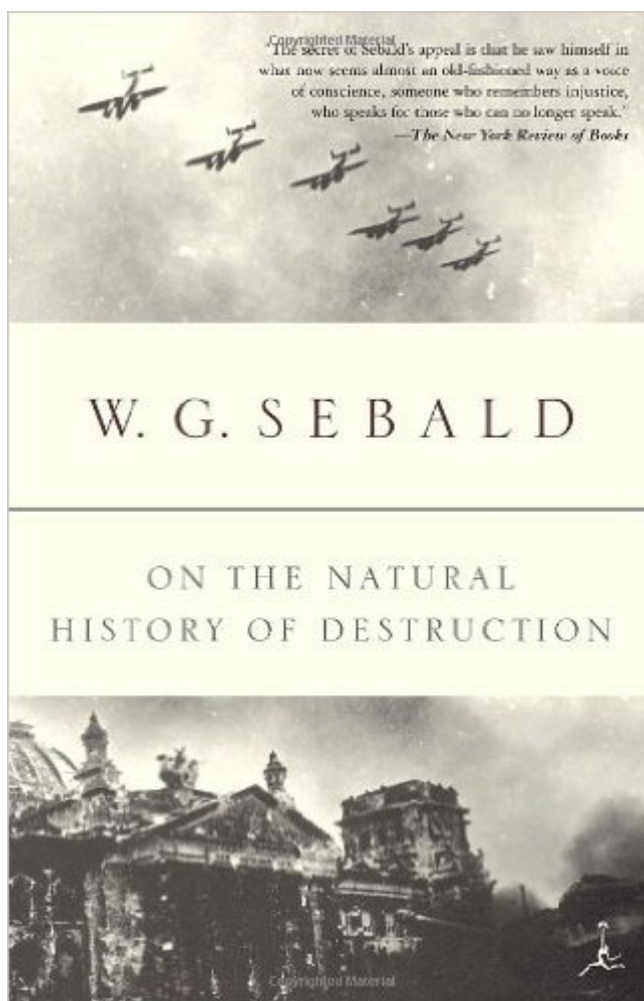


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On The Natural History Of Destruction (Modern Library Paperbacks)



Synopsis

During World War Two, 131 German cities and towns were targeted by Allied bombs, a good number almost entirely flattened. Six hundred thousand German civilians died—a figure twice that of all American war casualties. Seven and a half million Germans were left homeless. Given the astonishing scope of the devastation, W. G. Sebald asks, why does the subject occupy so little space in Germany's cultural memory? *On the Natural History of Destruction* probes deeply into this ominous silence.

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Customer Reviews

This posthumous volume of Sebald's non-fiction writing is a major contribution to German literary criticism and politico-cultural analysis. Accompanying his reflections on the traumatic impact of the air war against German cities are essays studying the very diverse reactions of three 'witnesses' of that time as reflected in their post-war literary works. In *AIR WAR AND LITERATURE*, originally presented as the Zurich Lectures, Sebald delves deeply into some very uncomfortable questions. The air war on 131 German cities killed some six hundred thousand civilians and destroyed more than the homes of seven and a half million people. Why have these events resulted mostly in public silence for decades? Why have so few literary works attempted to speak to the traumatic impact on the population? Most Germans seem to have tried to come to terms with the realities of the war years by suppressing their immediate pain and the longer-term suffering. Sebald has thoroughly

researched a multitude of authors, both in fiction and non-fiction. Yet, he deems their explanations unsatisfactory. Heinrich Boell is cited as one of the early exceptions, yet publication of his book, *The Silent Angel*, was delayed by forty years. Sebald contemplates the different causes for this persistent silence. For example, basing himself on a range of contemporary sources, he confronts the reader with a detailed description of the Hamburg firestorm. As disturbing as his account is, Sebald's reflective style makes it readable. His objective reporting neither criticises the Allies' campaign nor does he apologise for German actions leading to the war. He wonders, though, whether the depth of the traumatic experiences of this and other air attacks may have left many people numb and dazed, unable to express their reactions for a long time. The account of a young mother wandering through the station confused and stunned is one of several examples. Her suitcase suddenly opens onto the platform revealing the charcoaled remains of her baby. Sebald's intent is not to shock but to explain the deep sense of loss that must have been felt by people like her. He further contends that at that time in the war, the growing acceptance of guilt for the Nazi's atrocities led in many civilians to an acknowledgment of justified punishment by the Allied forces. Last, not least, after the war many Germans experienced a 'lifting of a heavy burden' that they felt they had lived under during the Nazi regime. Concentrating on building the new Germany focused their minds on a better future. The publication (in German) of his *Lectures* in 1997 resulted in a range of reactions from readers. He reflects their varied views and comments in a postscript, thereby adding a fascinating 1990's dimension to his "rough-and-ready collection of various observations, materials, and theses".

The three authors who are the subject of the essays in this volume may be better known to students of German literature and culture. They represent a fine example of Sebald's skill as a contemplative and sensitive literary critic. At the same time, these essays complement Sebald's *Lectures* in a more fundamental way. In terms of coming to terms with the Nazi period and its atrocities, each one represents a specific type of German with his own means and ways of dealing with the recent past. Alfred Andersch is presented as having reinterpreted his personal history to fit his vision of self-importance in post-war Germany. Jean Amery, of half Jewish parentage, suffered through SS torture and survived various concentration camps. For the rest of his life, which he ended himself, he did not lose the nightmares of his torment. It was not until the mid-sixties, that he found his voice to impart his experiences in the form of essays on exile, genocide and resistance. Peter Weiss, who had lived in exile most of his life, found his self-expression mainly through painting and theatre productions until he published late in life his major fiction work, *Aesthetics of Resistance*. This collection of "mediations on natural guilt, national victimhood, and the universal consequences of denying the past" is a significant socio-political document. Its importance for today's reader goes

beyond the concrete German situation. As it addresses more fundamental issues of dealing with a society's traumatic past experiences, Sebald also confronts the need to develop the capacity to heal while learning and sharing the lessons from that past. [Friederike Knabe, Ottawa Ontario]

I found Sebald's descriptions of the Allied firebombing to be moving. One reviewer faults Sebald for his inclusion of several pages on the destruction of the zoo, because the reviewer thinks the original description that Sebald uses gives comfort to neo-Nazis. Perhaps it does, but that doesn't make it invalid. And if you look at the totality of this work, it certainly does not in any way condone Germany's Nazi past. What Sebald is discussing is human memories of the bombings, and the repression of those memories. He isn't discussing the rights or wrongs of the bombings, which he mentions only briefly in what he calls a postscript. I don't think this should be used, as another reviewer has, to argue that he is minimizing German guilt. You could take the other point of view equally well: that he is minimizing Allied guilt by not discussing criticisms of the Allied bombing campaign. These issues are not germane to his narrowly-defined topic. In other words, the book is not a history of bombing, nor is it a discussion of the ethics of bombing civilians; rather, it is a description of what people remember about these events in later years. I found the second part of the book, a discussion of Alfred Andersch, to be equally interesting. Here is a man who, according to Sebald, used his novels to rewrite the story of his life, and he wrote it as he probably should have lived it, rather than as he did live it. And he did this without ever apologizing for (or even admitting) his less than heroic behavior in real life. The last two essays were less interesting to me than the rest of the work. They might be more useful to specialists in modern German literature. This brings me to what I consider a defect in this book. Surely the people about whom Sebald is writing are not household names in the U.S. I think that the translator or publisher should have included brief biographies of these individuals. And while we are on this subject, I think the translator could have added to Sebald's footnotes too. In the section on Andersch, we are told that he divorces his wife in 1943 because she is Jewish, thus leaving her and their daughter at the mercy of the Nazi regime. But, although we are told of the fate of Andersch's mother-in-law, we are never told what happens to his ex-wife & daughter. All in all, however, I think this work is well worth reading. It's not one that you will forget once you have finished reading it.

This is one of the most remarkable books written around World War 2. Whilst Sebald's primary subject is the lacunae and evasions in German texts around the experience of the Allied bombing campaigns of World War 2, the main essay of this collection also raises profound questions for any

reader associated with the Allied nations of the war. The response in popular histories written from an Allied perspective is revealed in the wake of the *Natural History of Destruction* to be less than adequate. Am I alone in feeling a degree of shame and repulsion as a citizen of nations who also violated human rights in such cases as Dresden and Hamburg? More honesty on our part is called for ... this book offers much food for thought especially around the human feelings at ground zero. Questions about whether this book assists the neo-Nazi cause and also the extraordinary tone (with strong overtones of Nazism) of the many angry letters received by Sebald further indicates how inadequate is later generations' response to the profound moral challenge of World War 2 - especially now we are in the midst of another war where the goodies and baddies are not quite so easy to tell apart as they are in late night movies. 3 other essays examine esteemed 20th century German literary figures in the wake of the war - these figures are less known outside of a German speaking context (with the exception of Weiss' theatre piece *Marat/Sade*) and serve to introduce them to a new audience. The prose is vivid and evocative - it is a tragedy that this writer was killed in a traffic accident at the height of his powers.

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