

Three Cities after Hitler: Redemptive Reconstruction Across Cold War Borders

By Andrew Demshuk. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021. Pp. xviii + 566. Hardback \$65.00. ISBN: 978-0822946977.

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For decades there has been a brisk trade in histories of reconstructed Central and Eastern European cities after 1945, given the region's massive wartime destruction and the huge energy devoted to reconstituting metropolises, urban infrastructures, and communities reduced to rubble and ruin. Flattened cityscapes distinguished the First World War from its more brutal successor, as Rotterdam, Dresden, Berlin, Warsaw, and Nagasaki served as the grim architectural signatures of the age. Inevitably these Central European debates about postwar reconstruction were inseparable from deeper issues of memory, identity, and heritage, as well as fraught attitudes toward both the past and the future. However, most architectural studies have focused on capital cities, in particular Berlin and Warsaw, whereas recent research has begun to move the terrain of inquiry in fresh directions.

Andrew Demshuk's new book reflects this new dispensation. For one thing, he directs his attention to the Central European "second cities" of Frankfurt am Main, Leipzig, and Wrocław/Breslau and places their histories of urban renewal in a broad comparative context across national and Cold War boundaries. In so doing, he builds on Klaus von Beyme's pioneering comparative work on the two Germanys from the 1980s to rethink urban modernization across borders, but in Demshuk's case the scope is extended to include Poland as well. Primary sources in both German and Polish are marshalled to good effect, and the book is handsomely illustrated. What Demshuk argues, above all, is that the material makeover of these cities played host to fierce contests over the reinvention of both municipal and national identity in the shadow of the Second World War. Furthermore, he contends that – despite national and ideological differences – these cities exhibited a surprising similarity in urban redesign, as architects, urban planners, and politicians strove to blend forward-looking "high modernism" with historicist rehabilitation, in a broader spirit of what he calls "redemptive reconstruction." Demshuk's is a story of how urban elites in these cities reassembled ruins into affirmative urban narratives, as "larger questions of democracy, civic activism and identity, and memory politics took shape at the local level in ways that confirmed, confronted and transcended state ideology in the shadow of Hitler." (4)

The book opens with a solid background chapter on how these cities barely survived under the Reich, after which they were rebuilt largely as a means to erase the legacy of wartime history and experience by devising usable identities in urban space. The rest of the book is a series of case studies of how this happened. There are good sections on how Wrocław's postwar elites worked to expunge the German elements of Breslau by rehabilitating – really reinventing – the "golden age" of Polish neoclassicism. In the obsessive search for Polish roots, architects and urban planners played a decisive role in the fabrication of an "eternally Polish Wrocław," including the restoration of the city's cathedral as supposed evidence of the Polish origin of the city. East Germany's own version of communist memory politicking could also be seen in Leipzig's effort to refashion Bach's grave as a sacred (non-Prussian) site for the GDR. Similar trends to resuscitate a usable German past after Nazism took place in Frankfurt am Main, best noted in the pitched debate over the reconstruction of the town's badly damaged Goethehaus, pointing up the tensions between the

quest for authenticity and worry about falsification. The book also usefully chronicles the rise of grassroots civic groups in all three cities, who protested the destruction of the old city centre and the “democratic deficit” of urban planning, often in the name of historical preservation and the yearning for a preindustrial municipal past.

The book’s strength is its depth of research and comparative approach, and it contains much that is new and insightful. Even so, there are missing elements that might have strengthened the overall presentation. First of all, more coverage could have been devoted to the cultural representations of these cities, especially given that their renewal was so ideologically driven and promoted from the beginning; more on how city monuments and cityscapes were visualised in popular magazines, films, and tourist literature would have given the reader a clearer sense of how these projects were being communicated at the time. Greater attention also could have been dedicated to the ways in which modernism was not simply anti-traditional, but in fact had become itself a tradition by the 1950s and 1960s, especially in Frankfurt am Main, given its interwar heritage. Demshuk, moreover, does not hide his harsh judgment of the crusading modernists in all of these cities and tends to support the protester accusations that the city governments were practicing a kind of Baudiktatur no less authoritarian than the hated 1930s forerunner. The main drawback, however, is the book’s loose organisation as a huge collection of mini-debates and lateral comparisons, which tend to loop back and forth chronologically; such a narrative style can be confusing to follow in terms of what did or did not change over the decades. For instance, the story of the razing of Leipzig’s University Church in 1968 (which is the main subject of the author’s previous book) is recounted numerous times across various chapters, making the book at times repetitive. The key question that could have been developed more directly is to what extent the Cold War actually mattered at all for these urban redesign projects, in that these widely divergent cities tended to follow similar patterns. These trends were discernible across the continent and much of the world in the 1950s and 1960s, raising the question of what exactly makes this regional Central European urban history distinctive.

That said, this is a rich and engaging book that raises many issues about the interface of architecture, urbanism, and identity politics after the war. It chronicles the rise and fall of “high modernism” in Central Europe and traces the huge cultural cost (both material and psychological) caused by the destruction of the prewar urban fabric to make way for the new. But more than that, Demshuk’s book makes a compelling argument about rethinking Central European modernity beyond a crude Cold War framework.

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Between Containment and Rollback: The United States and the Cold War in Germany

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Christian Ostermann’s book aims to add a hitherto missing piece to the historiography of German-American relations and the Cold War: East Germany. It does so “through the prism of American attitudes and policy” during the immediate postwar years (x). The