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Prof. Dr. Eberhard Sandschneider (Hrsg.)
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When Pictures Make Politics

Finding new symbols for tackling the German-French past

by Claire Demesmay and Klemens Kober

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When German President Joachim Gauck took part in ceremonies marking the June 1944 massacre of French civilians by a Waffen SS company in Oradour-sur-Glane on September 3, 2013 he closed one of the last remaining gaps in the process of coming to terms with the German and French past. If the substantial symbolic narrative associated with this history is for the most part complete, the process of encouraging understanding requires continual cultivation. Mutually emblematic gestures have been an essential part of the two states' pragmatic rapprochement. A far finer art, however, lies in continuing to create—and project—the right images.

The policy of rapprochement that has marked the Franco-German relationship since shortly after the end of World War II has always been accompanied by a strongly symbolic iconography. Considered as a whole, the well-known photographs of the major encounters that took place along the way form something of a postwar Franco-German photo album. A pragmatic path was chosen to achieve this reconciliation. Set against the background of the twentieth-century's pathos-laden history, it showed awareness of the circumstances, problematizing the open wounds rather than attempting to conceal them. These well-documented meetings between the countries' major political leaders were set at historical landmarks—including blood-soaked battlefields—in order to provide positive reinterpretation of painful memories associated with places so deeply connected to war.

Perusing the pages of this album, one quickly realizes how great a distance both countries have come in the past decades. At the same time, the album testifies not only to the gradual process of normalization of the bilateral relationship, but also to the necessity of developing a new symbolism that corresponds to the era of post-reconciliation.¹

Reinterpreting Places of Remembrance

The first of the album's well-known images date back to 1962. That summer, Charles de Gaulle and

Konrad Adenauer—the initial German-French postwar duo—traveled together through France to Reims. That historic city and site of royal coronations had been severely damaged in both world wars and remains highly emblematic of French history and German incursions. Here Adenauer was formally received as a head of state and reviewed the first joint military parade to take place since 1945 before attending a mass for peace in the celebrated cathedral at de Gaulle's side. The gestures of humility that marked this event would henceforth form a constant in the history of Franco-German rapprochement. At the same time, its staging illuminated the different ways the two World Wars would be addressed—with a sense of national identity tied up with World War I on both sides, in contrast to a more sober, rational approach to World War II.

In their respective resistance movements, Germans as well as French citizens fought National Socialist ideology, albeit in different ways and on different scales. What is more, Nazi ideology has been entirely discredited. It remains a part of German identity only in the sense that it has been bluntly and rigorously rejected. This chapter of common history can therefore be approached pragmatically. Conscious of the wider global and European context in the period immediately after World War II, statesmen acted accordingly. Like civil society protagonists, many of whom were driven by idealism, they too were realist enough to admit that only small steps and careful confidence-building measures could bring about the necessary recon-

ciliation between the two peoples. Many steps of approximation were to follow, for example the much-touted Élysée Treaty, which did not gain the symbolism associated with it today until the 1980s. Finally, in 2004, when Chancellor Gerhard Schröder participated in the sixtieth anniversary of the Allied landing at Normandy in the company of a German resistance fighter, he abstained from laying a wreath at the cemetery for German soldiers, where SS-soldiers are also buried. President Jacques Chirac's response to Schröder's simple statement—"We want peace"—was unequivocal: "Mr. Chancellor, the French will not forget your presence in Caen on June 6, 2004. Your words, your vision will remain in our hearts."²

President Joachim Gauck's visit to Oradour-sur-Glane on September 3, 2013 provided additional support to the mutual construct of coming to terms with World War II. He is the first German head of state to visit the small French village, a village of enormous importance to France. On June 10, 1944, units of the Waffen SS murdered almost all the inhabitants of the village in an act of reprisal for resistance activities. There had in fact already been attempts at symbolic reconciliation as early as 1947, when thousands of young people from Hamburg volunteered to rebuild Oradour—but it was still too early.³

Building on this, the recent visit by Gauck and Hollande with the last survivors of the massacre has now successfully transformed one of the last theaters of war into a common site of commemoration. The image is true to the Franco-German iconographic tradition: a site of barbarism as a backdrop; gestures full of reverence and dignity on the part of both presidents; moving speeches asking for forgiveness and calling for rejection of ignorance. Thus did the handshake between Gauck and Hollande serve to remind us of the meeting between Kohl and Mitterrand thirty years earlier at Verdun. Especially moving was the presence of a witness standing between the two heads of state: 88-year-old Robert Hébras, who survived the massacre as a young man and now led both presidents through the village. In an attitude of

respectful humility, President Gauck proclaimed: "I bow my head before your victims." To which Hollande answered: "You represent the dignity of today's Germany. ... Your visit confirms that the friendship between our two countries defies history and serves as an example for the entire world."⁴ Gauck's circumspect role of intermediary, moreover, helped the French come to terms with the trauma of Oradour.

As far as World War II is concerned, the French-German intellectual Alfred Grosser has expressed his objection to the term "reconciliation," which he feels is only appropriate in the context of World War I, a war in which two hostile nations fought each other.⁵ On both sides, many World War I memorials, street names, and positive statements about such controversial figures of national identification as Ferdinand Foch and Otto von Bismarck show the extent to which the "Great War" is to this day an integral part of both national identities.⁶ This remains an impediment to a conciliatory form of common remembrance, which inevitably would result in a partial deconstruction of those identities.

It was not until 1984 that the first symbolically important rapprochement with a direct connection to World War I took place. The image of François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl persisting, despite relentless rain, to humbly shake hands in front of the ossuary at Verdun furnishes a striking chapter in the Franco-German album. It was at Verdun in the year 843 that Charlemagne's empire was divided among his heirs. The apocalyptic battlefields of World War I turned the site into a thorough emblem of the "traditional enmity" between the French and the Germans. Kohl had in fact wanted to take part in the celebrations commemorating the Allied landing at Normandy, but Mitterrand declined and suggested Verdun instead.

Finally, on November 11, 2009 Chancellor Angela Merkel joined French President Nicolas Sarkozy in marking Armistice Day, the peace of 1918, which Schröder had still declined to take part in. Together the two heads of state visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Arc de Triomphe in

Paris and placed a wreath next to the eternal flame. Sarkozy announced that he wished to rename the date “German-French Reconciliation Day” (which did not take place, since a “Franco-German Day” already exists in the calendar: January 22), and the French press declared unanimously that the war of remembrance was over.⁷ In contrast to the unglamorous, deeply sorrowful *Volkstrauertag* in Germany (the people’s day of mourning)—which has since the 1950s inclusively commemorated not just those who die in war but also those who die due to the violence of an oppressive government—Armistice Day in France is a major holiday that solemnly honors soldiers who fell for France during World War I (and only recently, in all wars generally).

Despite these iconic images of reconciliation, the path to a communal memory that rests on the desire to understand the other side without accusations of guilt remains far off. President Gauck’s recent visit to Oradour may well have closed the door on the matter of coming to terms with World War II, but World War I still awaits a similar treatment. Apparently, this polarizing historical moment continues to be too deeply anchored in the national psyche on both sides for the Germans and the French to be able to reach out to each other with enough humility and respect. Next year’s centennial of the start of the conflict could furnish ample occasion for this.

An (almost) normal neighborhood

With each new picture in the Franco-German album, the bilateral relationship comes a step closer to being more natural and, as a consequence, calmer. Over fifty years ago, when Adenauer and de Gaulle attended that religious ceremony together in Reims, a part of the left-leaning press in France considered the form of the reception and the choice of the site to be premature. Kohl and Mitterand’s joint gesture at Verdun caused a certain amount of agitation; the symbolic character of this moment, too, would grow with time. In contrast, it was unlikely that President Gauck’s visit to Oradour-sur-Glane, no matter how moving his speech, would be at the center of much controversy. The French media, unusually united

in acknowledging the momentous character of the occasion, showed deep appreciation of the gestures made by both presidents. The daily *Les Echos* wrote of a “moving and historic” meeting, while the left-oriented newspaper *Libération* reported with the headline “A German-French Communion.” In Germany, too, where Oradour has been largely unknown until now, the news coverage was particularly full of praise.

This is because gestures of rapprochement have meanwhile become largely a matter beyond debate. Such pictures have in the course of time, moreover, also lost some of their raw power; in the context of today’s wide-reaching normalization of Franco-German relations, they are only rarely considered to be historical moments. Now, as before, finding the right tone is hard, but today the fine art of staging gestures of reconciliation has less to do with taking sensitivities into consideration than in arousing any emotions at all.

One of the greatest—if not the greatest—successes of Franco-German rapprochement in the past decades has been the “objectification” of the approach toward mutual awareness—the removal, in other words, of prejudice and emotions from this highly controversial terrain. Regularly conducted surveys make it possible to infer the extent to which this divide has been overcome in the past fifty years. Just two years after the Elysée Treaty was signed, when French citizens were presented with ten nations to rank on a scale of likeability, only 6 percent of those surveyed chose Germany as the most likeable country, while 19 percent considered it to be the least well-liked (the highest percentage in the study).⁸ Today Germany enjoys a completely different image in France; a BBC survey undertaken in May 2013 revealed that 82 percent of the polled French participants had a positive view of their neighboring country.⁹ The fact that the French do not apparently feel anti-German resentment in connection with the European management of the debt crisis—in marked contrast to the feelings currently prevailing in certain southern EU member countries—is also an expression of the degree to which emotion and prejudice have been removed from perception of Germany. Although there have of course been a few instances of verbal

abuse in French politics and media, these have in fact found little resonance in society as a whole.¹⁰

In addition to the many civilian programs for exchange between the two countries, symbolic gestures by high-ranking politicians have contributed to substituting an image of a trustworthy partner for the old stereotype of the threatening neighbor.¹¹ Of course French perception of Germany still contains memories of the war and the Nazi past—a memory that, appropriately enough continues to be conveyed in schools through history books. If the past has not disappeared from French consciousness entirely, however, the importance of such references should not be overestimated. A recent survey conducted by the German embassy in Paris showed that only 6 percent of French respondents spontaneously associated Germany with National Socialism, and only 5 percent with World War II. Of the events associated with Germany that are seen as particularly decisive, the fall of the Berlin Wall and Reunification were at the top of the list (32 percent of respondents). Memories of the war were relegated to second—if certainly not insignificant—place (for 18 percent of all respondents and 30 percent of respondents under the age of 35).¹²

New symbols beyond the battlefields

Even if the image of Germany across the Rhine is now a largely positive and trusting one, it must nonetheless be continually cultivated and reworked. This process of building up trust has only become possible in recent decades because German heads of state and government have continually shown humility and historical sensitivity in the course of such encounters. This is as important for the future as it has been in the past. In this regard, a continuation of the Franco-German “family album” along traditional lines remains of the utmost importance. Alongside this well-functioning dramaturgy, however, the two countries now also have the task of developing a new, common symbolism, one that captures the spirit of “post-reconciliation” and, in doing so, can serve younger generations as a basis for identification.

Overcoming the intense sense of pathos without ignoring the past in the process is of course no easy matter. The Germans and the French have a difficult time giving up a symbolism of reconciliation that has been up until now fixed on common battlefields, as shown for example by the establishment of the Franco-German brigade of 1989. A volume on German and French history was planned for the fortieth anniversary of the Elysée Treaty (January 2003) and in fact appeared in 2006. The book represents an effort to move away from an emotional memorializing of the war experience and toward an educational project with academic credentials. In doing so, it was geared explicitly toward schoolchildren. The development of this three-volume set, which conveys a number of different perspectives on the past, presents the latest struggle over memory in the minds of the people. However, the books do not seem to have found their way into many German and French classrooms; nor did they receive prominent attention in public discourse. As handsome and well-chosen as symbols may be, their effect depends largely on whether or not they are used. It remains to be seen if the Germans and French will embrace their history book in the future.

Images of tandem visits abroad could also help introduce a new dynamic into the iconography of German-French relations. In countries like Germany and France, the discourse of reconciliation and rapprochement is often taken as a given. This is far from the case in other parts of Europe and the world. Particularly in countries currently experiencing strained relations or conflicts with their neighbors, the Franco-German experience can only be perceived as projecting a positive, future-oriented message. French and German citizens can, in turn, learn much from this outside perspective: by leaving familiar territory, they will become more aware not only of the achievements of the past but also of their responsibilities toward the future of the EU. Pictures such as the one that showed European ministers Michael Link and Thierry Repentin on a visit to Croatia in May 2013 are far too rare. Above all, one would like to see many more photographs of heads of state and government making joint appearances abroad. At any rate there is no lack of destinations, whether in regions

where Germany and France cultivate different traditions—North Africa and the Middle East, for example—or areas such as India and China, where they may indeed be economic rivals.

Claire Demesmay is head of the Franco-German relations program at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP); Klemens Kober is a student at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt and at Sciences Po Rennes.
Translation: Miranda Robbins.

Notes

- 1 Hubert Védrine coined the phrase “*post-réconciliation*,” and German foreign minister Joschka Fischer used it in the speech he gave before the French national assembly on January 20, 1999.
- 2 See Henri de Bresson, “Umarmung in Caen,” in: *Spiegel Online* Jahres-Chronik, Hamburg, 12/14/2004, <<http://www.spiegel.de/jahreschronik/a-331559.html>> (accessed 9/14/2013).
- 3 Alfred Grosser, “Les nouveaux rapports franco-allemands,” in: *Revue d’Allemagne* 9/1977, p. 722.
- 4 “Allocution du président de la République à Oradour-sur-Glane,” Oradour-sur-Glane, 9/4/2013 <<http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/allocution-du-president-de-la-republique-a-oradour-sur-glane/>> (accessed 10/1/2013).
- 5 Alfred Grosser, “La Dimension politique de la réconciliation: retour sur le 6 juin 2004,” in: *Visions franco-allemandes* 3/2004, p. 2.
- 6 Symptomatic of this are the strikingly different way that the German-French battles are evaluated on their respective German and French Wikipedia pages.
- 7 Cécile Calla and Claire Demesmay, *Que reste-t-il du couple franco-allemand?*, Paris 2013, p. 77.
- 8 “Das Deutschlandbild der Franzosen,” cited in Manfred Koch-Hillebrecht, *Das Deutschenbild: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Psychologie*, Munich 1977, p. 42.
- 9 “BBC poll: Germany most popular country in the world,” 5/23/2013, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22624104>> (accessed 9/14/2013).
- 10 Claire Demesmay, “Collective Obsession. France’s ‘Germany complex’ and the future of the Paris-Berlin tandem,” in: *IP Journal*, 8/8/2013, <<https://ip-journal.dgap.org/en/ip-journal/topics/collective-obsession>> (accessed 9/14/2013).
- 11 Claire Demesmay and Daniela Heimerl, “Idealismus und Vernunft: Perspektiven zivilgesellschaftlicher Partnerschaft zwischen Deutschland und Frankreich,” in: Martin Koopmann, Joachim Schild, and Hans Stark (eds.), *Neue Wege in ein neues Europa. Die deutsch-französischen Beziehungen nach dem Ende des Kalten Krieges*, Baden-Baden 2013, pp. 161–78.
- 12 Institut français d’opinion publique, “L’image de l’Allemagne en France,” study undertaken on behalf of the German embassy in Paris in January 2010, <http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_30031-1522-1-30.pdf?120126150316> (accessed 9/14/2013).

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Prof. Dr. Eberhard Sandschneider, Otto Wolff-Direktor des Forschungsinstituts der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V. | Rauchstraße 17/18 | 10787 Berlin | Tel.: +49 (0)30 25 42 31-0 | Fax: +49 (0)30 25 42 31-16 | info@dgap.org | www.dgap.org | © 2013 DGAP