

'The Bourbon era' from Der Spiegel (3 March 1986)

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. AUGSTEIN, Rudolf ; Herausgeber BÖHME, Erich; ENGEL, Johannes K.; FUNK, Werner. 03.03.1986, n° 10; 40. Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "Bourbonische Zeiten", p. 23-24.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_bourbon_era_from_der_spiegel_3_march_1986-en-ed026953-2187-4802-83e8-b19ded4525dc.html

Last updated: 06/07/2016



The Bourbon era

Bonn is introducing a machine-readable passport as a counterpart to the machine-readable identity card. No other EC country except the UK wants to follow its example.

Bonn faced enormous problems. It had to determine the format of the document and the colour of the cover, the arrangement of the gold lettering on the front cover and the typefaces on the inside pages, the sequence of data and the foreign languages to be used in the explanatory notes.

After six and a half years of preparatory work, and after resolving the ‘final technical differences about the size of the lettering’, the EC Council of Ministers agreed on 23 June 1981 on a ‘passport with a uniform format’. The burgundy-coloured European passport, measuring 125 by 88 millimetres, was to be issued in Member States as from the beginning of 1985; but only half the Member States of what was then the Community of Ten met the deadline. One of the latecomers is the Federal Republic, which has only just adopted the appropriate passport legislation.

Only the cover of the future West German passport, which is to be issued as from 1988, follows the EC format. While other countries have kept to the traditional paper passports, the German passport is technically distinct: the second page is plastic, looks like the new, machine-readable identity card and can be checked in exactly the same way, i.e. electronically.

The German Interior Minister is trying to justify this controversial project on the grounds of pan-European technical pressures, which do not in fact exist. Friedrich Zimmermann (CSU) argues that the EC Council of Ministers has ‘made express provision for the introduction of a forgery-proof and machine-readable passport’.

Actually, the Germans themselves invented the directive to which Mr Zimmermann is referring. It was thanks to their efforts alone that the machine-readable passport was allowed in the EC as an alternative to the traditional paper passport. Apart from Bonn, only the UK Government is, to date, in favour of the plastic second page, while the other ten EC partners are against it.

In countries that do not require an identity card and do not even keep manual registers or police data banks, machine-readable passports would be senseless anyway. Machine readability assumes that the reading devices are linked to electronic data storage facilities from which information on the individuals checked can be retrieved.

Spain, for instance, only has partially complete citizens’ registers, in the form of electoral lists giving the individual’s name, date of birth and profession. Much the same applies in France: only those who apply for a polling card are officially registered. Changes of address are notified to the local authorities through rent invoices or electricity bills. Italy does have a residents’ registration office, but locals complain that the way it works is reminiscent of ‘the Bourbon era’ — i.e. not at all.

Most Britons would be appalled at the very idea of having to register their place of residence. Nonetheless, the British police have an electronic information system that could be accessed via a machine-readable passport. First, however, the index of offenders, which currently contains about five million names, would have to be updated, as some of the records date back 40 years. Since passports are used only for crossing borders, while a driving licence or cheque card is taken as sufficient evidence of identity within the UK, this would, at all events, be of little practical use to the police.

Most other EC countries, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, do not require national identity cards. Even where such documents are issued, the forces of law and order accept all kinds of substitutes: Italy, for instance, will accept civil servants’ employment cards or firearms licences. Most Spaniards carry around yellowing and dog-eared photocopies of their identity cards.

As long ago as 1980, the Italian Government wanted to introduce machine-readable identity cards, yet the

bill to that effect is still pending in Parliament. In some French *départements*, plastic identity cards were actually in circulation as long ago as 1981; but although it was not even obligatory to carry an identity card, this project had to be halted because the French objected to the plastic card. In Belgium, the optically readable area of the identity cards that have been around for a year now was deleted as a result of public pressure.

It is only under the West German security philosophy that the machine-readable passport has been made obligatory as a counterpart to the electronically checkable identity card. 'For reasons of internal security,' Mr Zimmermann explained, the passport must meet 'the security standard of the new identity card.' No other Western democracy has produced such an elaborate control instrument. According to Wilhelm Steinmüller, a professor of law and information technology in Bremen, this 'creates a technical infrastructure of the type found in a totalitarian state.'

The EC Commission also views this West German idiosyncrasy with some scepticism. According to one memorandum, a state-run electronic system carries the 'risk of perfected, systematic controls' at the EC's internal borders; it considers it 'absolutely vital' to prevent the erection of 'computer fences' of this kind.

SPD Bundestag Member Alwin Brück regards the new machine-readable passport as 'most un-European, because it means that the Federal Republic is contributing to its own isolation rather than to a greater community spirit.'