



## **Town twinning between France and the GDR (1959-1989)**

Town twinning between France and Germany is – in general – an expression and symbol of civil society initiatives for reconciliation and mutual understanding after the atrocity of the Second World War. We believe that the research done on Franco-West German twinning, even though they have already been the subject of much research, should be complemented by a study on Franco-East German town twinning. The latter remain in the shadows, even though they have always been a significant player in the triangular relations between France and the two German states.

The present research aims to examine seven case studies of municipal partnerships between France and the GDR that were concluded between 1959 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. Therefore the project focuses on continuities, caesuras, parallels as well as differences in the development of the partnerships. The analysis of seven twinning projects serves as a basis for comparison, which makes it possible to make general statements about the development of twinning and to highlight the specific characteristics of individual town twinning. Another aim of the study is to clarify to what extent the partnerships were limited by the Iron Curtain and at what point the actors of these twinning initiatives reached their political and ideological limits.

Significant research has shown that town partnerships between East Germany and France were ostensibly used for political purposes by the leaders of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), particularly for a premature diplomatic recognition by the French government. This study is built on this assumption and examined in a systematic way how the East German towns attempted to forward the image of the “better” Germany in the partner communities. In terms of interest policy, the SED leadership found itself in a fundamental ambivalence regarding the concept of town twinning, as it depended on the one hand on political and social contacts with the West, while on the other hand it feared hostile infiltration from the West through the partnerships. So far, the extent of personal contacts within the town twinings, as well as the perception and criticism of the organizers and participants, have received little attention in scientific research. We asked ourselves to what extent the French municipalities supported the foreign policy efforts of the GDR leadership and how the image of a different and “better” Germany, which the GDR leadership tried to convey, was received by the French participants. The present study assumed a permeability of the Iron Curtain, which allowed an exchange of people and ideas in a limited, politically controlled and ideologically regulated way. The study aspires to know what the exchange and the reality of contacts between citizens of two hostile countries looked like in the context of the Cold War.



Université  
franco-allemande  
Deutsch-Französische  
Hochschule

Another research gap that the study attempted to fill was a comprehensive analysis of the role, influence and intentions of the states, the parties and civil society in France and in the GDR. The analysis of these actors made it possible to trace the political significance of partnerships and decision-making processes in the GDR and in France. A specific interest was placed on the past of French and East German mayors, who had experienced similar moments of resistance, deportation and persecution during the Second World War, because of their communist convictions. For the first time, this study examined the role and influence of the Ministry of State Security on town twinning projects. Although there are analyses of twinning arrangements between France and East German cities over the period of the 1990s, there has not yet been a study of changes and continuities during the period of German unification. Therefore, we analyzed how the collapse of the GDR and German unification affected the communal partnerships, their actors, and their goals.