

# *Nomina sunt Omina*—Capital City Bonn: Inventing an Image for the Federal Republic of Germany

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Bonn's ascension to the rank of capital city in 1948/1949 represented the first major success of a new political culture and the original aesthetic imperatives it was designing. In 1948 five cities, Berlin, Bonn, Frankfurt, Kassel and Stuttgart, vied to be chosen capital city of the soon to be formed Federal Republic of Germany. When the dust settled, the unexpected had occurred; the sleepy university town in the Western reaches of the country, Bonn, had triumphed over a cultural centre, financial centre, commercial centre, and the former capital city. The new political aesthetics were firstly based on the repudiation of any aesthetic program associated with either National Socialism or Monarchism, Third Reich or Wilhelmine Germany. Carlo Schmid warned that *nomina sunt omina*—names are omens! 'Names express what is really there, or ought to be there', that is, the essence of things. Although Schmid was warning about the name of the future constitution, his attitude reflected a broadly held belief that names and symbols are important, even crucial signifiers. This paper explores the ways the choice of Bonn was perceived by West Germans in their visual media through a look at several political cartoons and how the cartoons and official state press photographs from the Bundesarchiv collection contributed to the formation of Bonn's symbolic identity.

**Keywords:** 1950s—Germany—identity—photographs—political cartoons—urban design

Bonn's ascension to the rank of capital city in 1949 represented one of the first major successes of a new West German political culture and the aesthetic imperatives it was designing. Arguments about the correct way to reconstruct Germany and to represent post-Nazi Germany erupted almost as soon as the war was over.<sup>1</sup> The debates encompassed every aspect of architecture and urban identity from the individual building, to the neighbourhood, to the city and region. To date, most scholarship has focused on the imagery of the buildings, rather than the symbolic meaning read into the choice of capital city, Bonn. Authors like Michael Z. Wise and Deborah Ascher Barnstone have discussed the symbolism of transparency and the elevation of Bauhaus modernist design principles as the ideals for West German state architecture.<sup>2</sup> Wise also explains the importance of the 'self-effacing' character of Bonn and the sense that it was a 'city without a past' in comparison with other German cities.<sup>3</sup> However, the way symbolic identity was constructed is attributed to architects and politicians only. Neither author scrutinizes the ways in which visual media contributed to the construction of Bonn's image, before and after the choice of capital city. From 1948 onwards, the battle between German cities vying to become capital was waged in the German press, in particular in political cartoons that satirized the cities and the selection process, using intentionally designed visual imagery to create symbolic identities for the competitors: Berlin, Bonn, Frankfurt, Kassel and Stuttgart. After Bonn was chosen, the challenge was for government to construct a unique identity for Bonn and its state architecture, one that differentiated the city from Berlin but also that projected political hopes for the new West Germany. The press office of the Bundestag, the German parliament,

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did so using visual media, primarily the photograph, which was carefully selected for propaganda purposes. Thus, the cartoon was the instrument of negative imaging while the photograph was the tool of positive imaging, a suggestive difference in the choice and power of medium.

The use of the image as propaganda tool in Germany, especially during the National Socialist period, is well documented in works like Jeffrey Herf's *The Jewish Enemy: Propaganda during World War II*, Wolfgang Benz's *'Der Ewige Jude': Metaphern und Methoden Nationalsozialistischer Propaganda* and the exhibition catalogue *State of Deception: the Power of Nazi Propaganda*.<sup>4</sup> Equally, recent scholarship has examined the relationship between new mass media and politics, in the case of Corey Ross' *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich*, and the ways the photograph contributed to perceptions of the modern metropolis in Sabine Hake's *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin*.<sup>5</sup> Ross demonstrates how different media allowed the government to shape public opinion, but more importantly he discusses the lack of symbolic self-representation in Weimar.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, West Germany began designing its self-representation almost before it existed as a state. Hake's study suggests the way the photograph was implicated as a propaganda tool with which to construct a mythological urban identity. As Allan Sekula asserts, 'a photograph communicates by means of its association with some hidden, or implicit text; it is this text, or system of hidden linguistic propositions, that carries the photography in to the domain of readability'.<sup>7</sup> The missing elements in post-war images are the neoclassical buildings and monumental urban spaces of Wilhelmine and Nazi-era Germany. The photographs used here are all from the official press collection of the Bundestag, the *Bundespresse Amt* (Federal Press Office) and *Bildarchiv preussischer Kulturbesitz*, and therefore represent the images the government chose to stage and proliferate in the public realm.

Less well known and studied than the photograph is the import of the political cartoon. The political cartoon has a long history in Europe dating back at least to the fifteenth century, although the development of image-focused satire over text-laden is relatively recent.<sup>8</sup> Twentieth-century political cartoons tend to be image driven with sparse commentary below so that they bridge art historical iconographic history and political history. But, as Angelika Plum asserts, the consideration of the political cartoon as significant in art or political history is rare.<sup>9</sup> Plum illuminates the widely held belief in the political cartoon as 'guardian of democratic debate', tool of 'enlightenment' and 'propaganda'; she works to show how the cartoon is also a 'mirror of collective imagination'.<sup>10</sup> The cartoons drawn to comment on the *Hauptstadtstreit* (Capital City Controversy) of 1948/1949 were all of the above: they were reflections of contemporary ideas, satirical commentary on state affairs and efforts on the part of the press to sway the public image of all five contending German cities. The selection used here was collected in the Bundestag Archives in Bonn as part of the state record keeping apparatus; the drawings come from regional newspapers with a small audience, such as the *Rheinische Zeitung*, and national newspapers with a wide audience, such as *Die Zeit*.

These cartoon images of Bonn proliferated in the months leading up to the selection of the capital city, whereas the state's photographic campaign only began after the selection was finalized. As Susan Sontag explains in *On Photography*, 'A painting [or drawing] [. . .] can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency. But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between

art and truth.<sup>11</sup> Sontag shows how the photograph is as ‘much an interpretation of the world’ as other art and as much a constructed image that reflects either the bias of the photographer or of the person commissioning the image. The danger in the photograph is that because it captures an image of ‘reality’, it is often taken as ‘truth’.

After the Second World War, a faction arguing for the reinstatement of traditional German architecture and the reconstruction of destroyed cities as they had been before 1939 battled with others who saw the destruction of the historic urban fabric as an opportunity to rebuild Germany in the most technologically advanced way possible, as a futuristic utopia.<sup>12</sup> Two of the more contentious aspects to the post-war architectural debates were the questions of fitting aesthetic expression for state architecture and of the proper location for a West German capital city given Germany’s political history and ruinous physical state. Capital cities traditionally reflect notions of national identity, but in West Germany in 1948 that identity was highly contested. Two camps emerged: those favouring historical construction and traditional aesthetics *versus* those advocating new construction and modern design. The former argued that Germans should look back to the great cultural achievements of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for the foundations of the post-war state. According to this view, the National Socialist period was the only one to be ashamed of. Thus it was possible to ignore Nazi appropriations of historic and neoclassical language as an aberration since the period was relatively short. Another group vehemently disagreed suggesting that Wilhelmine Germany, especially the Prussian state, was as sullied as the National Socialist era. Therefore, the new aesthetics should be a foil to those of Wilhelmine and the National Socialist states. Any qualities deemed intrinsic to either former regime were declared undesirable, whilst the opposite qualities were embraced. On the other hand, Weimar Germany was seen as modern, progressive and democratic and, in many ways, a viable model for West Germany; the richness of artistic invention during the period seemed an appropriate source for West German state aesthetics. West Germany was therefore imagined as a fragile, contingent, modest democracy, temporarily separated from the East, with a decentralized and dispersed state structure in contrast to the monolithic, permanent and centralized power projected by Wilhelmine and National Socialist Germany.

The symbolic aesthetic values associated with the different historic German regimes can be divided into a range of dichotomies seen to apply at the urban scale: temporary and fragile *vs* permanent and monumental; informal *vs* formal planning; garden city *vs* stone city; modern buildings and infrastructure *vs* neoclassical or traditional. But the selection of capital city played out while West Germans were inventing their new aesthetic discourse. That is, before 1948, there was no symbolic self-identification with West Germany because West Germany did not exist. The political cartoons and politically selected propaganda photographs from 1949 and 1950 expand the symbolic argument beyond the historic symbolic frameworks to include contemporary German perceptions of the identity of each city, especially of Bonn, that was seen as provincial, backward, remote, unsophisticated, but also non-threatening. The cartoons and photographs demonstrate how self-identity emerged through satire and through carefully manipulated and disseminated images.

Considerations about the political structure of post-war Germany date to the end of the Second World War, while architectural propositions for reconstruction appeared as early as 1943.<sup>13</sup> In the closing communiqué of the Potsdam Conference in 1945 the Allied Powers articulated their intention to prevent the reconstitution of a centralized German government after the war. They intended a fractured and diffused

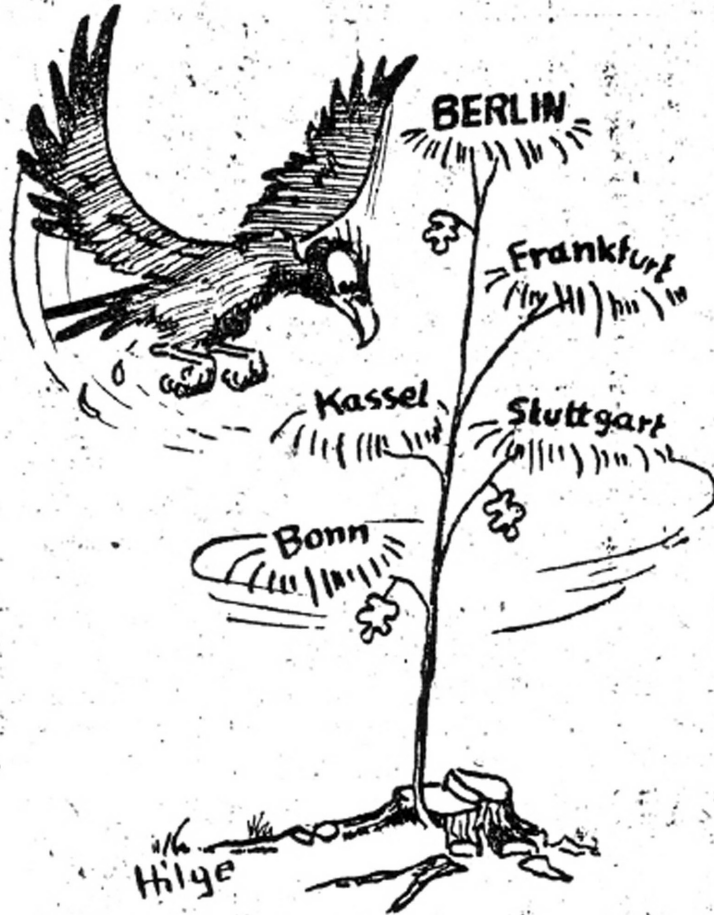
power structure, although the form it would take was worked out over time. The cities considered for the capital were spread across West Germany and quite different in character. In 1948 Bonn's population was just over 115,000, compared with over 140,000 in Kassel, 831,000 in Munich, 440,000 in Stuttgart, 400,000 in Frankfurt and 3,300,000 in Berlin. Frankfurt was the financial centre, Stuttgart the commercial centre and Munich the cultural centre. Bonn's buildings were low-rise without the monumental scale typical in Berlin, Frankfurt, Stuttgart and other larger German cities, making Bonn seem less formal, urban and bombastic.

The Allies squabbled over many points after the war but they agreed that Berlin, Hitler's and the Prussians' seat of power, could not remain the capital city. The Allies did not want a return to the Prussian model of a centrally controlled state. This desire became particularly acute when relations with Stalin deteriorated, so that already in 1946 the British had discussed options beyond Berlin.<sup>14</sup> For the British and French, not only did the Soviet Block surround Berlin but also Berlin was sullied because of its history as capital city of an aggressive, militaristic German state, under both the Kaisers and the National Socialists. For the British and French, Berlin was off limits for the new West German capital because it was implicated in the initiation of two World Wars. Symbolically, then, Berlin was already associated with negatives, namely the National Socialists and the Prussian monarchy, as well as the monumental neoclassicism favoured by the Kaisers and Hitler.

Patrick Dean, Legal Advisor to the British Foreign Office, felt that a new capital should be inside the British Zone, somewhat smaller and less ruined than Hanover, with more of a cultural rather than military or industrial history. 'What about Göttingen?' he asked. 'If that is thought to be too near the "Iron Curtain," what about Bonn?'<sup>15</sup> He hoped to find a politically and historically benign location close to the British and American centres of occupation power. Because it was already clear that the KPD (German Communist Party) wanted Berlin to remain the capital city, A. R. Walmsley of the Foreign Office Research Department strongly advised choosing a city in the Western Occupied Zones, distant from Berlin, one that would not lead to open conflict with the Russians.<sup>16</sup> The Allied position vis-à-vis the choice of capital city was by no means monolithic. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery argued explicitly *for* Berlin in 1948 because he felt that locating the government in Berlin would act as a positive sign of coming unification and a return to political normalcy. He also feared that if the West abandoned Berlin for a new capital city, the action could be interpreted as a triumph for the East.<sup>17</sup> By vacating the city, he thought, the West would appear to be abandoning claims on Berlin because of fear of the Russians. His arguments had particular force in the light of the Berlin Blockade of 1948 to 1949.

Although several cities, Bonn, Kassel, Frankfurt am Main and Stuttgart, initially competed for the privilege of becoming capital, the group quickly reduced to Bonn and Frankfurt.<sup>18</sup> A cartoon printed in the regional paper *Rheinische Zeitung* from the period depicts an almost naked tree with five branches on it labelled Bonn, Stuttgart, Kassel, Frankfurt and Berlin [1]. The tree pictured is the oak, which was, and is, the German national tree. On each branch sits an empty nest. An eagle, the federal German national bird, scrawny looking, underfed, seems to have nested on each branch and is now searching for its proper home as it circles the tree. The blossoming part of the tree sprouts from a larger, hacked-off stump cleft in two. The sapling clearly represents the new state of West Germany growing from the stumps of pre-war Germany. Bonn is the lowliest branch while Berlin is at the pinnacle. The caption reads, 'The "German

## Der „deutsche Aar“ sucht sein Nest



**Fig 1.** The German eagle ('der "Deutsche Aar"') searches for his nest. *Rheinische Zeitung*, 12 February 1949

eagle" searches for its nest'. The cartoonist uses a poetic, archaic word for eagle, 'Aar', over the more usual 'Adler', which hints at the poetic significance of the capital city choice. The cartoon clearly shows how many Germans felt about the choices; they valued Bonn the least and Berlin the most, yet were sceptical about the entire enterprise.

One particularly poignant contemporary cartoon depicts Frankfurt, Bonn and Kassel as Greek maidens vying to become capital city in front of a male judge who strokes his chin in thought as he contemplates the three beauties standing before him [2]. The cartoon suggests that many Germans in 1948/1949 viewed the choice as a beauty contest with little real significance or merit rather than an important political decision. But, in fact, far more subtle forces are at work. In the cartoon image Frankfurt and Kassel wear traditional looking, modest, floor-length ancient gowns; Frankfurt's in the style of republican Rome and Kassel's in the style of democratic Greece. Only Bonn sports a modern looking, even risqué, outfit, raised above the knees with one breast exposed. Frankfurt was associated with republicanism because it was already an important city in Roman times, but also because from 1562 Frankfurt was the coronation site for



**Fig 2.** Bonn beauty contest. 1949. Source unknown

the German King of the Holy Roman Empire. By the twentieth century Frankfurt had become an important financial and business centre. Its wealthy citizens were more likely to prefer republican-style representative rule rather than popular government. Kassel too was an ancient city with origins in the Roman era but was known from the sixteenth century as a Calvinist Protestant centre, which perhaps explains Kassel's Greek dress. Kassel's openness to outsiders suggests receptiveness to expressions of the individual voice. Bonn also is a Roman city but compared with the other two it was historically less important. Both Frankfurt and Kassel were administrative centres but Bonn was not. In the cartoon, it could be Bonn's sex appeal that makes her attractive but it could also be her status as something contemporary with no visible connection to history.

Seated in front of the three, pictured contenders is a pensive man, seated and holding a round object labelled 'Hauptstadt'. The cartoon is obviously a latter day version of the famous Judgment of Paris in Greek mythology in which three goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, competed for status as the 'fairest one', whose prize was to be a golden apple. Zeus decided to have the mortal Paris judge the women. There are different versions of the myth but perhaps the most apropos here is the one that has Aphrodite win the contest because she is the most sexual of the three women and therefore most appealing to the mortal male. Hera is goddess of fidelity, chastity and marriage while Athena, as goddess of wisdom, is seen as asexual. In the cartoon, Bonn is clearly Aphrodite, goddess of sexuality, with her exposed legs and breast and leerily suggestive facial expression.

The cartoon is fascinating because it encapsulates many aspects of the capital city debate and West German concerns over political symbolism. In 1948/1949 West

Germans were obsessed with the perception Germans and foreigners might have of any important political decision they made, whether it involved the wording of the Basic Law, the choice of capital city, or the aesthetics of government buildings. Primary concerns discussed in political circles included how to ensure the separation of powers at all levels of government; how to guarantee democratic involvement of the people especially in a more direct form of government; and how West Germany could realize a break with its past. Each issue had many political layers as well as symbolic ones making it difficult to extricate one set of issues from the other. Moreover, symbolic arguments were often raised for political reasons.<sup>19</sup> Bonn's success in becoming capital signalled the beginning of an era in West German architectural and political symbolism intimately tied to the complicated political identity of the Federal Republic of Germany.

A couple of challenges faced the *Parlamentarischer Rat* (Parliamentary Council), the group charged with drafting the first constitution for the Federal Republic in 1948, when it had to consider the question of a capital city for West Germany. Capital cities historically were representations of royal majesty and power, symbols of monarchical state authority.<sup>20</sup> Modern capital cities therefore generally developed at or near the seat of the ruling dynasty. Their location usually was also one of geographic importance, economic exigency, military strategy or cultural significance, if not all of these qualities together.<sup>21</sup> Paris is typical of the modern capital city. Particular urban and architectural tropes were typically used in the capital: monumental buildings were often constructed in a neo-classical style, grand vistas were created between significant locations in the city and wide avenues were built both as a sign of majesty but also to provide easy access for the military, to name just a few common features. Although several models for a modern democratic capital did exist by 1948, such as Washington, DC; Canberra, Australia, and Brasilia, Brazil; none was analogous to the new West German capital, since the political conditions in West Germany were unique.

A combination of factors pressured members of the *Parlamentarischer Rat* as they considered the question of a new capital city: the memory of the National Socialist state and loss of the Second World War, the physical ruin throughout much of Germany and the attendant poverty and deprivations of Germans, the reality of the Allied Occupation, the recent Nuremberg trials, growing tensions between East and West, and the division of Germany into two were perhaps the most significant. Figuring out how to respond to recent history and contemporary reality was a challenge on many fronts. In the 1940s and 1950s many architects and politicians based their thinking about political symbolism on several sources besides traditional symbolism, in particular the writings of Carlo Schmid.

A leading figure in the *Parlamentarischer Rat*, Schmid was a distinguished constitutional lawyer and key figure in the authorship of the new constitution, the Basic Law. He went on to serve for over twenty years in parliament and hold various key positions. Schmid believed that every aspect of political life should reflect 'the collective decision of a free people over the form and content of its political existence'.<sup>22</sup> Many politicians and architects interpreted Schmid's formulation to suggest that all aspects of political life had symbolic importance, from the choice of capital city to the design of state architecture, and should embody the nation's democratic aspirations. Furthermore, in his famous speech to the *Parlamentarischer Rat* on 8 September 1948, Schmid took up the question of the Federal Republic of Germany's relationship to the National Socialist state it replaced. Schmid asserted that, 'Germany does not need to be newly invented, just newly organized'. Schmid did not want to vilify every aspect of Germany, Germanness and German culture because of Nazi transgressions.<sup>23</sup> He argued persuasively that the government apparatus was defeated during the war but not the German nation,

therefore West Germans should work to create a better functioning political system but not be ashamed of the positive achievements of German culture throughout the centuries.

However, Schmid asserted that in the aftermath of the Third Reich, Germans must find new models for their national identity and government, because the older ones were discredited at home and abroad. Schmid also warned that *'nomina sunt omina'*—'names are omens'. 'Names express what is really there, or ought to be there'; that is, names express the essence of things. Although Schmid was warning about the name of the future constitution, his attitude reflected a broadly held German belief in the importance of metaphor and symbol. Names can be symbols and like symbols are important, even crucial signifiers. Schmid was also indicating that every decision matters and has potential symbolic import. Schmid also wrote that, 'Democracy means that the state is identical with the nation and not beside or above it as in times of absolutism'.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the political structure should reflect the social structure; it should be a part of the *polis* not separate from it. Anything created to represent the state should symbolically align with the state of the nation. Schmid's concern both allied with and diverged from notions of a Zero Hour for culture and a new post-war beginning for Germany. Advocates of a Zero Hour wished to eradicate the memory of pre-war historic German cultural achievements in order to invent an untainted contemporary culture. In the case of the choice of capital city and aesthetics for state architecture breaking with the past meant replacing one set of symbols with another. Schmid seems to have favoured inventing a new symbolic language but he did not believe in dismissing all that was good in German cultural history in order to do so.

Cartoons like the Bonn Beauty Contest and "'German Eagle" seeks its Nest' do more than reflect the mood in Germany over the Capital Controversy; they show how sensitive the West German press was to issues of self-representation and, by implication, how sensitive the West German populace was as well. The cartoons also expose aspects of the potential capital identities not probed verbally in Parliament but certainly of concern, such as the historic identity and foreign perceptions of each city.

Kassel and Stuttgart do not seem to have had much serious or sustained support nor could they compete with the overwhelming propaganda campaigns mounted by the pro-Bonn and pro-Frankfurt factions. Berlin simply had too much historic and symbolic baggage, the Allies were dead set against Berlin and the land-locked situation inside the Eastern Block posed logistical as well as political challenges.<sup>25</sup> An influential anonymous paper titled 'Berlin als künftige Hauptstadt' ('Berlin as Prospective Capital City') framed its discussion of the capital city choices around the notion of the *genius loci*. According to the author, the spirit of Berlin made it untenable as capital city. The author pointed to the lengthy period of German history in which cities other than Berlin, such as Aachen, Frankfurt, Prague, Vienna and so on, were capital. Berlin had been capital for a mere seventy-five years and therefore had potentially a lesser historical claim than other former capital cities. Furthermore, Berlin was the centre for mass demonstrations, political unrest and overt exhibitions of German might, not to mention the cultural particularism exemplified in the Prussian *Bürgertum* (middle class). Much of the post-First World War violence occurred in Berlin. According to the author, Berlin's citizens typified the qualities post-war Germans wished to avoid: they were 'arrogant, insolent, thoughtless, and aggressive at the wrong times and despondent when things went awry'. Equally troubling, Berlin was the seat of Prussian power and, for many Germans associations with Prussia were to be avoided at all costs. Many West Germans saw Prussian militarism as a precursor to the National Socialist variety. The article demonstrates how fraught with symbolic meaning each potential capital city was.



The *Zeitschrift für Kultur u. Politik*, April 1946, epitomized many attitudes: 'Was the freedom of the Germans and Germany perhaps in Berlin best raised upon the victory chariot of the goddess of the Brandenburger Gate? The two Reichs that this capital city symbolized are sunk.'<sup>26</sup> In other words, how can Berlin be an appropriate capital city when it was home to the failed Wilhelmine and Nazi regimes? The Berlin Blockade of 1948 probably cemented Allied opposition to placing the capital in the city. The Allies were worried that Berlin was simply too vulnerable and too difficult to protect. Konrad Adenauer's anti-Prussian and anti-Berlin attitude is legendary and certainly contributed to the decision to exclude Berlin from serious consideration, since Adenauer lobbied actively for Bonn. For Adenauer Berlin was not only the city of the Kaiser and Hitler, but of Bismarck and his anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf* (Culture War). Members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), like the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), were split over the question of Berlin as capital city. On 10 February 1946 Carlo Schmid declared in a prescient moment, 'Berlin centralization did not serve us Germans well; it may not return and perhaps one day we must speak about it if Berlin once again is considered for capital city; for me personally, it lies too close to Potsdam'.<sup>27</sup> Like his colleagues across the aisle Schmid was not comfortable with a capital so close to the East.

The same piece that framed the arguments against Berlin, 'Berlin als künftige Hauptstadt', posited the arguments for a city in the West or South of Germany where supposedly a healthy suspicion of all things Prussian flourished. According to this line of thinking, placing the capital in the overwhelmingly negative atmosphere of Berlin would make it very difficult for democratic governance to succeed. Furthermore, the task of the government should be less to *represent* the power of the state than to direct its functions using compromise in a modest fashion.

Frankfurt had several arguments in its favour: the Allied Powers were quartered there; it was a financial centre; it was well inside West Germany; and it was home to the Paulskirche, where the first German parliament met in 1848.<sup>28</sup> Frankfurt was therefore a symbol of democracy for many West Germans. For others, however, it symbolized failed democracy since the 1848 parliament wrote a constitution but was unable to convince the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm to accept constitutional monarchy. The Paulskirche was in ruins like the rest of Germany so that in the eyes of some, reconstruction would be symbolic of rebuilding the country as a whole. Schemes to make Frankfurt capital city date at least to 1946 when Eugen Kogon wrote in the *Frankfurter Hefte*, 'Berliner Zentralismus und Frankfurter Bundesregierung' ('Berlin Centralism and Frankfurt Federal Government'). Kogon's title implies a fundamental difference between the characteristics of a government that would be hosted by Berlin as opposed to one hosted by Frankfurt, as if it was something about the city itself that shaped the political system. Kogon wrote that the two Reichs Berlin symbolized had both failed; in contrast Frankfurt was a positive symbol of the German democratic impulse. Furthermore, 1948 would be the 100th anniversary of the Frankfurt democratic effort, so the *Bundesregierung* (Federal government) could symbolically celebrate two political milestones at once. The effort to reconstruct the church quickly became embroiled in controversy, however. One group wanted the church rebuilt exactly as it had been before the war; the other argued for a contemporary design. The latter group won, in what can only be called a victory for the notion of *Neubau* (new construction) and a new beginning for Germany after the war.<sup>29</sup> The city of Frankfurt made yet another forceful argument in November 1948 for reinstatement as capital. One concept for the capital was a major city located in a central geographic location: Frankfurt held such a position in the event that Germany split into two. Frankfurt also enjoyed excellent infrastructural connections to the rest of the country and had enough of a building

stock to be able to easily accommodate government agencies in existing structures, which would make installation of a new government apparatus relatively seamless and affordable. Finally, the housing of the Bi-zonal headquarters in Frankfurt meant that there were already plentiful renovated office spaces and accommodations for future government employees.

The arguments against Frankfurt were equally fierce. Theodor Heuss found the Paulskirche too cold and impersonal to house a parliament; Carlo Schmid felt that the associations with the Germany of 1848 were such that most of Europe bordering on Germany would see Frankfurt as the symbol of a failed attempt at democracy.<sup>30</sup> Others were worried that situating the capital so close to the Allied Command would jeopardize Germany's political independence. Some were turned off from Frankfurt's candidature because its desire to be capital was clearly self-serving; the city stood to receive millions in aid if it became capital. Sensitivity to over-concentrating power was also a factor: Frankfurt was Germany's financial centre and, as such, already a centre of wealth and influence. Thus locating the capital in Frankfurt could turn it into a city as politically powerful as Berlin had been with economic clout to boot, something many West Germans wished to avoid.

In another contemporary cartoon from the regional newspaper, the *Rhein Echo*, two women are engaged in a nasty fight in what appears to be a boxing ring [3]. There are two chairs in either corner, each draped with a banner. One reads, 'Frankfurt'; the other reads, 'Bonn'. Three other female bodies lie vanquished on the floor. They are all clearly knocked unconscious. One is 'Kassel', a second is 'Frankfurt', while the third sports no name at all but certainly was Berlin, the unnamed contestant for capital city. She is partly cut out of the picture frame, an allusion to Berlin's status as the silent fifth competitor. All the women are decked out like professional wrestlers in scanty outfits that bare their midriffs and all are wearing high-heeled shoes, yet rather than the sexy bodies

**Fig 3.** 'Bonn—Frankfurt: City-scale battle in freestyle.' Bonn and Frankfurt duke it out. *Rhein Echo* 5, May 1949



**Bonn — Frankfurt: Städteringkampf im Freistil**

professional wrestling women usually have, this group are all a bit dumpy and unattractive. The woman we can assume represents Bonn smiles broadly. She is supported on her arms with her legs in the air, kicking what may be the knockout blow to Frankfurt who looks to be in pain by the expression on her face and the stars radiating from the blow she just sustained. Frankfurt is holding onto Bonn's ankle in one hand and kicking Bonn in the rear with her right foot. In the background, a victory wreath is mounted on the wall, adorned with the word 'Bundeshauptadt' ('Capital City'). The caption reads: 'Bonn-Frankfurt: City-scale battle in freestyle'. The cartoon suggests that the battle over which city should be capital was a tough, nasty and even underhanded catfight, since the engagement between Frankfurt and Bonn looks like dirty fighting. It also shows how unappealing most of the candidates were deemed to be, with their pudgy bodies and unkempt hair. Berlin appears to be the most trim but she is 'out of the picture'.

Bonn won the competition to become the capital city in part because its *name* and its character were not sullied in any way. The sleepy 'Rentnerstadt' ('retirement city') along the Rhine was Beethoven's birthplace, Robert Schumann's resting place and the seat of a respected university, outside the real centres of German power.<sup>31</sup> (Bonn advertises its cultural significance as a German musical centre in spite of the fact that the two great composers Beethoven and Schumann never composed there.) 'Pensionopolis', as Bonn was also known, did not conjure images of imperial glory or Nazi megalomania, only mild-mannered, grey-haired grandparents going about their business. By contrast, Frankfurt was a financial capital where world economic power sat; Stuttgart a manufacturing capital where global trade power was located; and Berlin a discredited and divided political capital. In other words, all three of these cities were already seats of concentrated power of some kind.

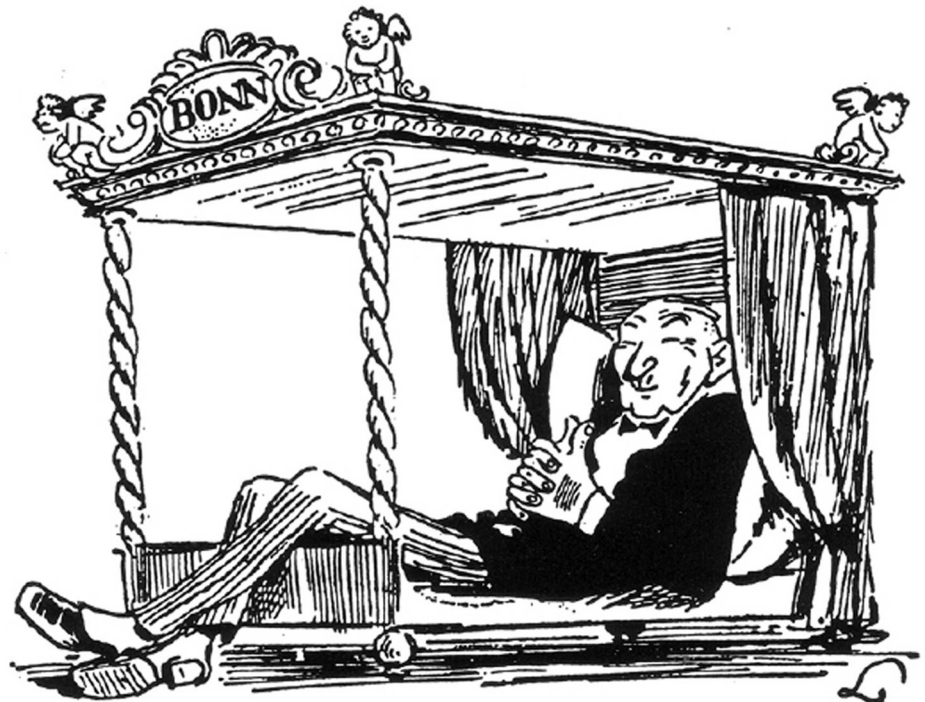
Ironically, in all the literature pondering the significance of the different candidate cities no writer considered the meaning of the city names. But as Carlo Schmid warned, names also carry meaning, either related to the historic function of the place, the people who settled there, or a prominent geographic feature. The name 'Stuttgart' came from *Stutengarten*, or garden of horses, because the city is the site of a horse-breeding centre and riding school founded by Ludolf of Schwaben in 950. 'Berlin' has Slavic origins in the words for 'bog', 'meadow' or 'swamp'. Seen in this context, Berlin is certainly the least attractive of the cities! Bonn, Frankfurt and Kassel were all fortified cities whose modern names reflect their Roman but also military and strategic origins. Kassel was *Castellum Cattorum* or 'castle of the Chatti', who were a Germanic tribe that lived in the area. Frankfurt's name had origins in Latin and Old German. It meant the 'ford of the Franks' or river crossing for the Frankish people. The name Bonn comes from *Castra Bonnensia*, then *Bonna*, which derived from the Gaulish word *bona* for 'fortress', 'city' or 'fortified city', an image West Germany's founding fathers might not have wanted to invoke.

Among the criteria for the new capital, parliamentarians decided the location should be temporary. Most West Germans in 1948/1949 believed unification with the Eastern parts of the country to be imminent. In fact, the Basic Law was written with such an eventuality in mind so it included conditions for unification. The desire for a provisional seat made Bonn attractive since few could imagine that Bonn would remain capital city for long. It was too remote and not a major urban centre. Moving to Frankfurt seemed a more permanent solution than Bonn, not because it had to be, but because Frankfurt was a more substantial city.<sup>32</sup>

Another factor making Bonn attractive was its physical state in 1948. Bonn was largely untouched during the war; it suffered only minor damage amounting to about 16% of the city. Its architecture was typically German baroque and rococo and particularly quaint.

whereas Frankfurt's historic centre was razed. Bonn was equated with Washington, DC, and dubbed 'Washington on the Rhine', because like Washington Bonn was pastoral, provincial, unimportant and situated in a beautiful landscape. The seemingly harmless aspect of the city, non-threatening in a military or geopolitical sense, was certainly an advantage Bonn had. Finally, the presence of the Rhine and its landscape were viewed as quintessentially German. The romantics praised the choice of Bonn because of its location along the Rhine banks, in the mythic German landscape and close to the Siebengebirge, the Eifel and the fabled Lorelei.<sup>33</sup>

Adenauer had additional political motives for supporting Bonn. He hoped to put a halt to French territorial ambitions by locating the capital close to France. At the same time, proximity to France, the Netherlands and Luxembourg would strengthen ties between West Germany and the West whereas locating the capital in Berlin suggested ties to the East. Furthermore, placing the capital in North Rhine-Westphalia might help counter separatist agitation in parts of the Rhineland such as Aachen, Düren and Monchau, and counter fears about the *Ruhrstatut*.<sup>34</sup> And, the British made it abundantly clear that they would support the choice of Bonn. Another contemporary cartoon shows Adenauer lying in an ornate canopy bed called 'Bonn', looking very self-satisfied [4]. He is far too large for the bed so his legs dangle over the end. The image suggests that the West German government will be too large for its new home even if it is pleased with its choice. Adenauer certainly was able to make his bed and sleep in it. His peers accused Adenauer of somehow engineering the vote in favour of Bonn and doing so for personal reasons. He had studied law in the city and had a home in nearby Rhöndorf. He certainly preferred a city in the Ruhrgebiet to Frankfurt, Kassel, Stuttgart, or Berlin. Adenauer was famous for his dislike of Prussia and Berlin. But in 1948/1949 Adenauer could not have foreseen his future election to *Bundeskanzler* or know that he would for certain continue to be in government.



**Fig 4.** Adenauer enjoying his new home. *Kölner Stadt Anzeiger*, n.d.

Most members of the Bundestag believed Berlin would eventually be capital city again and wanted a clause included in the Basic Law affirming the temporary nature of any choice made in 1948/1949.<sup>35</sup> The vote for capital city was initially formulated by the SPD as follows: 'The legislative seat is Berlin. So long as it is not possible, the interim federal seat is the city of Bonn [. . .]' But the actual wording used was 'The governing legislative bodies take their provisional seat in the city Bonn [. . .]' The altered wording was an attempt to avoid aggravating the representatives of the Allied Powers, who were united in their opposition to Berlin. On 10 May 1949, in a 33–29 vote, Bonn won. Of course Bonn itself was not to house the state apparatus; that would be in a quiet suburb south of the city, Bad Godesberg. Once the selection of Bonn was complete, the government set about designing an image for the new capital city.

A famous photograph from 1949 shows the signs to the parliamentary council, Christian Democratic Union and German Social Democratic Party headquarters in Bonn in front of an idyllic scene—grazing and resting cows pictured on a grassy hillside [5]. There are no buildings, sidewalks, or people. Even the road is not shown since the photograph is cropped above the base of the signposts. In short, there are no signs of human civilization. The author may have meant the image advertising Bonn as a pastoral locale populated by cows rather than politicians or state architecture seriously or sarcastically since it visually suggests the Bonn was no more than a cow town, or pasture. Missing from the image are all the things that we usually associate with a city: buildings, people, transportation networks and vehicles, advertising placards and more. The image is designed to suggest a place so modest that it barely exists at all. The photograph was part of the *Bundespresse Amt* collection of images used to disseminate the official view of Bonn.

One way to invent a new order was to repudiate every aspect of the National Socialist period. On the Allied side, the massive re-education programs and forced visits to



**Fig 5.** Signs to the Parliament in Bonn. Photographer unknown. 1948/1949. Bundespresse Amt, Bundesarchiv, Berlin

concentration camps mounted after the war were part of the effort to help West Germans distance themselves from the National Socialist period and help them learn to be democrats. For West Germans contemplating urban design certain modes were quickly associated with a National Socialist aesthetic, whether rightly or wrongly. A spate of articles appeared in the post-war West German press debating the correct style for urban design.<sup>36</sup> Geometrically-based totalizing schemes associated with the modern American metropolis were considered to be preferable over reinstatement of the historic German city fabric or the grand avenues flanked by monumental neoclassical buildings of Speer's and Hitler's urban visions. High-rise architecture, lightweight, functional glass and steel or stucco boxes, with no ornamentation, set either in park settings or along dense city streets, were favoured.

An iconic photograph of Bonn as new capital, shot in 1949 and disseminated throughout the world, is, in fact, an image of the new parliament and senate buildings rather than the city [6].<sup>37</sup> Everything about the image projects an anti-urban, understated and unassuming presence. The Rhine flows in the foreground dominating one-third of the picture plane; the white stucco volume of the plenary chamber sits beyond. Next to a stand of tall, thin trees that partly obscure the main body of the parliament buildings behind. The branches and leaves of a tree frame the image; the Bad Godesberg hills are visible in the background. The photograph looks suburban, not urban, and certainly not imposing or grand. The river, hills and trees dwarf the buildings, making them seem insignificant. Without a caption identifying the buildings in the image, it would be impossible to recognize them as anything special or as state architecture. There are no emblems to indicate their function such as flags or eagles. The buildings are recognizably modern with their flat roofs and stucco facades, which was one goal for the new city, but they are also faceless. The whiteness makes them appear modest and anonymous, two goals for the capital city in the 1950s.

As Susan Sontag asserted, the things omitted from the photograph of the *Bundeshaus* are as revealing as what is included. The photographer, Hugo Schmölz, omitted almost anything that would make the image seem urban, although if shot from the street, Platz der Vereingten Nationen, where other surrounding buildings would be visible, the building would have appeared very different. The decision to select this photograph



**Fig 6.** The iconic photograph of Hans Schwippert's Bundeshaus from the other side of the Rhine, 1949. Hugo Schmölz. Bundespresse Amt, Bundesarchiv, Berlin

is also a form of omission; the press office chose to omit anything monumental, urban, historic, or recognizably Germanic in its signature photograph. By extension, the use of this photograph as the emblem of the capital city Bonn signals the importance of a self-effacing yet modern image to members of parliament.

There were very few official photographs circulated in 1949/1950. Besides the exterior image of the newly complete parliament building, images of the Villa Hammerschmidt and Palais Schaumburg, two historic buildings renovated for state use, appear in some articles in the national press, but the majority of photographs used to publicize the new capital are of the *Bundeshaus* interior, especially the plenary chamber, and a shot of spectators watching the first session of parliament on 7 September 1949 [7, 8]. Again, the choice of images was designed to communicate the non-threatening nature of Bonn. The context in Bonn, Bad Godesberg, is so insignificant that it is ignored. Instead, the pictures celebrate a new, modern government building and the participatory aims of the young democracy, without a sense of place.

The members of the *Parlamentarischer Rat* believed the Federal Republic should be founded on forward-looking, affirmative principles rather than negative associations with the past. Strangely, none of the candidates for capital city represented a true modern alternative to the historic city, at least not initially. For all its status as outsider, Bonn was still an ancient city like Frankfurt, Kassel, Stuttgart and Berlin. What differentiated Bonn, perhaps, was that it was the only city that aimed to use a contemporary building for the new government. Bonn proposed to house the parliament in the 1930s Pedagogical Academy, a building designed by Bauhaus disciple, Martin Witte, but the city itself was only modernized after 1949 as the reconstruction efforts progressed.

The *Parlamentarischer Rat's* extreme sensitivity to image is apparent in one of the paradigmatic press photographs distributed during their deliberations [9]. At first glance, the image seems fairly ordinary; a group of men dressed in dark suits are seated in a room with a German flag hanging between them. On closer examination, however, the symbolism becomes rich with possibilities.

The men are seated facing each other in a fairly informal arrangement. The flag is flying from a freestanding metal pole that hovers over an open book, a copy of the Basic Law. A spotlight set to one side simultaneously illuminates the open book and the flag making it clear that these two objects are the most important things in the room. Although the photograph is titled 'Signing of the Basic Law', the stool on which signatories must have sat is empty. The backdrop is an enormous, floor-to-ceiling glass wall through which other nondescript buildings and some trees are visible. The spatial arrangement is at odds with conventions from the time which, normally would have had the delegates seated together in a horseshoe or auditorium plan opposite a group on a dais with the German flag or eagle flying above. The seating suggests informality because of the moveable chairs, the lack of geometric layout and the variety of chairs in the room, which makes it appear to have been assembled *ad*

**Fig 7.** View inside the newly-completed Plenary Chamber in Schwippert's 1949 *Bundeshaus*. Bildarchiv preussischer Kulturbesitz, 30025239



**Fig 8.** Citizens watching the first day of parliament in Schwippert's Bundeshaus, 7 September 1949. Bundespresse Amt, Bundesarchiv, Berlin



**Fig 9.** Signing of the Basic Law, 1949. Bundespresse Amt, Bundesarchiv, Berlin



*hoc* with furniture from many different places. The photograph was shot off-centre, a compositional choice that reinforces the sense of informality. Although the German flag and Basic Law occupy the centre of the image, underscoring their importance to the proceedings that are underway, the flag is hanging from a strange support that looks makeshift because its pieces do not seem to belong together. This mode of



display and the relatively small size of the flag compared with the usual size hung in official state buildings downplay the significance of the flag and hint at the reticence to celebrate the nation and its symbols.

The way the flag is hung also hints at the sense members of the *Parlamentarischer Rat* had of the provisional nature of the Basic Law and West Germany at the time. Perhaps this explains the reason that no one is looking at the camera. The image is a marked departure from usual practice; most representations of a ceremonial completion of a document picture the signatories holding pens and smiling in front of the work they have just finished. Here, the participants seem studied and serious but certainly not jubilant.

The West Germans were not the only ones who were sensitive to the importance of Bonn's selection as capital city. American and British newspapers took note. The *Picture Post*, the official paper of the British military in Germany, described the *Bundeshaus* and Bonn as 'the outward and visible token of a fresh start. The visitor's first impression is reassuring. Here, he feels, is a complete break with Nazi and traditional German architecture, a total rupture of the heavy brigade tradition.' Journalist Fenno Jacobs goes on with his description of the iconic photograph of the *Bundeshaus* [6] discussed above: 'Behind you, the expellee camps and the rubbed-out cities; in front of you, the green lawns and the white walls of the Shangri-La Parliament House; behind you, the heaviest agenda of the century; the great, sprawling agglomeration of economic, spiritual, and power problems-to-be-solved, that goes by the name of Germany. In front of you, the improvised political instrument called Bonn [ . . . ]'<sup>38</sup> Jacobs recognized the impossibly romantic symbolism the German state had vested in Bonn as capital city. Yet his article affirms the success of the press campaign; it accepts the official design image for Bonn, if sceptically.

Future Under-Secretary of State Rolf Lahr wrote to his brother on 1 November 1949, '[Bonn] will never be what a modern capital should be: the emblem of the state, representation of the people, centre of power and centre of attraction for national and international life'.<sup>39</sup> Many Germans, including the journalist Fenno Jacobs, shared Lahr's opinion of their new capital city. This certainty about Bonn is ironic; forty years later, Bonn epitomized the proper German capital city for almost half the *Bundestag*. By the 1990s Bonn had become such a strong symbol of the new Germany that when the question of capital city arose again it was defended as the emblem of modern German democracy.<sup>40</sup> In the vote to decide between Bonn and Berlin, Berlin won by a narrow margin of 18 votes.

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## Notes

- 1 The debates played out in many forums including the architectural press, in a series of articles published between 1948 and 1950 in *Bauen und Wohnen*.
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- 11 S. Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1977, p. 6.
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- 13 See W. Durth, *Biographische Verflechtungen 1900–1970*, Krämer, Stuttgart, 2000.
- 14 R. Pommerin, *Von Berlin nach Bonn: Die Alliierten, die Deutschen und die Hauptstadtfrage nach 1945*, Böhlau, Cologne, 1989, p. 34.
- 15 'Opinions of German politicians in Hannover on Central Administration', 11 February 1946, in FO 371/55586/C1499, PRO, also cited in Pommerin, op. cit., p. 35.
- 16 'Die neue Hauptstadt', *Wochenzeitung am Abend*, 3 March 1949.
- 17 Pommerin, op. cit., p. 58.
- 18 One excellent contemporary summary of the symbolic issues associated with each city is 'Wie denken Sie über Bonn?', *Rhein-Ruhr-Zeitung*, 21 January 1949.
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- 27 C. Schmid, *Die Forderung des Tages. Reden und Aufsätze*, Ernst Klett, Stuttgart, 1946, p. 74. 'Der Berliner Zentralismus hat uns Deutschen nicht wohl getan; er darf nicht wiederkommen, u. vielleicht wird einmal darüber gesprochen werden müssen, ob Berlin noch einmal als Hauptstadt in Betracht kommt; mir persönlich liegt es zu nahe an Potsdam [. . .]'
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- 29 Ibid., p. 410.
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- 33 S. Fröhlich, *Das Bonner Innenministerium. Innansichten einer politischen Institution*, Osang, Bonn, 1997, p. 20.
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- 35 E. Reger, 'Staatsanwälte', *Tagesspiegel*, 31 October 1948.
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- 37 The number of newspapers and magazines that used this image is too long to list in full but here is a brief sampling, *General Anzeiger*, *Bonner Rundschau*, *Neue Bauwelt*, *Süddeutscher Zeitung*, *Picture Post* and *Building Digest*.
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