WHAT IS DEFORTIFICATION?
MILITARY FUNCTIONS, POLICE ROLES, AND SYMBOLISM
IN THE DEMOLITION OF GERMAN CITY WALLS
IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

Yair Mintzker
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
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Throughout its long history, the German city was always a dynamic organism. It continuously changed in size and appearance, and its economic and political relationships with the outer world were often in flux. The defortification of the German city in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a significant moment in the city’s history. It signaled a fundamental transformation of the urban environment on three interrelated levels: the level of the city’s defense against military intervention from the outside; the level of public security and police within the city; and the symbolic level of the way burghers and foreigners imagined the urban community.

Contemporaries wrote a great deal about the transformation of cities from closed to open places. Whether supporting or opposing this transformation, they wrote with much passion; all felt that something very important was at stake. Some burghers argued that even the smallest change in the old walls was absolutely unacceptable. The city representatives in Jena, for instance, sent a delegation to their Grand Duke one day around 1800 with the urgent request that His Highness put an immediate stop to the demolition of a small part of Jena’s walls. The burghers evoked “their old, honorable city walls” (ihre alten ehrwürdigen Stadtmauern) and claimed not to understand how anyone would think about demolishing even a small section of them (the adjective “honorable” was frequently associated with the walls—before, during, and after their destruction). Others would hail the prospects of similar action in other cities as “the liberation of the city from its old ‘pressing belts’” or write poems and even compose music for the occasion.

In many cases, contemporaries viewed the defortification of a city as nothing short of magic. “Many years had passed since I last saw this friendly city with its high standing castle,” wrote, for instance, one traveler to Gotha in 1810,

And how speechless I was, when—coming from Erfurt and traveling along the street before the Siebleber Gate—I saw

1 This is an expanded version of an article that was originally published in the online journal WEIMARPOLIS: Multi-disciplinary Journal of Urban Theory and Practice 1.1 (2009): 31–48. http://www.weimarpolis.net

2 J. W. von Goethe, Gespräche, ed. Waldemar Freiherr von Biedermann, 10 vols., vol. 8, Anhang an Goethes Werke (Leipzig, 1890), 260–61. Another excellent example of the use of the terms ehrwürdig (honorable) and Zauber (magic) to describe the walls can be found, among many other contemporary texts, in Amalie Muenster-Meinhövel, Amaliens poetische Versuche (Leipzig, 1796), 128.

3 Napoleon Weinhagen, Studien zur Entfestigung Kölns (Cologne, 1869), 3.
the great and pleasant transformation that had taken place in that area. In years past, a traveler had seen here the city’s walls and deep moats and had been forced to go through the dark, long passage of the gate into the city. But now everything had changed as if by a magic spell into a wonderful park with large grass lawns, little grottos, groves, and small waterfalls.4

A few years earlier Catharina Elisabeth Goethe (1731-1808) echoed this sentiment in a letter to her illustrious son. For many of her fellow burghers in Frankfurt am Main, the demolition of the old walls was a moment of great melancholy. For Catharina Elisabeth, however, it was a joyful occasion. “It is all really like magic [Feerei],” she wrote about the defortification of the city in which she served on the city council. “Our ‘old wigs’ would surely have waited until the Second Coming before daring to do such a thing of their own volition.”5

The reactions in Frankfurt to the demolition of the city walls contain three of the most important leitmotifs of defortification stories in general: contests over the fundamental transformation of the city (the “old wigs,” who would have never dared to defortify the city of their own volition, were nonetheless forced to do so); a sense of wonder when it finally arrived (“it is all really like magic”); and accompanying nostalgia for the world just lost (sadness about the demolition of some beautiful gates and towers). Such sentiments, though conflicting, were almost always related. Together, they signaled that the destruction of the old barriers between city and countryside meant much more to contemporaries than the demolition of a physical object. Contemporaries had strongly contradictory views about defortification because they viewed it as a metamorphosis of the urban environment as such: a fundamental transformation of what the city actually was. This transformation was the source of burghers’ nostalgia and the reason for their sense of wonder after the walls fell; the sense that through defortification the old city had suddenly turned into a totally different place, as if by a magic spell.

Indeed, many contemporaries had a hard time calling an open city “a city” at all. Some felt the expression was inadequate; others viewed it as an actual contradiction in terms. French military theoreticians around the turn of the eighteenth century, for instance, used the expression “to raze [razer] a city to the ground” as a synonym for the destruction of the city’s fortifications and not the destruction

5 Letter from 1 July 1808. Catharina Elisabetha Goethe, Briefe an ihren Sohn Johann Wolfgang, an Christiane und August von Goethe (Stuttgart, 1999), 287.
of the city’s footprint. To raze a city was equal to demolishing its defenses, since by doing so one turned it “back” into a village. In German, on the other hand, the verb “to raze” (schleifen) was reserved in the early modern period to what one did to the walls, not to the city. Thus, the walls were razed to the ground (geschleift); the city, however, was either physically destroyed (zerstört, geäschert, der Erde gleich gemacht) or merely defortified (entfestigt). But on the whole, men of letters in eighteenth-century Germany held a similar view to that of their French counterparts. An unfortified place was simply not a city, argued the important German jurist Johann Gotthold von Justi (1717–1771). Echoing the old German proverb that what distinguishes the burgher from the peasant are the city walls (Bürger und Bauer scheidet nichts als die Mauer), Justi claimed that a place could be big, beautiful, or densely populated, but if it was not physically surrounded by a wall it lacked the most important sign (Wahrzeichen) of a city and should therefore not be called by that name. Even in the early nineteenth century, one sometimes encounters examples of similar sentiments. Goethe himself shared this sentiment when writing about newly defortified cities. They were nothing more than big villages, he argued. The fact that the market, the streets, the churches, and all other buildings were left intact did not matter. With the destruction of their walls, these places ceased to be towns and turned back into rural communities (große Flecken).

What was behind such arguments? In what sense were the walls “honorable”? And why did one refrain from calling a large though wall-less settlement “a city”? What, in other words, was at stake in the contests over the defortification of the German city, and why, when it finally happened, did it make one feel that something “magical” had just taken place? These questions take us back to the late seventeenth century: First, to the issue of the overall spread and geopolitical characteristics of urban fortification in Germany; and second, to the daily routines of the city and the symbolic meaning of its walls.

I. The Fortifications of German Cities by the Late Seventeenth Century

Down to the late seventeenth century, German cities had a long tradition of political independence that was manifested by strong fortifications. Comparing his day with that of the ancients, Sir Roger Williams wrote in 1590 that “Alexander, Caesar, Scipio, and Hannibal ...
never have conquered countries so easily had they been fortified as [present-day] Germany, France, and the Low Countries.”

“The cities of Germany,” wrote Niccolò Machiavelli a few decades earlier,

are completely free, they have little surrounding territory, they obey the emperor when they wish, and they fear neither him nor any other nearby power, as they are fortified in such a manner that everyone thinks their capture would be a tedious and difficult affair. For they all have sufficient moats and walls; they have adequate artillery; they always store in their public warehouses enough to drink and to eat and to burn for a whole year; and besides all this, in order to be able to keep the lower classes fed without exhausting public funds, they always have in reserve a year’s supply of raw materials sufficient to give these people work at those trades which are the nerves and the lifeblood of that city and of the industries from which the people earn their living. Moreover, they hold the military arts in high regard, and they have many regulations for maintaining them.

Much would change in central Europe from Machiavelli’s time to the late seventeenth century, when German cities began to be permanently defortified. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a time of great upheaval in the Holy Roman Empire. The Reformation and the Wars of Religion during the sixteenth century and the Thirty Years’ War in the seventeenth brought the Holy Roman Empire to the brink of collapse without, however, revealing an undisputed winner in the conflict. The military impasse after three decades of war and the peace treaties of Westphalia (1648) established a delicate political equilibrium in the Empire, which would last—at least in some parts of Germany—until the Napoleonic Wars and the Empire’s final demise in 1806. This delicate balance was one of the two factors that shaped the physical appearance of Germany’s numerous fortified cities in the century and a half after 1648.

Based on the status quo painfully achieved by the end of the Thirty Years’ War, the peace treaties of Westphalia strove to prevent conflicts within the Empire from turning into another general war of all against all. They created a political mechanism that historian Mack Walker called the “perpetual frustration of disruptive energy and aggressive power.” The treaty did not abolish the Empire (Reich), and the Imperial Diet (Reichstag) could still declare a general war.


against the Reich’s external foes and raise an Imperial army for that purpose. But the treaties also gave the German states the right to form and break alliances independently in defense of their liberties (Landeshoheit), and they designated the Great Powers of Europe as guarantors of the peace. The result of these arrangements was that no one, not even the Emperor himself, could garner enough power to dramatically change the status quo of 1648. In theory, at least, the Empire was meant to be sufficiently strong to protect itself as a whole but never strong enough to deprive its members of their liberties.

The impact of the political arrangements of Westphalia on the physical form of German cities was unmistakable. Unlike the situation in other European countries such as France, England, or parts of eastern Europe, the idea of a wall-less, defenseless city remained for a long time a contradiction in terms in the German lands. In France, the king demolished many an urban wall in the seventeenth century, and in England, in the words of an Italian traveler, “the sea served as the wall and moat” of a united, even if not completely pacified, country. But since every member of the Holy Roman Empire had the constitutional right to defend itself and since external threats did not disappear but had to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, it was almost unthinkable for a city to demolish its defense systems. The Peace of Westphalia was not only, as Catherine the Great once put it, “the very basis and bulwark of the constitution of the Empire.” It was also the reason so many physical bulwarks existed in the Empire at all.

The second factor determining the outer appearance of contemporary German cities was continuous innovation in military technology. By the late seventeenth century, German cities, which Machiavelli had hailed as “fortified in such a manner that everyone thinks their capture would be a tedious and difficult affair,” were no longer well defended by contemporary standards. The introduction of gunpowder to European warfare in the late Middle Ages contributed to a slow “military revolution,” which by the mid-sixteenth century had fundamentally changed the nature of the defense of cities. It was the result of a vicious cycle in military technology. In order to counter the rise in the besieger’s firepower, the city’s fortifications became stronger; the stronger the city walls, however, the greater the need for further development in firepower, and so on.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it became clear that the simple stone walls of preceding centuries were no longer sufficient,
but that strengthening the old walls would not be enough. One also had to reevaluate the layout and functions of fortified places more generally. Some of early modern Europe’s greatest minds contributed to this reevaluation: not only famous military engineers such as the Marquis de Vauban (1633-1707) and Menno van Coehoorn (1641-1704), but also such figures as Albrecht Dürer, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo Galilei, and even Immanuel Kant. The size and complex structure of the new fortification systems made war on the continent much more sophisticated and more expensive for the defender. For the besieger, too, war had become more costly. One had to keep a much larger field army and supply it with ever more expensive equipment in order to have a chance of taking a city fortified according to the new style. Not every member of the Holy Roman Empire was strong enough or wealthy enough to do so.

Together, the political compromise of Westphalia and the change in the nature of the science of fortification and the art of siege explain the particular character of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fortifications of German cities: practically all German cities were fortified, but only a few were fortified well. The Reich, it was agreed, should not have a standing army or any fortress towns directly under its control. In case the Imperial Diet declared a general war, the Emperor was allowed to raise an Imperial army and use existing fortified cities in the Empire to support his campaigns. But it had been the general consensus at least since 1635 (Peace of Prague) that the Emperor and the Reichstag should have no say in the construction of new fortifications in the cities and no right to interfere with the decisions of particular territorial states to fortify or defortify cities and towns. Such provisions were recognized as part of the constitutional liberties of the Reich’s members, which were now even entitled to raise money for the overall defense of their territories without the need of their estates’ consent. Since the essence of the treaties of Westphalia was defensive in nature, offensive operations were made deliberately difficult, while defensive measures on the part of the Reich’s members were unrestricted. The construction of modern fortifications in post-Westphalia Germany was never, and could never have become, a general matter for the Empire as a whole.

With the Reich playing little or no part in the financing of city defenses, the construction of new fortifications could be funded only by a territorial state or a wealthy city. Several cities belonging to territorial states such as Prussia, Bavaria, or the Habsburg lands were
indeed fortified by the state in the new, modern style. But such cities were relatively few in number, since states fortified in the modern style only those cities that they deemed strategically important, such as the capitals (Residenzstädte such as Berlin, Vienna, or Munich), or cities along their borders. Several wealthy, independent cities such as Hamburg and Bremen were also able to finance—single-handedly—the construction of modern fortifications. But the vast majority of German cities lacked the independent financial means to strengthen their fortifications and could not rely on the support of any territorial state to do so. They therefore refrained from strengthening the fortifications altogether, had to compromise the quality of the fortifications because of the huge sums of money involved (as in Frankfurt am Main, for instance), or, after spending a fortune on their construction, neglected the maintenance of their walls. One traveler to Cologne in the 1790s had this to say about its fortifications: “[T]his pompous enclosure, . . . with its hundred turrets and twenty-four principal gates, is in such a state of dilapidation that I am apprehensive it would tremble and fall at the very report of the besieging cannon, as effectually as the walls of Jericho yielded to the sounds of ram horns.”

A general map of fortified cities in Germany during the first half of the eighteenth century demonstrates the resulting spread of urban fortifications (see Figure 1). The map shows the differences between three areas in central Europe: the north, the center, and the south. The north and the south were what historical geographer Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823-1897) called Germany’s “centralized country”: the two areas traditionally under the control of the strong territorial states of Prussia (north) and
The “centralized country” contained many fortified cities, though it had significantly fewer cities than Germany’s central areas. It was in the north and south, too, that one could find the greatest number of well-fortified cities, since the strong, centralized states had the means to finance the building of modern fortifications.

The majority of German cities lay outside the centralized country, in a belt running through the middle of the country, roughly from Saxony through Thuringia, Franconia, and Swabia, to the southwest. Here, in the lands Riehl termed “the individualized country” because of the variety of small and medium states they contained, lay most of Germany’s mid-sized cities and home towns. As opposed to the north and south, the “individualized country” contained very few modern fortifications. There was simply no one who could finance the strengthening of the old city walls in these areas. Lying outside the sphere of influence of the great territorial states, middle Germany’s cities and towns could not apply for money for new defenses from the Imperial Diet, and they lacked the financial means to embark on such an expensive project independently.

But even in small German cities and towns, where by the second half of the eighteenth century city walls possessed little or no military significance, there were heated debates over whether to defortify cities or keep their walls intact. As we saw in the cases of Jena and Gotha, one spoke about the walls as possessing “honor” and about demolition as a kind of “magic.” Such debates, as well as the type of language deployed in them, stemmed from the fact that city walls were important not only militarily; they were also crucial to public security and to the community’s symbolic self-definition. To understand the contests over defortifications, it is therefore not enough to describe the walls’ military functions. One also needs to picture a typical early modern German city in its daily routines and its physical, as well as symbolic, form.

II. The City at Night
The police role of the walls was especially evident after dark. Indeed, approaching a city like Gotha, Jena, Frankfurt, or Munich in the early modern period was something a traveler would dare to do only during the day. At night, the city gates were bolted, the drawbridges raised, and the city’s surroundings engulfed in pitch black. By the late seventeenth century, German cities no longer hung heavy chains
(Strassensperren) across their streets after dark, but even so, nocturnal city streets were quiet and human movement rare. Only a couple of German cities had public streetlights before 1750, and even then more to prevent garrison troops from deserting than anything else. In some towns, a gibbet just outside one of the city gates would provide a solemn warning to soldiers who might entertain the idea of fleeing their posts. Still, many managed to escape into the night, never to return.

In one or more of the city’s towers, a night watchman kept an eye on the city, calling the hours throughout the night. His main role, as the motto on the Holsten city gate in Lübeck solemnly proclaimed, was to guarantee both concordia domi (domestic harmony) and pax foris (peace without). The night watchman’s highest task in assuring “domestic harmony” was to ring the alarm bells in case a fire broke out somewhere in the city. Fire was by far the gravest danger to the burgher’s life and property. “The burning city” was so much on everyone’s mind at the time that it even existed as a separate genre of painting in early modern northern Europe. The watchman’s task of assuring “peace without,” on the other hand, involved alerting the population in case of an approaching enemy or horde of robbers from the surrounding, often unsafe, countryside. The gravity of these dangers to the community prompted cities to draw strict rules for their night watchmen. Most importantly, the rules forbade them from compromising their responsibilities by falling asleep during their watch or bringing alcoholic beverages and women to sweeten their long, solitary hours up in the tower. Needless to say, over time quite a few watchmen had to be dismissed.

Travelers and even locals who missed the gates’ lock-out time (or had the strange notion of trying to enter the city during a missa solennis on a major holiday, when the gates were also closed), were forced to seek accommodation at one of the inns in the suburbs or in a nearby tavern. As late as 1827, a Scottish traveler described such a place just outside Vienna:

At ten o’clock the outer gate [of the inn] must be shut, whatever revelry may be going on within. It is a police regulation, and the police is watchful. Besides a body of men corresponding to our watchmen, the [city] streets are patrolled, all night long, by gens d’armes, both mounted and on foot. Street noise, street quarrels, and street robberies are unknown. It is only outside of the walls, in the more

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28 This can be seen in the painting by Frans Francken the Younger, Gastmahl im Hause des Bürgermeisters Rockox, ca. 1630/5, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

29 For Breslau, see “Nacht Wacht Dienst,” Sta Breslau, Akten der Stadt Breslau, (985) 11 524. For a collection of instructions in Hamburg, see Instruction für die Wächter an Thoren und Bäumen, Staatsarchiv Hamburg (no Signatur).
lonely parts of the glacis... that nocturnal depradations are sometimes committed; and, in such cases, robbery is not infrequently accompanied with murder.\textsuperscript{30}

The suburbs—for those cities that had them—were unruly places. They belonged legally to the countryside (\textit{das platte Land}), not to the legal sphere of the city, and were consequently an unsafe and unstable social environment. In the suburbs of big cities such as Vienna and Berlin, the situation steadily deteriorated from the second half of the eighteenth century onward, and the local gendarmerie began raiding them frequently in search of “troublemakers.” In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such raids (\textit{Vagabunden-Visitationen}) occurred so often in Berlin’s suburbs that the authorities felt compelled to print out large numbers of blank report forms about raids’ possible outcomes in order to save the gendarmes’ precious time.Raids were held at ten o’clock in the evening, when “vagabonds” were usually busy playing and drinking in the local tavern, or at six o’clock in the morning, when they were still in deep slumber. The aim was to arrest not only the “troublemakers” themselves but also their accomplices and helpers, of whom there was evidently not a small number. As one regulation put it:

All local establishments as well as all houses and persons with any possible relation to, or communication with, these lawless persons should be thoroughly searched. The search should therefore not be limited to the taverns themselves. Stables, rooms, cellars, barns, gardens, courtyards, churches, and in general all other conceivable places where one might seek haven, should be thoroughly combed out.\textsuperscript{31}

Travelers had quite a few reasons, therefore, to refrain from roving the city’s surroundings at night and had to be careful not to miss the gates’ lock-out hour in the evening. This could force even the city’s own sons and daughters, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously found out in Geneva, to spend the night in an open field or to look for a bed for the night in some suburban tavern or at the closest travelers’ inn.\textsuperscript{32} From there, together with the colorful dangers of such places, they could make out the nightly silhouette of the city’s fortifications. From there, too, they could faintly hear, though not actually see, the watchman calling the hours from the church tower.

\textsuperscript{30} John Russell, \textit{A Tour in Germany and Some of the Southern Provinces of the Austrian Empire}, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh, 1827), 2:221-22.

\textsuperscript{31} The quote is taken from “Die General-Vagabunden-Visitation, 1818-50,” Landesarchiv Berlin, A Rep 038-01 Nr. 48. Similar materials about earlier periods can be found in the same record group.

III. The City as an Organism

At daybreak the city awakened. For many early modern Germans, such a statement was more than a mere metaphor. The powerful legal philosophy of corporation theory (juristische Korporationstheorie), ubiquitous in central Europe throughout the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, perceived the city as an actual organism: it was both an independent, breathing individual and a limb or an organ of a larger being. As the first of the two it was called a corporation (Stadtkorporation, from the Latin noun corpus, “body”) and possessed its own limbs or organs (the guilds, the city councils, the city officers, etc.). As a corporation, the city also had the status of a legal person. It could sue and be sued in a court of law and had its own interests, views, and voice in many legal matters. As the second, it was a member or “a limb” (Mitglied) of a yet larger corporation or “body” such as a province (Land) or the Empire as a whole. Such larger bodies possessed not only individual members (such as cities), but also “a head” (Haupt). In the Reich, for instance, the head was the Emperor (see Figure 2).

In its role as a member or an organ, the city was of vital importance to the existence and overall health or constitution (Verfassung) of the body politic. This was Justi’s opinion in the eighteenth century as it was the opinion of John of Salisbury in the twelfth century, Lucian’s in the second, and Aristotle in the fourth century BCE (In The Republic, Plato famously made the opposite analogy: The city is not like a body, but rather the human body is like a polis). Thus, for instance, did Justi explain the role or place of the city in a state:

If one were to compare the moral body of a republic to a human body, then trade and the circulation of money would represent the blood circulation or the force of life itself; [furthermore,] one would have to consider the cities as the main or largest blood veins, which represent the actual engine that makes possible the entire movement.

33 This is an old biblical theme, of course (e.g., Isaiah 52:1). Compare also contemporary music like J. S. Bach’s cantata BWV 140, Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme.
34 See, most recently, Albrecht Koschorke et al., eds., Der fiktive Staat: Konstruktion des politischen Körpers in der Geschichte Europas (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), esp.
35 For the idea of the city as an organism see, most importantly, Richard Sennett, Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization (New York, 1994). For the Holy Roman Empire as a living body, see Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, Das Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation: Vom Ende des Mittelalters bis 1806 (Munich, 2006). And for its ceremonial practices, see Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, “Zeitmonial als politisches Verfahren. Rangordnung und Rangstreit als Strukturmerkmale des frühneuzeitlichen Reichstags,” in Neue Studien zur frühneuzeitlichen Reichsgeschichte, ed. Johannes Kunisch, ZFH, Beihrift 19 (Berlin, 1997), 91-132. A classic study about the inner workings of small urban communities can be found in Walker, German Home Towns, 34-72.
37 Justi, Staatswirtschaft, 491.
Like all members and persons in the hierarchical world of the Holy Roman Empire, the city had a political rank. The city could have a voice or vote (Stimme) in the Imperial college of cities (Reichsstädtekollegium), one of the three colleges in the Imperial Diet, in which case it would have the rank of an Imperial or free city. It could have a voice in a provincial diet (Landtag) only, in which case it would have the status of a provincial city or town (Landesstadt). Or it could have an even lower legal standing and exist as an independent legal person only in a smaller legal corporation such as a small princely state or a county (Bezirk).

In order to assert its legal status, distinct privileges, and even its "honor," the city resorted to legal and political measures as well as to particular ceremonial practices. As we shall see, the walls played an important role in all these respects.

For a German living in the early modern period, the city was therefore a living, breathing organism. It was often even described in sexual terms—that is, imagined as a woman or a maiden (a virgin)—so she could also be raped if she were dishonored by having her walls "penetrated." This was an ancient metaphor, of course, but one that was still prevalent in early modern Germany—in many depictions of the destruction of Magdeburg during the Thirty Years’ War, for instance. And like all creatures, the city passed through natural cycles. It was sometimes healthy and sometimes ill; at times it grew up and, like a plant, flourished, while at others it grew old and declined. It was constantly changing and yet always the same. Little wonder, then, that the city also “awakened” every morning and “fell asleep” every night. Little wonder, too, that much like any other honorable person in Germany of the time, the city also engaged in ceremonial practices when the time arrived to start the day.

Figure 2. The Holy Roman Empire with Head and Members, known as Quaternionenadler, woodcut of ca. 1510 by Jost de Negker instructed by Hans Burgkmair the Elder (1473-1531), master painter in Augsburg.

38 See Werner Lahne, Magdeburgs Zerstörung in der zeitgenössischen Publizistik (Magdeburg, 1931), e.g., 85-87.

39 For a description of courtly ceremonies in early modern France, see Norbert Elias, The Court Society, rev ed. (Dublin, 2006). For the importance of ceremonies in the world of the Holy Roman Empire, see Stollberg-Rilinger, “Zeremoniell als politisches Verfahren.” And for the idea of the city as a person with ceremonial practices similar to those of nobles, see André Krischer, Reichsstädte in der Fürstengesellschaft: Zum politischen Zeichengebrauch in der frühen Neuzeit (Darmstadt, 2006).
The larger the city, the more elaborate were its morning rites. In smaller towns, where the city walls consisted merely of wooden fences, a series of hedges, or an enclosure of palisades, there was little sense in employing the same level of control and observation used in heavily fortified cities. But even in a typical German home town where burghers knew each other well and where, consequently, it was difficult for them to pretend to be somebody else, one used the city gates and walls as important means of control and observation. “[Our] city walls are not meant to defend the city from an approaching army,” explained one Coburg citizen in the mid-1780s: “[but] a lawless rogue is often much more dangerous than such an army.”

In large, heavily fortified cities, morning rites were much more intricate than in the home towns. In Breslau, for instance, the gatekeepers (*Thorschlüsser* or *Zirckler*) woke up shortly before dawn and came down to the gate. Except for their commander (*Schlüsselmajor*), all gatekeepers had the key to a single gate and could only assume their posts after an older gatekeeper passed away. The keeper swore an oath to fulfill his job dutifully, to abstain from mingling with night watchers, and to let no one, no “women, children, relatives, acquaintances, or even superiors,” distract him from his duties. His was the key to the city, and this key had to be safe.

Other office holders soon followed. According to several general instructions published by the Prussian government during the second half of the eighteenth century, such officers included soldiers in garrison towns and gate watchers elsewhere (*Torwächter*, *Torsteher*; to be distinguished from the night watchers), scribes (*Torschreiber*, often Jews), and different types of customs officers (*Zöllner*). The last group was especially heterogeneous, as officers specialized in different types of customs (such as wine, beer, wood, foodstuffs). The gate officers, distinguishable from one another by different uniforms, would then occupy separate posts at the gate. The customs officer, dressed in green, would stand at the front together with the gate watchers, and the scribe occupied a small office nearby. When all was ready, the gatekeeper would open the gate himself and immediately depart. The key’s importance to the security of the city was so great that no burgher other than the gatekeeper (or his commander) would be entrusted with it, day or night. At last, with the drawbridge rolled down, the gate unlocked and unbolted, and with all the gate officers in place, the city was open. The day could finally begin.


IV. The City and Its Boundaries

It was a part of the natural cycles of the city as an organ in a larger, pulsating body that the city tended, to use Justi’s metaphor, to “pump out” people and commodities in the morning, and take them back in at sunset. It was a simple question of numbers. At dawn travelers and locals would leave to start the day outside the walls or to travel farther to a different city, town, market, or fair; at sunset they crowded back into the safety of the city before the gates were closed. The bigger the city, the more marked this cycle was and the more mayhem ensued at the gate. Contemporaries would especially notice this movement shortly before lock-out in the evening. Since the city consumed more commodities and people than it sent into the bloodstream of the country, the traffic in a large city was more into the city than out of it.

Travelers in the Holy Roman Empire would most likely leave early from the city or inn where they had spent the night and start the day’s journey to their next destination.44 In the German lands, such a journey was a notoriously cumbersome affair. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were over one thousand more or less independent political entities in the Empire, including, among many others, great territorial states, free and Imperial cities, ecclesiastical territories and monasteries, smaller princely states, and even some Imperial free villages. Some of these entities were so small, claimed one eighteenth-century German writer half-jokingly, that they seemed to be made up completely of borders.45 To a contemporary traveler, however, boundaries were no joking matter. Border controls were practically everywhere: on turnpikes, local roads, and on bridges, at the entrance to canals, in mountain passes, in the middle of Germany’s great rivers, and of course in and around towns and cities. “In the small district between Mainz and Koblenz, which, with the winding of the river [Rhine], hardly makes twenty seven miles,” wrote one contemporary, “you don’t pay less than nine tolls. Between Holland and Coblenz there are at least sixteen.”46

The first border one would usually encounter upon approaching a major German city was its legal limits (Weichbild).47 These limits could be quite far from the walls in the case of prosperous independent cities such as Nuremberg or Frankfurt am Main, which, over the centuries, had managed to subordinate a large territory to their control. The territory of the city of Nuremberg, for instance, included six smaller towns as well as dozens of market villages and other rural communities.48 A city like Munich, on the other hand, was not

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44 A general discussion of traveling to a fortified city as well as of this genre of travel literature can be found in Klaus Martin Hofmann, “Festungsstädte im Rahmen regional- und stadtgeschichtlicher Konzeptionen,” in Festung, Garnison, Bevölkerung: Historische Aspekte der Festungsforschung: Die Vorträge des 2. Internationalen Kolloquium zur Festungsforschung Minden (29. bis 31. Oktober 1982), ed. Volker Schmidtchen (Wesel, 1982), 31–44.


46 Johann Kaspar Riesbeck, Travels through Germany, in a Series of Letters (London, 1787), 3:284.

47 A general treatment of the history, as well as prehistory, of the concept of Weichbild can be found in Ernst Kaeber, “Das Weichbild der Stadt Berlin seit der Steinschen Städteordnung,” in Ernst Kaeber: Beiträge zur Berliner Geschichte, ed. Ernst Vogel (Berlin, 1964).

a free city, and both sides of its legal boundary—though marking two separate legal spheres, city and countryside—were nonetheless under the overall sovereignty (Landeshoheit) of the Bavarian Elector. In such a case, the city’s legal boundaries enclosed a sphere known as the “peace of the castle” (Burgfriede).49

In big or politically powerful cities, where the walls and legal boundaries did not converge, the latter were marked by one of two physical signs: milestones or dikes (Landwehr). Historically, the older of the two was the Landwehr: a long dike or ditch, flanked by an earthen wall and planted with trees or hedges. Some dikes dated back to the early Middle Ages when they served as signs of a territory’s legal status as well as impediments to the movement of wild beasts and even an approaching army. In some cases, the Landwehr were exceptionally long, cutting the countryside for several dozens of miles.50 By the eighteenth century, however, these dikes did not usually correspond to the city’s legal boundaries and had been replaced by milestones.51

When one approached a well-fortified city from afar, three parts were immediately conspicuous: the suburbs, the glacis, and the fortifications.52 The suburbs were often surrounded by a simple wall. They were sometimes as old as the city and, like exoparasites, fed on the city’s fortified body. The suburbs existed within the economic sphere of the city, but they belonged legally to the countryside (das platte Land). Consequently, the city had little or no legal obligations vis-à-vis its suburbs in such crucial matters as fire insurance (Feuersozietät), poor relief (Armenverpflegung, Armenwesen), or even defense. Had cities possessed legal obligations to such communities, they would have had to defend them and therefore include them within their walls, in which case the suburbs, strictly speaking, would cease to be suburbs.53 Thus, while the suburbs of German cities began to expand rapidly in the second half of the eighteenth century, the cities themselves often remained the same size. Unlike North American cities, for instance, German cities did not simply expand into the surrounding countryside; rather, the surrounding countryside increasingly “crowded” around them.

The second conspicuous feature of a major seventeenth or eighteenth-century German city was its glacis. The glacis was a slow, downward slope stretching from the city’s fortifications towards the fields or suburbs around it whose aim was to provide a field of fire for the city’s gunners in case of attack or siege. Thus, it was either

49 One eighteenth-century milestone marking this boundary still exists today in Munich’s English Garden.
50 The Sächsische Landwehr in southern Thuringia, whose remains are still visible today, stretched for almost forty miles.
51 For the origins and history of medieval fortifications in Germany, including the Landwehr, see the collection of articles in Gabriele Isenberg and Barbara Scholkmann, Die Befestigung der mittelalterlichen Stadt (Cologne, 1997).
52 A good comparison between descriptions of German fortified towns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is Hofmann, “Festungstädtische,” 31–44.
completely devoid of tall vegetation and man-made structures (as mandated by legal measures known as Rayon-Gesetze), or it contained only objects that could be quickly demolished if necessary (Wallservitut). The word “glacis” was originally reserved for the artificial downward slope close to the fortifications themselves, but with time it came to describe the entire round, exposed belt or “no man’s land” surrounding a fortified place and separating it from the suburbs.

Within the rings of the suburbs and the glacis stood the fortifications themselves, often under repair (it was customary for the city to employ the poor to execute such works). Modern star-shaped fortifications (Stadtbefestigung) could be extremely intricate, including ravelins, moats, dikes and ditches, drawbridges, bulwarks, ramparts, bastions, several lines of walls, gates, towers, magazines, and more. An eighteenth-century field officer would have to know many dozens of different terms in order even to speak about the fortifications, let alone effectively command them. Beyond the modern fortification works stood the old medieval city walls (Stadtmauern). They were much simpler than the modern fortifications, containing only moats, gates, towers, and curtains (Courtinen: wall sections connecting every two towers).

Some sections of the medieval walls were inhabited or formed the outer walls of buildings so that the walls comprised a part of the city’s living tissue. The towers, for instance, contained some of the city’s most important institutions. Some housed the city’s prison (Hexen- and Diebtürme—witches and thieves towers), or stored the wheat, barley, or gunpowder needed for the city’s garrison. Others were inhabited or formed the outer walls of private houses. In the Imperial town of Schwäbisch Hall, for instance, one of the city towers was inhabited by the local executioner (Scharfrichterturm); in Berlin parts of the walls belonged to the Charité, the city’s largest hospital; and in Frankfurt am Main the medieval wall formed one side of the Jewish ghetto’s enclosure.

In German cities where Jews were allowed to live, they often settled right next to a part of the walls’ inner side, a location that manifested the Jews’ equivocal position vis-à-vis the community: they were simultaneously insiders and outsiders. Sometimes Jews worked as clerks at the gate (as in Breslau or Berlin), and in some places they could enter the city only through a single entrance (e.g., the Rosenthaler Gate in Berlin).
It was anything but pleasant to live just inside the city wall. This part of the city was the most distant from the marketplace, and often housed not only Jews, but also the poorer segments of the population, as well as the city’s brothels (where these were allowed). As the walls cast long shadows and often retained moisture, it was dark, wet, and slippery there. With poor air circulation and no modern sewage system, this part of the city literally stank. If that was not enough, persons living right next to the walls also sometimes had a gunpowder storage tower looming right above their heads. This was a cause for great concern as such structures were prone to sudden explosions because of a force of nature or the carelessness of a single soldier. When lightning struck the gunpowder tower in Breslau one day in 1749, the explosion not only broke the glass windows of churches hundreds of yards away; it also killed many dozens of Jews living in its vicinity. Living near the wall was at its worst when the city was bombarded during a siege, as the fate of the Jewish ghetto in Frankfurt am Main demonstrates all too well. The ghetto burnt down during several sieges in the eighteenth century, the last one in 1794. Since Frankfurt was defortified shortly thereafter, the ghetto walls were never rebuilt. In this case, as in others, the demolition of the city’s outer boundaries implied an internal restructuring as well.

Approaching the city by day, an eighteenth-century traveler would cross the suburbs and the glacis and advance toward the city gates through over- and underpasses in the fortification works (see Figure 3). The gates were one of the city’s busiest locations; they were spatially peripheral but economically and socially central, since all travel to and from the city had to pass through one of them. Some city entrances were elaborate structures, containing not one, but two or even three consecutive gates. The gate officers would charge entry fees and indirect taxes. Here the guard would also examine travel documents and luggage—sometimes searching the travelers’ bodies as well—admitting them or sending them away, sometimes quite brutally. When one Christina Bobingerin, a nineteen-year-old peasant from the area around Augsburg, tried to sneak into that city without permission, she was put in jail, whipped, and finally deported by the guards. In the second half of the eighteenth century the gate watcher in Berlin was instructed to “pay special attention to the Jews approaching the gates, to let the locals in, and send back the foreign Jews.” Both Moses Mendelssohn and Salomon Maimon, the great Jewish philosophers, experienced the effects of these regulations personally when they tried to enter Berlin at the time.

56 Goethe, Gespräche, 232.
57 For arguments for and against keeping such a tower in Breslau, see “Der Bau der Koenigl. Pulver Magazine ausserhalb der Stadt,” STA Breslau, Akten der Stadt Breslau (1682) 12.221.
59 Christopher Friedrichs, The Early Modern City (New York, 1995), 214.
60 Heinz Knobloch, Herr Moses in Berlin: Auf den Spuren eines Menschenfreundes (Berlin, 1979), 35.
On its external side, the gate was not unlike a combination of a modern checkpoint and a train station. It was often the location of a small market, where different types of people—peasants, playing children, and gate officers, but also beggars, thieves, and self-appointed preachers and prophets—would seek the money or at least the attention of passersby. One gets a glimpse into common scenes at the gate by reading what cities forbade the gate officers to do. The city of Hamburg, for instance, declared that its gate officers and garrison should refuse bribes; abstain from stealing from, insulting, or spitting on passersby; avoid fights, duels, drinking, and gambling during their shift; and refrain from threatening anyone, including their comrades and even their officers, with their weapons (and yes, one instruction added, a dagger is also considered a weapon in this respect). That such activities needed to be forbidden implies that they occurred often enough to draw the attention of the city government.

V. The Invisible City

Beyond its military, economic, social, and police roles, the gate also had an enormous symbolic function. It was the physical incarnation of the borders between the city and its adjacent countryside. Much as a piece of paper cannot have only one side, so too must a gate always have two faces. For a traveler entering the city, the gate denoted the physical boundaries of the city corporation (“city-side”); for a traveler

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61 Eighteenth-century travel accounts were often constructed along fairly rigid lines. See Wolfgang Griep and Hans-Wolf Jäger, Reisen im 18. Jahrhundert (Heidelberg, 1986). In order to overcome these often rigid narrative structures, I used customs and gate watchers’ instructions (e.g., “Koenigl. Preussische Accise Reglement,” and Instruction für die Wächter an Thoren und Bäumen, StA Hamburg, ca. 1812), letters of complaint regarding events at the gates (e.g., “Berichtigung eines Aufsatzes im Kiel. Mag. II B. 25t. S. 186 die Thorpolicey in Coburg betreffend,” Journal für und von Deutschland 10 (1785): 380-82), as well as other police documents (such as “Die Unterhaltung der Stadtmauer, Belegung von Pforten in derselben, Abbruch der Thore in Beeskow,” Br. LHA Potsdam, Rep 2 A, Nor. 1165, for evidence of children playing near the walls).

leaving it, the entrance to the adjacent territory (“countryside”). In its quality as a boundary, the gate (and the walls in general) belonged to more than one entity: the city, on the one hand; its surrounding area, on the other. At this convergence of boundaries, it was most appropriate to present the city’s symbols, motto, or coat-of-arms. By means of its “coat” or “dress,” external symbols, and human officers, the city would “speak” to the persons approaching its walls, expressing the city’s existence as a living being. Walking through the gate was, in the most literal sense of the phrase, a rite of passage.

Entering the city was much like entering a cathedral. A traveler walking through one of the city gates not only entered a place; he or she also performed a symbolic act. A cathedral’s overall architecture represents the crucifix’s structure through the narthex, nave, transept, and chancel. Walking underneath the arch of triumph in a cathedral’s transept, chapels, altar, and ambulatory, a pilgrim reinstates Christ’s body by the very act of visiting a basilica. The general architecture of a city gate served a similar purpose. It made both visitors and locals perform symbolic acts vis-à-vis the city—acts that indicated and constituted the city’s imperceptible presence as a living organism. Much as in religious ceremonies, the gate’s rites not only described or indicated the city’s symbolic form; they breathed life into it.

When a prince, bishop, or ambassador approached the city, the gate provided the stage for the urban community’s welcome ceremonies. The first delegation would meet the visitor earlier, near the city’s legal boundaries. It was at the gate, however, that the entire city assembled to welcome its guest: the priests in their long robes (and, in Catholic towns, also carrying the local church’s reliquaries), the garrison troops fully armed and in uniform, the gate watchers with the city’s keys, and representatives of other members of the city, all performing their roles according to a strict protocol. On an especially festive occasion such as an imperial procession, heralds also sounded the trumpets, flags were planted on the walls and banners hung from windowsills, and the burghers, crowding along the procession route, even cared enough (in the words of one contemporary description) to “wear clean clothes.”

Even without such extraordinary ceremonies—when, for instance, a native of the city came back after a long absence—the gate served its function as a “rite of passage.” Goethe’s Werther felt this way when he approached his old town after a long absence. “I approached the city,” Werther says, “and on my way greeted all the old, familiar garden houses . . . . I walked in through the city gate, and felt, immediately

and completely, like my old self again (Ich trat zum Thore hinein, und fand mich doch gleich und ganz wieder).”65

The symbolic functions of the walls explain why even in small cities and towns the walls remained crucial for the city’s self-definition long after they had stopped serving their original economic, defensive, and police functions. They were a basic element in the way every urban community constructed and asserted its presence: a manifestation of the idea of who or what the city was, its “honor.” Thus, even in the small Saxon town of Königsbrück, which had never possessed actual gates, walls, or moats, one still called the two entrances to the city the Kamenzer and Schmorkauer Gates.66 The gates and the walls were elements of a physical city. But they were also, to use Italo Calvino’s poetic formulation, monuments of a città invisible, an invisible city: the tangible form of every city’s abstract idea of itself.67

A community, wrote Emile Durkheim, “is not constituted simply by the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things they use, and the movement they make, but above all by the idea it has of itself.”68 It is only too understandable, then, that historians have tended to look with suspicion on the old definition of the city as a fortified place. To reduce a city to one of its architectural elements seems like a basic misunderstanding of how the urban community functions and how it is perceived and experienced. It would be like equating a vineyard with its surrounding fence or collapsing the entire realm of human religious sentiment into a church’s outer walls.69 The city was always much more than its physical features; it was, and it still is, a complex group of ideas.

Nevertheless, the city walls—as seen in the case of Königsbrück—were as much ideal or abstract structures as they were physical ones. They belonged to the idea of the city as much as to its visible side.70 Three main ideological components of the German city seem to have contributed to the symbolic (rather than physical) construction of the walls: the world of religion, the workings of human memory, and the symbolic cosmos of the Holy Roman Empire as a whole.

The city walls were part of the symbolic form of the city because of their biblical connotations. City walls were an inseparable element in the religious imagination of the time and appeared in countless stories, works of art, and even reenactments of the Godly Word in the world.71 They appeared in the description of the gates of Paradise with their eternally revolving sword in the story of the Original Sin;
in Joshua’s conquest of Jericho and the Land of Canaan; in Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem (a model for Palm Sunday processions and even royal entry ceremonies in some German cities), in his passion and crucifixion, and in his legacy to the apostles in the form of the double key handed over to Peter.72 Within such a symbolic world, the city was much more than a physical entity or even a political body (corpus politicum); it was also a heavenly place, a model for social organization in general (St. Augustine), a corpus mysticum. No wonder that Martin Luther, for instance, often used the metaphor of walls in his writings. In *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), he compared the papacy to a city surrounded by three rings of walls, and in his most famous chorale, *Ein‘ feste Burg*, he followed the psalmist and compared God himself to a mighty, walled castle. Indeed, the very crown of the Holy Roman Emperor (*Reichskrone*) represented the heavenly city (and therefore the Empire itself) by its octagonal shape, the “gates” in which its four plates were placed, and the setting of its gemstones, all alluding to the Book of Revelation and *de civitate dei* (see Figure 4).73

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The invisible operation of the walls did not vanish with the destruction of the city’s physical fortifications. On the contrary, it became all the more conspicuous. It was as if the symbolic form of the city came out of the shadows of the physical stones once the walls themselves had been destroyed. Such was the case, for instance, with the religious connotations of the walls. In Bonn, where in the early eighteenth century the peasants from the surrounding countryside helped demolish the city’s walls, one poet commented that “[w]hat through trumpet blows in Jericho had happened / By that miracle, is all the world amazed // A different thing is what in Bonn has just transpired / When by sounds of peasants’ horns the walls had just been razed.”74 Even a century later, one still finds a similar deployment of biblical imagery. When one Hamburg writer opposed the charging of fees at his city’s gates, he too composed a poem for the occasion. He claimed that charging fees at the gates was against the Bible itself. Hamburg might charge entrance fees at its gates, he wrote, “[b]ut when we climb to Heaven’s door / From the earthly valley’s floor / There Peter stands, no slave is he / He’d let one in and charge no fee.”75

The city’s walls were also inseparable from the invisible presence of the city’s past. They were lieux de mémoire: places of memory.76 After all, German cities had always been fortified. During the Middle Ages, walls—together with the city’s market and legal privileges (Stadtrecht)—were the three prerequisites that turned a settlement into a city. Strictly speaking, therefore, Munich, Freiburg, or Nuremberg, as cities, had always possessed walls. Furthermore, the city gates, towers, and walls were old, familiar faces for the burghers; they were part of the city’s genius locii. They stood around the city at one’s birth and throughout one’s life. And they stood when crucial events in the city’s history took place. The Ulrepforte in Cologne reminded one of an important battle (the memorial plaque still exists there today); and the Jerusalem Gate in Büdingen bore witness to residents’ safe return from a historical pilgrimage. The gates and the walls were in that respect often the only “witnesses” to the city’s history. At any rate, they were always witnesses to one’s friends and childhood games, to one’s family, to one’s culture, and to one’s home or Heimat. To demolish the gates and walls would consequently be tantamount to dis-membering the city, in the sense of both physically cutting or disjoining one of the city’s limbs or members from its body and in the sense of annihilating their functions as places where the city’s past was re-membered, where the present city was symbolically connected with its traditions and its history.


Indeed, the city gates and towers had their own personalities. They had individual names, sometimes so ancient no one could remember where they had come from. In Hamburg the ravelins were named after Jesus’s disciples. In Dresden, parts of the star-shaped fortifications were named after the planets. The walls in those cities were literally a part of the cosmology or “metaphysics” of the city. To demolish them was almost unthinkable; it meant (in the case of Dresden quite literally) to destroy a world. This is why, as Catharina Elisabeth Goethe so beautifully put it, the “old wigs” would have waited until the Second Coming before demolishing Frankfurt’s city walls. Time itself had to stop before such an event could take place.

The third and perhaps most important reason the walls belonged to the “invisible city” was that the city itself, as an organ in a larger body, also belonged to an invisible world: the Reich or any of its organs. Such a state of affairs was most evident in the case of a free or Imperial city. The functioning of the Reich’s whole body was visible—in the form of the Reichstag—only to a select few. According to early modern German political philosophers, it was only in the Imperial Diet, when all the members or organs of the Reich were physically present, that the Reich as a coherent body, “with head and limbs” (Emperor and Imperial estates), became visible.77 The Reichstag was then the Empire in corpore: “embodied” or physically “incarnated.” “The sovereign princes and the estates constitute the Imperial body,” wrote, for instance, the important jurist Tobias Paurmeister in the early seventeenth century. “This body’s head is the Emperor, and only when all members are present together in a compendium representativum can one say that the Empire [itself] has been assembled.”78

Contemporary political philosophers further stated that individual members of the great pulsating body of the Empire were not distinguishable from their membership. A duke, for instance, was not only the individual who carried this title at a specific point in time. A duke was also all his ancestors and future descendents—much in the same way that kings, as human beings, always died, yet the king never passed away.79 In such a world, external symbols of the intangible ideas of membership and rank were by no means superficial. They were of the essence, because they were more durable than the specific person who carried them at a given point of time; they were how the invisible bodies of a king (invisible because it was always greater than the body of the crowned person), a bishop, or even the Empire as a whole made their presence known. “Honor,” concluded one early modern legal theoretician, “consistit in signis exterioribus.”80

77 See, for instance, Johann Carl König, Gründliche Abhandlung von denen Teutschen Reichs-Tägen überhaupt und dem noch fürwährenden zu Regensburg insbesondere (Nuremberg, 1738), vol. 1, 31.
78 Tobias Paurmeister, De iurisdictione imperii Romani (Hanover, 1608), Vol. 2, 1.
79 Louis XIV once wrote in this vein to his son, the Dauphin: “I give you an opportunity to demonstrate your personal superiority. Show it to the whole of Europe, so that no one would notice, when I am gone, that the King has died.” Quoted in Jean-Christian Petitfi ls, Louis XIV (Paris, 1997), 494. The most important treatment of the relationship between the king’s two bodies is Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology (Princeton, 1957).
80 The quotation is from Bartholomeus Cassanaeus, a sixteenth-century scholar whose work appeared in new editions well into the seventeenth century. Stollberg-Rilinger, “Zeremoniell als politisches Verfahren,” 95, n13. My analysis of the importance and meaning of signs in the world of the Holy Roman Empire is influenced by St. Augustine’s definition of signs in St. Augustine, De Magistro, 1.
Likewise, the walls often stood more strongly as symbols than as physical barriers. Just like the Imperial crown (which, as we saw, was modeled after Jerusalem’s city walls), a city’s walls were external signs of an abstract idea or honor (the city). We remember how the burghers of Jena pleaded with their Grand Duke to leave their old honorable monument unharmed.81 And like a monarch’s crown, the walls were also always greater than their physical incarnation. They could change physically (compare: a monarch) without ever changing substantially (compare: the monarch, or monarchy). They could even be physically absent (Königbrück), and yet still be very present. This is the reason why one sometimes spoke about the demolition of relatively new, modernized walls as if they had been built during the Middle Ages. The physical stones were indeed new, but they bore the memory of the original walls and the rite of initiation that those walls once meant to a nascent city.82 The city, consequently, was its actuality (its streets, houses, physical walls, and gates), but also an abstract idea. The gates and the walls were among the places where these two aspects of the city converged, places where stones had meanings and the meaning of living in a city was incarnated in stone. In that respect, the city walls constituted one of the city’s pineal glands: a point where the city’s soul came into contact with its physical body.83

In times of peace, as we have seen, the gates and the walls were places where travelers and locals felt, recognized, and instituted the city. In times of war or political turmoil, the city’s fortifications stood for the idea (and by the mid-eighteenth century, it was often little more than an idea) that a city could independently defend itself. Contemporary Germans called this idea die Stadt in Waffen, “the city in arms.” Urban fortifications possessed important military functions well into the second half of the nineteenth century. But the military revolution of the early modern period and the resulting changes in the art of siege and the science of fortification made it increasingly clear that city walls were not sufficient by themselves for the defense of a city and that the community had to find additional ways to protect itself in times of war. Such practical considerations notwithstanding, the idea that a city ought to be able to defend itself independently was still very much alive in the second half of the eighteenth century. It is all too easy to ridicule the citizens of Frankfurt am Main, for instance, who well into the 1790s thought they could single-handedly defend their city from the French revolutionary armies.84 More important, however, is not to ridicule but to understand. It was not only the

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81 See n2 above.
82 This theme recurs very often, for instance, in “Der Abbruch der Stadtmauer sowie die Regulierung, Pflasterung und Unterhaltung der hierdurch freier werdenden Straßen, 1859–1882,” LA Berlin, A Rep 000-02-01 Nr. 1579.
83 Another urban monument that served the same purpose was the Rathaus.
84 “Verteidigungsmaßnamen der Stadt,” ISG Frankfurt am Main, Kriegszeugamt Nr. 5.
actual military functions of the walls that were important to the citizens of the early modern city. It was also the abstract idea behind the military fortifications: the idea that in a time of need the city ought to be able to raise its arms and defend itself like any honorable person in the Reich.

Within the mental universe of the Reich, the demolition of city walls was consequently much more than the destruction of purely military defenses. It was equivalent to a king’s wrecking his scepter and crown or a bishop trashing his pastoral insignia. Such acts would be considered either signs of madness or crimes against “honor”—that of the organ or member as well as that of the body politic as a whole.

VI. Defortification and Its Resulting Problems

The walls were related both to the physical nature of the city and to the city as an idea. They were important for the city’s defense and public security. But even more significantly, they were a part of one’s religious imagination; they related to the community’s past, present, and future; and they belonged to the larger symbolic cosmos of the Holy Roman Empire. Walls were in all these respects an inseparable part of the life and honor of the city, an abstract idea that took a physical shape. To demolish the external signs of its personality, to destroy the stone-made borders of its community, was of course to deface the visible, physical city. At the same time, defortification also dealt a crushing blow to the invisible, intangible city: a painful blow to the city’s symbolic, rather than physical, form. It was to dismantle (literally: to divest of a mantle or a cloak; to strip off a piece of clothing, covering, protection) the idea of the city. All of this explains why walls were still so fundamental to the city’s definition of itself in the eighteenth century, why contemporaries had a sense of magic when they looked at their transformed, defortified cities, and why the word “honor” appeared in so many contemporary descriptions of urban fortifications.

Defortification introduced, therefore, two interrelated sets of problems: the one practical, the other symbolic. On the one hand, the demolition raised a series of questions about the ability of the city to defend itself, finance itself, and control its population. It further raised questions about property, both in terms of the walls as a whole and of the fortifications’ inhabited parts. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German burghers had to determine to whom the walls actually belonged, who was entitled to make decisions about
their demolition, how defortification should be performed and by whom, and who should be allowed to profit from it. They also had to decide what would happen to the persons and institutions that had been related to the walls for so many centuries: where to relocate the magazines, what to do about the prisons, how to find new employment for all the different gate officers, and what to do with the exposed area around the city (including the glacis) now that the walls were gone.

Beyond these practical issues, however, the community had to confront the assault on the walls’ symbolic aspect, the assault on the invisible city. Not only the beauty of the city was at stake here, but also, and perhaps above all, its identity. Since the walls were lieux de mémoire, their demolition raised questions about the community’s collective memory and the city’s relation to its history. Since they served as external signs of the city’s honor and membership in the Empire, the walls’ demolition raised questions about the old mental universe of the Reich as a whole. And since the walls constituted symbolic borders between city and countryside, their demise raised questions about the city’s abstract boundaries: questions such as where the city began and where it ended, who belonged to the city and who did not, and what differentiated the city from a big village now that it was no longer a closed, protected place. In other words, in what respect could it still be called “a city” at all.

Yair Mintzker is an Assistant Professor of European History at Princeton University, specializing in early modern German-speaking Central Europe. He received his Ph.D. from Stanford University in 2009 with a dissertation entitled “The Defortification of the German City, 1689–1866,” which won the Elizabeth Spilman Rosenfield Prize of Stanford’s Department of History (2009) and the GHI’s Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize (2010). Among Mintzker’s recent publications are articles in History of European Ideas and Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques.