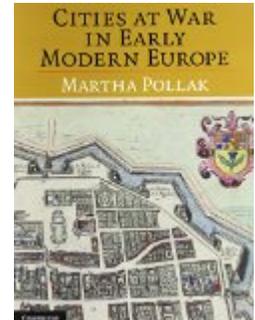


Martha Pollak. *Cities at War in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Illustrations. xv + 354 pp. \$32.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-62272-2.



Reviewed by Robert Tiegs

Published on H-War (October, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Cities at War provides an expansive examination of the impact of defensive fortifications on cities throughout Europe from 1550 to 1700. Martha Pollak is well situated to take on such an arduous study as evidenced by the success of her first work, *Turin 1564-1680: Urban Design, Military Culture, and the Creation of Absolutist Capital* (1991). Her earlier book provides an intensive study of how military culture altered the design of one city, while this monograph scales back the lens to examine the process across Europe. The argument is straightforward; she believes that the new style of warfare and a passion for geometry created a “military urbanism” in cities throughout the continent. She notes, “The imperatives of strategic representation and defense decisively transformed the architecture and public domain of cities, resulting in what I call *military urbanism*, a style of urban design based on uniformity, geometric clarity, control, architectural economy, and unadorned monumentality” (p. 1). While the work has a clear thesis that is argued well throughout, the book is best suited to specialists

as the terse prose and in-depth analysis may prove difficult for the general reader.

An introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue comprise the work. The first chapter, “Geometry of Power,” focuses on the development, diffusion, and impact of the citadel throughout Europe. Pollak then moves to chapter 2, “Military Culture and the Dissemination of Urban Knowledge,” in which she discusses the ways in which military architecture developed into its own aristocratic and elite field of study, replete with its own discourse. The third chapter, “Siege Views: The War of Military Images,” examines how artistic renderings of sieges became objects of propaganda and promotion, making cities sites of “conquest and pleasure” (p. 118). Chapter 4, “The Forms of Military Urbanism,” surveys interactions between defensive requirements and urban requirements, such as public spaces, showing how the relationship between streets and the defensive perimeter drove the design of cities. Pollak turns to the post-siege events in her last chapter, “Celebrating Peace,” looking at the urban environ-

ment through the perspective of public festivities and monument building. The short epilogue analyzes the role of fireworks, through which the sovereign showcased his mastery over artillery, transforming the terrifying instrument of destruction into a medium for entertainment.

Throughout *Cities at War*, a few prominent themes emerge, specifically how military engineers balanced idealized designs versus specific geographies and civic priorities versus military demands. This process was by no means direct or uncontested, but was in fact a negotiated process, which Pollak does well to trace. The underlying premise of fortifications was that modular design and geometric perfection offered the best defense, but this had to be adjusted to the locale. The development of the citadel highlights this negotiation, as it was intended to dominate a region and intimidate enemies, while simultaneously hold urban populations in check. The construction of this structure required a considerable alteration to the city. In some places, these defenses could be built into landscape and combine the artificial with the natural, but this was rare. Instead, by 1600 the affinity between citadel and city gelled, developing a complete identity formed on military urbanism. An important part of this form of civic planning involved the demonstration of military authority in such a way that the civic population either adopted or acquiesced to the new realities of urban life. A significant portion of the work showcases the way in which aristocrats and elites monopolized siege warfare, making the construction of defensive bastions and the capture of fortified places their purview. Once a city was successfully captured or defended, elites reiterated their prominence, bringing the martial aspects of their rule into the civic. They constructed arches and equestrian statues, and supplemented these structures with symbolic events, such as mock battles in public squares. As Pollak makes clear, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the city became the privileged site of war, as the siege became the preeminent military strategy. In the

process, however, a clear hierarchy developed among European cities between those worthy of defenses and those without defense.

There is a lot to recommend about this work. The level of erudition is superb, as Pollak condenses roughly three hundred years of pan-European history into a manageable 350-page work. It is full of interesting detail and wonderful examples, such as a satirical print of a group of German generals using the Spanish general Marchese Ambrogio Spinola's propaganda piece that depicted his successful sieges as a board game. The publisher deserves credit as well; the book includes over two hundred illustrations, nearly one per page. Nevertheless, the work is not without some weaknesses. The majority of these difficulties stem from Pollak's ambitious plan to survey so much time and space. As a result, her analysis often jumps temporally and geographically to the detriment of the reader. The thematic chapter organization adds to this confusion. The end result is that the reader is thoroughly convinced that a "military urbanism" did develop in Europe, but will probably have some confusion about the exact process. Similarly, there are a few difficulties with the illustrations. Since some of the images that she uses as evidence highlight several important points, they are referred to throughout the work, such as Peter Paul Rubens's oil sketch of Antwerp. Pollak first examines this work on page 13, but repeatedly offers new layers of analysis on this image over the next fifty pages. Unfortunately, in this short space the reader is also introduced to forty other illustrations; making comparisons between the various illustrations is difficult. It may seem pedantic to complain about an abundance of images, but one wonders whether less could have been more in this case. This reviewer gets the impression that Pollak wanted to share her voyage of discovery with the reader. Every fact and image so arduously extracted from the archives was too valuable to be discarded in exchange for greater clarity. The end result is that only experts in early modern warfare and urban

studies will truly get to go along with Pollak on her journey.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Robert Tiegs. Review of Pollak, Martha. *Cities at War in Early Modern Europe*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41878>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.