

Aachen – From Charlemagne to the new Franco-German Treaty

Harald Müller

Let's strengthen Europe together! This could be the slogan summarising the treaty signed on 22 January, 2019 in Aachen by Germany and France. The two states committed to implementing a vast series of measures to intensify their cooperation. This strengthened collaboration also aims to become an engine of evolution within the European Union in terms of the economy, foreign policy and security, culture, and media, as well as the law, the environment and the climate. It's a programme of commitment, drawn up by Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. Once more, the two countries show themselves to be the driving forces of the European Union, a political power working in a resolute and homogenous manner.

The goals of the Aachen Treaty

The treaty's preamble formulates an essential goal: preparing for the challenges facing the two states in the 21st century. Shared values form the basis of shared action – this is the common thread that runs through the treaty. In the time of globalised trade, harmonised economies and social models guarantee a greater effectiveness than isolated national actions. Security policy, shared if possible by the entire European Union, was already desirable in 2019; in light of the war in Ukraine, it appears more urgent than ever. The major objectives of the treaty concerning human rights, climate change, global Europe or the United Nations are realised in the Franco-German way of being together: promoting both languages, cooperating between border regions, stimulating city partnerships and international mobility thanks to the major role played by the Franco-German Youth Office, which is even expressly named in the treaty.

An Élysée Treaty 2.0

The date of the signing of the treaty was intentionally set on 22 January, 2019, exactly 56 years after that of the Élysée Treaty in Paris by Germany and France, which remains the foundation of a new cooperation between the two countries. At the time, two decades after the end of the Second World War, it was reconciliation that formed the heart of the treaty. This was plainly obvious, as both countries had repeatedly been at war with each other for centuries, separated by great divides. By signing the Élysée Treaty, France and Germany committed to peace and close cooperation, thereby creating the foundations of a dynamic integration of the Western European states.

The Aachen Treaty of 2019 therefore constitutes an expansion of the 1963 treaty. Franco-German friendship having been consolidated over the preceding fifty years, it was now possible to agree on concrete measures and political objectives, aiming to strengthen the ties between the two neighbours and to greatly influence the community of European states.

The city of Charlemagne

But why not return to Paris or Berlin? This can be explained first by the importance of the regional political forces in Germany and that of Armin Laschet, Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia, 2021 candidate to the Chancellorship and born in Aachen.

A more crucial reason is the fact that Aachen is the place of memory *par excellence* when it comes to Franco-German history. It's in this city, named Aix-la-Chapelle in French, that Charlemagne spent the last twenty years of his life. This prominent European leader of the High Middle Ages, claimed as a countryman by the Germans as well as the French, made this city his permanent residence, breaking with the habits of the kings of his time. It's from Aachen that he ruled over the vast Frankish kingdom, the heart of which was composed of regions that today are French or German. His son Louis initially perpetuated

this custom, such that Aachen was considered *prima sedes Francia*, the most important location in the Frankish kingdom, crystallising on a European level that which then became an Empire. But this glorious period met its end in the ninth century. The great Carolingian Empire dislocated into smaller entities: over the centuries, the Italian, German and French nations were born.

Aachen at the heart of Europe

Aachen and Charlemagne are historical-geographical roots of the modern post-Second World War idea of Europe: building a strong democratic centre on the continent, comprised of the Benelux countries, France, and the Federal Republic of Germany—the latter two having been the engine of European unification over the past decades. The cities of Aachen and Reims, where the kings of both kingdoms were crowned in the Middle Ages, are linked since 1967 by a greatly symbolic and highly dynamic partnership. It would have been difficult to find a better location than Aachen for the signing of the 2019 treaty between France and Germany, especially given that the city is geographically situated on the contact line between Romance and Germanic cultures.

Further reading

Special report : « 60^e anniversaire du Traité de l'Élysée (1963) et mise en œuvre du Traité d'Aix-la-Chapelle (2019) », *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui*, 244 (avril-mai 2023).

Kerner, Max, *Karl der Große. Entschleierung eines Mythos*, Cologne, 2001.

Lappenküper, Ulrich, *Die deutsch-französischen Beziehungen 1949-1963. Von der „Erbfeindschaft“ zur „Entente élémentaire“*, Munich, 2001.

Müller, Harald, « Aix-la-Chapelle à l'époque carolingienne. Nouvelles approches », *Francia*, 41 (2014), p. 25-48.

Werner, Karl Ferdinand, « Aachen – Aix-la-Chapelle », in : Horst Möller, Jacques Morizet (dir.), *Allemagne – France : lieux et mémoire d'une histoire commune*, Paris, 1995, p. 43-74.

Newspaper article illustrating the importance of the site of Aachen for the two countries
<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/meinung/die-deutsch-franzosische-freundschaft-lebt-nicht-nur-von-gesten--sie-braucht-taten-4137877.html>

Interview with Sabine Thillaye, a Franco-German politician

<https://www.deutschland.de/de/topic/politik/aachener-vertrag-folgt-elysee-vertrag-sabine-thillaye-im-interview>