

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

LOOKING FOR GERMANY
IN THE NEW GERMANY

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company that is trying to sell off East Germany's state industries. But all this is really camouflage, because in the end the problem is not Berlin or how many Berlin streets change their names but the fact that in making Berlin the capital of a new Germany, Germans have collapsed their two very different and elaborate memories of "Germany" in the city where those memories were purchased—and now no one seems to know which memory is real, or what "being German" is supposed to mean, or what Germany should look like or act like or build like when it builds its capital, if it tries to dismiss the last forty or fifty or sixty years.

Legally, Berlin was always the capital. Bonn was a provisional arrangement, because the West German constitution was a provisional constitution, a piece of enabling legislation at the discretion of what until last year were the occupying armies of France, Britain, and the United States, and had been drafted so that West Germany could go about its business as a country without precisely being one. The constitution named Bonn to represent this provisional country called West Germany until it could join the other provisional country called East Germany and become "Germany" again, with—it was understood—Berlin again the seat of government. That, at least, is what the West said. East Germany did not. The Russians let East Germany declare itself a real country in 1949—although, with half a million Soviet troops installed in its five *Länder*, East Germany accepted another form of occupation—and it followed that, for the East, West Germany was a real country, too. The rhetoric of partition was complicated and exacting—East German Communists were careful never to refer to West Berlin as "West Berlin" but always as Westberlin, as if it were a new city and had nothing to do with the real Berlin or with who owned it or whose capital it was—but what it came down to was that East Germany's interest lay in recognizing West Germany whether or not West Germany wanted to be recognized.

West Germany certainly never recognized East Germany, though for forty years the two did a great deal of business. The West Germans sent "mission chiefs" to East Berlin but never "ambassadors," and the Allies, who had to send ambassadors if they

wanted embassies in East Berlin, and diplomatic status, called those embassies "embassies to the German Democratic Republic," and never "embassies in the German Democratic Republic." This, of course, had nothing to do with the realities of political or economic life in the East or the West, and it didn't keep either of the Germanys from sending missions to the United Nations, or from joining NATO or the Warsaw Pact, or, for that matter, the Common Market or Comecon. In the end, the rhetoric of German unity was mainly the stuff of West German campaign speeches, because the idea of keeping the size and shape and status of "Germany" open was a convenient Cold War notion and a convenient political notion. The irony is that it lasted long after anyone on either side believed in a united—or reunited—Germany.

The politicians in the West got used to Bonn. They grumbled at first, but eventually most of them decided that the boring town Konrad Adenauer had chosen for the capital—mainly because he had a house near Bonn, and liked to water his roses in the afternoon, and, being Catholic and usually outnumbered by Protestants in West Germany, he appreciated the fact that in Bonn the Catholics outnumbered the Protestants—had its uses. The deadly rectitude of the place was not the least of those uses; no one else wanted to be in Bonn, certainly not the reporters who had to cover it, and for a long time this left the politicians and the tenured *Beamten* of the bureaucracy remarkably unscrutinized.

There were (and still are) forty-five thousand people in Bonn involved one way or another in running Germany, and for them the city was a captain's paradise. Deputies and ministers and important bureaucrats who kept their wives and families at home in Düsseldorf or Stuttgart—it is a mark of status in Bonn to commute—bought pretty villas in the suburbs and installed their girlfriends and hired cooks and decorators and learned to enjoy the arrangement, proving that the highest form of decadence in Germany is a secret *bürgerlich* life. They put their money in property, and paid prices that they could never recover if the capital moved—which is one reason so many of them voted against moving it.

Two years ago, it was hard for any politician in West or East Germany to imagine that Bonn would not go on, provisionally,

forever. Erich Honecker said that the Wall would be here in a hundred years, and Helmut Kohl, who dreamed publicly and profitably about reclaiming Berlin for "democracy," razed more than a hundred beautiful old Bonn houses to expand the capital he had. When the Wall came down, and in the public mind—for reasons no one has really explained completely—the eventuality of a democratic East Germany became the inevitability of *one* Germany, a lot of people had forgotten that Bonn was not, legally, anybody's capital. No one anticipated the argument between the Bonn partisans and the Berlin partisans which started then—any more than anyone anticipated that three hundred thousand East Germans would move west into the Bundesrepublik in a matter of a few weeks, and make the promise of a quick unification the only way to keep the rest of them home.

The fact that Berlin was the *de facto* capital of the new Germany was in most ways beside the point of the argument; constitutions, and certainly provisional constitutions, change. The argument was about politics, and about money, but mainly it was about the ambition and the direction of the country. It had to do with whether Germany was going to be an "East-looking" country or a "West-looking" country. It was a way of talking about nationalism, and about what the connection was between German nationalism and the old capital of German nationalism, and about how long a salubrious German "Europeanism" would survive if Bonn was abandoned for a city whose history and "instinct" pointed Germany eastward. It was a way of wondering whether a new Germany would be frightening again or collegial at last, and it was complicated by the fact that nobody really knew where the East ended and the West began in the German consciousness—in 1871, Berlin was actually the middle of "Germany," four hundred miles from its eastern border—or whether in Germany "East" was a matter of politics or the church or *jus sanguinis* or temperament or propaganda or culture or "destiny." All anyone knew was that Bonn stood clearly for "West"—for Europe, for the European Community, for partnership, for a kinder, gentler German, for the peaceful eagle that always votes with the other birds instead of swooping down and taking the spoils for himself. Bonn people pointed out that Berlin had been their capital for a very short time—from

1871, when Bismarck collected the various kingdoms, duchies, principalities, and Hanseatic states of "Germany" and put them under Prussian rule, to 1945, when the Reich fell—and that "not the best things in German history happened then." My friend Spiros Simitis, who teaches constitutional law at the University of Frankfurt and was a Bonn advocate, told me before I came here to remember, in the excitement of Berlin, what a critical symbolic value Bonn has had as Germany's capital, because it represented "what has been good in Germany since 1945."

Everyone knows the story about François Mauriac's telling a reporter that he loved Germany so much he was glad there were two of them. It was an obvious postwar tenet that a divided Germany would be a safer (for everybody else) Germany. But it was also believed—by liberals in West Germany like Professor Simitis—that West Germany would be safer if power were literally spread across the country. The Bundesrepublik was structured as a decentralized federal state. The Chancellery, the ministries, and the two houses of parliament were built in Bonn, but the West German Constitutional Court sat in Karlsruhe, the Bundesbank was in Frankfurt, the Bundeskriminalamt, which is Germany's F.B.I., was in Wiesbaden (along with the Hessen office of the Data Protection Agencies conceived by Professor Simitis to protect West Germans from the information the *Länder* collect about them), and, in fact, the Social Security office, which is the biggest bureaucracy in the country, was in West Berlin. Trains ran and planes flew and roads were built to accommodate the considerable distances between the offices of the men (and the few women) who governed and administered the country. It was not unusual for a German politician to start the day in, say, Hamburg, stop at the Bundestag in Bonn, fly to a meeting in Saarbrücken, and end the afternoon in Stuttgart—and never leave the bureaucracy of the Federal Republic. Centralism meant one thing in West Germany—Germany's disastrous experience of concentrated power—and people adjusted their lives to avoid it. Liberals feared that putting authority in one place in Germany would eventually mean putting the wrong authority in one place. They felt that the democracy here was still too fragile to