A NATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION

BY W. G. SEBALD

I grew up with the feeling that something was being kept from me: at home, at school, and by the German writers whose books I read hoping to glean more information about the monstrous events in the background of my own life.

I spent my childhood and youth on the northern outskirts of the Bavarian Alps, in a region that was largely spared the direct effects of the so-called hostilities. At the end of the war, I was just a year old, so I hardly have any impressions of that period of destruction based on personal experience. Yet, to this day, when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war, I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, one from which I shall never entirely emerge. A book published in 1963 on the history of the little market town of Sonthofen, where we lived, contains a passage that runs, “The war took much from us, but our beautiful native landscape was left untouched, as flourishing as ever.” Reading that sentence, I see pictures merging before my mind’s eye: paths through the fields, river meadows, and mountain pastures mingling with images of destruction—and, oddly, it is the latter, not the now entirely unreal idylls of my early childhood, that make me feel as if I were coming home, perhaps because they represent the more powerful and dominant reality of my first years of life. I know now that at the time, when I was lying in my bassinet on the balcony of our house and looking up at the pale-blue sky, there was a pall of smoke over all Europe, over the rear-guard actions in the East and the West, over the ruins of the German cities, over the camps where untold numbers of people were burned: people from Berlin and Frankfurt, from Wuppertal and Vienna, from Würzburg and Bad Kissingen, from Hilversum and The Hague, Namur and Thionville, Lyons and Bordeaux, Kraków and Lodz, Sarajevo, Salonika and Rhodes, Ferrara and Venice—there was scarcely a place in Europe from which no one had been deported to death in those years. I have seen memorial tablets even in the most remote villages on the island of Corsica reading “Morte à l’Ausschwitz,” or “Tür par les Allemands, Flossenbürg 1944.”

In one of my narratives, I described how, in 1952, when I moved with my parents and siblings from my birthplace of Wertach to Sonthofen, twelve miles away, nothing seemed as fascinating as the areas of wasteland here and there among the rows of houses. On February 22 and April 29, 1945, bombs had been dropped on the insignificant little market town, probably because the place contained two large barracks for the mountain troops and the artillery, as well as an establishment known as the Ordensburg, one of four training colleges that had been set up for the education of the new Fascist elite soon after the Nazis came to power.

Of the buildings destroyed in Sonthofen and not rebuilt, I remember two in particular. One was the railway station, the main part of which was used as a storehouse for rolls of cable, telegraph poles, and similar items, while in a largely undamaged annex Gogel, the music teacher gave lessons every evening. It was strange, especially in winter, to see the music pupils scraping away with their bows at their violins and cellos in the one lighted room of the ruined building, as if they were sitting on a raft drifting away into the darkness. The other building was known as the Herz-Schloss: a villa built at the turn of the century close to the Protestant church. Nothing was left of it now but its cast-iron garden railings and the cellar. By the nineteen-fifties, the plot of land, where a few handsome trees had survived the catastrophe, was entirely overgrown, and as children we often spent whole afternoons in this wilderness created in the middle of town by the war. I remember that I never felt at ease going down the steps to the cellars. They smelled of damp and decay, and I always feared that I might bump into the body of an animal or a human corpse.

Today, it is hard to form an even partly adequate idea of the extent of the devastation suffered by the cities of Germany in the last years of the Second World War, harder still to think about the horrors involved in that dev-
Janet Flanner described the "dwindled population in black and with bundles—the silent German people appropriate to the silent city."

It is true that the strategic-bombing surveys published by the Allies, together with the records of the Federal German Statistics Office and other official sources, show that the Royal Air Force alone dropped almost a million tons of bombs on enemy territory; it is true that of the hundred and thirty-one towns and cities attacked, some only once and some repeatedly, many were almost entirely flattened, that about six hundred thousand German civilians fell victim to the air raids and three and a half million homes were destroyed, that at the end of the war seven and a half million people were left homeless, and there were 31.1 cubic metres of rubble for every inhabitant of Cologne and 42.8 cubic metres for every inhabitant of Dresden—but we do not grasp what it all actually meant. The destruction, on a scale without historical precedent, entered the annals of the nation only in the form of vague generalizations as Germany set about rebuilding itself. It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected, and it never played any appreciable part in discussions about our country. This is highly paradoxical in view of the large numbers of people exposed to the air campaign day after day, month after month, year after year, and the length of time—well into the postwar period—during which they faced its real consequences, which might have been expected to stifle any positive attitude to life. Even after 1950, wooden crosses still stood on the piles of rubble in towns like Pforzheim, which lost almost a quarter of its eighty thousand inhabitants in a single raid on the night of February 23, 1945, and no doubt the dreadful smells that, as Janet Flanner wrote in March, 1947, were released by the yawning cellars of Warsaw in the first warm days of spring pervaded the German cities, too, in
the immediate postwar period. But these things apparently did not register on the sensory experience of the survivors still living at the scene of the catastrophe. People walked "down the street, through the dreadful ruins," the novelist Alfred Doblin wrote in 1945, after returning from American exile to southwest Germany, "as if nothing had happened, and...the town had always looked like that." The reverse side of such apathy was the declaration of a new beginning, the unquestioning heroism with which people immediately set about the task of clearance and reorganization.

Writing of a conversation with the directors of I.G. Farben in Frankfurt in April, 1945, the journalist and diplomat Robert Thompson Pell records the amazement with which he heard Germans talk of rebuilding their country to be "greater and stronger than ever before"—in a tone in which self-pity, grovelling self-justification, a sense of injured innocence, and defiance were curiously intermingled. Nor did they subsequently fail to carry out that intention, as witness the postcards that travellers in Germany can buy today at the newsstands of Frankfurt am Main. From the outset, the new legendariness—and in some respects genuinely admirable—reconstruction of the country after the devastation wrought by Germany's wartime enemies, a reconstruction tantamount to a second liquidation, in successive phases, of the nation's past, prohibited any look backward. It did so through the sheer amount of labor required and the creation of a new, faceless reality, pointing the population exclusively toward the future and enjoining on it silence about the past. German accounts of the time are so few and far between that Hans Magnus Enzensberger's collection "Europa in Ruinen" ("Europe in Ruins"), published in 1990, consists predominantly of pieces by foreign journalists and writers making observations that until then had been almost completely ignored in Germany.

Even what has been called the "literature of the ruins," which would seem to presuppose an unerring sense of reality and a concern, as Heinrich Böll put it, with "what we found when we came home," proves on closer inspection to be an instrument already tuned to individual and collective amnesia, and probably influenced by pre-conscious self-censorship—a means of obscuring a world that could no longer be presented in comprehensible terms. There was tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described. The darkest aspects of the final act of destruction, as experienced by the great majority of the German population, remained under a kind of taboo, like a shameful family secret—a secret that perhaps could not be acknowledged even privately.

Of all the literary works written at the end of the nineteen-forties, probably only Böll's "Der Engel Schweigt" ("The Angel Was Silent") gives some idea of the depths of horror then threatening to overwhelm any who really looked at the ruins around them. Reading it, one is immediately aware that, of all novels, this—a tale that seems marked by irredeemable gloom—was more than readers of the time could be expected to take, as Böll's publishers and probably Böll himself thought. As a result, it was not published until 1992, more than forty years after it was written. Indeed, the seventeenth chapter, relating the death throes of Frau Gompertz, is so unremittingly sombre that even today it makes painful reading. The dark, stickily clotting blood described as it pours from the dying woman's mouth in floods and spasms, spreading over her chest, staining the sheets, dripping over the edge of the bed to the floor and forming a glutinous puddle—inkly and, as Böll is at pains to emphasize, extremely black-hued blood—symbolizes the despair that militates against the will to survive, the bleak depression that refuses to lift and to which the Germans might have been expected to succumb.

Apart from Heinrich Böll, only a few other writers—among them Hans Erich Nossack, the author of "Der Untergang" ("The End")—ventured to break the taboo on any mention of the inward and outward destruction, and generally did so rather equivocally. Even in later years, when local and amateur war historians began documenting the fall of the German cities, their studies did not alter the fact that the images of this horrifying chapter of our history have never really crossed the threshold of the national consciousness. They did not try to provide a clearer understanding of the extraor-
inary faculty for self-anesthesia shown by a community that seemed to have emerged from a war of annihilation without any signs of psychological impairment.

Enzensberger points out that it is impossible to understand "the mysterious energy of the Germans" without recognizing that "inscrutability was the condition of their success." The prerequisites of the German economic miracle were not only the enormous sums invested in the country under the Marshall Plan, the outbreak of the Cold War, and the scrapping of outdated industrial complexes—an operation performed with brutal efficiency by the bomber squadrons—but also something less often acknowledged: the unquestioning work ethic learned in a totalitarian society, the logistical capacity for improvisation shown by an economy under constant threat, experience in the use of "foreign labor forces," and the lifting of the heavy burden of history that went up in flames between 1942 and 1945.

The plan for an all-out bombing campaign, which had been supported by groups within the Royal Air Force since 1940, came into effect in February, 1942, with the deployment of huge quantities of personnel and war materials. As far as I know, the question of whether and how it could be strategically or morally justified was never the subject of open debate in Germany after 1945, no doubt mainly because a nation that had murdered and worked to death millions of people in camps could hardly call on the victorious powers to explain the military and political logic that dictated the destruction of the German cities. It is also possible, as sources like "The End," Nossack's account of the destruction of Hamburg, indicate, that quite a number of those affected by the air raids, despite their grim but impotent fury in the face of such obvious madness, regarded the great firesstorms as a just punishment, even an act of retribution on the part of a higher power with whom there could be no dispute. Apart from the reports of the Nazi press and the Reich broadcasting service, which always spoke in the same tone of "sadistic terrorist attacks" and "barbaric gangers of the air," protests against the long campaign of destruction conducted by the Allies seem to have been few and far between. According to several accounts, the Germans faced the catastrophe that was taking place with silent fascination. "This was not the time," Nossack writes, "to draw such petty distinctions as the difference between friend and foe."

But, in contrast to the mainly passive reaction of the Germans to the loss of their cities, which they perceived as an inescapable calamity, the program of destruction directed primarily against the civilian population was vigorously debated from the start in Great Britain. The ambivalence was even more pronounced after Germany's unconditional surrender. As accounts and pictures of the effects of area bombing began appearing in England, there was a growing sense of revulsion against damage that had been, so to speak, indiscriminately inflicted. "In the safety of peace," the historian and newspaper editor Max Hastings wrote, "the bomber part in the war was one that many politicians and civilians would prefer to forget."

The origin of the area-bombing strategy lay in the extremely tenuous position of Great Britain in 1941. Germany was at the height of its power; its armies had conquered the entire continent of Europe and were about to advance further into Africa and Asia, and the British were simply left to their insular fate. Churchill, with this prospect before him, had written to Lord Beaverbrook that there was only one way to force Hitler back to confrontation, and that is an absolutely devastating exterminating attack by very heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland. Admittedly, the prerequisites for such an operation were far from present at the time. The British production capacity was inadequate, there were not enough airfields, training programs for bomber crews were in short supply, and so were effective explosives, new navigational systems, and almost any kind of useful experience. But area bombing was a strategy that was comprehensible and, notwithstanding its small degree of accuracy in hitting a target, allowed a kind of movable front line to be drawn the length and breadth of enemy territory, and it was sanctioned by the governmental decision of February, 1942, "to destroy the morale of the enemy civilian population and, in particular, of the industrial workers."

This directive did not, as is frequently claimed, spring from a wish to bring the war to a speedy conclusion; it was the only way of intervening in the war at all. The criticism later levelled at the ruthless pursuit of such a program of destruction (partly in view of the Allies' own casualties) concentrated chiefly on the fact that it was sustained even when selective attacks could be made from the air, with far greater precision, on targets like ball-bearing factories, oil and fuel installations, railway junctions, and the main transport arteries—operations that, as Albert Speer commented in his memoirs, would very soon have paralyzed the entire system of production. Critics of the bombing offensive also pointed out that, even in the spring of 1944, it was emerging that, despite incessant air raids, the morale of the German population was unbroken, while industrial production was impaired only marginally at best, and the end of the war had not come a day closer. I believe that if, nonetheless, the strategic aims of the offensive were not modified, and the bomber crews, many of them boys who had only just left school, were still exposed to a game of Russian roulette costing sixty out of a hundred of their lives, it was for reasons largely ignored in the official histories. One was that an enterprise of the material and organizational dimensions of the bombing offensive, which by A. J. P. Taylor's estimate swallowed up a third of Britain's war effort, had such a momentum of its own that short-term corrections of course and restrictions were more or less ruled out, especially at a time when, after three years of intensive expansion of factories and production plants, that enterprise had reached the peak of its develop-
ment. Once the material was manufactured, simply letting the aircraft and their valuable freight stand idle on the airfields of eastern England ran counter to any healthy economic instinct.

A conclusive factor in deciding to continue the offensive was probably the propaganda value, essential for bolstering British morale, of the daily reports in British newspapers of systematic destruction at a time when all other contact with the enemy on the continent had been cut off. For these reasons, there can hardly have been any question of sacking Sir Arthur (Bomber) Harris, commander-in-chief of Bomber Command, who inflexibly supported his strategy even when it was obviously not working. Although Churchill on various occasions expressed scruples about the bombardment of cities, he consoled himself, under the influence of Harris, with the idea that there was, as he put it, a higher poetic justice at work, and that “those who have loosed these horrors upon mankind will now in their homes and persons feel the shattering strokes of just retribution.” In fact, there is much to suggest that, in Harris, a man had risen to the head of Bomber Command who, according to the scientist and military adviser Solly Zuckerman, liked destruction for its own sake, and was thus in perfect sympathy with the innermost principle of every war, which is to aim for as wholesale an annihilation of the enemy, with his dwellings, his history, and his natural environment, as can possibly be achieved. Elias Canetti has linked the fascination of power in its purest form to the growing number of its accumulated victims. In line with this idea, Sir Arthur Harris’s position was unassailable because of his unlimited interest in destruction. His plan for successive devastating strikes, which he followed uncompromisingly to the end, was overwhelmingly simple in its logic, and, by comparison, any real strategic alternatives such as disabling the fuel supply were bound to look like mere diversionary tactics. The war in the air was war pure and undiscussed.

In midsummer of 1943, during a long heat wave, the R.A.F., supported by the United States Eighth Army Air Force, flew a series of raids on Hamburg. The aim of Operation Gomorrah, as it was called, was to destroy the city and reduce it to ashes. In a raid early on the morning of July 28th, beginning at one o’clock, thousands of tons of high-explosive and incendiary bombs were dropped on the densely populated residential area north of the Elbe. A now familiar sequence of events occurred: first, all the doors and windows were torn from their frames and smashed by high-explosive bombs weighing four thousand pounds, then the attic floors of the buildings were ignited by lightweight incendiary mixtures, and, at the same time, fire bombs weighing as much as thirty pounds fell into the lower stories. Within a few minutes, huge fires were burning across the bombed area, which covered some eight square miles, and they merged so rapidly that, only a quarter of an hour after the first bombs had dropped, the whole airspace was a sea of flames as far as the eye could see. Five minutes later, at 1:20 A.M., a firestorm arose of an intensity that no one would ever before have thought possible. Reaching more than a mile into the sky, it snatched oxygen to itself so violently that the air currents reached hurricane force, resonating like mighty organs with all the stops pulled out at once.

The fire burned like this for three hours. At its height, the storm lifted gables and roofs from buildings, flung rafters and entire advertising kiosks through the air, tore trees from the ground, and drove human beings before it like living torches. Behind collapsing façades, the flames shot up as high as houses, rolled like a tidal wave through the streets at a speed of more than ninety miles an hour, spun across open squares in strange rhythms, like spinning cylinders of fire. The water in some of the canals was ablaze. The glass in the tramcar windows melted; stocks of sugar boiled in the bakery cellars. Those who had fled from their air-raid shelters sank, in grotesque contortions, in the thick bubbles thrown up by melting asphalt. No one knows for certain how many lost their lives that night, or how many went mad before they died. When day broke, the summer dawn could not penetrate the leaden gloom above the city. The smoke had risen to a height of five miles, where it spread like a vast, anvil-shaped cumulonimbus cloud. A wavering heat, which the bomber pilots said they had felt through the sides of their planes, continued to rise from the smoking, glowing mounds of stone. Residential districts whose street lengths totalled a hundred and twenty miles were utterly destroyed. Horribly disfigured corpses...
lay everywhere. Blush little phosphorous flames still flickered around many of them; others had been roasted brown or purple and reduced to a third of their normal size. They lay doubled up in pools of their own melted fat, which had sometimes already congealed. The central death zone was declared a no-go area in the next few days. When labor gangs of prisoners and camp inmates could begin clearing it, in August, after the rubble had cooled down, they found people still sitting at the tables where they had been overcome by carbon monoxide.

Elsewhere, clumps of flesh and bone or whole heaps of bodies had cooked in the water gushing from bursting boilers. Other victims had been so badly charred and reduced to ashes by the heat, which had risen to a thousand degrees or more, that the remains of families consisting of several people could be carried away in a single laundry basket.

The exodus of survivors from Hamburg had begun on the night of the air raid itself. It started, as Nosack writes in “The End,” with “constant movement in all the neighboring streets … going no one knew where.” The refugees, numbering more than a million, dispersed all over the Reich, as far as its outer borders. The diarist Friedrich Reck, under his entry for August 20, 1943, describes a group of some forty or fifty such refugees trying to force their way into a train at a station in Upper Bavaria. As they do so, a cardboard suitcase “falls on the platform, bursts open and spills its contents. Toys, a manicure case, a folded underwear. And last of all, the roasted corpse of a child, shrunk like a mummy, which its half-deadened mother has been carrying about with her, the relic of a past that was still intact a few days ago.” It is hard to imagine that Reck can have invented this dreadful scene.

Some time ago, I was in Sheffield, where I met an elderly gentleman who, because of his Jewish origins, had been forced to leave his native Sonthofen and emigrate to England. His wife, who came to England immediately after the war, grew up in Stralsund, on the Baltic coast. A midwife by profession, this resolute lady is extremely down to earth and not given to flights of fancy. After the Hamburg firestorm, in the summer of 1943, when she was sixteen years old, she was on duty as a volunteer helper at the Stralsund railway station when a special train came in carrying refugees, most of them still utterly beside themselves, unable to speak of what had happened, struck dumb or sobbing and weeping with despair. And several of the women on this train from Hamburg, I heard on my visit to Sheffield, actually did have dead children in their luggage, children who had suffocated in the smoke or died in some other way during the air raid.

All over Germany, one way or another, news of the horrors of the destruction of Hamburg must have been spread by distraught refugees vacillating between a hysterical will to survive and leaden apathy. Reck’s diary, at least, makes it clear that, in spite of the news blackout suppressing all detailed information, it was not impossible to know how horribly the cities of Germany were being destroyed. A year later, Reck describes tens of thousands camping out around the Maximilianplatz after the latest major raid on Munich. He writes, “On the nearby main road an endless stream of refugees, frail old women with bundles containing their last possessions carried on sticks over their backs. Poor homeless people with burnt clothing, their eyes reflecting the horror of the firestorm.” The remarkable aspect of such accounts is their rarity. Indeed, it seems that no German writer, with the sole exception of Nosack, was ready or able to put down on paper any concrete facts about the progress and repercussions of the destruction. It was the same when the war was over. The quasi-natural reflex, engendered by feelings of shame and a wish to deny the victors, was to keep quiet and look the other way. The journalist Stig Dagerman, reporting from Germany in the autumn of 1946 for the Swedish newspaper Expressen, writes from Hamburg that on a train going at normal speed it took him a quarter of an hour to travel through the lunar landscape between Hasselbrook and Landwehr, and that, in all that vast wilderness, he did not see a single living soul. The train, Dagerman writes, was crammed full, like all trains in Germany, but no one looked out the windows, and he was identified as a foreigner himself because he looked out.

Janet Flanner made similar observations in Cologne, which, as she said in one of her reports, lay “by its river banks … recumbent, without beauty, shapeless in the rubble and loneliness of complete physical defeat.” She continued, “Through its clogged side streets trickles what is left of its life, a dwindled population in black and with bundles—the silent German people appropriate to the silent city.” That silence, that reserve, that instinctive looking away are the reasons that we know so little of what the Germans thought and observed in the five years between 1942 and 1947. The ruins where they
A view of Hamburg from a church tower in August, 1943, a month after Operation Gomorrha. Within a few minutes, the fires started.
lived were the term incognita of the war.

Solly Zuckerman, who visited the ravaged city of Cologne at the earliest possible opportunity, may have had a premonition of this deficiency. On his return to London, he was still over-whelmed by what he had seen. He had agreed to write a report for Cyril Connolly, then the editor of the journal *Horizon*, to be entitled “The Natural History of Destruction.” In his autobiography, written decades later, Lord Zuckerman mentions that nothing came of this project. “My first view of Cologne cried out for a more eloquent piece than I could ever have written,” he says. When, in the nineteen-eighties, I questioned Lord Zuckerman on the subject, he could no longer remember in detail what he had wanted to say at the time. All that remained in his mind was the image of the blackened cathedral rising from the story desert around it, and the memory of a severed finger that he had found on a heap of rubble.

How ought such a natural history of destruction to begin? With a summary of the technical, organizational, and political prerequisites for carrying out large-scale air raids? With a scientific account of the previously unknown phenomenon of the firesstorms? With a pathographical record of typical modes of death, or with behaviorist studies of the instincts of flight and homecoming? Nossack writes that after the raids on Hamburg there were no conduits available for the great tide of people that “silently and inexorably deluged everything, carrying disquiet along little rivulets and into the most remote villages.” No sooner did the refugees find accommodation somewhere, Nossack continues, than they set off again, either travelling further or trying to get back to Hamburg, “whether to salvage something, or to look for relations,” or for those dark reasons that compel a murderer to revisit the scene of the crime. In any case, a countless crowd of people was daily on the move. Later, Böll suggested that such experiences of collective uprooting are at the origin of the German craving for travel: a sense of being unable to stay anywhere, a constant need to be somewhere else. In terms of social conditioning, this would make the ebb and flow of the population bombed out of their homes rather like a rehearsal for initiation into the mobile society that formed in the decades after the catastrophe. Under the auspices of that society, chronic restlessness became a cardinal virtue.

Apart from the distraught behavior of the people themselves, the most striking change in the natural order of the cities during the weeks after a devastating raid was undoubtedly the sudden and alarming increase in the parasitical creatures thriving on the unburied bodies. The conspicuous sparsity of observations and comments on this phenomenon can be explained as the tacit imposition of a taboo, very understandable if one remembers that the Germans, who had proposed to cleanse and sanitize all Europe, now had to contend with a rising fear that they themselves were the rat people. “The Angel Was Silent,” Böll’s novel that lay so long unpublished, contains a passage in which he describes a rat among the ruins making its way from a mound of rubble to the street, sniffing the air, and there is a 1947 story by Wolfgang Borchert, who died the same year, at the age of twenty-six, in which a boy keeps watch by the body of his brother, who is buried under the rubble, his horror of the rats banished by the assurance that they sleep at night. Otherwise, as far as I can see, the only reference to the subject in the literature of that time is a single passage by Nossack about the convicts in striped uniforms who were called in to clear away “the remains of what had once been human beings,” and who could reach the corpses in the air-raid shelters of the death zone only with flamethrowers, so densely did the flies swarm around them, and so thick were the floors and steps of the cellars with slippery finger-length maggots. “Rats and flies ruled the city,” Nossack writes. “The rats, bold and fat, frolicked in the streets, but even more disgusting were the flies, huge and iridescent green, flies such as had never been seen before. They swarmed in great clusters on the roads, settled in heaps to copulate on ruined walls, and basked, weary and satiated, on the splinters of the window-panes.” While the majority of the survivors may have been spared direct confrontation with the most repulsive...
fauna of the rubble, they were pursued everywhere by the flies, at least, not to mention the "stench of charred household possessions, rotting and decay," which, as Nossack writes, "lay over the city." There are almost no records of those who succumbed to the sheer nausea of existence during the weeks and months after the destruction, but Hans, for one, the protagonist of "The Angel Was Silent," feels horror at the idea of having to resume life again, and nothing seems to him more natural than simply to give up, to "climb down the stairs and go into the night." Decades later, it is still characteristic of many of Böll's central characters that they lack any real will to live. This deficiency, like a stigma in the new world of success, is the legacy of an existence among the ruins which was felt to be shameful.

No one knew where the homeless stayed, although lights among the ruins after dark showed where they had moved in. This is the necropolis of a foreign, mysterious people, torn from their civil existence and their history, thrown back to the evolutionary stage of nomadic gatherers.

Let us therefore imagine "the charred ruins of the city, a dark and jagged silhouette far away beyond the allotments, towering above the railway embankment," as Böll writes, and in front of the ruins a landscape of low mounds of rubble the color of cement, with great clouds of dry, red brick dust drifting over the lifeless surroundings, a single human figure poking about in the detritus, a tram stop in the middle of nowhere, people emerging suddenly and, apparently, out of nowhere, as if they had sprung from the gray scree, "invisibly, inaudibly . . . out of this void . . . ghosts whose path and whose goal could not be perceived: figures burdened with parcels and sacks, crates and cartons." We see people who have lit small fires in the open (as if they were in the jungle, Nossack writes), stovepipes emerging from the remains of walls, smoke slowly dispersing. The Fatherland must have looked something like that in 1945. Stig Dagerman describes the lives of the cave dwellers in a city in the Ruhr: the unappetizing meals they concocted from dirty, wrinkled vegetables and dubious scraps of meat, the cold and hunger that reigned in those underground caverns, the evil fumes, the water that always stood on the cellar floors, the coughing children and their battered and sodden shoes. Dagerman says he talked to one Herr Schumann, a bank clerk then in his third year of living underground. The white faces of these people, Dagerman writes, were just like the faces of fish coming up to the surface to snatch a breath of air.

Three authors besides Heinrich Böll who did write about the destruction of the cities and postwar survival in a landscape of ruins—Nossack, along with Hermann Kasack and Peter de Mendelssohn—were linked by this common interest. Kasack and Nossack had been in regular contact since the early nineteen-forties; Mendelssohn had been living in exile in England and could scarcely grasp the full extent of the destruction when he first returned to Germany, in May, 1945. He wrote an enthusiastic review of Kasack's novel "Die Stadt Hinter dem Strom" ("The City Beyond the River"), which appeared in the spring of 1947, tried to find an English publisher for the book, and immediately started translating it himself. In 1948, as a result of his interest in Kasack, he began writing his own novel, "Die Kathedrale" ("The Cathedral"). Mendelssohn was working for the military government, helping to rebuild the German press, and the many tasks he had to shoulder made him shelve the project, and the story, which was first written in English, remained a fragment. It was published, still in fragmentary form, only in 1983.

The key text of this group is undoubtedly "The City Beyond the River," a work generally considered at the time to be of epoch-making significance, and long regarded as the last word on the insanity of the National Socialist regime. "With a single book," Nossack wrote, "German literature was reinstated at the highest level, literature that had been created here, grown on our ruins." The city beyond the river in which "life, so to speak, is lived underground" manifests itself as in every way a shattered community: "Only the façades of the buildings in the surrounding streets still stood, so that a sideways glance through the rows of empty windows gave a view of the sky." And it could be argued that the account of the "lifeless life" of the people in this twilight kingdom was also inspired by the real economic and social situation be-
between 1943 and 1947. There are no vehicles anywhere, and pedestrians walk the ruined streets apathetically, "as if they no longer felt the bleak nature of their surroundings... Others could be seen in the ruined dwellings, now deprived of their purpose, searching for buried remnants of household goods." However, the lowered standard of living and the reduced economic conditions are merely the setting for the novel's paramount plan, which is to mythologize a reality that in its raw form defies description. Consequently, the fleets of bombers appear as transcendent entities, rising "as if at the prompting of Indra, whose cruelty in destruction surpasses the demonic powers... striking like the apocalypse." Green-masked figures, members of a secret sect who give off a stale odor of gas, may be meant to symbolize the victims murdered in the camps.

In the closing passages of the novel, an attempt to make sense of the senseless is added to this mise en scène, which owes its existence to the most dubious aspects of Expressionist fantasy. The longest-serving thinker in Kasack's kingdom of the dead indicates "that for some time the initiates have been concentrating their forces on opening up and extending the region of Asia, so long cut off, for reincarnations, and they now seem to be intensifying their efforts by including the West too as an area for the resurrection of mind and body." It emerges, from further pronouncements by the Master Mage, that millions must die in this wholesale operation, "to make room for those surging forward to be reborn. A vast number of people were called away prematurely, so that they could rise again when the time came as a growing crop." The choice of words and terminology in passages such as this, which are not rare in Kasack's epic, shows with alarming clarity that the secret language supposedly cultivated by the "internal emigrants" was to a high degree identical with the code of the Fascist intellectual world.

In the 1947 novel "Nekyia: An Offering for the Dead," Nossack, too, succumbs to the temptation to make the real horrors of the time disappear through the artifice of abstraction and metaphysical fraudulence. "Nekyia," like "The City Beyond the River," is an account of a journey to the kingdom of the dead, and, also like Kasack's novel, the book contains teachers, mentors, masters, ancestors both male and female, much patriarchal discipline, and much prenatal obscurity.

Still, it is undoubtedly to Nossack's credit that, in spite of his unfortunate tendency to indulge in philosophical exaggeration and false notions of transcendence, he was the only writer of the time to try recording what he actually saw as plainly as possible. Even in "The End," his account of the destruction of Hamburg, the rhetoric of fatefulness sometimes intrudes—he speaks of a human countenance sanctified for the transit to eternity, and matters finally take a turn toward fairy tale and allegory—but on the whole he is primarily concerned with plain facts: the season of the year, the weather, the observer's viewpoint, the drone of the approaching squadrons, the red firelight on the horizon, the physical and mental condition of refugees from the cities, the burned-out scenery, chimneys that curiously remain standing, washing put out to dry on a frame outside a kitchen window, a torn net curtain blowing from an empty veranda, a living-room sofa with a crocheted cover, countless other objects lost forever, the rubble burying them and the dreadful new life moving beneath it, people's sudden craving for perfume. On the whole, the moral imperative for at least one writer to describe what happened in Hamburg on that night in July leads him to abandon elaboration. His account, given in dispassionate language, tells of a terrible event in prehistoric times. A group of people were burned to death in a bombproof shelter because the doors had jammed, and coal stored in the cellars next to it caught fire. That's how it was: "They had all fled from the hot walls to the middle of the cellar. They were found there crowded together,blasted with the heat." The narrative tone here is that of the messenger in classical tragedy. Nossack knows that such messengers are often strong up for their pains. Inserted into his account of the fall of Hamburg is the parable of a man who claims that he must speak of what actually happened, and whose audience kills him for the deathly chill he spreads.

Those who can salvage some metaphysical meaning from the destruction are usually spared such a wretched fate; their trade is less dangerous than dealing in concrete memory. Elias Canetti, in an essay on the diary of Dr. Ichiya from Hiroshima, asks what it means to survive such a vast catastrophe, and says that the answer can be gauged only from...
a text that, like Hachiya’s observations, is notable for precision and responsibility. Canetti writes, “If there were any point in wondering what form of literature is essential to a thinking, seeing human being today, then it is this.” The same may be said of Nossack’s account of the destruction of the city of Hamburg, which is unique even in his own work. The ideal of truth inherent in its entirely unpretentious objectivity, at least over long passages, proves itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction. Conversely, the construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world is a process depriving literature of its right to exist.

As an example, it would be difficult to surpass the page after page of embarrassing writing in Peter de Mendelssohn’s “The Cathedral,” which lay unpublished for so long (and a good thing, too, one is tempted to say), and even after publication attracted little notice.

Mendelssohn cites all manner of horrors, as if to show that he does not shrink from depicting the reality of destruction in its most drastic aspects. Even so, an unfortunate tendency toward melodrama remains dominant. Torstenson, the hero of the story, sees “the head of an old woman, all awry, into a broken window frame,” and almost steps on the bare breast of a dead woman. Torstenson feared, Torstenson saw, Torstenson thought, had the impression that, was in some doubt as to whether, judged that, was at odds with himself, was disinclined—it is from this egomaniacal viewpoint that we are obliged to follow a plot that obviously borrowed its grandiloquence triviality from the screenplays written by Thea von Harbou for Fritz Lang, and particularly the script for the 1927 mega-production “Metropolis.”

According to Mendelssohn, the book was to end with Torstenson putting out to sea in one of the great barges used to clear the ruins; as the rubble sinks into the depths, he sees the whole city down on the seabed, complete and undamaged, another Atlantis: “All that was destroyed above is intact down here, and everything that is left standing up above, in particular the cathedral, is not present down here.” Torstenson climbs down a flight of steps in the water and into the sunken city, where he is arrested and must plead for his life before a court of law. Torstenson, who encounters an orphan boy at the beginning of the novel, soon comes upon a seventeen-year-old girl just out of a work camp. When they meet for the first time, on the steps of the cathedral, “in the bright sunlight,” the rag of her dress slip off her shoulders, and Torstenson studies her, “calmly and thoroughly.” We are told, “She was a dirty, grubby girl, beaten black and blue, with tangled black hair, but in her slender and supple youth she was lovely as a goddess from the groves of antiquity.” Appropriately, it turns out that the girl’s name is Aphrodite Homerides, and (to provide an additional frisson) she is a Greek Jew from Salonika. Torstenson, who at first contemplates sleeping with this strange beauty himself, finally, and in a kind of reconciliation scene, leads her to the German boy so that she can teach him the secret of life—an echo of the final frames of “Metropolis,” which are shot outside the gateway of a mighty cathedral.

It is not easy to sum up the quantities of lasciviousness and ultra-German racial kitsch offered by Mendelssohn to his readers (with, we must assume, the best of intentions), but, in any case, his wholesale fictionalization of the theme of the ruined city is the opposite of the prosaic sobriety for which Nossack strives in the best passages of “The End.” Where Nossack successfully exercises deliberate restraint in his approach to the horrors unleashed by Operation Gomorrah, Mendelssohn plunges headlong into more than two hundred pages of trash.

It remains for me to mention a letter from Darmstadt that I received not long ago concerning the air war. I had to read it several times, because at first I could not believe my eyes. It propounds the theory that the Allies waged war in the air with the aim of cutting off the Germans from their origins and inheritance by destroying their cities, thus paving the way for the cultural invasion and general Americanization that ensued in the postwar period. This deliberate strategy, continues the letter from Darmstadt, was devised by Jews living abroad, exploiting the special knowledge of the human psyche, foreign cultures, and foreign mentalities which they are known to have acquired in their wanderings. The letter, written in a tone as assertive as it is businesslike, closes by hoping that I will reply by sending back to Darmstadt my professional opinion of the theses it puts forward. I do not know who Dr. H., the letter writer, is, or the nature of his pro-
fession, or whether he is involved with some group or party of the radical right, or can I pronounce on the little cross that he adds to his signature, both handwritten and computer-generated, except that people like Dr. H., who see secret machinations everywhere working against the vital interests of Germany, like to belong to some kind of order or association. As far as I have been able to discover, he is about my age and therefore not of the generation subject to direct Nazi influence. Having made inquiries, I have also discovered that he is not notorious in Darmstadt for being of unsound mind (the one thing that might have been some excuse for his bizarre hypotheses). Indeed, he seems to be in full possession of his mental faculties and obviously lives in respectable circumstances.

It is true that the combination of fantastic delusions, on the one hand, and an upright way of life, on the other, is typical of the particular fault line that ran through the German mind during the first half of the twentieth century. That fault line is nowhere more evident than in the correspondence of the Nazis, which, in its curious mingling of Insanity with an alleged interest in objectivity, has left a ghastly mark on the ideas set down on paper by Dr. H. As for the actual "theses" that Dr. H. offers, not without pride in his own acumen, they are nothing but a derivative of the so-called "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," that pseudo-documentary forgery first circulated in tsarist Russia, claiming the existence of an international Jewish body that aimed to dominate the world and ruin entire nations with its conspiratorial wire-pulling. The most virulent variant of this notion was the legend of an enemy, invisible, ever present, and attacking the nation from within, which was to be found everywhere in Germany after the First World War, from the beer hall to the press, in the culture industry, in the organs of state, and, finally, in the legislature. Whether openly or covertly, that enemy was identified with the Jewish minority.

It is obvious that Dr. H. could not take such claims on board without modification, since long before the Allies began their bombing campaign the rhetoric of denunciation had led, throughout the German sphere of influence, to the removal of legal rights from Jews, the confiscation of their property, their exile, and their systematic annihilation. He therefore circumspectly confines his suspicions to Jews living abroad. When, in a curious rider, he contends that those whom he holds responsible for the destruction of Germany acted not so much out of hatred as from their special knowledge of foreign cultures and mentalities, he is creditizing them with such motives as those of the subservient genius of self-transformation Dr. Mabuse, the title character in Fritz Lang's 1922 film.

Mabuse, who is himself of uncertain provenance, can adapt to any background. We see him in the first sequence as the spectacle Sternberg, whose criminal manipulations cause chaos on the stock market. As the film goes on, he appears as a gambler in illegal casinos, the head of a criminal gang, the power behind a forgery operation, a seductive ribbervousier and a phony revolutionary, and then, under the ominous name of Sandor Weltmann, as a hypnotist with power even over those who do their utmost to withstand him. In a shot characteristically lasting only seconds, the camera shows us, at the front door of this expert operator who can paralyze the will and destroy the mind, a plate with the words "Dr. Mabuse—Psychopath." Like the foreign Jews of Dr. H.'s imagination, Dr. Mabuse is not motivated by hatred. He is concerned only with power and the desire for power. With his expert understanding of the human psyche, he can get inside the heads of his victims. He ruins the gamblers who play with him, destroys Count Told, steals his wife, and brings his antagonist, the attorney von Wernik, who in Thea von Harbou's scenario represents the archetypal Prussian nobleman, to the brink of death.

Fritz Lang's film is a paradigm of the xenophobia that spread among Germans from the end of the nineteenth century onward. Dr. H's remark about the Jewish specialists in human mentality who are allegedly behind the strategy of destroying the German cities derives from this hysterical view of German society's constitution as a whole.

From a present-day standpoint, one may be inclined to dismiss the utterances of Dr. H. as the absurdities of someone who will never learn. And absurd they certainly are, but no less appalling for that. For, if anything first set off the immeasurable suffering that we Germans inflicted on the world, it was language of this kind, spread out of ignorance and resentment.

The majority of Germans today know—or so, at least, it is to be hoped—that we actually provoked the annihilation of the cities in which we once lived. Scarcely anyone can now doubt that Göring, with his Luftwaffe, would have wiped out London if his technical resources had allowed him to do so. Albert Speer describes Hitler at a dinner in the Reich Chancellery in 1940 imagining the total destruction of the capital of the British Empire: "Have you ever seen a map of London? It is so densely built that one fire alone would be enough to destroy the whole city, just as it did over two hundred years ago. Göring will start fires all over London, fires everywhere, with countless incendiary bombs of an entirely new type. Thousands of fires. They will unite in one huge blaze over the whole area. Göring has the right idea: high explosives don't work, but we can do it with incendiaries; we can destroy London completely. What will their firemen be able to do once it's really burning?" This intoxicating vision of destruction coincides with the fact that the real pioneering achievements in bomb warfare—Guernica, Warsaw, Belgrade, Rotterdam—were the work of the Germans.

And, as we think of the nights when the fires raged in Cologne and Hamburg and Dresden, we ought also to remember that as early as August, 1942, when the vanguard of the German Sixth Army had reached the Volga and not a few were dreaming of settling down after the war on an estate in the cherry orchards beside the quiet Don, the city of Stalingrad, then swollen (like Dresden later) by an influx of refugees, was under assault from hundreds of bombers, and that during this raid alone, which caused elation among the German troops stationed on the opposite bank, forty thousand people lost their lives. (Translated from the German, by Anthea Bell.)

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