Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Germany’s bourgeois elites became enthralled by the civilization of Renaissance Italy. As their own country entered a phase of critical socioeconomic changes, German historians and writers reinvented the Italian Renaissance as the onset of a heroic modernity: a glorious dawn that ushered in an age of secular individualism, imbued with ruthless vitality and a neo-pagan zest for beauty. The Italian Renaissance in the German Historical Imagination is the first comprehensive account of the debates that shaped the German idea of the Renaissance in the seven decades following Jacob Burckhardt’s seminal study of 1860. Based on a wealth of archival material and enhanced by more than a hundred illustrations, it provides a new perspective on the historical thought of Imperial and Weimar Germany and the formation of a concept that is still with us today.

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THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE
IN THE GERMAN HISTORICAL IMAGINATION, 1860–1930

MARTIN A. RUEHL
Meinen Eltern
‘There has never been a more critical question than that of the Renaissance – it is my question, too. . .’

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (1888)

‘More than any other object of historical inquiry . . . the Renaissance seems relevant to the present. The question as to how and when the foundations of modern European civilization were laid has the most profound repercussions for us today. [. . .] Of all the periods in history, the Renaissance reveals that the problems we think we discover in the past are really our own. ’

– Gerhard Ritter, ‘The Historical Significance of German Humanism’ (1923)

‘You know what the fellow said – in Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace – and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.’

– Harry Lime (Orson Welles) in *The Third Man* (1949)
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