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When Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's young Faust walks outside of Leipzig's city walls to join the burghers as they enjoy the sights and sounds of springtime, he is wandering into a shifting, evolving landscape that shapes the way that both urban spaces and wilderness are understood. Kristin Poling's enjoyable and very readable history follows the different ways that German cities dealt with their increasingly obsolete city walls and defense spaces over the course of the nineteenth century. Yes, Carl Schorske demonstrated the centrality of Vienna's Ringstrasse that replaced the bastions of the imperial capitol and served as one of the nascent spaces of an emerging modernity. But Poling convincingly argues that the development of other German-speaking cities point to a variety of different ways that the city center came to interact with the rural periphery and the natural landscape. The process was further complicated by the rise of urban social upheaval and revolution, as well as by the emerging spatial realities of the industrial revolution. Eschewing jargon and theoretical posturing, Poling provides a fascinating theoretical lens for exploring Germany's urban expansion in the nineteenth century.

While many American Germanists would expect to be taken right into the swampy transitional building sites of Heinrich Zille's fin-de-siècle Berlin, Poling instead begins with fascinating case studies from Leipzig and Oldenburg, and later visits the peripheries not only of Berlin, but also of Nuremberg, with its preserved city walls. Leipzig, as a market city, valued openness and free trade but also had a hard time letting go of the idea of taxing merchants as they entered the city's gates. Competing visions of promenades, retail spaces, and natural retreats competed for dominance in the space between the old city center and the evolving suburbs. Leipzig's own Adolf Emil Roßmäßler sought to preserve forest spaces close to the city, helping to create “one of the distinctive characteristics of the German forest ... its accessibility from the city” (p. 41). And, as it turns out, Daniel Gottlob Moritz Schreber was also from Leipzig, where he developed some of Germany's earliest urban small garden projects. Deftly weaving in strands from her exhaustive archival research, Poling lays out a compelling story, from newspaper polemics to city planning documents to maps and illustrations.

With the unique chapter on the city borders of Oldenburg, Poling explores the idea that the German notion of Heimat consists of human settlements that appear in the context of natural environments, undermining the knee-jerk idea that the artificial human realm and the idyllic natural realm are mutually exclusive. Building dikes and using technology to open marshlands and other
formerly unusable lands, Oldenburg joined the nineteenth-century project of “inner coloniza-
tion,” creating more arable lands for German set-
tlers. The project of urban expansion thus be-
comes “inseparable” from environmental im-
provement projects and a belief in technological
progress. Eventually, the loss of unique local land-
scapes was regretted, but the city still came to be
seen as emblematic of a kind of “natural” urbaniz-
ation because of its interaction with these lost
landscapes. The city's long battle with the forces of
nature created a different historical narrative bey-
ond the spatial remnants of its former city walls.

The next two chapters focus on Prussia’s in-
creasing problems in dealing with the walls around its cities. On one side, the Prussian tax
code depended upon a strict delineation between
cities and the countryside. Westphalian cities such
as Paderborn wished to tear down their decrepit
central walls, but the Prussian government in-
sisted that Paderborn maintain its wall so that
taxes could be excised from millers, butchers, and
other tradespeople who passed in and out of the
city. In the case of Berlin, the worry was not so
much about loss of tax revenue as it was about the
unruly residents of the Vorstadt. Poling cites a fas-
cinating contrast between a plan to build villas
outside of the city walls for wealthy residents, and
the reality of the crowded shantytowns that de-
veloped on the city’s periphery as residents fled
the horrid conditions and steep rents within the
city proper. “The first was planned and unbuilt,”
she explains, while the second was “unplanned
and built” (p. 110). Even with the extensive
“Hobrechtplan” for building an expanded Berlin
in 1862, the built reality of the city included large
and convoluted unofficial building projects.

It is to Poling’s credit that she has done the
archival work necessary to trace the history of
these shantytowns. Other epochal treatments of
Berlin's development—such as Johann Friedrich
Geist and Klaus Kürver’s exhaustive series titled
Das Berliner Mietshaus (1989)—build their argu-
mants around the buildings outside of the city
gates but do not explore the nature and scope of
Berlin’s temporary and illegal buildings from the
mid-nineteenth century to the fin de siècle. Pol-
ing’s archival exploration of working-class
shantytowns—from official documents to cartoons
by the aforementioned Zille—provide a worthy
cultural history of the unruly outlying spaces that
caused so much fascination and fear among Ber-
lín’s city officials and middle-class readership.

Nowhere does the discourse about German
identity, history, and city walls play out more
legibly than in the late nineteenth-century discus-
sion of the fate of Nuremberg’s medieval city
walls. Long before Leni Riefenstahl captured im-
ages of the Führer waving to throngs of Nurem-
berg admirers, the city had served, in Poling’s
words, as “Germany’s imagined cultural capital”
(p. 150). Medieval Nuremberg was the most iconic
German city, well known from its two-page wood-
cut centerfold in Hartmut Schedel's 1493 Welt-
chronik. It had housed the Renaissance heyday of
Albrecht Dürer, Hans Sachs, and the humanist
philosopher Willibald Pirckheimer, and had re-
mained well preserved into the modern period.
Long before native Nuremberger had themselves
organized historical preservation societies, there
arose a loud national resistance to tearing down
the city’s walls. Drawing from archival sources,
Poling demonstrates how the city’s ancient fortifi-
cations came to be spoken of in religious terms,
with nostalgic Germans making “pilgrimages” to
the walls as a kind of secular German cathedral.
Destruction of the walls would be “sacrilege,” tear-
ing down a rare holy artifact that was not
burdened with Catholic or Protestant identity.

Poling’s most fascinating idea comes in her
conclusion, where she defends her use of the term
English term “frontier” to describe German city
borders. The German terms “Grenze” and “Vor-
stadt” do not contain the pioneering spirit of the
American use of the term “frontier,” but Ger-
many's nineteenth-century discussion of city walls
and urban expansion very much did resonate with new-world frontier visions. The wild land outside the gates could, in the words of Clara Viebig, Gustav Freytag, and others, provide an alternative for immigrating to America, for they served as potential open spaces for Germany's own inner colonization. Poling's careful and illuminating re-visiting of the works of Werner Sombart, Julius Faucher, and other historical urban theorists makes a valuable contribution to the decades of the “spatial turn” in German studies, which often focused on Germany's urban spaces and on its idealized wilderness, but seldom on the dynamic borders between them. Simultaneously exhaustive in its use of archival sources and imaginative in its use of literary, artistic, and popular works, Poling's book will be a welcome addition to researchers and teachers of German cultural history.

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