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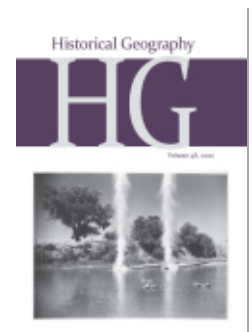
Building Nazi Germany: Place, Space, Architecture, and Ideology by Joshua Hagen and Robert C. Ostergren (review)

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Building Nazi Germany: Place, Space, Architecture, and Ideology.

Joshua Hagen and Robert C. Ostergren. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. Pp. xiii+496, photographs, maps, notes, index. \$130.00, hardcover, ISBN 978-0-7425-6797-9.

Scholars have spilled copious ink over the social, historical, and political dimensions of National Socialism, and yet few Anglo-American geographers have investigated Nazism's deeply geographical worldview, which resulted in myriad uses and abuses of space and place. Displaying an impressive command of German and English scholarship, Hagen and Ostergren deliver a geographically "comprehensive overview of the surprising, and often overlooked extent, variety, and cumulative effects of the Nazi building program" (xi). Alongside "traditional geographic concerns," the authors integrate recent scholarship regarding the spatiality of semiotics, performativity, and affect (xii). Overall, *Building Nazi Germany* is an ambitious synthesis and achieves its goal of reaching a general English-speaking audience with transatlantic scholarship.

The Nazis' reordering of German *Lebensraum* was to be a total experience—a sensory hijack by totalitarian spatialities that positioned "German people, places, and spaces into hierarchical order" of *Führer* and party. The authors demonstrate the bewildering centrality, diversity, and lethality of Nazi geographies. Some of the topics treated include triumphant monuments, *Autobahns*, *Führer* cities, youth hostels, *völkisch* theaters, Nazi educational institutions, utopian homesteads, apartments, neighborhood renovation projects, and new civic spaces, in addition to hellish Jewish ghettos and death camps. Often due to wartime contingencies, many Nazi architectural ambitions remained partially realized—or unrealized—but the authors include striking photos of maps and plaster models that show what *could have been*. The costs of restructuring German space defy the imagination, but this did not stop Hitler and his accomplices from monumental planning until the war's end.

The authors organize their overview thematically, interspersed with enough historical detail to orient the reader. A few fascinating premises emerge in the book. First, though Hitler fancied himself a master architect, he was not one; nor was he omniscient or omnipresent. Hence, the Nazi vision of space and place relied on its polycratic nature—competing officials who, at the municipal, state, and federal levels, "worked toward the *Führer*," according to historian Ian Kershaw. Given

entrenched German localism, the Nazi ordering of space was a remarkably “haphazard affair” (144). Chapter 3, “A Nazi Civic Spirit,” illustrates this well. Although the Nazis intended to transform German cities and towns into “new political-propaganda assembly spaces” centered on obedience to Hitler, party, and Reich, the *Führer*—busy crushing dissent early on—often relied on local proposals and municipal competitions to develop new sensorial civic spaces: monumental party buildings, “Adolf Hitler squares,” and *Gauforums*. Hitler’s ad-hoc interventions could even slow the renovating process down. Yet, regarding the erection of a Weimar assembly hall, Hitler’s leadership style of “indecision, equivocation, and improvisation” were reframed as “decisive and brilliant insight” (119). Despite employing some of Germany’s most promising architects (e.g., Albert Speer), Hitler’s personality cult loomed behind all decision-making.

The second point of interest is National Socialism’s historical continuity with German and international culture wars between modernists and traditionalists, who, in an industrializing climate of housing crises, rural depopulation, and cultural “decadence,” clashed on space, place, and architectural style. In chapter 4, “From Chaos to Order and Back Again,” the Nazi “cleansing” of urban spaces witnessed intra-party competition between traditionalist Nazis and those with modernist pretensions in that “form follows function” (388). While attacking decadent modernist principles, Nazi aesthetic ideology was actually vague and malleable. It adapted to Hitler’s stylistic whims, which ranged from stark, functionalist styles (modernism) to baroque, ornamental flavors of neoclassical design (53). Traditionalists preferred a rustic, vernacular flavors. Culture wars did not translate necessarily to housing policy. Though Nazism emphasized heroism, sacrifice, and “eternal values,” antisemitism per se did not solve the housing crisis, nor did it offer a blueprint for how to best organize German space. For decades, German city planners, often fearful of socialist unrest, had tried to solve this problem, to little avail. Cities were always easy targets, and the Nazis were not novel in this regard. Even after the war, many Nazi technocrats helped rebuild devastated German cities (392–93).

Most chapters end with a coda that highlights an interesting subtopic. I found them to be the least effective part of the book. Given the complex nature of Nazism, and the authors’ intricate tapestry of scholarship, ending each chapter with an overall conclusion would be helpful.

To what extent were the Nazis effective in the themes treated by the authors? After having digested a complex chapter, the reader is left instead with codas that distract rather than engage with the previous material. While chapter 2 ends with an effective conclusion, chapter 5, “Turning Germans into Nazis,” ends with a Nazi medical training facility, the *Alt Rehse*, after the book tackled Nazi educational institutions, homes, hostels, sports, churches, and so on. Likewise, chapter 7, “Working toward Genocide,” ends with the Auschwitz-Birkenau sauna building, where prisoners were deloused, then followed by the book’s epilogue. This heavy-hitting chapter needs a satisfying conclusion. Mentioning the network of thirty thousand labor camps, a thousand concentration camps, and six death camps at the beginning of this chapter would be more effective than a brief discussion at the end. The sheer scope and lethality of the Nazi genocide defies reason, and so ending with a delousing station does not do the chapter justice.

While the authors may have had little control over their book title, to me *Building Nazi Germany* does not encompass the Nazis’ overall racial, imperialistic, and genocidal objectives. *Building the Third Reich* would be a more appropriate title. Already in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler was obsessed by the *Ost* (East), and, as Timothy Snyder pointed out in *Bloodlands* (Basic Books, 2010), the fertile lands of Ukraine transfixed the Nazis, whose *Lebensraum* concept was rooted in autarky as well. It was in the imaginary imperial hinterlands—not in Nazi Germany—where the worst atrocities occurred.

This book will be a useful reference guide for teachers and students, and given the extensive bibliography and footnotes, a departure point for further research. While Nazism had its singular aspects, comprehensive syntheses like *Building Nazi Germany* are effective at showing important continuities and discontinuities through time and space.

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