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978-1-107-03699-4 - The Italian Renaissance in the German Historical Imagination, 1860–1930

Martin A. Ruehl

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

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.

MARTIN A. RUEHL is Lecturer in German intellectual history at the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and a Fellow of Trinity Hall, University of Cambridge.

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107036994

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First published 2015

Printing in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Ruehl, Martin A., 1970–

The Italian Renaissance in the German historical imagination, 1860–1930 /

Martin A. Ruehl.

pages cm. – (Ideas in context)

ISBN 978-1-107-03699-4 (hardback)

1. Renaissance – Italy – Historiography. 2. Italy – Foreign public opinion, German.
3. Historiography – Germany – History – 19th century. 4. Historiography – Germany – History – 20th century. 5. Renaissance in literature. 6. German literature – 19th century – History and criticism. 7. German literature – 20th century – History and criticism. 8. Germany – Intellectual life – 19th century.
9. Germany – Intellectual life – 20th century. I. Title.

II. Title: Italian Renaissance in the German historical imagination, 1860–1930.

DG445.R84 2015

945'.05–dc23

2014040270

ISBN 978-1-107-03699-4

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‘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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Acknowledgements

This book has been some time in the making and I have accumulated many debts along the way. For financial support, I need to thank the Hans-Krüger-Stiftung (Berlin), the Franz-Marie-Christinen-Stiftung (Regensburg), and the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD). At Princeton, I was the recipient of the Davis Merit Prize, the Rollins Prize, a summer stipend, and a research grant from the Council on Regional Studies. In 1998, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded me a University Center Prize Fellowship, and I was privileged to be a member of the Center for Human Values, then under the direction of Amy Gutmann. In the final year of my Ph.D., I was a Newcombe Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, whose aid greatly facilitated my work in the German archives. In 1999, I left Princeton to take up a Research Fellowship at my former undergraduate college in Cambridge, Queens', where I continued my research and writing. I also have to thank the Master and Fellows of Sidney Sussex College and Trinity Hall, respectively, where I was subsequently employed as a teaching fellow, for kindly allowing me to complete my work, despite many other obligations.

For their permission to reproduce and revise material originally published elsewhere, I should like to thank the editors of *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, *Oxford German Studies*, De Gruyter, and Louisiana State University Press. I must also thank the staff at Cambridge University Press for their encouragement and patience while I reworked the manuscript. Richard Fisher played a crucial role in the early stages; later on, Chloe Dawson, Amanda George, Elizabeth Friend-Smith, and David Mackenzie kept up the friendly pressure and at long last got me to let go. With characteristic generosity, Damian Valdez and Stefan Eich helped to straighten out the footnotes and bibliography. Laurence Marsh and Kay Hyman were

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Acknowledgements

expert copy-editors. Auriol Griffith-Jones sure-handedly compiled the index.

I am grateful to many friends and colleagues for their comments on my ideas and written work as well as their moral assistance. At Princeton, Stefan Siegel and Tamara Griggs discussed early drafts and gave important advice on questions of method and direction; later (much later), Michael Gordin and Anson Rabinbach examined the Ph.D. thesis from which this book originated. At Cambridge, I profited from discussions with Christopher Clark, Melissa Lane, David Abulafia, Peter Stacey, Jonathan Conlin, Anthony Molho, and Joachim Whaley. Chris Young and Nick Boyle gave me the proverbial extra push. I next have to thank Iris Dávila, Aileen Forbes, Antonya Allen, Ciara Fairley, and Crystal Eisinger for their care for me and for my work at various stages of its gestation. My mother and father, Ingrid and Karl-Heinz Rühl, helped me decipher Meinecke's execrable hand-writing and supported me throughout in many other ways, great and small. I dedicate this book to them.

The debt to my *Doktormutter*, Suzanne Marchand, runs very deep. Sue introduced me to new and exciting areas of modern German intellectual history in my first two years at Princeton; she showed me the pleasures, pains, and huge benefits of archival research for the historian of ideas; and she taught me not to be 'embarrassed by the nineteenth century'. Her work on this period has been a model and an inspiration for me, and its influence will be evident in most of the following pages. Here I need to record my thanks for her unswerving support at every stage of my graduate career.

Lionel Gossman has been my unofficial advisor since our first conversations about Burckhardt on the C-Floor of Firestone Library. I cannot thank him enough for the kindness and generosity with which he has shared his extraordinary knowledge of modern German thought and culture and the keen interest he has shown in my work. He has become much more than a mentor since those early days in Firestone. The reproduction of Overbeck's *Italia and Germania* in Chapter 1 is both a visual motto for my investigation of the German *Renaissanceidee* and a memento of our special friendship.

I am indebted most of all to Anthony Grafton. It is no exaggeration to say that the present book would be unthinkable without his guidance and care. My interest in Burckhardt and Baron was awakened in his graduate seminars; he first drew my attention to Ernst

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Kantorowicz; his comments on early drafts – wonderfully thorough and constructively critical – made me aware of countless new connections and ambiguities. His erudition and his humanity are among the strongest impressions I have taken away from Princeton. He remains for me, to quote Nietzsche’s late homage to Burckhardt, ‘unser großer, größter Lehrer’.