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Hans Erich NOSSACK, *The End – Hamburg 1943*. Translation & Foreword Joel AGEЕ. Photographs Erich ANDRES, Chicago, London (University of Chicago Press) 2004, 87 p., ISBN 0-226-59556-0, USD 20,00.

This is a brief book of extraordinary power. Nossack was a German writer who by chance witnessed the Allied bombing of Hamburg in late July 1943 from a cottage on the heath outside the city. Three months later he chose to write a brief essay about what he had seen. It was reproduced in his collection of stories under the title »Interview mit dem Tode« some years later. The collection was read by Joel Agee, a young American in Berlin, who later translated the essay out of a desire to show it to friends and family. It is this translation of a work originally entitled »Untergang« (a word now familiar to audiences worldwide as the title of a film on the last days of Hitler) that has finally been published, some 26 years after Nossack's death. Agee has chosen to call the essay not »Downfall«, as the film is called, but »The End«. He has done so because he shares Nossack's own conviction that the bombing of Hamburg was an apocalyptic event. »It was the end«, wrote Nossack, »what people had been waiting for« (p. 9).

The essay itself is brief and unadorned, but Nossack succeeds in no more than 63 pages of text in conveying a remarkable sense of what it is that bombing on such a genocidal scale does to those who experience it. He starts from the controversial premise, familiar from much of the writing on the Holocaust, that mere rationality will never be sufficient to comprehend what happened in the firebombing of the city. His essay is a poetic evocation of that reality, poignant but never pathetic. He watched the bombing from a distance, but then went into the stricken city to see for himself. He is honest enough to admit that to all voyeurs of disaster there is a sense of thrill as well. As he drove into Hamburg he experienced a »feeling of joy« (p. 35), as if somehow the destruction had created the possibility to move on or to start again. Though there is no mention in the whole essay of National Socialism or of the coils with which the dictatorship suffocated the German population, it is hard not to see in this sense of liberation a temporary emancipation from the system.

His impressions of the bombing were unmediated and immediate. It would be interesting to speculate about what he might have written six months or a year later. The reactions of the population are those of the first stunned days of realisation. Nossack's observations confirm what many other studies of bombing have done. Most people were apathetic during the first days after the attack, surprising Nossack with what he calls their »uncanny silence« (p. 17). He expected them to complain more, but he found no-one who blamed the government or the enemy. Instead he observed the development of a strongly autonomist, anti-state attitude. People in Hamburg expressed a tacit contempt for »the impotence of the state« (p. 33), which had neither the capacity to prevent the attack nor the means to cope with its direct aftermath. The bombing powers expected a rather different outcome. The whole assault on »morale« was predicated on the idea that public sentiment would shift strongly against the government. In fact for most victims of bombing what the state did or did not do was largely irrelevant. They were freed from the restraining hand of state conformity since there were no rules (save the brutal edicts on looting) to cover the utter destruction of a major city. Nossack described this shift in outlook in arresting terms. Men, he concluded, lie about reality; it was only permissible to talk about the bombing »in the language of women« – in terms of what had been lost and what might be salvaged from the home, but also in terms of a private sphere that the state of men could not invade or transcend at that moment.

This insight is one of many that make Nossack's essay a classic of its kind. Agee's brief and sensitive introduction is well aware of the issues that Nossack does not address, but more could be made of the relation between this early essay and the current debate on the »morality« of bombing German cities. It is striking that Nossack never makes any attempt to discuss retribution or to delineate the attacks as crime; yet the bleak and matter-of-fact

style of the writing makes the evidence of German victimhood all the more real. These people in Nossack's essay are universal, as recognisable in Baghdad and Beirut today as they were in scores of European cities during the Second World War.

The whole question of whether area bombing was a war crime has been opened up by Jörg Friedrich in »Der Brand« (2002) and more recently by the British philosopher Anthony Grayling in »Among the Dead Cities« (2006). The current consensus inclines to accept that bombing was a war crime, but the terrible conclusion from Nossack's account is how little relevance the wider moral issues have to those who are the immediate victims of bomb attack. The only issue the victims confront is survival. If they had the opportunity they would think not philosophically but practically: how can states be persuaded or deterred from bombing in the first place? The harsh truth, which Nossack did not live to see, is that all the suffering of Hamburg, or Dresden or Hiroshima has done nothing to dent the hubristic ambition of the two states that bombed Germany and Japan from using bombing as their strategy of choice in almost every conflict in which they have been involved since 1945. It is at this narrow audience that »The End ought« to be directed.

Richard OVERY, Exeter

Les populations civiles face au débarquement et à la bataille de Normandie. Textes rassemblés et édités par Bernard GARNIER, Jean-Luc LELEU, Françoise PASSERA et Jean QUELLIEN, Caen (Éditions du Mémorial de Caen) 2005, 320 S., ISBN 2-916392-00-9, EUR 25,00.

Kriege besitzen historisch gesehen nichts Eindeutiges. Dies gilt sowohl für die großen Auseinandersetzungen der Vergangenheit als auch für die (vermutlich) zu erwartenden »kleinen« Konflikte der Zukunft. Auf eine knappe Formel gebracht, könnte man konstatieren: Einen Krieg, dessen Geschehnisse, vor allem auch moralisch, widerspruchsfrei wiedergegeben werden können, gibt es nicht. Ein solcher Konflikt ist nur noch nicht richtig ins Licht der Öffentlichkeit und der Forschung gerückt.

Ein sehr gutes Beispiel hierfür bilden die Ereignisse, die sich bei der Befreiung Frankreichs gegen Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs abspielten. Lange Jahre, insonderheit, als de Gaulle noch die Geschicke Frankreichs lenkte, galt das Geschehen seit Anfang Juni 1944 als Paradebeispiel für die gelungene Befreiung von einem brutalen Regime und der Beginn der Retablierung der Demokratie auf dem europäischen Kontinent. Vor allem in den USA liebt man bis heute die Perspektivenbildung auf langer Zeitachse, d. h. von 1944 über das Ende des Kalten Krieges 1989/90 bis zu den »neuen« Aufgaben von heute und der dazu nötigen Solidarität (3. Golfkrieg). In Frankreich selbst betonte man vor allem die eigene Rolle im gemeinsamen Bündnis gegen Hitler, hier insbesondere die nationale Widerstandskraft im allgemeinen und die Résistance im besonderen.

Mit fortschreitendem Abstand vom Kriegsende traten indes allmählich Zweifel am moralischen Gesamtgebäude zutage. Die Rolle nicht nur des Vichy-Regimes unter der deutschen Besatzungsmacht geriet in den Fokus. Antisemitische Tendenzen und Auslieferung von Juden wurden rufbar, dies nicht zuletzt auch vor dem Hintergrund der Vorkriegsgeschichte. Während der dreißiger und vierziger Jahre hatte es bereits rechte und rechtsradikale Strömungen gegeben, deren Angehörige auch nach der Niederlage von 1940 nicht automatisch gegen alle Ziele des Nationalsozialismus waren. Die Masse der Bevölkerung verhielt sich während der sogenannten »schwarzen Jahre« eher gleichgültig. Diese historischen Erkenntnisse trugen zur Differenzierung bei, führten aber noch keineswegs zu einer erschöpfenden Neubilanzierung aller Aspekte. Insbesondere eine Dimension, die gerade für die Kriege des 20. Jhs. erkanntermaßen eine zentrale Bedeutung gewonnen hat und die einen maßgeblichen Indikator für den Grundcharakter eines Krieges darstellt, wurde häufig recht sparsam behandelt: das Schicksal der passiven Zivilbevölkerung vor dem Hintergrund