

# Johannes Hoffmann, The Saar's European vocation


**Caption:** In January 1951, in the journal Notre Europe, Johannes Hoffmann, Prime Minister of the Saar, outlines the historical background of the Saar and emphasises the economic and political role that the Saar region intends to play at European level.

**Source:** Notre Europe. dir. de publ. Ray, Marcel. Janvier-Février 1951, n° 2. Strasbourg: Société européenne d'éditions et de publications. "Vocation européenne de la Sarre", auteur:Hoffmann, Johannes , p. 27-31.

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## The Saar's European vocation

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There are two facts which dominate the Saar question: firstly, the region's position between France and Germany, and secondly, its possible role in a European context.

The historical circumstances which shaped its destiny are those of all border regions which, over the centuries, have found themselves included within the boundaries of first one and then another of the powerful States which have fought over them, always coveting them while remaining suspicious of them. The geographical situation of the Saar is like that of Lorraine, another industrialised region and also the possessor of reserves of iron ore which both the French and German steel industries need. As for the Saar's racial and cultural affinities, they are essentially Germanic.

The Saar has been in existence in its current formation since 1919. The Treaty of Versailles wanted France to be given compensation for the damage caused to its coal mines during the First World War, and so the Saar Region was created with that in mind. It consisted of the Saar's coal deposits, together with its accompanying iron and steel industries, along with a 'hinterland' from which most of the required labour force could be recruited. The Saar Region was created from part of the Prussian Rhine Province and, to a lesser extent, the Bavarian Rhenish Palatinate.

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The area covered by the present Saar corresponds more or less with the original entity created in 1919, plus a narrow corridor towards the west, intended to provide a direct link between the Saar and Luxembourg. In addition, a few minor adjustments have been made to the initial border line, for practical reasons.

The composition of the population has varied little. Following the end of hostilities in 1945, some elements from outside the region either departed voluntarily or were eliminated. Otherwise, the Saar was lucky enough to escape the influx of assorted foreigners which neighbouring Germany had to cope with. It has to be said that, so far, its own labour force, of which almost 100 % are employed, has been enough to meet its needs. The population consists of a base layer formed by the original native inhabitants, who predominate chiefly in the agricultural areas. Then in the industrialised areas and in Saarbrücken there are those people who arrived around 1890, when the area became industrialised, and who came from the neighbouring Prussian or Palatinate regions in the case of the blue-collar workers, and from all the Prussian provinces in the case of their managers. This generation of immigrants is in the process of disappearing. They are gradually being replaced by their descendants, who were born in the Saar. For the rest, recent political upheavals have ensured that, since 1945, others have ended up here along with those Saarlanders who remained, such as exiles from the Nazi regime and those who were scattered throughout the former *Reich* as a result of their official positions or jobs.

The Saar as a State was born at the end of 1947. In addition to administrative, social and judicial autonomy, it increasingly began to obtain political autonomy as well. The conventions recently signed with France are a tangible sign of this.

Geographically, the Saar is situated between France and Germany, two great European States who, for a long time and by definition, were adversaries and rivals within that continent. From the very first, however, those who were in control of the new Saar were convinced, as was the authorised representative of France, that their very *raison d'être* was first and foremost to bring about reconciliation and entente between their two powerful neighbours. With good reason the Saar is described as a bridge, a meeting place, a link. All of these images express, with varying degrees of success, the desire on the part of the people of the Saar to be unstinting in their efforts to bring about a union between the two great nations whose fate they share. It is, therefore, only natural that the Saar Government should not want to do anything to jeopardise this essential entente.

Seen from this angle, economic union with France is in line with the practical requirements of the Saar's geographical location. The Saar Basin and the Lorraine Basin are essentially just different parts of the same whole. On the other hand, preserving the Saar's cultural traditions and its own ways and customs will guarantee its liberty at a more human level. These are the basic aspirations of the peoples who are regarded as being at the starting point of the paths adopted by those who govern them. In the case of the Saar, the appropriate and secure method adopted by High Commissioner Gilbert Grandval, representing a France which is understanding despite its own misfortunes, and the active willingness of the Saar Government, have already obtained conclusive results.

Admittedly, it was initially not easy for West Germany to admit that the Saarlanders' opinion was the right one. In many cases, sentimental factors and memories of a policy which we hoped had been superseded have stood in the way of objective judgment. At the present time, however, it is recognised, just as much in Bonn as in Paris, that the experience of the Saar, despite all the difficulties which have been overcome or which are yet to be overcome, is the first tangible sign of successful cooperation between economies and administrations of differing structures.

Great Britain's attitude towards the Saar, like that of the United States, enabled representatives of the Saar Diet, or Parliament, to join the European Consultative Assembly in Strasbourg, at the same time and on the same basis as the representatives of the Federal Republic of Germany, i.e. as representatives of associate members. Since then the delegates have been invited to sit in on the work of the Committee of Ministers in Rome. Consequently, in the logical scheme of things, de facto situations seem to be heading, in the shorter or longer term, towards a de jure situation. The most deeply held belief of the people of the Saar is precisely that their own fate is closely bound up with the definitive creation of a united and peaceful Europe. The League of Nations, which from 1919 to 1935 was responsible for the administration of the Saar Region, had hoped to achieve this same goal through bilateral or multilateral conventions and by diplomatic means. We know only too well that, despite a promising beginning, it failed in the task which it had set itself.

The Council of Europe, learning from this experience, placed alongside the Committee of Ministers, which is a direct manifestation of national governments, the Consultative Assembly, consisting of representatives of elected parliaments. This provision enabled the Saar Diet, to the great satisfaction of the Saarlanders, to be represented in Strasbourg. Its appointed representatives are acting in the spirit of the overwhelming majority of the electorate when they emphasise the urgent need to establish a European governing body of a supranational nature.

However, the greatest minds will never succeed in convincing individual nations of the immediate need for general coordination if the interests of individual States do not give way to the inevitable requirements of a European community.

In Rome, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has just ratified the Human Rights Convention which resulted from the work of the new organisation. Mr Joseph Bech, President of the Council of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, was able to say that this declaration guaranteed the existence of his country. The Saar shares this opinion on its own account, because, despite the differences in their respective situations, the Saarlanders have voted by an overwhelming majority in favour of autonomy.

The Saar knows for a fact that its destiny will be determined, in the first instance, by the nature of the relationship between France and Germany. In this sense, the success of the Schuman Plan would, from now on, prevent any economic friction. The work which has been completed by common agreement in the Saar over the last five years has shown us that all obstacles can be overcome thanks to a willingness which knows not only how to discuss but also how to act, and which refuses to be discouraged.

The existence of an autonomous Saar, especially at the outset, may have given rise to apprehension and to concern both in the French camp and in the German camp directly involved, but as the real situation has become known, those apprehensions have started to calm down, in spite of reluctance on the part of some hardened opponents.

If Western nations are right in declaring the need to defend their common heritage and the benefits of a civilisation which, for centuries, has been the yeast or leaven of human progress, then it is obvious that this is possible only on condition that individuals and peoples are allowed the freedom to act each within his own sphere, for the good of the public interest.