

'De Gaulle's Continental barrier' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (18 May 1967)

Caption: On 18 May 1967, the German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung criticises the decision taken by General de Gaulle, who, the previous day, had again declared his opposition to the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. Dürrmeier, Hans ; R Herausgeber Proebst, Hermann. 18.05.1967, Nr. 118; 23. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "De Gaulles Kontinentalsperre", auteur: Birnbaum, Immanuel, p. 4.

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De Gaulle's Continental barrier

by Immanuel Birnbaum

Admirers and critics in turn have said of the French President that he embodies his country's main historical figures. With his policy on Europe, Charles de Gaulle is at present reminiscent above all of Napoleon I when he was bent on consolidating France's hegemony in Europe by closing the Continent to British trade. The means have become more peaceful in the meantime. The President does not oppose new negotiations on the subject of UK accession to the European Economic Community. But he has made it quite plain that he neither promises nor seriously wishes such negotiations any success in the foreseeable future. The island kingdom is still too closely linked to the United States in his estimation, and its economic structure does not yet 'qualify' for Europe. One can only wonder whether France's leader truly wishes his British neighbour to reach the entrance standard in the near future.

For de Gaulle has a further series of arguments against the admission of the British, and for that matter of the Scandinavians, as full members of the EEC. Incorporating such states would, in his opinion, change the nature of the Common Market. The laboriously achieved market regulations could not be maintained in their present form. Although he does not actually say it, the message coming from him is that France is no longer interested in an extended Community, one that would lead to a kind of enlarged Free Trade Area.

To ascribe this attitude to the kind of old-fashioned nationalism that never looks beyond a country's own borders would be to do the General an injustice. De Gaulle is, in his own way, a sincere European — in the same way as his predecessor Napoleon. He wants to press on with the task of uniting the Continent, but only on condition that it remains under French leadership. That is why he no longer wanted a good European like Walter Hallstein, himself also averse to any loosening of the Brussels Community, to continue to head the EEC Commission. According to the former French Ambassador, André François-Poncet, Hallstein more than once subordinated the interests of his own country to those of the European cause. But he was not prepared to be a vehicle for French policy and therefore left Brussels of his own accord.

The successor does not have to be a Frenchman. The EEC statutes, which require decisions to be taken unanimously in important matters, will always tip the scales in favour of whichever Member State is prepared, if necessary, to say 'no'. Neither the Federal Republic of Germany, nor Italy, nor again the Benelux countries are prepared to go that far. But France has already shown, in leaving NATO, that it is ready to go the whole way if the worst comes to the worst.

It is the claim to actual, not formal, leadership that is ultimately moving the French President to keep Great Britain out of the Common Market. If a Briton were to become the seventh member of the present Community of the Six, there would be two powers with equally high ambitions. This is why Harold Wilson, despite all his concessions and friendly overtures, has been unable to change de Gaulle's mind. His offer to unconditionally accept the EEC's Rome Treaties had as little impact at the Élysée as his assurance that London's foreign policy was independent of the world powers. The only effect has been for de Gaulle to switch from the polemic broadsides to which he subjected Harold Macmillan to an ironic mildness. But 'the other mainly hears the "no".'

Well, Wilson will now also have to make out he is hard of hearing. His membership request has been submitted and can no longer be withdrawn, especially as de Gaulle has not rejected discussion of this request. Since the passable success of the Kennedy Round, and the resulting lower customs barriers between mainland Europe and the sterling and dollar zones, it has become somewhat easier for Wilson to await the final decision from Brussels. The waiting can obviously not go on for much longer, with EEC transitional provisions coming to an end in 1970. But Wilson still has some strong arguments up his sleeve to show that the British economy would not be marrying into the European family without a dowry. The production capacity of the Six for supranational technical projects has already proven insufficient in certain cases and France has already had to look for partners in eastern Europe in particular instances. For other projects, they could also be found across the Channel.