Martin Luther’s “Mighty Fortress”

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Martin Luther wrote the hymn Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott (A Stronghold Fortress is our God) in the late 1520s as ein trost Psalm (“a psalm of comfort”), inspired by Psalm 46, “with its own newly composed tune.”¹ The hymn does not render the full biblical text into metrical form, but rather provides a paraphrase, drawing on the major themes Luther identified in his commentaries on the Psalm: “God is our confidence and strength” and “the heathens [nations, ἡθνὲς] must despair and the kingdoms fall.”² The hymn was written to encourage the faithful in the tumultuous and beleaguered first decade of the Reformation, when believers were forfeiting their worldly goods and relationships. At the same time, it was intended as a propagandistic weapon in the spiritual and actual battles against the Reformation’s many opponents.³ It quickly became an international feature of the Evangelical movement. In the four centuries since the words and music were first written, Ein feste Burg has often been appropriated as a hymn sung to reaffirm the earthly power and military prowess of Lutheran empires and German nationalists, particularly in the era centered around the Unification of Germany in 1871. The hymn has also been claimed as a psalm of spiritual consolation, especially after the complete defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945.

This article emphasizes the hymn’s reception from the 1520s to the present day. It offers a close reading of the German lyrics in the context of the Reformation and of Luther’s other writings, which document that the hymn was intended for spiritual encouragement. A fresh translation into English is used here in the spirit of Luther’s work in his translations of the Bible into the vernacular. In this way we hope to contribute to the ongoing re-assessment of the hymn, to understand Ein Feste Burg as a spiritual and eternal refuge with God.
This section will trace the genesis and immediate dissemination and translation throughout the Protestant world of Luther’s most popular hymn. For such a popular hymn, the genesis of *Ein feste Burg* is largely undocumented. No manuscripts or revisions exist, nor do any reflections on how the hymn came to be written survive from Luther’s hand. Nor is there any documentary evidence of a specific occasion or event, in spite of much speculation later. The hymn was apparently published as a broadsheet in Augsburg in 1529 under the title *Der 46. Ain trost Psalm. In seiner aygnen weiß* ("The 46th. A psalm of comfort. With its own tune"). While numerous other such broadsheet publications survive, “single sheets of paper printed on one side, and pamphlets, single gathering of leaves usually containing only one, two, or three hymns,” the original single sheet publication of *Ein feste Burg* is no longer extant.

Within that year, *Ein feste Burg* was incorporated into a collection of hymns published in Wittenberg by Joseph Klug (also no longer extant), and within two years it was translated into Low-German in an edition which is still extant. This article uses the text and spelling of the hymn as printed in the second 1533 edition of the Klug hymnal, the first high German original still extant. In 1535, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* was published again, this time under the title *Der xlvj. Psalm/ Deus noster refugium et virtus/ etc. Martinus Luther* ("the xlvj. Psalm/ God is our refuge and strength/ etc. Martinus Luther"). The hymn thus retained its character as a “psalm” and is arranged among the metrical translations of the psalter the reformer created for his first two hymn collections (1524 and 1528). Similarly, many contemporary hymnals, from the earliest publication in the Nürnberg *Achtliederbuch* and Erfurt *Enchiridion*, grouped *Ein feste Burg* among the Psalm hymns.

However, *Ein feste Burg* differs fundamentally from Luther’s other psalm hymns. Where the others followed the biblical text in close metrical versions, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* is a paraphrase that combines the psalm, other biblical references (particularly portions of John 16–18), and thematic reflection. Another comparison may be Luther’s ballad *Eyn newes lied wir heben an* ("A new song we
raise”), written soon after the burning of two Augustinian canons in Brussels in July 1523. Luther’s “newspaper song” commending the “two martyrs of Christ,” significantly influenced the promotion of Luther’s theological ideas, as Loewe has shown. Eyn newes lied provided a theological commentary on the persecution of Luther’s followers by the authorities in the Spanish Netherlands, similar to the purpose served in the next decade by Ein feste Burg.

It was from the early 1530s onwards that Ein feste Burg came to surpass the early Lutheran hymnals in popular use, through the combination of vernacular theological teaching and political commentary. It provided, in a single hymn, an expression of the confidence of Lutheran Christians in God and a reflection on the fragile political context in which believers found themselves at the beginning of the third decade of the sixteenth century. God alone, the hymn makes clear, would protect them from their enemies, whether they were human or supernatural foes. The four-stanza hymn speaks into the dichotomy of Christian living in a world of Anfechtungen: the challenges common to every Christian throughout the generations, as well as the particular challenges faced by the religious wars and conflicts of Luther’s own generation. In times of struggle, God proves to be a safe refuge and fortress who provides shelter for believers, a place to weather the storms of the age. God is “our final, blessed, eternal comfort and joy against death, hell, devils and all sadness,” Luther commented in the introduction to his 1542 collection of burial hymns; Ein feste Burg is a musical testament to that certainty. Soon after its publication, this hymn of encouragement for the persecuted Lutheran community was widely disseminated and translated. The first translation of the hymn, Eyn vaste Borch ys unse Godt, was published by Joachim Slüter as part of the Low-German Roslneck hymnal (1531). A Swedish translation, most likely by Luther’s former student in Wittenberg Olaus Petri, War gud är oss een weldigh borg, formed part of the 1536 Svenske songer eller wisor nw på prentade / foröade . . . utsatte. In 1539, the hymn was translated into English by Miles Coverdale as Our God is a defence and towre and published in his Goostly Psalmes and Spirituall Songes in 1543. By the time of Luther’s death in 1545, the hymn was widely sung throughout Protestant Europe.
In spite of its popularity, the exact occasion for the composition of the hymn remains unknown. Heinrich Heine’s supposition that the hymn was a “Reformation Marseillaise” sung by the Reformer’s party at their entry to the Diet of Worms (1521), while theatrical, is wholly implausible. Three years later the people of then Catholic Magdeburg engaged in a massed marathon singing of Lutheran hymns to express their discontent with local Catholic authorities, but *Ein feste Burg* is not among the early Luther hymns sung in protest. Instead, local citizens are recorded as having sung Luther’s *Aus tiefer Not* and *Es soll uns Gott genädig sein* for hours on end prior to the commencement of any Catholic worship. An intriguing but equally unlikely theory is that the hymn was written in the run up to the Marburg Colloquy (1529) in order to defend the doctrine of the real presence of the Lord’s Supper against Zwingli, as put forward by Staats (1998) and van Stam (2002). Their argument hinges on the interpretation of the *wörtlein* (“single word”) that would fell Satan in verse three, as the Verba (Words of Institution) *das ist mein Leib* (“this is my body”), in particular *ist* (“is”) and *mein Leib* (“my body”). This is contradicted by Luther’s own *Weekday Sermons on John’s Gospel*, where he suggests the little words are in fact the “I am he” that Jesus spoke at the moment of his betrayal when he was handed over to be crucified (John 18.5), as will be shown below. Moreover, there is little internal evidence that the hymn speaks to a specific sacramental debate. The Johannine character of the final two verses of the hymn, which depict a judgment of the prince of this world by the Savior in judicial and combative terms, suggests that the Marburg theory is unpersuasive.

Similarly far-fetched is the suggestion by Wolfram (1936), Völker (1936) and Merriman (2010), that the hymn was written in support of Protestant soldiers engaged in the siege of Vienna of 1528–9, the time Luther wrote and published *Vom Kriege wider die Türken* (“On War against the Turks”). The enemies at the time may have included Turks, but Luther’s polemics were aimed more at Catholic opponents. Certainly, on hearing the hymn in May 1531, Catholic count Ernest II of Mansfeld-Vorderort identified the hymn as an attack on Catholic principles and, Luther’s *Table Talk* recounts, “the dead tyrant Graf Ernst von Mansfeld, on hearing the hymn *Ein feste
Burg ist unser Gott etc., said, ‘I will help destroy this fortress or prefer not to live!’” The Table Talk laconically adds how “three days later [on 9 May 1531] he died, without either confession or sacrament.” Chronologically possible, but unfortunately equally undocumented, are the hypotheses that the hymn was written either for the Diet of Speyer (1529) or at the time of the Diet of Augsburg (1530) and sung at the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. The hymn was certainly in circulation at the time of both Diets, and may well have been sung at them, but again there is no documentary evidence as to such origins.

It is likely that Ein feste Burg was not written as an occasional work to mark a specific event but rather as a general hymn of confidence in the saving works of the cross in times of great upheaval for the growing Protestant community. Drawing on theological principles deeply ingrained in the life of the Reformer, and using Psalm 46 and parts of John 16–18 as its biblical base, the hymn encourages believers to sing about the realm that alone will remain when all other principalities fall: the kingdom of heaven where God himself is a stronghold and place of shelter for those who share this belief.

Reception from 1617 to 1945

Luther’s most famous hymn began its life as a hymn of consolation. It soon became a triumph song in celebration of his reformation and later of the German national movement that would claim Luther its patriarch. By the time of the centenary of the Reformation it had become an anthem of Lutheranism, led by massed choirs and orchestras under the baton of Heinrich Schütz. From the time of the first “evangelical festival of exultation” in November 1617, marking the centenary of the Reformation, Martin Luther’s hymn Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott began to develop into a hallmark of international Lutheranism. As part of the three-day festival, Luther’s hymn served as the centerpiece of celebrations on the second day of festivities at the then Lutheran Schlosskirche in Dresden. After the festival sermon by court preacher von Hoënegg on the subject of “God’s Word and Luther’s teaching/ now and never will decay,” five choirs joined the Hofkapelle to perform Ein feste Burg “in a
special arrangement with trumpets and military kettle drums” concluding the morning worship. When Johann Sebastian Bach wrote his Reformation Cantata in about 1723, *Ein feste Burg*, it had become an essential part of the annual Reformation Day celebrations on 31 October.

During the Thirty Years’ War of Religion, the hymn is later said to have gained a secular dimension as the battle hymn of an international coalition of Swedish, German, Finnish, English and Scottish soldiers led by King Gustavus Adolphus. Although we have not been able to locate primary documentation between 1617 and 1814 for this use as a battle hymn, nineteenth-century poets and historians paint a vivid image of an army singing *Ein feste Burg* in defence of the Lutheran cause at the battle of Breitenfels (1631). In 1814 Karl Curths supposed that “in profound solemn devotion the Swedish Army sang the two hymns *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* and *Es soll uns Gott genädig seyn*, accompanied by the sound of kettle drums and trumpets.” Curth’s retelling of the battle’s beginning is contrasted by the contemporary eye-witness account of Scottish officer Robert Monro present at the battle of Breitenfeld, who does not recall any specific hymns sung in battle, but only a solemn act of dedication and their marching “in order of Bataille, with Trumpets sounding, Drummes beating, and Colours advanced and flying, till we came within reach of Cannon of our enemies Armie.” The Romantic realist poet Theodor Fontane intertwines both accounts in his ballad “The Sixth of November 1632: A Swedish Tale” (1868). In the poem, a labourer on his way home to his farm in Sweden mysteriously overheard the sounds of the Battle of Lützen, at which king Gustavus Adolphus was killed and his armies gain a decisive victory:

It is as if the battle throngs across,
at times it sounds like a sacred song:
I hear in the war horses’ whinnying trot
“A mighty fortress is our God”.

Three hundred years after Luther composed his hymn, Felix Mendelssohn immortalized the melody as a song of Lutheran triumph in the concluding movement (allegro maestoso) of his *Reformation*
Symphony (1829). At the time of the commemoration of the quadricentennial of Luther’s birth in 1883, both the Reformer and his hymn with its confident assertion about the “Reich” remaining had been firmly recruited for the German nationalist cause. This literal, nationalist interpretation came to its crescendo in the Great War and the Nazi period. In the early stages of the First World War, the hymn served as a rallying song for enthusiastic soldiers, and featured in slogans of encouragement chalked onto railway carriage transporting soldiers to the Western front. A 1915 chalk inscription, written by soldiers on a Nürnberg troop carrier read:

Germany sings the first verse:
A stronghold fortress is our God
a good defence and weapon.
France sings the second verse:
With our might nothing is done,
we are completely, quickly lost.

By the time of the four-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, the Lutherlied (“Luther hymn”) had become the defiant anthem of imperialist Germany. For the 1917 Recital-book for Reformation Celebrations, the Naumburg teacher and playwright Ernst Heinrich Bethge provided a martial dramatic performance of the hymn as a victory song. As the hymn was sung, a tableau of German soldiers was revealed, kneeling at the body of their fallen comrade on the battlefield. A German Lutheran pastor with “New Testament in his raised hand, stands stage left. He sings together with the warriors, and then preaches to them.” Against this dramatic backdrop, Bethge’s verses were to be recited:

The Luther hymn sounds across the battle field,
battle grey soldiers at prayer.
The battle is over, the adversary shattered,
the angels of God speak.
Certainly came the adversary in greater might
Certainly they gave us a hard fight
God was with wonderfully us
and helped subdue the adversary.
Other German war poets and artists also used Luther’s hymn to glorify the German cause, and to entreat “the Great Heavenly Ally” for success.⁴¹ Even the defeat of imperial Germany did not rupture the close association of Ein feste Burg with German nationalism: the hymn remained part of the Nazi propaganda machine, “as a national battle hymn, a clarion call and rallying cry.”⁴² Only after the complete collapse of Nazi Germany was the hymn again tentatively reclaimed, not as a song of triumph and self-confidence, but as a song of consolation in times of terror and great upheaval.

_A Hymn of Confidence in God’s Eternal Salvation_

The language and themes Luther employs to create Ein feste Burg reflect recurrent themes in his letters, sermons and writings. In English, the hymn is best known as “A mighty fortress is our God,” the first line of numerous singable translations used in Lutheran and other Protestant denominations across the English-speaking world since the nineteenth century. Yet this translation obscures the meaning of the adjective “feste” for a safe or secure stronghold. The hymn was translated more accurately by John Christian Jacobi in 1722 as “God is our Refuge in Distress, Our strong Defence,” and by Thomas Carlyle in 1831 as “A safe stronghold our God is still.”⁴³ For this article we have used the term a “stronghold fortress”—which we believe most closely matches the layers of meaning that “feste” would have suggested to Luther’s contemporaries.

Luther articulated his understanding of the central themes of Psalm 46 in his three commentaries on the Psalms, as seen particularly in the Wittenberg group project known as Nachbesserungen an der Deutschen Bibel: Psalter, 1531 (Improvements on the German Bible, Psalter, 1531, published only two years after Ein feste Burg). In multiple versions between 1524 and 1545, Luther re-shapes his interpretation of the themes of the Psalter to address the conflicts faced by his contemporaries. “God is our confidence and strength, a help in the greatest distress” (Psalm 46.1) is glossed to suggest that God will provide a joyful place of refuge from all evil in the eternal city: “the city of God will be pleasant and cheerful . . . and be surrounded by joy.”⁴⁴ The other theme of the Psalm demonstrates the significant
development in Luther’s understanding of the viciousness, and yet ultimate powerlessness, of the enemies of God. In verse 7, the “heathens rage” (1524), “must despair” (1531); “the kingdoms bestir themselves” (1524), “bend” (1528), “must fall” (1531); “the earth’s empire melts” (1524), “dies away” (1531). Both the early vision of a defeated violent upheaval and the later understanding of inevitable decline and despair for the enemies of the Lord of Hosts are expounded in Ein feste Burg. In the Nachbesserung, Luther glosses the verses “the heathens [nations, ἡθοδος] must despair and the kingdoms must fall. . . . The LORD Sabaoth is with us, the God of Jacob is our defence” (46.7–8) to mean that though we are in “greatest distress,” those who have God’s city as their place of confidence and strength will not fear any onslaught either of earthly or supernatural enemies.45

Luther there provides a list of examples of God’s enemies, including both current Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand, Duke George of Saxony and the Ottoman armies, as well as historic enemies of the people of God such as Xerxes.46 These may rage, they even may attempt to scale God’s city, but ultimately they will fail. In the characteristic macaronic Latin and German: sollen die stad persequi, sed et ynn ein ander fallen et tamen zu schanden werden (“Should they attempt to take the city, they will fall in ruin and thus come to shame”).47 His commentary concludes with his confession in God’s provident care, and the encouragement that “we, too, should sing that verse.”48 Thus the famous hymn Luther wrote at about the same time as he was writing the commentary may be understood as a practical contribution to enable his contemporaries “to sing that verse.” Luther’s hymn is the result of a deeply-rooted spirituality in which the devil was as real and ever-present as was the saving presence of Jesus Christ. In the same way in which Christ bestowed his goodness and grace in defence of his followers, so the devil held sway over the forces of evil. Certainly, since the Diet of Worms held in spring 1521, Luther consistently spoke of his opponents as “devils” (Teufel). In a letter dated 5 March 1522 to his patron, Elector Friedrich the Wise, Luther recollects that “had I known that so many devils were targeting me as there were roof-tiles, I would nevertheless have jumped joyfully straight into their midst.”49 A world populated with devils, as the
third verse of his hymn states, was a natural consequence of human sinfulness. Even though the influence of evil for Luther is ever present, in the mid-1520s the religious conflicts of his day did take a turn for the worse. The central theme in the first verse of Luther’s hymn, *der alt böse feind/ mit ernst ers jzt meint* (“The ancient evil enemy/ With Earnestness he now intends”) can be understood as a reflection in music on recent events: in summer 1526 the Ottoman forces sacked Hungary, in 1527 the plague struck Wittenberg, and by the end of the decade Ottoman forces had begun their first siege of Vienna, threatening one of the administrative centers of the Holy Roman Empire. The devil and his forces were always active, Luther knew, but Evangelical Christianity was particularly under threat *jzt*, “now.”

In this time of spiritual uncertainty and faced by physical acts of persecution and threat, God alone will prove to be *ein feste burg* (“a stronghold fortress”) and *ein gute wehr und waffen* (“a good defence and weapon”) for the believer. The political and theological circumstances in which the hymn writer and his followers find themselves closely resemble those described in the Psalm Luther loosely follows: “The heathens must despair and the kingdoms must fall” (Psalm 46.7). In times of turmoil, “The LORD Sabaoth is with us, the God of Jacob is our defence” (46.8). For the Reformer, hymns served as a vehicle for disseminating this theological message.

While the second verse of the hymn will emphasise the utter dependency of the believer on this free act of grace, the first verse serves to illustrate the stark dichotomy between the apparently overpowering might of evil and the goodness and grace of God: the armies of evil (*der alt böse feind*), clad in the terrible armour of power and deception (*gros macht vnd viel list/ sein grausam rüstung ist*), are gathering at this very time (*jzt*). They are rallying, preying on believers and drawing them away from the teaching of God’s goodness and grace. For Luther, the armies of evil are real forces. Just as *der alt böse feind* (“the ancient evil adversary”) is a very real power, so Satan has control over all who oppose this teaching. Muslims, Jews, Catholics, and Zwinglians for Luther are all numbered, to a greater or lesser degree, among the forces of evil. Previous battles have been fought between the armies of Satan and those who have faith, but
the war that *jetzt* is brewing *auff erd ist nicht seins gleichen* (“on earth is not his equal”).

Faced with this amassed opposing force Luther encourages the believer to rely on God’s true champion, Christ. On their own, they are utterly powerless: *mit vnser macht ist nichts gethan* (“with our might nothing is done”). Indeed, any who would attempt to challenge evil by force *sind gar bald verloren* (“are very quickly lost”). The only way to face evil at all is by the believers’ acknowledgement of their utter dependence on God. Luther here draws on an image from medieval courtly life and the battles of classical antiquity: for the war between good and evil to be won, two champions will need to enter into personal combat on behalf of their respective forces. The successful champion will hold the field for their followers. Where the individual believer alone is utterly vulnerable, the champion sent by God to save humankind is *der rechte man* (“the proper man”) to deprive evil of its ultimate power. God himself has *erkoren* (“chosen”)—the German used here echoes the ceremonial election of a prince or the crowning of a victor in a contest—the rightful champion to enter into the battle against evil. The interjection to the singer, *fragstu wer der ist?* (“you ask, who he is?”) is rhetorical: only one person could attempt this epic struggle: *Jhesus Christ*. Again, alluding to the Psalm that inspired the hymn, Luther identifies Christ as *der Herr Zebaoth*, the Lord Almighty, the King of glory (Psalm 46.8).53 No other divinity, *kein ander Gott*, not even the prince of darkness, could ever expect to win and hold the field of battle for his followers: *das felt mus er behalten*. Luther’s Trinitarian beliefs mean that he can see Jesus as both God’s champion and part of the one God himself. The manner in which this champion maintains his stand on behalf of the believer is shown in the Psalm that inspired this hymn: “he has ended the fray to the ends of the world, he has broken the bow and shattered the spear, and burnt the chariots with fire.”54 Such works reveal the true champion in the Psalm: “cease the fight, and recognise that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted throughout the earth.”55

Immediately juxtaposed with the identification of the champion on behalf of humankind as God Almighty is the human reality. Where the final two lines of the second verse seek to inspire
believers to place their trust in *kein ander Gott* (“no other god” than the Almighty, and confidently expect that in the end God will remain victorious, the first two lines of the third verse depict the human reality until that final victory is accomplished. Luther paints a world filled with devils roaring to devour their prey. Even if *die welt vol Teufel wer/vnd wolt vns gar verschlingen* (“if the world full of devils were”), the fact that Christ has entered the battle on their behalf means that believers need never be paralysed by fear. Because evil has already been overcome ultimately the battle can be won: *es sol vns doch gelingen* (“despite them we shall succeed”). The prince of this world (*der Fürst dieser welt*) may rail and roar now, but he has conclusively been judged in the event of Calvary. Indeed, the *wörtlein* (“single word”) that will so effectively slay the prince of this world was the self-revelatory “I am he” Jesus spoke at the moment of his betrayal when he was handed over to be crucified (*John 18.5*), Luther explains. Just as the armsmen who have come to arrest Jesus fall back at the moment of Jesus’ self-revelation, so also the *Fürst dieser welt . . . ist gericht* (“prince of this world . . . is judged”) by the suffering and death of Christ. In the same way in which his physical opponents are overthrown, Christ has overcome all human suffering. The *wörtlein* that slays evil also slays human reliance on self, so Luther elucidates in his *Weekday Sermons on John’s Gospel*, preached a couple of years before his hymn:

> Under the papacy these words [I am he] were forgotten. . . . Yet in the same way in which Christ casts to earth with a single word such a large company of the soldiers and temple servants, so his merit and suffering will drive back the merit and suffering of all humankind: so that his suffering alone grants us salvation before God.

If only a few letters, “I am he,” can overthrow the agents of evil that have come to capture God’s champion, how much more powerful is the Word of God in its entirety? Luther’s hymn places the appointment of the champion to combat the world and its many devils—Jesus Christ—at its heart. The final verse of the hymn is a natural development of the theme of the efficacy of both the incarnate Word in history and also the preached Word in its contemporary setting.
Internally it juxtaposes the effective Word of Christ as a *gute wehr vnd waffen* ("good defence and weapon") against the *Ernst . . . gross macht vnd viel list* ("earnestness"), the *grausam rüstung* ("inhumane armaments") of the *alt böse feind* ("ancient evil adversary") in the first verse of the hymn. The only effective means of defeating evil is the Word of God: *das wort sie sollen stahn* ("That word they should let stand"). While Christians will experience suffering in this world, Luther draws confidence from the Johannine assurance that "in this world you will have tribulation; but be comforted, I have overcome the world" (John 16.33). In his *Weekday Sermons on John’s Gospel*, Luther reflected: “Christians are not left in peace, they do not leave them their honor. However, tyrants and Satan may let the heathen go, no one takes their goods, their honor.”66 For the Christian, tribulations certainly will include the loss of honor and goods, families, and even life, Luther preached.

Luther makes the same claim in the last verse of his hymn, in the line which speaks of the loss of *leib/ gut/ ehr/ kind vnd weib* ("life, goods, honor, child and wife"). Life itself proved fragile by 1529: for Luther, it was clear that "if Satan does not snatch away your body and goods, as with John, you will carry Satan around your neck.”67 The threat of losing earthly goods and relationships was not important, compared to the eternal reign of Christ: “therefore I may be confident: let them take house and farm, etc., you may nevertheless not dethrone Christ, you will leave him firmly in place to reign.”68 For Luther, Christ joined humankind on the eternal battlefield between good and evil, and the loss of all that earthly life provided, including life itself, was worth it in order to secure eternal salvation: *las faren dahin/ sie habens kein gewin* ("let them be transported thither/ they will have no winnings"). Ultimately, it is the eternal reign of Christ, the kingship of one whose kingdom is not of this world that would endure, Luther preached: “I feel that I am a sinner and will die, but I believe that Christ will justify me, and is alive. Therefore, there is no other victory—go away, world [far hin welt].”69

At the end of this *wunderlich krieg* ("wondrous battle") stood the certainty that *das leben behielt den sieg/ es hat den tod verschlungen . . . der sunden macht ist vergangen* ("life upheld the victory/ it has swallowed
up death . . . the power of death has vanished”), as Luther had written in his 1524 Easter hymn, *Christ lag yn todes banden*. At the end of the believer’s personal struggle of life stand two certainties: God fights alongside the believers, *ist bey vns wol auff dem plan* (“is with us certainly on the field of battle”), to support them by *seinem Geist und gaben* (“with his Spirit and gifts”), and that whatever Satan and the forces of evil may exact in this life, the overall conflict is won, and any gains by the forces arrayed against us are futile: *das Reich mus vns doch bleiben* (“the kingdom must remain with us regardless”).

That this empire or kingdom is not a physical nation state, but the realm where Christ rules, is evident from Luther’s preaching, as it is in the hymn itself. As long as believers remain steadfast, they will not lose their share in the kingdom of God, even if they lose control over their nations and principalities. As Luther commented on John’s Passion account: “The Lord . . . is a King, but not an earthly king. The Gospel is his reign, which brings rebellion—not earthly but spiritual rebellion, by which hearts are divided about the faith.” In Luther’s commentary on the reign of Christ, as played out in Christ’s interrogation before Pilate, he takes care in spelling out in detail how Christ’s kingdom is “not of this world”:

He would therefore say: “I will tell you [Pilate] in one word, what kind of a king I am and what kind of a realm I have. I am not such a king, who storms in, harnessed with weapons, with earthly power and might. Nor is my royal office to ride great impressive war horses, and stallions, and to bear an earthly sword. But rather to preach the spoken Word and testify to the truth.”

Therefore the *Reich* (“reign”) that will remain as the permanent solace and fortress of the believer, clearly, is a spiritual haven and place of safety in times of danger.

**Conclusion**

*Ein feste Burg* was not written to glorify the Lutheran princedoms, or to promote an idea of a trans-national Protestant empire. Rather it is a hymn of spiritual confidence in the eternal reign of Christ.
Its eschatological character enables the hymn writer to look back to the events of Calvary in order to sing of his assurance and trust in God’s reign. The heavenly kingdom is made present in the office of preaching the Gospel, as Luther suggested in his *Weekday Sermons on St John* and the introduction to his first collection of hymns. The “Word” therefore will remain, even in times of extreme hardship, even as the powers of evil, through their earthly regiments, persecute those who promote the “spoken Word and testify to the truth.” Through the office of preaching, the faithful already share in the citizenship of the regiment of Christ, and therefore can confidently expect a lasting fortress and strength in the coming kingdom.

The hymn was always intended as a weapon in the battle against “devils,” who infected other Christian denominations, as well as people of other faiths or of political entities who opposed the growing influence of the Lutheran reformers. Luther’s Reformation hymn, like his prose writings, demonstrates a man who could believe in the absolute consolation and acceptance of God for all peoples while simultaneously consigning his enemies to eternal damnation. This confidence and martial language was sometimes used to turn the hymn into a battle song for Lutheran rulers and German nationalists who looked to Luther as one of their founding fathers. Luther’s sophisticated theological and rhetorical underpinnings of the hymn were lost in both German and translated versions, leading some artists, scholars, and ordinary people to appropriate the hymn as a tool of nationalism. Particularly in the nineteenth century, with the rise of the idea of a unified Germany among poets, playwrights, and composers, an imagined history of the hymn was popularized. During World War I and World War II, the hymn was further coopted as a militaristic and nationalistic anthem in support of the German Empire and the Third Reich. Only since the latter half of the twentieth century has the hymn began to be reclaimed as a “psalm of comfort” (*ain trost Psalm*). *Ein feste Burg* was intended to be sung as a collective affirmation of faith in God’s eternal kingdom in the face of loss of life, liberty, family, and nation; a psalm of spiritual consolation and solace in the face of overwhelming violence and loss.

2. Luther, Der Psalter von 1524–28, 1531 und 1545, WA DB 10, 250: “Gott ist unsre Zuversicht und Stärke” and “Die Heiden müssen verzagen und die Königreiche fallen.”

3. For the authors’ previous work on propaganda, see J. Andreas Löwe, Richard Smyth and the language of orthodoxy: re-imagining Tudor Catholic polemicism (Leiden/New York: Brill, 2003); Katherine Firth, “‘Bright flower breaks from charnel bough’: The arts of peace and the 1953 Coronation,” in The Finzi Journal (March 2014), 90–118.


7. The first edition of the Klug hymnal has not been sighted since 1788, but was replicated in its entirety in a Low-German translation in the Rostock Hymnal: Joachim Slüter, Geystlike leder vppt nye gebetert tho Wittenberch/ dorch D. Martin Luther (Rostock: Ludwig Ovetz, 1531).

8. Klug’sches Gesangbuch (Wittenberg: Klug, 1535). Our analysis retains the spelling of this edition. In 1971 Konrad Ameln, “Das Klugsche Gesangbuch, Wittenberg 1529: Versuche einer Rekonstruktion,” Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie 16 (1971), 159–162, suggested that in spite of the likely close correlation between the two, “the second edition [of the Klug] hymnal gives us a better understanding of the content of the first—especially as regards the choice and order of hymns—than that of another hymnal altogether, that is a re-print of the Klug hymnal of 1529.”


11. A number of Christian songs/ Songs of praise/ and Psalms/ according to the pure word of God/ from Holy Scripture/ composed by a number of well-learned people/ for singing in Churches/ as is, in part, already practiced in Wittenberg (Etlich Cristlich lider/ Lobgesang/ vnnd Psalm/ dem rai-/nem wort Gottes gemeß/ auf der/ heyligen schrift/ durch mancher-/ley hoch-gelerter gemacht/ in der Kirchen zum singen/ wie es dann/ zum tayl berayt zu Witten-berg/ in übung ist, “Wittenberg” [Nürnberg: Jobst Gutknecht] “M.D.X.iiij” [1524], An Eucheridion or Small Handbook/ for each Christian very usefully to bear with them/ for the constant practise and reflection on spiritual songs and Psalms/ rendered skilfully and artfully into German (Eyn Enchiridion oder Handbüchlein./ eynem ytzlichen Christen fast nutzlich bey sich
zuhaben / zur stetter vbung vnd trachtung geystlicher gesenge vnd Psalmen / Rechtschaffen vnd kunstlich verteutscht, Erfurt: In der Permenter Gasse, zum Ferbefaß, 1524).


15. Slüter (153), B viij r.

16. [Olaus Petri], *Svenske songer eller wisor nu på prentade/ forökade . . . utsatte* (Stockholm: Kungliga Tryckeriet, 1536), xii r-v.

17. George Pearson, ed., *Remains of Myles Coverdale, Bishop of Exeter*, Parker Society 14 (Cambridge: University Press, 1846), 360–370; intriguingly, Coverdale, himself a translator of the Psalter into English, retains Luther’s meter, and augments Luther’s texts by two verses to accommodate further literal references to the original Psalm.


21. Staats (1998), n. 10: “here it is first of all the *wörtlein* in the words of Institution, ‘is’ and the ‘my body,’ which have to remain” (Hier sind des zunächst die “Wörtlein” in den Einsetzungsworten “Ist” und das “Mein Leib,” die stehen bleiben müssen).


24. Luther, *Tischreden*, WA Tr 2566b: “Tyranus mortuus Graff Ernst de Mansfelt. Is cum audireit canere Ein feste burg ist vnser Gott etc. dixit: Ich will die burg helfen zuschissen oder wil nicht leben!”

25. Luther, *Tischreden*, WA Tr 2566b, n.1: “Et post triduum mortuus est sine confessione et sacramento.”


35. Felix Mendelssohn, Symphony no. 5 in D major, op. 107, written in 1829 to mark the tercentenary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession 1530.

38. Following the Great War, Bethge eschewed his erstwhile nationalist views. Following the 1944 attempt on Hitler’s life, he was interned in Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he died later that year.
40. Bethge (1917), 19: “Das Lutherlied klingt übers Feld/ feldgraue Krieger beten./ Die Schlacht ist aus, der Feind zerschellt./ Die Engel Gottes reden./ Wohl kam der Feind in Übermacht,/ wohl gab’s ein harten Ringen./ Doch Gott war mit uns wunderbar,/ er half den Feind bezwingen.”
44. Luther, Nachbesserungen an der Deutschen Bibel: Psalm, 1531, WA DB 3, 46, 14: “Die stad Gottes fein lustig sein und . . . ynn freuden schweben.”
47. Luther, Nachbesserungen: Psalm, 1531, WA DB 3, 46, 21–22.
50. Luther, Geistliche lieder auffs new gebessert zu Wittenberg (Wittenberg: Klug, 1535), fo. 45r–v.
51. Luther, Der Psalter von 1524–28, 1531 und 1545, WA DB 10, 250, 7: “Die heyden toben vnd die konigreiche regen sich.”
52. Luther, Psalter, WA DB 10, 250, 8: “Der HERR Zeboath is mit vns, Der Gott Jacob ist vnser schutz.”
53. Luther, Psalter, WA DB 10, 250, 8.
54. Luther, Psalter, WA DB 10, 250, 10: “Er hat die streyt auff gehaben bis an der welt ende, Er hat bogen zu brochen, spies zu schlagen, vnd wagen mit fewr verbrand.”
55. Luther, Psalter, WA DB 10, 250, 11: “Lasst ab, vnd erkennet das ich Gott byn, Ich werd erhaben seyn vnter den heyden, Ich werd erhaben seyn auff erden.”
60. Luther, Wochenpredigten über Johannes, WA 28, 67, 11–14: “Christianum lest man nicht mit rue sitzen, man lest yhm sein ehr nicht. Si tyranni non, tamen Satan, die heyden lest man ghen [sic], nemo aufert bona, honorem.”
61. Luther, Wochenpredigten über Johannes, WA 28, 67, 18–19: “Si non aufert leib und gut ut Iohanni, so mustu dennoch den teuffel am hals tragen.”
63. Luther, Wochenpredigten über Johannes, WA 28, 69, 22–28: “Ich fule, das ich ein sunder bin, morior, sed credo, quod Christus sit iustificator et vivat. Ergo non alia victoria, far hin welt. Das ist die letzte und beschluß seiner lieblich predig [sic], quam habuit cum discipulis in cena. . . . Ut verbum sit efficax, quot praedicavit.”
64. Enchiridion (1524), 32r-v.
65. Luther, Wochenpredigten über Johannes, WA 28, 312, 17–21: “Darumb bleibet der HErr dabei, das er sagt, Er sey ein König, aber doch nicht ein weltlicher König. Das Euangelium ist sein Regiment, welches erreget Auffrhr [sic], nicht weltliche, sondern geistliche Auffrhr, dadurch die Hertzen sich spalten über dem Glauben.”
66. Luther, Wochenpredigten über Johannes, WA 28, 314, 19–315, 7: “ER wil also sagen: Ich wil dir mit einem Wort anzeigen, was für ein König Ich bin und was Ich für ein Reich hab. Ich bin nicht ein solcher König. Der geharnischt und gewapnet erein platzet mit Weltlicher Gewalt und Macht. Und mein Königlich Ampt ist nicht, auff grossen herrlichen Caballen und Rossen reiten und das Weltlich Schwert füren. Sondern das mündlich Wort predigen und die Warheit zeugen.”