

'The Saar, a "Europeanised" territory?' from La Libre Belgique (11 August 1952)

Caption: On 11 August 1952, in an article published in the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique, the Belgian Senator Paul Struye considers the repercussions that the Franco-German dispute over the territory of the Saar has for the progress of European unity.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 11.08.1952, n° 224; 69e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "La Sarre, territoire "européisé" ?", auteur:Struye, Paul , p. 1.

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The Saar,

A 'Europeanised' territory?

Reports in Belgium that Robert Schuman had said that a solution to the Saar issue was essential before the Coal and Steel Community could operate smoothly appear to have been somewhat exaggerated.

The truth is that the distinguished French statesman, like everyone else, would like to see an end to the poisoning of Franco-German relations — and, by the same token, the entire European climate — by the nagging problem of the Saar, and that he believes a satisfactory solution would greatly facilitate the start-up of the Community. But there is no reason to suppose Schuman believes the Community would be doomed to impotence if the efforts to solve the Saar issue failed.

In any case, it is certain that the outcome of the current negotiations will, to some extent, be a test of the progress of the European idea in the public mind.

There is often a striking contrast between the generous aspirations for European unity shown in countless speeches, conference resolutions and demonstrations by youth movements, and the obstinate nationalistic resistance to every practical proposal.

The teething troubles of the Coal and Steel Community have provided more than one example of this. The failure of the six Member States to reach agreement on the seat of the institutions — a secondary issue that had already been discussed at length — was a telling illustration of the gap between theory, that is the idea of Europe, and practice, i.e. actual achievements involving national sacrifices.

The way in which the use of languages within the Community was settled at the last meeting in Paris calls for similar comment.

We know now that the Community will use four official languages: French, German, Italian and Dutch. Furthermore, the language of proceedings before the Court of Justice will be that of the defendant.

From the Belgian perspective, it would obviously be bad grace to complain about a solution that places both our national languages on an equal footing with those of the other Member States. For us, it is the perfect solution. From a European perspective, however, we are moving further and further away from the idea of unity. The Council of Europe, with 15 member countries, has only two official languages. The Community of the Six will have four.

In another connection, is it not significant — and disappointing — that, although Belgium has joined, at least at government level, the European Defence Community of which Germany is a member, our country still has not managed to obtain from the Bonn Government a satisfactory solution to the tiny but symbolic problem of the adjustment of our eastern borders?

What exactly is the border issue?

Belgium has long abandoned all annexationist ambitions. Although certain historical arguments could have been put forward in support of territorial claims to regions that were part of our provinces for centuries, we wisely refused to go down that road. Our claims are limited to a few patches of woodland and grassland that would give us a rational frontier and put a stop to irksome border conflicts, in the obvious interest of neighbourly relations between the two countries.

The Allies had recognised the validity of these minimal claims. Nevertheless, in a supreme gesture of reconciliation, the Belgian Government of 1949 thought it best to refrain temporarily from taking possession of the greater part of the tiny pieces of territory the Allies had granted us. Belgium was entitled to expect that Germany would acknowledge this gesture by immediately concluding an amicable bilateral agreement granting the small adjustments Belgium was still requesting, which were, moreover, in the true interest of

both parties.

Three years later, Belgium is still waiting ... Is it not incredible that Germany, which aspires, so we are told, to become part of a European Federation, has been unable, for three years, to find the time to propose a rational and fair solution to this minor problem of neighbourly relations?

The Saar affair raises similar issues, but the fact that they are on a larger scale makes them much more difficult to solve.

France does not wish to annex or gallicise the Saar, which it recognises to be fundamentally Germanic. But it values the economic union it has created with this territory, which is complementary to neighbouring Lorraine, and it argues — with reason — that this union has given an economic boost to the Saar, that it seems warranted by the geography of the area, and that the majority of the inhabitants of the Saar declare themselves pleased with it.

Germany, on the other hand, considers the Saar an integral part of the German homeland, and the separatists currently in power are considered as traitors.

Could 'Europeanisation' of the territory be the basis for a solution acceptable to all parties?

At first glance, Europeanisation would be nothing but a label — others say a camouflage — for the present autonomy arrangement, which is geared towards France and is considered by Germany as a permanent threat to its territorial integrity.

If, however, Europeanisation were feasible and put into practice, it is hard to imagine what would prevent the people of the Saar from one day deciding to return to the German fold. It would be paradoxical if the inhabitants of a 'Europeanised' territory were the only Europeans prohibited until the end of time from freely determining their own fate.

But perhaps these objections are not decisive. The further clarifications that Bonn has requested of Paris will probably give us, in the next few days, a clearer idea of the chances of success of what looks like an attractive proposition.

Paul Struye