

The refusal to ratify the EDC Treaty

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The refusal to ratify the EDC Treaty

Whilst France's five European partners were setting out along the road towards parliamentary ratification of the EDC Treaty, an intense ideological dispute divided most of the French political parties — so much so that Italy decided to wait for the results of the French vote before taking its own decision.

The *Mouvement républicain populaire* (MRP — Popular Republican Movement), led by Robert Schuman, fought for the ratification of the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community (EDC), which it considered to be the decisive step in moving towards federal unity in Europe and the best way to prevent a revival of German nationalism. The supporters of the EDC also saw it as an effective way for European countries to break away from their rather humiliating position as protected, dependent allies, the mere object of competition between East and West. On the other hand, the French Communist Party (PCF) and the *Rassemblement du peuple français* (RPF — Rally of the French People), created by General de Gaulle, combined their efforts to fight against a project which in their eyes meant an unacceptable surrender of national sovereignty and which would once again leave the United Kingdom out of a highly strategic European project. At that time, memories of the Nazi occupation were still strong, and the rearmament of Germany was anathema to many. In addition, Radical, Socialist and independent MPs were split on the issue.

Nor was the international situation favourable to the EDC. Whilst France was suffering serious military setbacks in Indo-China, the nationalist right feared a further weakening of the French army. The death of Stalin in May 1953 and the signature of the armistice ending the Korean War, four months later, seemed to herald a period of détente in which the EDC no longer seemed quite as urgent. Furthermore, strong American pressure for ratification ended up irritating French MPs, who did not want to be told what to do.

In these circumstances, successive French Premiers delayed ratification of a Treaty openly criticised to an increasing extent by the French political community. Weakened by the successive governmental crises of the Fourth Republic, the new government under Mendès France, itself split between those for and those against the EDC, met with considerable difficulties in its efforts to have such a controversial bill adopted. At the eleventh hour, Mendès France, who himself had considerable reservations, even asked his European partners to modify certain aspects of the implementation of the Treaty and make it less supranational, but his efforts proved to be in vain. Not having been able to secure these amendments, Mendès France refused to take the political responsibility of turning ratification of the Treaty into a vote of confidence in his government.

While the Treaty had already been ratified by France's partners, with the exception of Italy, which was ready to do so, the political friction and impassioned debates came to a head on 30 August 1954, when the French National Assembly decided by 319 votes to 264 to postpone discussion of the document that would allow the President to ratify the EDC Treaty. This procedural artifice meant that France had, in effect, rejected the proposal for a European army that it had instigated. For the federalists, the 'crime of 30 August' was the end, for the moment at least, of a process favourable to supranationality in Europe.

France's course of action met with considerable consternation in Western Europe and the United States. The disappointment was intense and required a rapid response. France, which had for many years been the champion of the European cause, found itself seriously discredited by its refusal to ratify the EDC Treaty. The establishment of Western European Union (WEU) on 23 October 1954 provided but a feeble substitute for the EDC, and from 5 May 1955 German rearmament went ahead regardless, despite France's reservations, under the auspices of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). It was not until the Messina Declaration of 1955 that the process of European integration was able to resume.