

TOWN TWINNING IN THE COLD WAR WORLD

Review article

*Kirsi AHONEN,
University of Tampere
The School of Social Sciences
and Humanities
kirsi.ahonen@uta.fi*

Abstract: Town twinning refers to a practice of creating bonds between pairs of towns located in different countries in order to enable interactions between municipalities and townspeople in such fields as culture, education and local development. As an extensive and organized activity, town twinning started in the aftermath of the Second World War to provide material aid to those who had suffered from the war and to promote friendship and mutual understanding between former enemies.

Owing to this kind of background, town twinning contained intrinsic potential for transnational interaction and for bridging divides. Yet from the 1950s, town twinning started to play a role in the cultural Cold War as one of those means which were used in the competition for cultural and political influence by both blocs. In the West, town twinning with western partners was encouraged in order to reinforce its cultural legacy against communism. Along with this kind of a bonding model of twinning, a so called bridging model appeared as relationships were established between East and West bloc towns. Even though East – West twinning activities obviously were characterized by the Cold War spirit of rivalry, they should not merely be considered from the viewpoint of such competition. In accordance with its original idea, town twinning also enabled encounters between people living on the opposite sides of the Iron Curtain and, therefore, the dimension of interaction should not be neglected in the research concerning the Cold War twinning activities.

Key words: town twinning, sister cities, the Cold War, municipal internationalism, transnational interaction

* The author is currently a member of the research project 'Cities and Transnational Interaction. The Cultural Contacts between West and East European Urban Centres during and beyond the Cold War', located at the University of Tampere and funded by the Academy of Finland.

CONFRONTATION AND RIVALRY HAVE USUALLY constituted the starting point for discussion on the cultural contacts between the East and the West during the Cold War era. As a part of the attempts to illuminate more diversified fabric of human and cultural transnational encounters during this period, my article shall focus on an activity that had its background in the post-war efforts to generate peace and understanding between people and provided thus intrinsically a channel for interaction in the Cold War world as well.

This channel, town twinning, represents a special form of municipal internationalism (Ewen and Hebbert 2007, 340). Taking place under the level of governments and high politics, it has sometimes been characterized as municipal or citizen diplomacy. The aim of creating bonds between pairs of towns located in different countries is to enable co-operation between municipalities and townspeople in such fields as culture, education and local development. Twinning is often based on formal agreements and is supposed to be reciprocal. Moreover, the relationships do not limit themselves to single projects but enable a variety of activities on a regular basis. These include the exchanges of official delegations, schoolchildren and students; sports events; theatre, film, dance and musical performances; visits by different kinds of artists, members of professional organizations and hobbyists; festivals and fairs; exhibitions; experiments in the other community's cuisine; the sharing of technical and other expertise and sometimes assistance in the form of material aid, equipment, advice and information (Zelinsky 1991, 3, 27).

Town twinning movement emerged from the human suffering and material devastation caused by the Second World War. Already during the war, some towns started to send material aid to such localities that were badly hit by warfare. The link that was established between British Coventry and Soviet Stalingrad in 1944 is often referred to as the first town twinning. It arose out of the desire of ordinary people of Coventry, who themselves had experienced severe bomb damage, to help others living even in more desperate conditions. Another example of wartime contacts is the connection between Canadian Vancouver and Soviet Odessa, from 1944 as well (Zelinsky 1991, 5–6; Coventry 2012). In addition to these relationships between cities located in the Allies, partnerships were also formed between Nordic municipalities. From 1940, material aid was sent from the towns of the neutral Sweden to Finland that was attacked by the Soviet Union. These contacts between Swedish and Finnish municipalities persisted throughout the war, when Finland continued its fight against the Soviet Union as an ally of Germany, and the post-war reconstruction period.¹

1 From the early 1950s, the nature of these links started to shift from aid to cultural co-operation Korppi-Tommola 1982; (see: Sandberg 1995, 141–142).

Whereas human and material aid had marked the wartime town twinning, another kind of mission emerged when the war was over. Interaction at grassroots level became an important tool when reconciliation was sought between former enemies. The idea of friendship and mutual understanding was also connected with the desire to prevent new wars and this motivated some municipal leaders and private citizens in Western Europe to create contacts with their former enemies in the fields of culture, education, leisure activities and professional life. The first such contacts seem to have been those between British and West German towns, Bristol and Hanover probably forming the first pair in 1947. Other pairs of British – West German and to some extent American – West German municipalities as well followed this example (Weyreter 2003, 37, 40). Nevertheless, the most extensive twinning movement developed between French and West German towns. This Franco – German municipal co-operation started in 1950 with the twinning of French Montbéliard and German Ludwigsburg. The number of twinings between French and West German towns increased rapidly and, at the end of the Cold War, these made up about twelve per cent of all recorded twinings in the world (Campbell 1987, 77–82; Zelinsky 1991, table 3 p. 12–13, table 5 p. 14).

In accordance with the principles of friendship and mutual understanding that were the essence of town twinning, the appellations used in different languages to describe this practice bear the idea of closeness as well. Town twinning and the twin town are expressions used in British English whereas the sister city is the term in North America. Similarly, French *ville jumelée* (twin town) and Russian род-побратим (brother town) refer to kinship while Swedish *vänskapsort*, Finnish *ystävyykskaupunki* and German *Partnerstadt* refer to friendship or companionship.

When the post-war spirit of peace turned into the rivalry between two competing blocs, such ideals as reconciliation and maintaining peace were accompanied by new goals, which draw town twinning into the toolbox of the Cold War. Even though those involved in twinning activities in the West still represented municipal institutions, some of them exercised rather the foreign policies of their governments than acted primarily on the basis of local interests (Bautz 2002, 236ff; Vion 2002; Clarke 2010). This resulted from the all-embracing nature of the Cold War, where rivalries over political influence did not limit to the level of high politics and superpower diplomacy but were also extended to other fields of human action. An essential part of the Cold War was the competition for the hearts and minds of ordinary people. Both blocs emphasized the supremacy of their political system and life style and, therefore, saw the importance of reinforcing their cultural influence inside the bloc as well as of extending it to the other side of Iron Curtain. Concerning the first aim of the cultural Cold War, the most famous example consists of the endeavours of US government to prove to West Europeans the high quality of

American culture, for which it used plenty of money by organizing varied cultural exchanges (Stonor Saunders 1999; Scott-Smith and Krabbendam 2003).

Considering town twinning from the viewpoint of states that have been involved, a distinction between a bridging and a bonding model of twinning provides a fruitful frame for discussing the Cold War twinning activities. The bonding model of twinning refers to cultural and civic exchanges between towns located in countries that can be regarded basically similar, for example countries having the similar political systems or on similar level of economic development. Thus twinings between towns located in the West bloc countries or in developed industrialized countries can be characterized bonding ones. The bridging model, for its part, depicts relationships that are created between towns located in countries that differ from each other for instance in terms of the political system or economic development. Consequently, twinings between towns on different sides of the Iron Curtain or between towns in developed and developing countries can be seen as bridging relationships (Clarke 2010, 177–178, 185–186).

In Western Europe, the bonding model of twinning was predominant and actually favoured by certain forces that promoted and coordinated transnational municipal cooperation. Though local initiative had been decisive for the emergence of town twinning movement, a few international organizations assumed an important role in advancing this activity. One of these, *Council of European Municipalities (CEM)*, believed that by creating and maintaining relations with other West European municipalities the western cultural legacy could be reinforced against communism (Vion 2002, 627–631; Clarke 2010, 175–178). Similarly, from the mid-1950s the United States encouraged its towns to seek twinning partners from the so called free world in order to strengthen American cultural influence there (Zelinsky 1991, 7–8). However, along with the tendency for bonding twinning relations, efforts were made in Western Europe, particularly in France, to create contacts with East block towns as well. On the organizational level, *United Towns Organization (UTO)*, a body originally created for preserving the French language, advocated links between blocs. Such twinings formed a part of its pursuits to orient outside Western Europe, which also included the Third World. Consequently, bridging model can also be discovered in the twinings established by West European municipalities. Yet it is quite obvious that these contacts reflected Cold War politics. On the one hand, West European communists were suspected of using town twinning for their own political purposes in domestic arena. On the other hand, it is probable that sometimes such twinings were motivated by the desire to diffuse western ideas and culture through the Iron Curtain. Still, it is possible that these inter-bloc twinings were, at least partly, motivated by the genuine wish to bridge the political divide and to learn something about each other's culture (Vion

On the Eastern side, the benefits of town twinning were recognized from the mid-1950s. Soviet Union showed interest in establishing contacts with non-socialist countries at the municipal level in order to promote its strategy for peaceful coexistence. At the same time, this provided opportunities for showing socialist achievements and promoting socialist way of life to Western people. Towards the end of the 1950s, German Democratic Republic became active, motivated by the desire for the recognition of its international status (Bautz 2002, 263–264, 333; Weyreter 2003, 41).

Nevertheless, viewing the totality of twinning relations, their vast majority was established between towns located in Western countries. Considering the number of twinings, the most active countries were those where the first initiatives had been taken: France, West Germany, the United States and United Kingdom as well as Nordic countries Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden. None of the socialist countries ranked high with their twinning contacts, Soviet Union coming only 15th and East Germany 19th. Considering partners, the general pattern is that those of western towns in most cases were other western towns. By contrast, from the viewpoint of Eastern bloc, the greater number of their contacts was established with western towns, making up about 60 per cent of their twinings. These relations suggest to a pattern of bridging the Iron Curtain though it is likely that a considerable part of them originated only during the last years of the Cold War (Zelinsky 1991, 8, table 4 p. 13, table 5 p. 14; Weyreter 2003, 40).

The background of town twinning movement with its aim to build bridges between people divided by the hostilities of war prompts to explore Cold War inter-bloc twinings henceforward from the viewpoint of interaction. It might be tempting to bypass town twinning as a less relevant phenomenon and label it as an activity made up of ritualistic performances and superficial contacts exemplified, for instance, by the visits of official delegations. Nevertheless, as town twinning included various kinds of activities which enabled travelling and contacts through the Iron Curtain, the nature of these contacts is not at all self-evident and deserves a closer look. Moreover, it is not self-evident either which kind of role governmental politics played in these activities even in those cases where Cold War cultural policies had contributed to the establishment of twinning relations. There might still have been room for manoeuvring at the municipal level. In any case, in addition to intended consequences, twinning activities may also have had unintended consequences like any human activity.

References

- Bautz, I. 2002. *Die Auslandsbeziehungen der deutschen Kommunen im Rahmen der europäischen Kommunalbewegung in den 1950er und 60er Jahren*. Siegen: Universität Siegen. <http://dokumentix.ub.uni-siegen.de/opus/volltexte/2005/11>.
- Campbell, E. S. 1987. "The Ideals and Origins of the Franco-German Sister Cities Movement." *History of European Ideas* 8 (1): 77–95.
- Clarke, N. 2010. "Town Twinning in Cold-War Britain: (Dis)continuities in Twentieth Century Municipal Internationalism." *Contemporary British History* 24 (2): 173–191.
- Coventry City Council. 2012. "Twin Towns and Cities, Volgograd, Russia." Accessed November 2. http://www.coventry.gov.uk/directory_record/6224/volgograd_russia
- Ewen, S. and Hebbert, M. 2007. "European Cities in a Networked World during the Long 20th Century." *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 25: 327–340.
- Korppi-Tommola, A. 1982. "Ystävyyttä yli Pohjanlahden. Ruotsin ja Suomen välinen kummituntaliike 1942–1980." PhD diss., University of Helsinki.
- Sandberg, S. 1995. "Kommunens internationella kopplingar – vad berättar vänorter och besök om kommunens nätverk?" *Kunnallistieteellinen aikakauskirja* 2: 141–156.
- Scott-Smith, G. and Krabbendam, H. 2003. *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe 1945–1960*. London: Frank Cass.
- Stonor Saunders, F. 1999. *The Cultural Cold War. The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. New York: New York Press.
- Vion, A. 2002. "Europe from the Bottom Up: Town Twinning in France during the Cold War." *Contemporary European History* 11 (4): 623–640.
- Weyreter, M. 2003. "Germany and the Town Twinning Movement". *Contemporary Review*, 281 (Jan. 2003): 37–43.
- Zelinsky, W. 1991. "The Twinning of the World: Sister Cities in Geographic and Historical Perspective." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81 (1): 1–31.

paper reported; 1. 4. 2013.
paper reviewed; 28. 5. 2013.
paper accepted; 5. 7. 2013.