

On the Natural History of Destruction by W.G Sebald.  
Hamish Hamilton, 2003. £16.99.

W.G. Sebald, the author of the acclaimed *Austerlitz*, died tragically young in a car accident in December 2001. He was Professor of European Literature at the University of East Anglia and had already won prizes with other works of fiction. *On the Natural History of Destruction*, a phrase used by the late Lord (Solly) Zuckerman after he visited the heavily bombed city of Cologne, is the first of Sebald's non-fiction to be translated into English and was originally published in Germany in 1999 where it caused a storm. The contents, largely based on a series of lectures given by Sebald in 1997, analyse German post-war literature and its response to the massive bombing of Germany by the Allies during the Second World War.

The author analyses the strange approach of certain writers, some alluding to the horrors of the Nazi period, others dwelling on certain of its more lurid aspects in almost pornographic detail, but none ostensibly or overtly criticising those who bombed parts of Germany, and many thousands of innocent German civilians, to oblivion. Sebald surmises that there was in many of these writers an acceptance of the fate meted out to their country folk as a just punishment for the terrors that Germany had unleashed on the world. His thesis is fascinating, persuasive and powerfully written.

Reading the book as the massive targeted bombings of Iraq were initiated by the American and British air forces was deeply disturbing. On the one hand it was possible to acknowledge that bombing from the air is largely no more the blunt instrument that it was some sixty years ago, but on the other hand the detailed description of what actually happened in Hamburg and Dresden was so chilling, and so distressing, that it was impossible not to think of those enduring the terror of even more powerful munitions falling on them, or nearby.

*On the Natural History of Destruction* has a haunting quality to it, as well as being a fine example of the power and intellect of Sebald the literary critic, it is also a reminder of the loss our society sustained when he was untimely ripped from our national intellectual life.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh