

Mainz – A city and its university, reflections of Franco-German relations

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In May 1947, during the solemn enrolment of the brand-new students, Willy Ebertz, the president of the student union of Mainz' Johannes Gutenberg University, thanked the French occupying forces for their "aid and understanding" during the refounding of the university in 1946 and declared: "As a token of our gratitude, we commit to doing everything that is in our power to promote mutual respect between the peoples, which means working sincerely towards peace using concrete means. We hope that all the barriers that have been separating the young students in every nation will fall at last..."

Mainz between "hereditary hostility" and "hereditary friendship"

Willy Ebertz' words had not been a given: for more than a century, the city and its university had experienced the tribulations of Franco-German relations. It's true that in the Holy Roman Empire, at the end of the 18th century, the last prince-electors and archbishops of Mainz enjoyed the best possible relations with the French court; when the French revolutionary forces occupied the city in 1792-1793, the short-lived Republic of Mainz was declared in the hopes of a union with revolutionary France. Following the victories of the French troops on the left bank of the Rhine between 1798 and 1814, Mainz became the capital of the French department of Mont-Tonnerre and residents of Mainz fought in Napoleon's Great Army, to which a memorial in the city's main cemetery still bears witness today.

But Rhenish Hesse is no stranger either to the rise of German nationalism, which produces the baneful cliché of Franco-German "hereditary hostility". In 1870, the German troops that will attack France set out from Mainz. At the end of the First World War, following Germany's defeat, the city of Mainz is subjected to occupation by the French from 1918 to 1930. The tombstones of French colonial soldiers still bear witness to this era. At the same time, the French military encourages separatism, which serves to exacerbate Franco-German antagonism. After the Second World War, the city is occupied once more by the French; however, it becomes possible to recreate Franco-German friendship. In 1958, a twinning partnership with Dijon is founded; in 1962, a regional partnership is sealed between Rhineland-Palatinate and Burgundy. The central driver of the reconciliation is the (re)founding of the University of Mainz in 1946.

Creation of the Johannes Gutenberg University

There had been a university in Mainz since 1477, but it had slowly ceased to operate at the beginning of the 19th century. Since the end of the First World War, attempts to revive it were made in vain. In 1946, the attempts in Mainz fall on sympathetic ears. The general Raymond Schmittlein, director of Public education in the French administration, and his collaborator Irène Giron see the creation of the university as a means of promoting Franco-German reconciliation and of awakening an interest for France among the German population on the left bank of the Rhine – a gift capable of ensuring France's long-term influence in the region.

The university, a place of Franco-German reconciliation

Louis Kleinmann, French commander of the city of Mainz, assigns German prisoners of war to the first construction works for the new university, in old Wehrmacht barracks located a little ways away from the centre of town; these men are then granted the right to enrol as students. Schmittlein massively invests in the construction of the university and gives his quasi-unrestrained support to student activities that encourage intellectual, cultural and

political renewal so as to turn the page on National Socialism. Beginning in 1947, summer universities are organised, which become a highlight of life on campus. These are open to students from different European countries, including France and Germany, who participate in shared scientific and cultural activities, which greatly strengthens mutual understanding and helps to fight prejudices.

Foreign languages, a gateway to the world

Irène Giron is the linchpin for the creation of an interpreting school in Gernersheim, in Palatinate, which has since become a training unit within the University of Mainz. Young Germans are given the opportunity to learn many languages and discover the cultures of the world. This is an essential contribution to breaking the mould that National Socialism had imposed on the German youth. As a matter of fact, since June 2023, the square at the university entrance bears the name of Irène Giron. To this day, binational relations are maintained through academic institutions such as the Franco-German doctoral college, aiming to improve bilateral scientific relations.

Mainz, a place of Franco-German scientific cooperation

After 1945, with the help of France, other cultural institutions are born in Mainz that work for understanding among peoples, such as the Leibniz Institute for European History and the Academy of Science and Letters. There is also an Institut Français, a place for Franco-German cultural events that is well-located in the old town.

Further reading

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