

Seeing Hitler's Germany: Tourism in the Third Reich

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Does the study of normality require justification when the latter coexists with atrocity? Semmens's study of tourism in the Third Reich begins on a defensive note, assuring the reader of the author's sensitivity to 'the enduring dissonance between holidays and horror, vacations and violence, tourism and terror' (p. 2). Yet such a justification is hardly necessary when it is the coexistence of the speakable with the unspeakable which constitutes both one of the fascinations and one of the foundations of the Third Reich. Semmens defends her area of research as providing a 'prism into the regime' and its combination of compulsion and conciliation, coercion and compromise. The author shows that the strength of the regime lay partly in its willingness to countenance such paradoxes, coupled with its sensitivity to the development and expectations of modern consumer culture. The German tourist industry had a similarly paradoxical character, on the one hand permeated by Nazi ideology, on the other, deliberately apparently devoid of it. In her article 'Travel in Merry Germany', the author also argued that 'an overtly Nazified tourist culture explicitly proclaimed the Nazis' racist, nationalist and imperialist aims, while, at the same time, a seemingly 'normal' tourist culture effectively masked them'. (1) Continuities with pre-Nazi tourist culture were hence not only countenanced but even promoted by a regime eager to present the semblance of a society both permeated but also untouched by Nazification. Tourism in the Third Reich was thus imbued with Nazi content, but appeared also to offer a holiday from it.

These two contrasting approaches are explored in *Seeing Hitler's Germany* through eight chapters which cover Gleichschaltung; Nazi tourist culture, 'normal' (non-Nazi) tourist culture; commercial tourism (including Kraft durch Freude (KdF), the Strength through Joy organisation); international tourism; and tourism at war. The author's style is very readable, exhibiting a love of alliteration, although some of the German translations need revision: private quarters do not 'stand' at your disposal in English, for example (p. 183). The introduction and conclusion provide helpful summaries of the arguments, and the sub-conclusions to each chapter are also reader-friendly, rendering this a text which could easily be drawn upon for suggested

readings in course design. There are seven illustrations, and a lengthy bibliography and index. Semmens draws upon a range of documentary records including those of various tourism organisations for Berlin, Bavaria, Weimar and the Black Forest, publications for tourists such as brochures and guidebooks, and eclectic items ranging from souvenirs to travel journals. The individual traveller's voice has less impact on the discussion, however, than the official publications and guidebooks, so that the reader is left wondering how individual holidaymakers experienced their holidays.

Semmens suggests that one compelling piece of evidence for the importance accorded to tourism in the Third Reich lies in the speed with which legislation was introduced to regulate the industry: on 23 June 1933, Hitler signed a law creating the new organisation of the Reich Committee for Tourism. This perhaps needs to be placed in the context of the scale of the introduction of new legislation in the opening months of the regime. Nonetheless, the new organisation established a national tourist body within the Ministry of Propaganda, underlining that tourism was a matter of enlightenment, not merely transport or the economy. The economic potential of the tourist industry was of particular significance to the countries defeated in the First World War, in this case not least because tourism provided a form of mass consumption that did not drain significant resources from rearmament. In terms of the travellers themselves, the intention was that tourism should rejuvenate the population to enable greater productivity, as well as to educate them in Nazi history and ideology. As Semmens argues, tourism was seen as having the potential to break down barriers between Germans through increased contact, and to assure them of promised improvements in the standards of living, in a further attempt to lure them away from the appeal of the Left. Its role was seen as fundamental at home to prepare popular opinion for geographic expansion, and abroad to establish international status, as well as secure international consent for Nazi foreign policy. Foreign misconceptions about Nazi Germany could be alleviated through attracting foreign tourists who would see for themselves how the regime had been misrepresented abroad. While the emphasis on ideology here is justifiable, there are fruitful avenues left unexplored in the economic realm: the impact of the need for foreign exchange, for example, and the imposition of tariffs on travellers, in the particular the 1000 Mark Barrier levied on Austrian travellers, is treated very sparingly, and thus the opportunity missed to discuss how tourism was controlled as a powerful tool in foreign diplomacy as well as in domestic affairs.

Further legislation followed; Semmens argues this is one area in which Gleichschaltung was effective and where the rivalry between Joseph Goebbels (president of the Reich Committee) and Hermann Esser (the vice-president) had little impact on the efficiency of organisation. The legislation was largely welcomed by the industry as it was seen as combating 'unfair' competition within the travel industry (which included both Jews and those of questionable political persuasions), streamlining its organisation, ensuring professional standards and providing some state protection, a price accepted for the concurrent loss of autonomy. The professionalisation of the industry was reflected in the introduction of both vocabulary and institutions, for example, through the new nomenclature for those working within the industry, 'Fremdenverkehrsfachmänner', a term which emphasised their expertise (Fachmann means expert); and through the fostering of tourism research in, for example, the Hermann Esser Research Society for Tourism in Frankfurt (founded in 1939). In war, the industry's expertise was to prove invaluable when dealing with the movement of both soldiers and evacuees. Although increasing professionalisation of the industry was not introduced by the Nazis, its linking into the ideological goals of the regime was new. What is also clear is the willingness of local organisations and publications to curry favour through the instigation of their own Gleichschaltung through emphasis and omission, even in the absence of explicit guidelines from above.

The main components of explicitly Nazi tourist culture included its identification of new sights and attractions and the creation of new events connected to the regime; their encoding in a politicised discourse which served to inculcate National Socialist ideals side-by-side with the provision of practical information on accommodation and facilities; and its self-referential character, so that tourists were repeatedly offered alternative experiences which suggested the same messages. So, for example, cities such as Munich (Capital of the Movement) and Nuremberg (City of the Party Rally), or the area around Berchtesgaden (where Hitler had his Alpine residence) could be remapped for their associations with the party or the Führer, and a particular emphasis was placed on the regime's new buildings in Berlin, such as the Reich Aviation Ministry.

Semmens misses the opportunity in this context to discuss the new KdF constructions such as the swimming complex KdF-Seebad Rügen. The only one of five such building projects which was largely realised, the complex was intended to 'intensify' the experience of the tourist to enable greater rejuvenation in a lesser period of time.

Co-existing with this identification of new sights, or new ways of seeing old sights, was tourism apparently untouched by the change of regime. The tourist literature on the Black Forest remained largely unchanged, for example: it may have lacked Nazi emphases, but it also did not have the unfortunate associations of, say, Weimar, home of the republic and its constitution. Erasure and substitution with alternatives proved the most appropriate tool there: the plaque commemorating the 1919 National Assembly was removed from Weimar's National Theatre in 1933, but a plaque to Hans Maikowski, a Sturmführer of the SA who had been killed on 30 January 1933, was put up on his former residence (p. 55). Even the Schiller House in Weimar, a traditional tourist site, fell victim to cultural cleansing when a volume by the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn was removed from the poet's desk. Such changes were subtle: these spaces remained 'sites of memory rather than [...] of instruction' (p. 76). Semmens concludes that the Nazis employed a 'shrewd technology of power' over tourism, which 'allowed for seemingly unpolitical spaces of ... consumption only to reinforce the existing political dependencies and identities' (p. 97).

The Kraft durch Freude movement appeared to have the greatest potential for innovation within the tourist industry and there is some evidence that it contributed to the growth of popularity of group travel. KdF trips had the additional advantage that participants were simultaneously consumers of the guidebooks, and an object of the tourist gaze themselves (p. 121); both 'actors and spectators' imbibing and providing evidence of the regime's commitment to its Volk. In Nazi rhetoric, workers experienced the same Germany as their social superiors while on holiday and together they would expand their love of the fatherland and their knowledge of its geography. Standards of living too were defined by 'access to the practices, privileges and cultural property of the upper classes' (p. 191). This argument is also made by Shelly Baranowski in her chapter on 'Radical nationalism in an international context: Strength through Joy and the paradoxes of Nazi tourism', (2) which concurs with Semmens in arguing that the KdF defined consumption as access to the cultural practices of the middle and upper classes. That definition, however, created problems within the industry, and for the fulfilment of the goals of the regime. In order to protect the affluent from the hordes, and to attract tourists to less well-established tourist destinations, disappointed KdF travellers often did not frequent the same locations that they had come to associate with a proper holiday. Being offered a new style of experience failed to meet their preconceptions and expectations, however. In any event, workers, represented by the regime at the main beneficiaries of the organisation, were consistently under-represented, making up around 5 per cent of holiday makers, rather than the figure of 60 per cent claimed in official statistics: they could not afford the holidays, let alone the numerous extras not included in the package price. KdF tourists also revealed the limitations of the Volksgemeinschaft. Class, regional and religious conflicts reported during KdF holidays (both between the holiday makers, and between the travellers and their hosts, especially when other types of visitor would have brought in more income) suggested tensions within the supposed community, as did the survival of the 'fierce individualism' of pre-existing travel culture, such as when KdF participants rejected demands for conformity and participation in political rituals. Their morals were also called into question: in popular lore, participants of Strength through Joy holidays lost too much strength through joy. Thus tourism did not only have the potential to overcome rifts within the population but to deepen or even initiate them.

The Nazification of the tourist industry had a more significant impact on perceptions and experience of national time and space, though it is suggested rather than explored explicitly here. Whereas the Black Forest was permitted a long history, for example, with little reference to contemporary Germany, Berlin's history, according to the guidebooks, started with the Nazis' assumption of power. The arrival of KdF holidaymakers altered local social calendars, as events were staged for their consumption. By emphasising sites of significance within party history (such as in the tours of the sites of street battles, mass meetings and murders), Germans were encouraged to read their cities with new eyes. New photographs in brochures demanded a new tourist gaze and guidance on keeping holiday diaries suggested these were not merely to

list activities but to describe the 'community experience'. The impact of tourism on perceptions of national space could be taken still further: although there is a brief discussion of the impact of the expansion of German Lebensraum on constructions of German tourist destinations (p. 169), it would have been valuable if the author had engaged more with the ways in which national space was constructed prior to the war: what constituted 'home' or 'abroad' – how, for example, Austria was constructed before the Anschluss and how its nationals were attracted to holiday in Germany; and what impact the expansion of KdF trips to include Austria and the Sudetenland had after these areas were annexed.

Semmens justifies her choice of topic by arguing that tourism not only provides insights into the politicisation of cultural practices, but is revealing of the regime's authority when faced with popular demand. She suggests there is still more to be said about its relationship to consumer culture and public memory. The study of leisure travel is, however, a study in its own right, illuminating conceptions of space, of home, and of consumer entitlement, as well as of collective identities, defined both from within, and against an other. In its emphasis on the role of tourism in promoting (or undermining) the Volksgemeinschaft (the People's Community), *Seeing Hitler's Germany* can be placed in the context of current historical studies of tourism which focus on the construction and maintenance of imagined collective identities through tourism. (See, for example the recent edited collection by John K. Walton, *Histories of Tourism, Representation, Identity and Conflict*). Semmens has provided an original and accessible discussion of a thought-provoking and under-researched subject of historical enquiry. And as this book shows, neither the study of 'normality' nor the study of tourism requires defensive justification, not least when the prosaic acquires such significance to both the rulers and the ruled.

Notes

1. K. Semmens, 'Travel in Merry Germany: tourist culture in the Third Reich' in *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity and Conflict*, ed. John K. Walton (Clevedon, 2005), p. 159. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. In *Histories of Tourism*, ed. John K. Walton. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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