Central European History 47 (2014), 482–487.
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doi:10.1017/S0008938914001587

Forum: *German Home Towns*, Forty Years Later Introduction

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THE idea of publicly recognizing an important milestone in the life of Mack Walker's book *German Home Towns*, which appeared in 1971, goes back to January 2011 when David Luebke and Yair Mintzker put out a call for papers to discuss "*German Home Towns*—Forty Years Later" at the upcoming meeting of the German Studies Association (GSA) in Louisville, Kentucky.[1] The robust response to their call confirmed the wide-ranging impact of Walker's book and validated their hunch that the fortieth anniversary was the right time for a critical celebration of this influential text.

After some sifting and paring, nine papers and three extensive comments appeared at three very well-attended sessions at the GSA meeting.[2] The sessions and papers were so impressive in their range and quality that several participants immediately recognized the possibility of having some contributions appear in print so that the vibrant legacy of *German Home Towns*, clearly on display in Louisville, could find a more enduring form of recognition. Surprisingly no other commemorations of the book were brewing.[3] *Central European History* (*CEH*) appeared as the most appropriate venue for a spotlight on Walker's book, in part because of the very American character of Walker's approach, unmistakably announced by the Americanism "Home Towns" in the title and noted, not always

I would like to thank Christopher Friedrichs, David Luebke, and Yair Mintzker for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this introduction; its flaws remain my own. Thanks to Ken Ledford for his flexible response to the idea of a small forum to celebrate forty years of Mack Walker's *German Home Towns*.

[1] Mack Walker, *German Home Towns: Community, State, and General Estate 1648–1871* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971).

[2] Many thanks to everyone who participated or attended. Full listings for sessions 128, 157, and 178 are available through the GSA website at https://www.thegsa.org/conference/documents/GSA_program_11.pdf.

[3] Walker's book had received two commendatory, although not uncritical, treatments shortly after its twenty-fifth anniversary: Christopher Friedrichs, "But Are We Any Closer to Home? Early Modern German Urban History Since *German Home Towns*," *Central European History* 30 (1997): 163–185, and James Sheehan's Foreword to the paperback edition of Mack Walker, *German Home Towns* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), xiii–xvii.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938914001587 Published online by Cambridge University Press

positively, by many initial reviews. The idea got a warm reception from *CEH* editor Ken Ledford, who, coincidentally, had been deeply influenced by Walker while studying with Vernon Lidtke at Johns Hopkins University, where Walker began teaching in 1974. Walker's influence on Ledford's study of the German legal profession, which appeared in 1996 as *From General Estate to Special Interest: German Lawyers 1878–1933*, is just one of the countless examples of how *German Home Towns* has helped to shape understandings of German society that extended far beyond the formal temporal boundaries of Walker's book. Unlike Ledford, the vast majority of scholars who have derived important insights from *German Home Towns*, including the four authors represented here, did not know Mack Walker personally, yet "knew" him very well through a book that combined his personal perceptions of German society with his historian's sensibility and his extensive knowledge of contemporary sociology.

The range of papers presented in Louisville reminded the audiences that the innumerable productive pathways leading from *German Home Towns* extend great distances in many directions.[4] In the first session, Justus Nipperdey and Marion Gray expanded our knowledge of the larger contemporary intellectual frameworks of early modern Germany by using Walker's understandings of the home town as starting points for their explorations of cameralist thinking and policies. Several of the papers presented in Louisville demonstrated the applicability of Walker's insights to towns and territories outside the area he investigated and to time periods that extended far beyond his primary framework. Marc Lerner used Walker's history of the home towns to reexamine the history of Zurich. Walker had noted the "obvious" similarities between the home town and the theory and practice of National Socialism, and two papers were devoted to German home towns in the twentieth century.[5] David Imhoof and Jeremy DeWaal each showed how the hometown identities that Walker explicated for earlier periods retained their usefulness for understanding local and regional developments during and after the Third Reich. The surprising durability of home towns that survived for nearly a century beyond Walker's date of 1870 for their death has emerged as a recurring theme in modern German scholarship.[6] German debates over immigration policy in the 1980s and 1990s and portions of the current German discussion regarding Europe's thorny financial issues might

[4]Friedrichs has pointed out that because of Walker's unconventional goals, his book initially found relatively less resonance in its home field of early modern German urban history. Friedrichs, "Are We Any Closer?" 164.

[5]Walker, *German Home Towns*, 427.

[6]Recently, for example, in Peter H. Merkl, *Small Town and Village in Bavaria: The Passing of a Way of Life* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), which references on p. 207 the "hometowns that Mack Walker has described so well." Walker was sensitive to the extended death rattle of the home towns, noting that their "final demise" came only in the 1950s. Walker, *German Home Towns*, 429–30.

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lead some observers to wonder if elements of the hometown identity continue to exert their influence into the present.

In view of the uncharted expanse of Walker's inspiring impact on subsequent generations of scholars, even a much larger collection of essays would have difficulty covering, or even acknowledging, the many ways in which Walker's penetrating investigation into the origins of a German "yearning for organic wholeness" have altered our understanding of early modern and modern German history.[7] The substance and vocabulary of *German Home Towns* persist in finding their way into countless conference papers, journal articles, and books, as even a casual internet search reveals. The book's influence continues to grow.[8]

The essays that appear in the limited space available here are not those that demonstrated the farthest reach of Walker's book by transferring his analyses to new times and places, extending his definitions, or stretching his models. Rather the four treatments collected here began as papers from the GSA sessions that engaged most closely and specifically with the book itself and with Walker's ideas as he presented them. There is, of course, something lost in exhibiting papers that are closer to Walker's book rather than farther from it, but immediacy appeared as the most manageable strategy for inclusion (the area of a circle increases with the square of the distance from the center), as well as the most appropriate plan for an anniversary commemoration.

It bears repeating that these four brief essays can serve only as a small sample of the many ways in which scholars have engaged Walker's work. The obvious heterogeneity of even these four demonstrates the variety of widely divergent intellectual stimuli that emerged from Walker's book, thus transforming a potential flaw (that the essays do not "hang together") into a virtue. Yet as essays that closely engage Walker's book, the four contributions do demonstrate some recurring themes and points of reinforcement. Although sometimes critical, these discussions are not a misguided collective attempt to "reassess" Walker's book in light of subsequent developments in the field. Although often complimentary, they are not primarily a *laudatio* of the book's many fine intellectual qualities and stylistic attributes. Readers can pick their own favorites from the ample palette of this book's achievements, and those choices will vary widely depending on discipline, temporal interest, and aesthetic taste. Few historians can remain unimpressed by the innovative periodization that combined early modern and modern elements while cutting across the conventional barriers of 1789, 1815,

[7] Walker, *German Home Towns*, 426.

[8] To cite just one example, *German Home Towns* is referenced in three different essays in R. J. W. Evans, Michael Schaich, and Peter H. Wilson, eds., *The Holy Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6, 75, 249. According to one assessment, the book provides "a wellspring of inspiration" and "could fruitfully lend itself to re-examination in light of nearly two generations of innovative research." See Susan Karant-Nunn, "Is there a Social History of the Holy Roman Empire?" 249.

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and 1848; the pioneering focus on the "individualized country" of the Third Germany; the early emphasis on personal presence in making premodern politics; the anticipation of identity as a major focus in German studies; and the evocative, almost poetic explication of the Holy Roman Empire as a metaphorical "Incubator"—an exposition that remains unsurpassed for introducing undergraduates to the empire's multilayered organization. How many authors could succeed in drawing readers in with a first chapter on the constitutional structure of the Holy Roman Empire? Walker used the life of the home towns as a thematic thread to lead readers past the well-known but still dangerous quicksand pits of detail and qualification that imperil any review of the Imperial constitution. He connected political processes to the lives of hometown inhabitants, making his expositions of early modern politics approachable without sacrificing ambiguity or complexity. These are some of the many reasons Walker's book was never "more often praised than read" as sometimes happens with iconic works. Current sensibilities would also identify a number of limitations and shortcomings in Walker's history; most striking perhaps is the absence of any discussion at all of how gender may or may not have played a role in the formation of hometown identities.

Among the following essays, my own is the most conventional. It displays the reciprocal processes of revision and confirmation that form a necessary part of coming to grips with a great work of historical scholarship. Important texts unavoidably receive the revisionist attention of succeeding scholars, precisely because new entrants into the field naturally orient themselves around the most visible landmarks that occupy the terrain. By the time I entered graduate school in 1981, *German Home Towns* had already obtained a "must read" status for many European historians. I was impressed even before reading a single word of the text because the book had been forcefully recommended to me by four very different professors of early modern and modern European history: Franklin Ford (who had been Walker's thesis advisor at Harvard), Charles Maier, Simon Schama, and Frank Sisson. That level of endorsement, sure to get the attention of a beginning graduate student, testified to the widespread recognition the book had gained in the decade following its publication. My essay reexamines Walker's depiction of the hometown economy as willfully disconnected from the patterns of long-distance trade and suggests that significant revision to this characterization is in order. The paper also argues that participating in extended trade networks did not lead to an undermining of the home towns' civic autonomy, as Walker assumed it must. By exploring cases in which commercially sophisticated home towns defended themselves against outside intrusions of authority, the essay paradoxically confirms the historical strength of the unique hometown "sociopolitical typology" that Walker had discovered.[9]

[9]Walker, *German Home Towns*, 6.

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Not surprisingly, all four of the essays that appear here have at least some hints of the revision-*cum*-confirmation paradox in them, although they offer much more. David Luebke's essay both qualifies and reinforces Walker's insights, again with the sense that these two activities are entirely compatible. Using a concept of civic concord derived from Walker's home towns and his own attendant ideas, Luebke explores pluriconfessional towns in the sixteenth century. The resulting discussion offers promising avenues for nuancing our understanding of confessionalization as it was practiced, rather than as an abstracted or idealized category of analysis. Civic concord might also be a useful concept for broadening and refining our understanding of politics in the Holy Roman Empire, where a large number of actors, multiple layers of authority, and several fora of activity have combined to hamper the rise of consensual views on the nature of this polity or how it operated.[10] Finally, the processes on display in some pluriconfessional settings reaffirm the functional independence of home towns, thus extending and reinforcing the point my essay tries to make in an economic context: that even where new research and ongoing scholarship might modify some of Walker's description of the home towns, they appear to confirm his essential judgments about hometown autonomy.

Christopher Friedrichs acknowledges with a tinge of embarrassment how, as a young scholar, he had eagerly sought empirical findings that implied revision of some social and economic components of Walker's home towns. His essay here has moved on to larger and important conceptual questions regarding the typicality of the German home towns in a European and global context, an issue Walker addressed only briefly at the beginning and end of his book. Walker thought that "at other times and in other places . . . similar communities have surely existed" and that the German home towns might be only the "purest historical form" of a "certain social style and character." At another point Walker speculated that "the story of the [German] home towns" might "take on the character of an historical allegory," that the home towns' "conditions and aspirations of social existence" might be "chained to no historical circumstance" and therefore have "by no means passed away with the communities."[11] Friedrichs concedes some nearly universal characteristics of early modern towns, but uses a few brief comparisons to set Walker's home towns more firmly in their distinctly German context than Walker himself had done. The essay's observations on civic unity, civic harmony, and the absence of organized factions in the German home towns support Luebke's insights into the primacy of civic concord.

[10] This literature has grown tremendously in the past decade. For an introduction, see Beat Kümin's review article, "Political Culture in the Holy Roman Empire," *German History* 27 (2009): 131–44 and the literature cited there.

[11] Walker, *German Home Towns*, 4 and 431.

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Seeking to explain the paradox he identifies in the simultaneous absence and presence of visual and material descriptions in Walker's book, Yair Mintzker moves the forum into new areas by inquiring into the theoretical foundations of Walker's work. In an essay that deftly combines breadth and brevity, Mintzker addresses two distinct components of Walker's book, locating its theoretical roots in contemporary American sociology of the 1960s and examining its source base in early modern German archival materials. Although some elements of Walker's approach might appear problematic in relation to present methods, they also support Walker's and others' assessments of social relations in the home towns. Thus Mintzker's conclusions also straddle criticism and validation.

Max Weber is alleged to have said, "if everything we write still seems correct ten and twenty years later, then we are not doing our work properly." By that measure, historians of early modern and modern Germany have been doing their jobs well over that past forty years. Since *German Home Towns* appeared in 1971, scholars have been eager to point out newly identified structures, activities, and locales that did not conform closely to the hometown portrait painted by Mack Walker. That is well and good and necessary. These interactions form one of the lifeblood processes in the development of any intellectual field. Indeed, a scholarly community thrives on the bonds forged by contestation, its members cooperate by disagreeing, and the collective advances via discord; as such, it may be very nearly the diametrical opposite of the German home towns, which sought to postpone, disperse, and suffocate conflict. All of the essays here sound at least some tones of both correcting and affirming Walker's work. The field as a whole benefits from new findings that refine the picture of the home towns, but Walker's book remains essentially untouched by these developments. The essays here indicate that the enduring contribution of *German Home Towns* transcends any revision in our understanding of the historical conditions of the home towns, because the book is not really about the historical conditions of the towns. As Friedrichs and Mintzker each eloquently suggest, the book is ultimately about self-perception, about the idea of the home town.[12] It was this self-understanding, with its own distinctive and identifiable content, that served as the final basis for the social communities of the hundreds of home towns in the German lands. That is why Walker's book endures in all of its truly important judgments about the unique political culture that developed, and was never quite lost, in the German home towns.

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[12]In discussing the legacy of the home towns, Walker distinguished between an "ideal of community" with characteristics "attributed" to it and the "actual communities as social entities." Ibid., 418 and 427. In this distinction he may have been moving toward the idea of "invented tradition" that emerged just one year later in Eric Hobsbawm's "The Social Function of the Past: Some Questions," *Past and Present* 55 (May 1972): 3–17.

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