

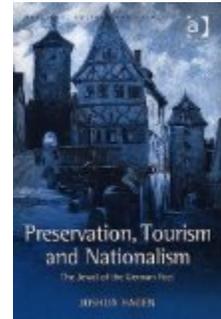
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Joshua Hagen. *Preservation, Tourism and Nationalism: The Jewel of the German Past*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2006. x + 340 pp. \$124.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-4324-1.

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Staging Rothenburg's

In his fascinating work, Joshua Hagen sets out to explain the paradox of Rothenburg, a town that seemingly enchants almost everyone who visits it. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of German and foreign tourists flock each year to this small Bavarian town to see and experience what has become an icon of everything quintessentially German: small patch-work streets with half-timbered constructed homes, medieval walls and towers, stores filled with cuckoo clocks, nutcrackers, and plenty of Christmas market trinkets to bring home. A city made up almost entirely of post-1945 historically reconstructed buildings has become a symbolic national landscape of German collective memory, identity, and tourism. Rothenburg has even radiated its allure to Hagen himself as a cultural geographer influenced by the craft of history. Hagen traveled to Rothenburg and plumbed through its archives to trace the influence of tourism on the evolution of German memory and identity.

Like the many tourists who visit Rothenburg every year, Hagen knows that he is not treading on entirely new territory. Rudy Koshar, Celia Applegate, and Alon Confino have looked at the interplay between the local and the national in the formation of German national identity and collective memory. Recent studies by Gavriel Rosenfeld and others examine historic preservation and urban reconstruction to illuminate the importance of space in memory. Still, Hagen skillfully weaves through this crowded field and discovers the unique interplay of tourism, preservation, and nation-

alism in Rothenburg. Building on the work of Dean MacCannell, John Urry, Orvar Löfgren, Christoph Hennig, and Koshar, he rejects the dismissal of some scholars that tourism is simply mass consumerism directed at passive onlookers. He takes tourism seriously as an active, negotiated process between the visitor and the place visited, and analyzes travel writings, books, articles, drawings, and television shows to provide a glimpse into the communication, reception, and contestation of the various meanings of Rothenburg. He concludes that tourism and the physical shaping of the built environment are interrelated. This rather intriguing argument unfolds only partially throughout the book but comes out most strongly in the chapters on the post-1945 period. With nearly 40 percent of Rothenburg in ruins, local and regional officials decided to rebuild selectively the "medieval" old town to suit the perceived tastes and desires of travelers who had been coming in ever increasing numbers since the late nineteenth century. Although the wrecking ball struck many of Rothenburg's historic buildings in the 1950s and beyond, local officials made a concerted effort to recreate the old town's "medieval" aesthetic. This strategy of selective historic reconstruction worked: Rothenburg benefited from the economic boom of the 1950s as reconstructed medieval walls, towers, and half-timber buildings became a picturesque site for mass tourism. In 2000, half a million tourists stayed overnight and over two million went for the day (p. 261).

But this mass attraction to Rothenburg had much deeper roots. For much of its history, Rothenburg had

little to offer to the world outside its own walls; in the late nineteenth century, it was discovered by good fortune and modern technology. Rothenburg owes most of its rise to fame to a single, serendipitous event. During the Thirty Years War, the town wisely surrendered to Johann von Tilly's powerful army, which just a few months earlier had razed Magdeburg. Two centuries later, this rather inconsequential event was turned into a legend about the town's "miraculous" survival thanks to the heroics of its citizens. Tilly supposedly agreed not to destroy the town only if one of its residents could empty a large tankard of wine in one drink. The performance of the "Meistertrunk" legend in a locally staged play in 1881 single-handedly launched the town onto the national stage. Rothenburg had been receiving attention from travelers throughout the nineteenth century for its old churches, fortifications, and other buildings, but the play produced a "torrential flood" of enthusiastic articles about its idyllic, medieval landscape in newspapers throughout the newly unified German state (p. 73). The play and the town as a whole spoke to the emerging liberal, middle-class values of civic pride and fascination with the past that became the hallmark of the *Heimatschutz* movement. Just as interest was growing, the railroad began service to Rothenburg. By 1911, nearly 22,000 guests visited Rothenburg annually and took away with them tourist goods such as postcards, articles, advertisements, and drawings. Most were German, but a little over 20 percent came from the United States, Great Britain, and Austria-Hungary (p. 118). Those who wrote about their experiences could barely hold back their effusive praise: "wonderful-splendid-surprising-medieval-famous-colorful-original-delightful-unbelievable-astonishing-magnificent-superb-unique-charming-delicious-stupendous-miraculous-fairy-tale-like-improbable-amazing-heavenly-to be kissed- -admirable-godly beautiful with one word-above all concepts!!!" (p. 80).

Rothenburg had arrived and local leaders set out to make sure that it remained a nationally symbolic icon. Just as tourists started making their way to the town, local preservation groups, especially the Verein Alt-Rothenburg (VAR), persuaded town officials and residents to preserve the "historic" character of the town, while modernizing it to suit the needs of tourists. In 1901, the VAR issued guidelines to ensure that new buildings fit into their historic surroundings and urged building owners to peel away plaster from facades to reveal more "medieval" looking half-timber construction. These policies conflicted with the general approach of Germany's main-

stream historic preservation movement, which tended to emphasize conserving a building's current state rather than altering it. Yet, the VAR and local leaders had the upper hand and were able to strengthen Rothenburg's image as a "medieval" town to connect with the growing historic consciousness of Germany's middle class.

If Rothenburg's appeal throughout the nineteenth century was that it transported its visitors deep into the past, it became packaged in the 1920s and 1930s as the "most German of towns" (p. 188). In April 1932, Rothenburgers embraced the idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* with enthusiasm, when 87 percent supported Hitler in the presidential election. A year later, they made Hitler an honorary citizen of the town and erected a monument to the Nazi party. In travel advertisements and pamphlets, local leaders transformed Rothenburg into an ideal Nazi small town and proudly posted placards on buildings marking where Rothenburgers in the past had persecuted Jews.

But the Nazi transformation of Rothenburg hardly compared to the dramatic changes of the postwar period. On March 31, 1945, just weeks before Germany's capitulation, American fighter planes flew over Rothenburg and dropped enough bombs to destroy as much as 45 percent of its historic center. If Rothenburg was to remain a quaint, small town bustling with tourists, a massive reconstruction was clearly needed. Both state and local leaders understood the task ahead. Bavaria's historic preservation office listed Rothenburg as one of three main priorities for reconstruction and sent Munich architect Fritz Florin to oversee the rebuilding of the town's historic core. Florin argued that new structures should be built to conform to the general medieval aesthetic of the town without producing exact replicas of the damaged buildings. In most cases, this approach meant constructing historicized buildings that followed the same architectural style and proportion of the previous structure without reproducing the decorative facades of the past (such as half-timbering). Florin attempted to strike a balance between the prewar emphasis on conservation and the postwar urge for historical reconstruction; he faced the same dilemma that many other historic preservationists throughout Germany and Europe faced in dealing with bombed-out old towns.

Florin's ideas dominated the reconstruction of Rothenburg but they contested those of the VAR, which favored Gothic styles and more ornate, decorative facades even for buildings that had not previously appeared as such. The rebuilding of so-called Old Smithy provides

a perfect example of this more radical form of historicized reconstruction. Destroyed during the war, this simple barn was turned into an ornate, half-timbered home. Since its “reconstruction,” it has been heavily marketed to tourists; it is now one of the town’s most popular attractions, appearing on countless souvenirs. In the 1970s and 1980s, social commentators and historic preservationists started to criticize this commercialized reconstruction, which focused on the most marketable sites. Some argued that the town had become a commercialized, historicist, and kitschy image of its former self, while others pointed out that many other seemingly less important historic buildings lying just outside the historic core, not least of all the *Judengasse*, were left to ruin as the rest of the town was meticulously maintained. But these criticisms did not faze the hundreds of tourists who continued to come to Rothenburg, though doubtless few realized that they were in fact taking pictures of a kind of Disney-like re-imagination of Rothenburg’s medieval past.

The history of Rothenburg’s postwar reconstruction brings out most clearly one of Hagen’s most important conclusions: to be considered “historic” places do not so much have to contain “authentic” artifacts from the past as they have to reflect contemporary perceptions and interpretations of the past. Rothenburg has long attracted tourists because it looks and feels old; it conforms to impressions of how a medieval town should appear. As these meanings and assumptions have shifted, so has Rothenburg’s image. Changing cultural meanings have, in turn, shaped the built environment as historic preservationists have emphasized or entirely reconstructed certain architectural styles to reflect contemporary perceptions of the “past.” Historic preservation after 1945 has been much less about “preserving” and “conserving” history than it has been about imaginatively reconstructing and staging it. But perhaps it would have been worthy for Hagen to consider just how much or how little this

postwar approach to historic preservation shifted from prewar practices. How exactly did the war change perceptions of the past and approaches to preserving and reconstructing it?

Moreover, it might have been useful if Hagen had probed more deeply the national framing that structures his narrative. National identity played a visible role in the initial discovery of Rothenburg and during the Nazi period, but the question remains whether after 1945 Rothenburg remained a “symbolic national landscape,” when today around half of its tourists do not speak a word of German (p. 16). After all, in the period of Hagen’s study, tourism itself changed dramatically. Hagen is correct to be skeptical of those who claim tourism is merely mass consumerism, but connections between tourism and nationalism become increasingly more tenuous as travel becomes increasingly transnational. Hagen might have considered more carefully not only how Rothenburg became national but also how it has gradually shifted away from this identity. Finally, Hagen emphasizes that tourism is an “interactive process between locals and tourists where meanings, their symbolic representations, and even the built environment are negotiated” (p. 292). Hopefully other historians will pursue further this highly suggestive conclusion, but I am not sure that Hagen has untangled all of it for Rothenburg. Although his chapters include travel writings and tourist guidebooks, his evidence comes mainly from officials, historic preservationists, and journalists. Rothenburg’s status as a tourist destination certainly has shaped their discussions and decisions, but can that alone be characterized as an entangled interaction between locals and visitors? Still, Hagen’s point by itself is intriguing. He has written an excellent and ambitious book that cultural geographers and historians of tourism, Germany, and historic preservation will enjoy reading and discussing.

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