The birth of the community of Europe — Introduction

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_birth_of_the_community_of_europe_introduction-en-2976228d-3bdb-4b12-bf9c-422f64f95667.html
Publication date: 21/05/2013

Introduction

In 1945, Europe was on its knees, bled dry. The United Kingdom and France may well have emerged as victors in the conflict with Hitler's Germany, annihilated and forced to surrender, but Britain, despite the laurels won by resisting the Nazis, was exhausted and in ruins as a result of the war, while France, having been occupied and then partly destroyed by the violence of the fighting, was no longer capable of defending and rebuilding itself without considerable Allied help. As the Cold War dawned, and for the first time in its history, a divided Europe had become dependent on the two undisputed victors in the World War: the United States and the Soviet Union.

Europe, nevertheless, sought to rise again from the ashes and build a future that depended on a peaceful and sustainable solution. Germany and France, hereditary enemies, were at the heart of the plans to establish a new order in Europe. Aware that Britain would oppose a federal Europe, France turned towards its German neighbour. The issue of the coalfields of the Saar and the Ruhr was, however, poisoning relations between the two countries. France was still haunted by the threat posed by Germany. The Ruhr, a stronghold that symbolised Germany's industrial and military might, quickly became a strategic issue of major importance. It was, therefore, placed under the control of the International Authority for the Ruhr (IAR), which, starting from the spring of 1949, controlled the production, export and distribution of the coal, coke and steel from the region. Despite ever-louder protests from Germany, France gained special access to these coal and steel resources that were essential for its own reconstruction.

Determined to find a way out of the deadlock by turning these divisive factors into the ingredients for unity, the French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, made a momentous declaration to the press on 9 May 1950. Inspired by the European plans of another Frenchman, Jean Monnet, General Commissioner of the National Planning Board, he proposed that the joint output of coal and steel in the two countries be placed within the framework of a strong, supranational structure, the High Authority. Designed mainly as a bulwark against a future remilitarisation of Germany and as an effective means of avoiding a steel surplus in Western Europe, this plan for sectoral economic integration created mutual interests that automatically linked the two countries. In practice, it made another Franco-German war impossible. The Schuman Plan also had the advantage of ensuring that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) became firmly anchored in the free, Western world. The plan, which was immediately welcomed enthusiastically by the German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, and then by Italy and the three Benelux countries, led to the signing, on 18 April 1951, of the Paris Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).

The Schuman Declaration is, indeed, a major milestone in the history European unification. It may be seen as the 'birth certificate' of the community of Europe. In essence, the Schuman Plan sought to end centuries of Franco-German hostility, to remedy the shortcomings of the European organisations then in existence and to open the way towards a federation. Just five years after the end of the Second World War, there were great hopes for peace and prosperity in Europe.