By Paula Jaegar, Research Associate, U K Defence Forum

Solly Zuckerman, biologist, botanist and advisor to the British wartime government, specialised in the human and economic effects of bombing raids, developing RAF strategy in preparation for D-Day.

He visited Cologne soon after its annihilation by air attack. On returning to London he agreed to write a piece for Horizon magazine. Its title was to be 'On The Natural History of Destruction'.

The article was never written. Decades later, Lord Zuckerman was questioned by W G Sebald, professor of European literature at East Anglia, as to why. "He could no longer remember in detail", writes Sebald, "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 stony desert around it, and the memory of a severed finger that he had found on a heap of rubble."

Sebald's 2001 collection of essays took the same title. At its core is a series of lectures the author gave in Zurich on why so little has been written in almost any genre in his homeland on the civilian experience of the sustained British air war against Germany."The events", says Sebald, "have never really passed the threshold of national consciousness"; and the economic miracle that is modern Germany "draws its psychic energy from the well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations of our state."

Writing about a decade ago, Sebald suggested that it was timely to exhume the subject "when the project of creating a greater Europe...is entering a new phase, and the sphere of influence of the Deutschmark...seems to extend almost precisely to the confines of the area occupied by the Wehrmacht in the year 1941."

Nuremberg, Cologne, Frankfurt, Aachen, Brunswick, Wurzburg. Hamburg. Dresden. Between 1942-45, 131 towns and cities attacked, some repeatedly. Three and a half million homes destroyed. Millions of refugees. 600 000 civilian dead . 60 out of every 100 aircrew lost.

AJP Taylor estimates up to one third of gross British materiel production was devoted to the air campaign; a figure also quoted by Max Hastings. The momentum of industrial effort overruled scruple. In the House of Lords, and to the general public, Lord Salisbury and George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, insisted that a campaign directed primarily against civilians was morally and legally indefensible. Military opinion was split. The Americans chose a different strategy. Until 1944 USAAF in Europe, according to Hastings, "devoted itself to precision attacks on industrial and military installations...America's political and military leadership proclaimed fundamental moral objections to area bombing, as practised by the British."

After the war, as evidence emerged from Germany of the devastation, there was widespread

revulsion at what had been done, and a will to forget.

On the German side, many reasons to keep quiet. Strongest perhaps was a hideous conviction that retribution had been visited upon them. (Six thousand corpses were burnt in the Altmarket in Dresden in 1945 by a detachment of SS who had gained their expertise at Treblinka). Not wishing to upset the occupying forces, or to derail the Marshall plan and the economic regeneration. On an individual level, "a preoccupation with retrospective improvement of the self-image they wished to hand down was one of the main reasons for the inability of a whole generation of German authors to describe what they had seen, and to convey it to our minds."

Firsthand accounts of traumatic events are notoriously unreliable. They are also often strikingly affectless; what Sebald terms a curious vacuity robs them of power or memorability. Narratives by survivors of the firestorms are characterised by an immediate resort to cliche. It is possible therefore to read endlessly of "all hell breaking loose" and "that fateful night when our beautiful city was razed to the ground" without any sensation of impact.

There is a persistent problem of form. The forensic, the documentary, "besides which all fiction pales" - what little of that there is - comes closest to fulfilling Sebald's prescription for authenticity. Yet he is a professor of literature, not reportage; and his work The Rings of Saturn, which became a bestseller some ten or so years ago, is, like almost all of his publications, an original and unclassifiable amalgam of narratives, history, memoir, and fiction.

The Scottish novelist A L Kennedy spent months in the archives of the Imperial War Museum researching her novel of the aircrew of a Lancaster bomber. Her prose feels like utter fidelity to historical detail, while quite free from leaden enslavement to scholarship. But the dialogue is so stilted it seems to belong to another work altogether. Does this reflect the speech conventions of the period, the limited education and articulacy of her main character, or a universal human inadequacy in conveying the most highly charged events and emotions? We are squarely in the land of all hell broke loose and that fateful night all over again.

What is going on inside tail gunner Alfred Day's head, however, as he nears the last of his thirty missions, is this:

"A light you'd never known, a red day swelling up ahead. Made everyone quiet on the intercom. You could feel it; you could tell it was thinking of you. And you're doing your job and you're keeping your eyes on the black, saving them. - but the black isn't black any more - it's smoke and ash at 20, 000 feet and a life in it, shifting, glowing - bombs go down and you buck higher, rattle over something like a prop wash, an odd turbulence, a fat, high writhe of air.

"Never known it before, the way it touched you, batted at the Lanc as if she were paper, a foolish thought.

"And slowly, slowly as you are there is the shape of what you've done - a twist of fire - a whole new kind of fire - one solid flame that sees you and gives you a name that is no name, no word - christens you outside words.

"Has to be a mile wide, wider - colours in it that aren't colours, that rise from somewhere human beings cannot be, that fatten and swell - and there's a howl in it, you could swear, the sound of a monster.

"Imagining the war must be over tomorrow. It must surely be done after this. Who could stand this ?

"And the howl dogging you home; screaming beneath the Merlins, raging, and you think

"This is death.

"This is the edge of the real face of death, its size - we burned the sky open today and now death will come in.

"Trip twenty-six

"Never knew another like it

"But twenty-seven was the worst. It was our ruination. When they ordered us back two days later and we went.

'Jesus, you can see it from here.'

'Shut up.'

'Still hot.'

'Shut up.'

'Still burning.'

'Poor fucking bastards.'

"We went back and we bombed them again."

What is the function of forgetting? What is the purpose of recovering memory?

Alfred Day has put away his experiences of pain, loss, death, destruction. The novel traces his recapturing of them - or by them - through his engagement as an extra in a film about POWs. At the end of the story he is able to establish some compromised equilibrium, a possibility of what has been called the greatest possible achievement of the returning soldier: The resumption of something approaching a normal life.

As Wilde puts it: "The good end happily, the bad end unhappily; that is the meaning of fiction."

Is it simplistic, optimistic, wishful thinking? Yes, yes and yes. Is it the only bearable outcome for

a story which has been to such unbearably dark places?

The burden of guilt for populations emerging from totalitarian regimes with which there has been mass complicity requires a different kind of expiation. The repression of the past allows a surface normality to pass for a reorganised reality. One can see a similar refusal to deal with the compromised past after the fall of the Soviet Union. But sooner or later the monsters below will raise their heads.

Against the monstrosity of the economic imperative of the Allied bombing campaign - the logical conclusion of which Is exemplified by a 1952 interview with Brigadier Frederick L Anderson of the US Eighth Army Air Force in which he claimed that a display of a white flag had been ignored by a bomber because his cargo was, after all, 'an expensive item' - consider this:

"...the system's economic exploitation of human detritus - Weiss notes the relevant statistics and speaks of the "exploitation even of blood, bones and ashes" - came nowhere even approximately close to justifying the expenditure involved. And there Is an almost metaphysical dimension to this negative balance sheet, an apparently aimless evil."

Sebald speaks in his lectures of the necessity of a deep slow reflective learning, the societal benefit of cultural expression of the bombings. But by the end of the book, he writes "the endemic perversion of cruelty inherent in the history of mankind is always described in the hope that the last chapter in that horror story will be written, and in a better time posterity will be able to look back....so that they might be more aware of their own happy condition. The purpose of representing cruelty thus outlined, as we now know, has never been fulfilled and probably never can be, since our species is unable to learn from its mistakes."

In 1964, Solly Zuckerman became the first Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government.

WG Sebald died in 2001. His other publications include The Emigrants, The Rings of Saturn, and Austerlitz.

Paula Jaegar's sources are:

On The Natural History of Destruction: W G SEBALD

A meditation on national guilt, national victimhood, and the universal consequences of denying the past

Day: A L KENNEDY

Winner of the 2007 Costa Book of the Year

Nemesis: The War Against Japan: MAX HASTINGS

Bomber Command: MAX HASTINGS