



Ralph P. Güntzel

The Demigod's City

A Short History of Kassel



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Tectum Verlag

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Für Kristina,
Charly und Bernette

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*View from the *Karlsberg* across *Schloß Wilhelmshöhe*
and *Wilhelmshöher Allee* toward the city center*

Introduction

The venerable archivist and historian Franz Carl Theodor Piderit once stated that few German cities can boast a history as rich and eventful as Kassel's. Piderit's assertion, which comes at the end of his painstaking four-hundred page survey of the history of the city, is remarkable not only for its content but also for the period when it was written. It was made in the 1840s, a time when the most dramatic events in the city's colorful history had not yet happened.

When Piderit penned his account he could not know that a few years later Bavarian troops would occupy Kassel; that a few decades later, a German emperor known to his detractors as "Mad Willy" would make the palace on the western out-

skirts of the city his annual summer residence; or that after the First World War, the German general staff would set up shop in the same palace and from there direct military activities against radicals bent on transforming Germany into a socialist republic.

Piderit could not know that in 1943 three-quarters of the city's buildings would be destroyed in air bombardments; that by the early 1960s, the city would once again have risen like a phoenix from the ashes but find itself merely a few miles from an impenetrable border that divided the whole world in half; or that in 1970, Kassel would become the scene of high-risk diplomatic efforts aimed at easing Cold War tensions amidst demon-

strations and violence in the streets.

While Piderit could not have anticipated any of these events, perhaps he would not have been unduly taken aback had somebody foretold him that Kassel would be the scene of so much commotion. His studies of the city's earlier history had shown him that exciting incidents were hardly alien to the city. It was in Kassel that medieval rulers and citizens first had bitterly fought each other but then valiantly stood together against the fiendish designs of foreign knights; that early Lutherans had resisted courageously all attempts of Catholic conquerors and clergymen to reconvert them; that Jérôme Bonaparte, Napoleon's youngest brother, had run the gayest court in all of Europe, wasted fabulous sums of money, and simultaneously brought equality before the law to central Germany.

Whether one looks at the distant past or at more recent developments, the annals of Kassel are anything

but dull. In fact, they make for a fascinating story. This book tells this story. It does so in a user-friendly way.

This book does not eulogize. It takes a critical yet sympathetic view of Kassel's history without glossing over the flaws, faults, and flimsiness. Above all, it portrays the major characters that shaped events and were, in turn, shaped by them. In the process, it debunks historical myths and takes supposedly great men down from their pedestal.

Like all histories, the history of Kassel has its heroes and its zeros. Its heroes were gifted individuals such as Georg Forster, who brought learnedness to a city in which few people read books; Gustav Mahler, who overcame unhappiness to compose great music; and Sara Nußbaum, who survived the Holocaust and then walked hundreds of miles by foot to return to Kassel.

Its zeros included Friedrich Wilhelm, the last ruler of Hesse-Kassel, who broke his promise to respect

his citizens' civil liberties; Philipp Scheidemann, the mayor who found it beneath him to do humdrum paperwork; and Herbert Ahlborn, the police chief who almost ruined a summit meeting between leaders from the East and the West during the height of the Cold War.

In the pages of this book readers will encounter likeable villains such as Rudolph Raspe, the author of the *Adventures of Baron Munchausen* who embezzled coins from the ruler's collection; tragic heroes like Georg Engel, who became the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice in a far-away land; and malevolent thugs such as Landgrave Hermann II, a medieval ruler who quartered citizens who challenged his ruthless methods of governance.

In narrating the story of Kassel, this book puts the history of the city into a larger context. It does not limit itself to recounting events within the municipal boundaries as if they happened in isolation from the rest of the world. Rather, it shows how

developments in Kassel related to developments on both the German and European stages.

The first chapter acquaints readers with the geographical setting and major features of the urban landscape. Subsequent chapters take readers through the major stages of the city's development from its emergence as a medieval settlement on the bank of the river Fulda to the present day.

In the process of nurturing this book through various drafts, I have benefitted from the support of a number of people whom I would like to thank but who are not in any way responsible for my interpretations or errors. I am indebted to Canan Aslan-Akman, Cylvie Claveau, Jochen Frey, Ute Gallmeier, Ute Göttmann, Erika Güntzel, Paul-André Linteau, Elena Novozhilova, Roberto Perin, Olga Safonova, Tim Schröder, Charly Stark, and Thomas Weigel. Their insights and perspectives were most useful. I am grateful to Eric Petenbrink who read the

entire manuscript and Joe Belser who read part of it. They made innumerable editing suggestions that greatly improved the final product. Last but not least, I would like to thank Heike Amthor and her colleagues at Tectum for having adeptly steered the book through the production stages.

May this book inspire those who have not yet done so to visit the north-Hessian metropolis, and may it help those who already know the present-day city to become better acquainted with its past.

The Setting: A Brief Historical Geography

The Lie of the Land

Even a cursory glance at the map of Germany shows that no other sizeable city lies in close proximity to Kassel. This lack of proximity does not mean that Kassel is isolated from the other urban centers. On the contrary, it is located at the junction of two superhighways, one from the densely-populated Rhine/Ruhr area to the west and the other connecting Hamburg in the north and Munich in the south.

The railway station at Kassel-Wilhelmshöhe is part of the country's high-speed train network. Travelers from and to Kassel-Wilhelmshöhe are able to cover the distance to Frankfurt-on-the-Main in less than 90 minutes; to Berlin, located some

350 kilometers (217 miles) from Kassel, in less than three hours; and to Munich, located some 385 kilometers (239 miles) from Kassel, in less than four hours.

Kassel is the only major city located in the northern half of the *Bundesland*, or state (or province), of Hesse. As a result, the city has been nicknamed "the metropolis of northern Hesse." While the city has only about 200,000 inhabitants and, thus, is relatively small by German standards the greater urban area is home to about 320,000 people. Besides Kassel, the greater Kassel urban area includes two small cities – Baunatal (28,000 inhabitants) to the south and Vellmar (18,000 inhabitants) to the north – and a set of minor municipalities. These minor

municipalities form a ring around Kassel that comprises (clockwise from the north) Fuldata, Niestetal, Kaufungen, Lohfelden, Fuldabrück, Schauenburg, and Ahnatal.

Kassel and the smaller municipalities on its perimeter are located in a scenic basin that stretches roughly north-southward and is embedded in forested hills. Through the basin runs the river Fulda, which has its spring some 190 kilometers (118 miles) to the south of Kassel and joins together with the river Werra some 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) to the north. The confluence of the Fulda and the Werra creates one of Germany's largest rivers, the Weser, which flows into the North Sea.

Throughout the centuries Kassel's location has elicited much praise. The famous British political economist Thomas Hodgskin, who spent three years touring the continent and who visited Kassel in 1818, was one of those who put their enchantment onto paper. He noted that "*few towns, indeed,*

are more beautifully situated than Cassel. It lies at the eastern foot of some commanding, well-wooded, and beautiful hills, and overlooks a fertile, cultivated plain."

The hills to which Hodgskin referred belong to the *Habichtswald*, one of four hill ranges that surround the basin. The other three ranges are the *Reinhardswald* to the northeast, the *Kaufunger Wald* to the east, and the *Söhre* to the southeast and south. The highest peak in all of the four ranges is the *Hohes Gras* in the *Habichtswald*, which has an elevation of some 615 meters (672 yards).

The Karlsberg and Park Wilhelmshöhe

Both the *Habichtswald* and the river Fulda are very important to the layout and identity of Kassel. The eastern edge of the *Habichtswald* lies within the city's municipal boundaries. It is there, on the easternmost peak of the *Habichtswald*, called the *Karlsberg* (525 meters/574