

'The Saar votes no' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (25 October 1955)

Caption: On 25 October 1955, the German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung comments on the outcome of the referendum on the Saar Statute held on 23 October 1955 and analyses the repercussions of the vote on Franco–German relations.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. FRIEDMANN, Werner; GOLDSCHAGG, Edmund; SCHÖNINGH, Dr.Franz Josef; SCHWINGENSTEIN, August ; Herausgeber FRIEDMANN, Werner. 25.10.1955, n° 253; 11. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "Das Nein an der Saar", auteur:Fackler, Maxim , p. 1.

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The Saar votes no

by Maxim Fackler

The result of the referendum in the Saar is unambiguous — that is one of the merits of an event that has stirred so many passions and left so many unanswered questions in its wake. The Saar Statute has been rejected by a solid two-thirds majority, a result achieved in the context of an exceptionally high turnout: it is rare indeed for 96 % of the electorate to go to the polls. The Statute drafted by the politicians has been swept away on a flood tide of ‘no’ votes. The victory is overwhelming, even though no one can say just what the immediate practical consequences of this rejection will be. The Saar will go to the polls again to elect a new Land Parliament, and from that Parliament a new government will emerge. It will be a government of those who rejected the Saar Statute, in other words a government that favours reintegration with Germany. It is that government, first and foremost, that will now have to work with France, because the vote against the Statute has in no way altered the status quo. The fact that rejection of the Statute can be seen as an act of revenge against Grandval will not discharge the protagonists of rejection from the duty to do business with Grandval’s successors. It is true, of course, that the victors are no longer talking quite the same language as they did on the eve of the referendum. Today, they are wondering how their cause has actually benefited from the rejection. Reaction in France covers the whole spectrum, to the bleakest depths of pessimism — pessimism not only about the developments in the Saar but also about the future of Germany, which in effect means the future of Europe as a whole. In tones of mingled shock and anxiety, the French are asking themselves where they stand now — does it mean the Germans again? In this climate of opinion, the need to restore a basis for peaceful coexistence between the Saarlanders and the French is the first clear consequence of the rejection of the Statute.

Anyone who was in favour of the Saar Statute and is now lamenting its rejection will have to consider very carefully why it was actually rejected. Were the supporters of the Statute just daydreaming? Was the Statute an illusion, a mistake, a political error or even a trick, as its opponents claimed? Words like ‘patriotism’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘chauvinism’, difficult enough to define and distinguish anyway, became hopelessly confused in the course of the Statute referendum campaign. Objective arguments took a back seat, while emotions seized the limelight. There was a severe lack of mature consideration of what would be the best result for the Saar. May the reason have been that mature consideration actually played too large a part in the signing of the Saar Agreement? Although even Adenauer and Mendès France recognised that no understanding could be reached between Germany and France that did not involve at least some emotional aspects, the subsequent signing of the Saar Agreement was nevertheless a pure act of will. It was a gesture of understanding between neighbours, yet it was a gesture made exclusively between governments: their respective peoples were essentially uninvolved. But the Saarlanders then became involved through the referendum — were, indeed, directly called upon to sit in judgment over the act of will between the two governments — and this necessarily gave a powerful stimulus to their emotions, all the more so since they had not previously enjoyed the freedom to determine their own political existence. Their inner commitment now boiled over, and their attitude became tough and, to a high degree, anti-French.

The Statute itself was responsible for this hardening of attitudes in so far as it asked the people for a simple acceptance or rejection of the solution it offered but made no mention of union with Germany. The Saarlanders either did not believe or did not fully understand that the Statute had been conceived only as a temporary solution: French statements on the subject had helped to persuade them that it would be a permanent arrangement. As a consequence, eventually, two-thirds of the Saarlanders did not want it. But as they also regarded the status quo as obsolete — and on this point all those in favour of the Statute agreed with them — and because they were weary of seeing Johannes Hoffmann clinging to office as Prime Minister, the tone frequently became strident. It no longer mattered to them that Hoffmann would have to go even if the Statute were accepted. It was this that we referred to during the referendum campaign as the ‘reversal of fronts’. A further point was that the Statute was hardly a masterpiece of accurate drafting. It was clearly apparent that the draftsmen had been working under pressure of time; and no subsequent attempt was made to improve upon what had been negotiated in the nightly discussions between Adenauer and Mendès France at La Celle-Saint-Cloud. With hindsight, it seems that the critical error was probably asking the people to decide upon a *temporary solution*. Is not this taxing democracy beyond the limits of its

capabilities? We are not arguing in favour of treating human beings as pawns or saying that the governments should have imposed their will over the heads of the Saarlanders — but we do ask, as a question of conscience, whether a democratic principle was not overstretched here.

Today, when all kinds of questions of conscience are being asked in an attempt to determine what went wrong, both supporters and opponents of the Statute are asking themselves who — apart from Prime Minister Hoffmann — really suffered a defeat when it was rejected. France? The West German Chancellor? Europe? For many Frenchmen, the experience is a painful one: they are coming to realise that they had devoted themselves to what was an optical illusion; they believed in all seriousness that France had gained such a foothold in the Saar during the ten years since the war that the Saarlanders were ready and willing to abandon any thought of full reintegration with Germany. Now, confrontation with the truth gives them palpitations, makes them a prey to new fears of everything to do with the untrustworthy Germans. Probably, the French never clearly perceived that, although the tightening grip of French officialdom upon the Saar was tacitly tolerated at first by the Allies (though not by the Soviet Union), a claim to compensation for the evils suffered as a result of Hitler's onslaught did not automatically give them a legal right to help themselves to territory by way of reparation. Regarding Gilbert Grandval — of whom we simply could not bring ourselves to say a kind word on his departure from Saarbrücken — as the right man for the job was a misapprehension that, curiously enough, seemed to afflict much of the political leadership in Paris. The assurance (given by Mrs Dominique Auclères of *Le Figaro* in this newspaper) that no one in France had any doubt that the Saar was German could not alter the fact that Grandval gave the Saarlanders little freedom to follow their own inclinations in the matter.

A defeat for Adenauer? Or a defeat for Europe? The two questions must be answered jointly. The conclusion of the Saar Agreement was, as we have said, an act of will, designed to bring about an understanding between France and Germany on this specific point, enabling European affairs to move forward. One major issue on the table at that time was the founding of the Western European Union, the successor in part to the European Defence Community. It was this issue that brought the Saar Statute into being — in other words, it was *a means to an end*. The Western European Union then declared its willingness to take the Saar under its protection. Whether it could be not just a military alliance but also a political community was to be determined by the results of its custody of the Saar. The Saar Statute was thus, in a sense, a vehicle to carry forward the European idea. Although that vehicle failed to meet with the approval of the Saarlanders themselves, that was far from marking the demise of the European idea. Since the beginning of the struggle for the Saar, we have warned against regarding 'Europe' as dead and buried if the Statute were to be rejected. Either the European consciousness is alive or it is not. If it is viable, it will survive the setback in the Saar.

The heaviest impact of that setback has been upon relations between Germany and France. How could it be otherwise? As far as those relations are concerned, the clock now has to be put back a considerable way. Adenauer and Faure may have exchanged encouraging telegrams over the grave of the Saar Statute, but that was little more than a gesture: with the Geneva Conference in the offing, the two leaders did not want to see Molotov as a complacent bystander. Although Paris is also saying that the 'no' vote has brought a new situation into being, there are many issues to be resolved before these words can be translated into further deeds: discussions within France on further elections and developments in North Africa.

We regarded the mistaken striking of the European note in the Saar Statute and the referendum campaign as one of the half-measures attendant upon the Franco-German settlement. We could have pointed out other defects, too, yet even so we did regard the Statute as a viable transitional arrangement. Sunday's decision was in the negative — doubly so, in our view. The first negative was the quantifiable 'no' vote by a two-thirds majority; but the second was a vote against what was *not* incorporated in the Statute. By that yardstick, what the Statute was supposed to offer was held to be worthless. But even the pro-German factions suggested, at least in the early stages of the referendum campaign, that they certainly did not expect a rejection of the Statute to result in immediate union with Germany. And Hoffmann's fate would have been sealed by the Land parliament elections on 4 December, if not before. The Statute was intended to reduce French hegemony over the Saar, to progress gradually to a point where an act of will between governments became the will of their peoples, and to persuade those peoples that they must have patience with one

another. Now, all of this has to be reconsidered, and we cannot regard that as a happy outcome.