Lost in Translations? The Discourse of ‘German Suffering’ and W. G. Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur

W.G. Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur has been credited, both nationally and internationally, with re-opening the discourse on memory of the Allied bombings, an allegedly ‘silenced’ and taboo subject. The chapter examines Sebald’s concept of trauma and use of Holocaust tropes in Luftkrieg und Literatur, together with the international reception of his theses, arguing that the alleged ‘taboo’ constitutes an act of forgetting of the commemoration and assessment of the effects of the war in the 1950s.

In the wake of the publication of Jörg Friedrich’s bestselling Der Brand,1 another book on the aerial bombing of Germany received once more increased attention: W. G. Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur, which was published in German three years earlier in 1999.2 My basic premise here is that Sebald’s work contributes in this context significantly to a discourse concerned with establishing competitive and exculpating notions of ‘German suffering’ and ‘German victimhood’ in relation to National Socialism and the Second World War.3

To begin with, I would like to point to the problematic connotation of the terminology: ‘German suffering’ necessarily implies that a whole population had suffered as Germans and that ‘Germans’ were targeted as such and not as the society which brought about National Socialism and war. Thus an appropriation of Holocaust discourse and of the de facto suffering of Jews as a group emerges almost inevitably. Furthermore, the term excludes German Jews and other minorities and individuals victimised by the Nazis – not to say, by Germans. The term in the context of the discourse implicitly likens the political agenda of National Socialism and the Allies. ‘German (wartime) suffering’ is thus a loaded term with far-reaching implications as it is aimed at describing the living situation and wartime experience of those Germans – the majority – that were at least co-responsible for the Nazi crimes, in short it turns a society of perpetrators and bystanders into a society of at least ‘also-victims’. Hence the difference between the common-place recognition that war
necessarily produces human suffering and the specificity of the German self-imagination as victimised group is obscured entirely.

When in January 2005 delegates of the neo-Nazi party NDP in Saxony’s parliament used the term ‘Bombenholocaust’ to refer to the Allied air raids they thus merely condensed within this term a sentiment already publicly expressed in far more respectable form in recent years. It is the claim to an ‘equal status of victimhood’ for Germans; this claim is expressed in discussions of ‘German suffering’ and the use of terminology and images tied to the Holocaust. Most notable in recent years for appropriating terms of Holocaust discourse to ‘German suffering’ was Friedrich’s bestselling Der Brand. The project of constructing a ‘German victimhood’ is intertwined with the assertion that until very recently there had been a silence about Germans as victims of war and expulsion and that this silence was a form of repression and resulted from trauma and/or taboo.

It is therefore no coincidence that I refer so prominently to Friedrich’s Der Brand. However, while his book is generally viewed in scholarly circles as at the very least highly controversial, Sebald’s theses on German (literary) memory and the Allied air raids were received much less critically, or, as we will see later on, are questioned from a very different angle. Moreover, on the back cover of Der Brand we find praise from W. G. Sebald: ‘Einzig der Militärhistoriker Jörg Friedrich hat sich genauer mit der Evolution und den Konsequenzen der Zerstörungsstrategie der Allierten befasst.’

However, instead of focussing on Friedrich’s Der Brand with its notorious appropriations, I direct my attention here to W. G. Sebald’s Luftkrieg und Literatur. I discuss this work in conjunction with the problematic translation and format of its English version On the Natural History of Destruction and in relation to its reception in Germany and beyond. I argue that not only Friedrich’s but already Sebald’s use of language contributed to the ingredient imagery for the creation of a term like ‘Bombenholocaust.’ However, I do not want to charge Sebald with any explicitly revisionist political agenda with respect to the debates on National Socialism, the Holocaust and memory but rather discuss his choice of language and argument by reading him in the context of writings by critics and in the context of the wider reception of his theses.

Sebald’s focus – as the title of his book suggests – was to be what he analyses as a nearly complete silence in German literature about the