclopedia entry. Although, contrary to what some readers say, there is a kind of light-hearted irony here already in the first pages. Gallows humor is of course characteristic of the war

novel genre, and Rehn has a nice touch with it. The arm, tossed overboard, “lies by now some 2,300 meters down, that is if no fish has eaten it.” Otherwise there is only smoking, eating bits of chocolate, and nipping at the remaining whisky ration, the only liquid on board, terse conversations about the hopeless situation, and lots of private thinking and remembering.

We learn about the characters gradually, but in such a way that underlines the irrelevance of their own individuality: “When a rubber raft is drifting alone in the mid-Atlantic it is irrelevant if it’s drifting there in war or peace. It is also unimportant what the nationalities of the two men are when they are drifting alone in the mid-Atlantic and will die of thirst if no one finds them in time. The sun is uninterested in the fact that the one-armed man is an American and the other man is a German, or in the fact that they are squatting in a rubber raft in the middle of the Atlantic in 1943” (p. 9).

Much of the narration concerns itself with the details of the physical state of the two men. The one-armed American airman dies of a massive infection at the end of the second of the five chapters. The other man, the German submarine officer, of dehydration at the end of the book. The actual relationship between the two is minimal, since the one-armed man dies early on, but the psychological relationship between them that exists in the mind of the other man is important and dominates the story, beginning with the other man’s debate with himself about whether and when to throw the dead man overboard, and ending with the one-armed man’s continued presence in the story through hallucinations in the mind of the other man. Even early on they converse about the hopelessness of human relationships: the narrator tells us that the German’s fiancée was killed in a riding accident. (So it goes.) And the American’s girlfriend learns that he was lost over the Atlantic, drinks herself into oblivion to escape her sorrow, and ends up in the hospital with a leg amputated after a drunken car wreck. (So it goes.) Thus we gain insight into men’s concerns—basic ones, to be sure: women, food, drink—and rescue. But from the outset all their needs are shown to be without meaning beyond physical survival. They die and that’s that. (So it goes.) Of interest later in the book are several hallucinations the other man has, mainly involving imagined conversations with the dead one-armed man, who for a day at least, floated along behind the raft inspiring all sorts of desperate thoughts. But then Rehn’s narra-

tor inserts one of the encyclopaedia entries: “Hallucinations are caused by, among other things, fever and extreme exhaustion. They are perceptions without a corresponding external stimulus, that is, perceptions of actual situations transformed by illness.”

Of special interest in the context of the current interest in German literary and historiographical representations of Germans as victims in war are a few scenes of submarine attacks on allied shipping convoys and the retaliatory depth-charge and bomb attacks on the German submarines. The results are deadly for all and seem to serve no real connection to Rehn’s presentation of the other man’s psyche. The war is a simple fact, unavoidable, present, like nature. “We shouldn’t have attacked. Then you could have continued sailing.—When and if.—Result 50 men gone to hell. In two days it will be 51 counting me” (p. 15). “The steamer was in the crosshairs and began to sink aft after the first hit. The next torpedo hit between the bridge and the stack. The ship broke up and sank quickly. Many people, very many people swam in the water. That was not good to see. The seas were very rough. The people would not be able to hold out in the water for long” (p. 92).

This was Rehn’s first work and aroused great interest in 1954. It won a literary prize and caught the attention of Gottfried Benn, Siegfried Lenz, and Martin Walser, who all wrote positively about Rehn’s novel. The reissue of the book has also inspired several brief positive notes in the press, always in the context of the current wave of treatments of Germans as victims of WWII. (For excerpts of the reviews, see the Schoeffling Verlag webpage for the book: <<http://www.schoeffling.de/content/buecher/232.html>>.)

#### V. Taboo?

Sebald might be right that there is no great German novel about the bombing. But there was never a taboo about speaking or writing about the bombings. There are, as Sebald himself mentions, hundreds of local histories of the experience of cities and towns during the war, as well as, inevitably, the photos—before and after—of the church or town hall. Nossack and Rehn show how the war was treated both as experience and topos soon after the war. Another war experience book that needs to be named in the context of Wuerzburg is Leonard Frank’s *Die Juenger Jesu*, a portrait of Wuerzburg in rubble and a sketch of moral possibilities for Germans and some Jews after the war. This novel, first published in 1949 and

long out of print in the West (Aufbau Verlag had it in print for a while in the late 1950s), has also been reissued recently, by a local Wuerzburg publisher.

As many reviewers have noted, there is no taboo about discussing or portraying German victimhood, one needs only pay close attention and listen well.

I believe the press and publishers have pushed the discussion we are having now for a couple of reasons beyond simply selling newspapers and books: first, because, in fact, there are some good new books out: Grass's especially. And second, because of the Germans' increasingly relevant role in international geopolitics. Having Germans see themselves as victims, or at least be reminded of their possible partial status as war victims—as complicated and fraught with problems as this may be—allows them to be better pacifists on the world stage, or to understand why their Green foreign minister should be taken seriously. In Wuerzburg, the bombings are nearly unavoidable. What is easy to miss here is the former Jewish life of the city. There is in this town what some have called “the presence of the absence” of Jews. The discussion of the Germans as victims, of the allied bombings of Germans and their cities, of the memorialization of these victims, is a necessary and useful one. But in this town I see an encrusted history of a cult of German victimhood and not much else.

Notes:

[1]. It would be worth investigating how this came about, who made the decision to issue *Der Untergang* as a separate book, whether the early-1960s wave of Germans-as-perpetrators media (Eichmann trial, various “Auschwitz trials” of former concentration camps guards; Mitscherlich, Grass, et al.) sparked some desire on the part of Suhrkamp or Nossack to offer *Der Untergang* as a kind of counterweight: Germans-as-victims vs. Germans-as-perpetrators. The correspondence between Nossack and his publisher (Unsel) and editor (Kasack) that might shed light on this question seems to be at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach, though I've not checked it there.

[2]. Among others: Inge Stephan: “In his postwar writings, Nossack achieved a belated literary breakthrough denied him during the Third Reich, when he had been banned from writing” (p. 172). Joseph Kraus: “Im Jahre 1933 haette Nossacks erstes Manuskript veroeffentlicht werden sollen; nun musste er froh sein, mit einem Schreibverbot davonzukommen” (p. 8). Jacket text from *Der*

*Untergang*, Ernst Kabel Verlag: “Hans Erich Nossack, Jahrgang 1901, konnte durch die Umstaende der Zeit, in die er hineinwuchs, als Schriftsteller erst nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg in der Oeffentlichkeit hervortreten.” Schroeder: “Nossack erhielt Schreibverbot” (p. 32).

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