The two edged sword: capital cities and the limits to state centralization in mid nineteenth-century Germany

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of capital cities in the construction of nineteenth-century German states. It describes the significant efforts that were put into strengthening new capital cities, such as Munich, Dresden, Stuttgart and Hanover, especially due to the polycentric nature of German society, and making them more central in citizens’ lives. This was done through symbolic and institutional measures. As a result, they were transformed into demographic, political, economic, administrative and iconic centres. However, demographic, geographic and historical constraints determined state infrastructural shape and form, just as much as political centrality. Consequently, existing circumstances limited the options and possibilities of the states, and prevented the creation of a German equivalent of London or Paris. This paper explores the role the capital cities of independent states such as Bavaria, Saxony, Hanover and Württemberg played in spatial infrastructure and spatial imagination, and shows contradictory processes of capital city development.

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The development of capital cities was largely the product of the era of nation-states. Although social theorists have not fully explained the role capital cities played in the formation of the idea of the nation or the nation-state, it is commonly understood that they are significant in the process of state centralization. ‘The capital city became a true centre of national unity and a visual laboratory of national imagination’, claims Vadim Rossman.

However, the relationship between capital and nation, or capital and state, is not so simple. Existing urban landscapes, institutions and commercial ties limit the ability of governments to predominantly focus the national imagination on a specific urban centre. This article examines the attempts made by nineteenth-century state officials in four German states — Bavaria, Saxony, Hanover and Württemberg — to form a single symbolic centre in each of their states and discusses the relationship between state-making and different kinds of centralization: cultural, iconographic, institutional and infrastructural.

These four kinds of centralization refer to different ways of drawing people into seeing the capital city as their centre. Cultural centralization relates to the view of the capital city as a spectacle and the planning issues associated with the growth of visitors to newly opened museums, galleries and festivals. Iconographic centralization refers to the changing representation of capital cities in visual discourse and their prominent role in the imagined geography of the state. Institutional centralization is the establishment of central civil institutes, which are not merely administrative centres, in the capital cities. Infrastructural centralization relates to the role of capital cities in transportation and communication networks, such as railway and postal systems. All four kinds of centralization were used by officials to bring the people of the state to the capital city, and to turn their capital cities into something more than just administrative-functional centres.

This paper will use these different forms of centralization to illuminate the complex relations between state-making and the power of capital cities through the history of the four medium sized German states of Bavaria, Saxony, Württemberg and Hanover, and their capital cities — Munich, Dresden, Stuttgart and Hanover — between the fall of Napoleon in 1815 and the end of the Austrian-Prussian war in 1866. These four states were not superpowers, such as Prussia or Austria, nor were they miniature entities, such as the Thuringian principalities. They were large enough to develop individual territorial cohesion, in which their capital cities were key components, but this feat was a process and a struggle. Empowering their capital cities was a central theme in the agenda of the four governments but, as this
German capital cities

The lack of overall political centralization posed a particular problem for capital city formation in German states. This has been referred to as ‘das Hauptstadtproblem’ or ‘Hauptstadtfrage’, and can be dated back to the founding of the medieval Holy Roman Empire. Although princes of small German states during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries imitated Versailles by constructing castles and royal courts in German capitals, this only led to the establishment of many palace towns (Residenzstädte), ranging from Zweibrücken in the west to Breslau in the east, most of which could not be seen as state centres. Stein Rokkan, the Norwegian sociologist, called the territory stretching from central Italy to the North and Baltic seas the ‘City Belt’, due to the existence of a large number of strong and autonomous cities that prevented the establishment of centralized territorial states earlier than the nineteenth century. Although some of the larger member states of the Holy Roman Empire began to resemble centralized territorial states during the eighteenth century, they were still fragmented polities. Furthermore, this political and cultural variety and multiplicity was perceived as the essence of German uniqueness by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller and Justus Moser.

The 1806 dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire and the Napoleonic establishment of German states reduced the number of capital cities and gave each of those that remained a more centralized role. However, the construction of each state from dozens of small principalities caused many of the previous Residenzstädte to become peripheral cities in much larger states, such as Würzburg or Regensburg in Bavaria, Lüneburg in Hanover and Merkentheim in Württemberg. Annexed into the new polities, these cities, and other politically powerful German localities, such as ecclesiastical principalities and free imperial cities, were threats to the integration of the newly emerging states. Although many of these cities had begun losing ground in the previous centuries, the Napoleonic wars erased their remaining political power and placed them geographically as far from the bureaucratic centres of the new states as one could imagine.

Mid nineteenth-century urban growth also widened the gap between Munich, Dresden, Hanover and Stuttgart and the other cities and towns in their states. Between 1850 and 1870 the population of Munich grew from 107,000 to 169,000, that of Dresden from 97,000 to 177,000, that of Stuttgart from 47,000 to 92,000 and that of Hanover...
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