

Reims – The staging of "reconciliation"

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There are few places where the complexity of the Franco-German history of conflicts and interconnections is as impressive as in Reims. This city in the northeast of France, the heart of the historical region of Champagne-Ardenne and the unofficial capital of Champagne's wine country, has undergone evolutions and events both negative and positive over the course of the relations between the two countries.

The mass of "reconciliation"

The major point of reference here is the year 1962. The French president Charles de Gaulle and the West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer chose this city to perform a special gesture: on 8 July 1962, the two men attended a mass together in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. The image of these leaders standing side by side in harmony became a twofold symbol: in light of the two nations' painful shared history, that of reconciliation, and in light of the future, that of the will to maintain friendly relations from now on.

A national "holy place"

Choosing Reims for this reconciliation did not happen by chance. From a French standpoint, it is a city that is full of history. For centuries, this was where the kings of France were anointed and crowned. Even in the French Republic, Reims and its cathedral represent a sort of national holy place. Let us also not forget the mythical Joan of Arc: by having Charles VII crowned in the cathedral in 1429, she made it a shining symbol of the affirmation of France as a nation.

The memory of the martyred city

During the First World War, this monument with 2 300 statues, considered a masterpiece of Gothic art – which would be registered as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1991 – was intentionally devastated by the German army. The destruction of the head of the famous "Smiling Angel" statue symbolised the incommensurable brutality of the conflict. It is also in Reims that the unconditional surrender of the Wehrmacht was signed on 7 May 1945 at the headquarters of the Allied forces. This marked the end of the Second World War in Europe.

1962's official visits to the neighbouring country

In 1962, these negative reference points were opposed with a strong positive sign of reconciliation and of a new start. From 2 to 8 July 1962, Chancellor Adenauer made an official visit to France. This trip expressed the "reconciliation" of the two so-called "hereditary" enemies and the friendly rapprochement between (West) Germany and France. In September 1962, it was the General De Gaulle's turn to travel to Germany, where he received an enthusiastic welcome; finally, in January 1963, the cooperation between the two states was confirmed in writing with the signing of the Élysée Treaty.

Reims was the final stop and the high point of Adenauer's travels, which took him to Paris, Rouen and Bordeaux. Seventeen years after the end of the war, on the morning of 8 July 1962, de Gaulle et Adenauer reviewed the troops on the military base of Mourmelon-le-Grand, some thirty kilometres east of Reims. Parading together were soldiers of the Bundeswehr and of the French army. Then, under the applause of numerous onlookers, de Gaulle and Adenauer went to the cathedral. Saluting archbishop François Marty, de Gaulle underscored the meaning of the ceremony: he and Adenauer were there to "seal the reconciliation of France and Germany". This set the tone for the entire ceremony, which

included the presence of a priest who had been a prisoner of war in Germany, and of a canon who had been deported.

The remembrance of the "Reims 1962" moment

The "mass of reconciliation" in Reims is a fundamental milestone in Franco-German history. The image of the two statesmen, whose proximity seems to symbolise the new ties between peoples who had been enemies for so long, inscribed itself into the collective memory. This event also forms an element of memory culture. In 2012, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the mass for peace, a service was officiated at Reims Cathedral in the presence of president François Hollande and chancellor Angela Merkel, an homage to the historic feat that was reconciliation in 1962. The darker times were however not forgotten: in memory of the destructions of 1914, three stained-glass windows paid for by Germany were inaugurated in the presence of both countries' Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

Further reading

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