

'The status of the Saar' from the Internationale Spectator (21 September 1949)


Caption: On 21 September 1949, the Dutch journal Internationale Spectator comments on the economic and political situation of the Saar and on its implications for France and the fledgling Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

Source: Internationale Spectator. 21.09.1949, n° 19. 's-Gravenhage: Het Nederlandsch Genootschap voor Internationale Zaken. "De status van de Saar", auteur:M.M. , p. 4-8.

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The status of the Saar

The history of the Saar is testament to the fact that it is a typical border region. France and Germany have repeatedly invoked their historical rights to this German-speaking region. At the Paris Peace Conference in March 1919, after the First World War, neither Woodrow Wilson nor David Lloyd George were willing to accept the historical claim by France, voiced by André Tardieu (France had lost the Saar in the Treaty of Paris in 1815), in which they saw no basis for lasting peace. However, France acquired economic rights in the Saar region in the Treaty of Versailles: the right to own and exploit the coal mines (reducing the compensation payable by Germany), whilst the area over which Germany retained sovereignty was placed under the control of a League of Nations Governing Commission¹⁾ consisting of a Frenchman, a Saarlander and three members, who must not be either French or German. It was stipulated that a plebiscite would be held in 1935 to decide to which country the Saar should belong.

From 1925 (after the meeting between Gustav Stresemann and Aristide Briand in Locarno), the Germans were already aiming at international exploitation of the Saar mines. Official talks were held on the issue a few years later, but they achieved nothing since there was too much resistance in France to any premature relinquishment of those rights. At the same time pro-German feeling in the Saar region was on the increase, especially after Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. Whereas in 1922 half the *Landesrat* was still made up of Catholic centre supporters, one quarter of German communists and one tenth of socialists, the proportions altered after 1933 and the pro-German group, the German Front, which the Catholics joined (and which was funded by leading industrialists) gained an overwhelming majority.

On the other side was the Freedom Front, which was in favour of the status quo. The third possibility, to become part of France, had only limited support.

In the plebiscite on 13 January 1935, 90.3 % of the 477 000 votes were for Hitler's Germany. On 1 March the region became part of Germany. The mines were returned to Germany in exchange for 900 million francs, payable in five years. Before the end of that period, war broke out. From June 1940 Germany made the Saar, Lorraine and part of the Palatinate Westmark under Gauleiter Josef Bürckel, with the Saar again attached to its natural hinterland, Lorraine. The prosperity of the Saar region could not be assured without the ore from the Lorraine mines. In contrast to the situation after 1935, the country experienced economic growth despite (or perhaps because of) the mobilisation of the Saar-Lorraine industries for the great German war machine. In fact the sale and supply of various products were mandatory.

American troops entered the Saar region in March 1945; French troops then took over the occupation three months later and the Saar region became part of the French occupied zone in Germany. The military governor was Colonel Gilbert Grandval, a resistance leader during the war and one of the most able figures in France. He controlled the regional government and parliament with the help of a Committee of Seven.

French plans

However, France had other aims for the Saar. The Saarlanders saw the great benefits that the French could bring, and by April 1946 the regional leaders of the two main German parties, the CDU and the SPD, and the central trade union sent a telegram to the Foreign Ministers meeting in Paris, asking for reunification of the French and Saarland economy. That was discussed at the 'big four' conference in May 1946. France wanted the Saar region to be part of its economic system, but did not want political annexation. The political status of the Saar would only be decided in the peace treaty with Germany.

Georges Bidault met with opposition from both James F. Byrnes and Ernest Bevin, who favoured a central German authority. This was discussed on various occasions, for instance in Paris in July 1946. Eventually the American General Joseph McNarney was instructed to exclude the Saar from any agreements on a merger of the French and American zones, and Byrnes agreed that the Saar should be removed from central control. Bevin endorsed the French proposals in the interests of the people of the Saar. The Saarlanders expressed their agreement in the local elections in September 1946, 90 % voting in favour of the 'economic union parties'.

The initial result of these initiatives by the French and the Saarlanders was Order 75/76 issued by the French commander in Germany on 20 December 1946, with a provisional regulation 'to promote food supplies for the Saarlanders'. This provided for the establishment of a customs system along the borders of the Saar region with Rhenish Palatinate, Baden and Württemberg from 22 December. A document from the French administrative authorities was needed to cross the border, and rules were introduced on traffic in money and goods. From then on, conditions in the Saar steadily improved. That was reflected in coal production, which in 1945 was 11 000 tons per day, in 1946, before the introduction of the customs cordon, 22 000, and in 1947 30 000.

New constitution

In 1947 a constitution was adopted by a constitutional committee, which met from June to September and was set up on the basis of the September 1946 elections (with 18 to 2 (comm.) votes), in which the Saar asked for autonomy, with France representing it abroad, and integration with the French economy. That included political separation from Germany.

The preamble to the constitution expresses the wishes of the Saarlanders as follows:

The people of the Saar,
Called upon to reconsider the principles of its culture, politics, economy and society after the collapse of the German Reich;
Convinced that its existence and development are ensured by the organic integration of the Saar into the economy of the French Republic;
Relying on an international Statute that will provide the basis for its existence and recovery;
Bases its future on an economic merger and on unity of the monetary and customs affairs of the Saar region and the French Republic, from which derive:
The political independence of the Saar from the German Reich;
Responsibility of the French Republic for defence of the territory and the foreign relations of the region with other countries;
The application in the Saar region of French laws relating to monetary and customs regulations;
The assignment to a representative of the Government of the French Republic of legislative power to guarantee customs and currency unity, together with a general right of scrutiny of compliance with the Statute.
A legal system established in order to ensure uniformity of the administration of justice as required under the Statute.
Accordingly the Saar Parliament, freely chosen by the people;
In order to give binding expression to these wishes;
In order — after departing from a system that violated and subjugated human personality — to establish lasting freedom, humanity, law and morality as fundamental principles of a new state, whose task is to become a step in the rapprochement between nations and, God willing, to serve the cause of world peace, has adopted the following constitution:...

This Constitution of 122 articles, which was at the same time the new constitution and the basis for mutual relations between France and the Saar region (in accordance with the agreement of 15 December 1946), came into force after the vote on 5 October 1946, in which 96 % took part, with a corresponding majority for the CDU and SPD as in 1946.

The Constitution was not an international statute, as the League of Nations constitution was at the time, but a reciprocal agreement between France and the Saar approved by the Allies.

Under international law, the Saar had no statute until the German peace treaty was signed.

Introduction of the franc

In the meantime the French franc was introduced in the Saar region on 20 November 1947, based on 2 000 francs to 100 old Reichsmarks, equivalent to about 6 dollars²⁾, with all assets exchangeable. That opened the whole French market up to the Saarlanders and they increasingly became the pampered offspring amongst the Germans. In particular there was a sharp contrast between conditions in the French zone and in the Saar region. The economic separation of that region from the French zone was one reason why the French questioned the inclusion of West Germany in the Marshall Plan.

The Saar region and Lorraine were once again joined by the economic and financial union. 40% of the steel

is processed in the Saar, and 60 % is to be exported to Italy, Africa, South and South-East Asia. Since coal and steel from the Ruhr are cheaper than those from the Saar, Germany is not a market.

The question is, in fact, whether the French will actually benefit just as much from economic union as the Saarlanders, and whether they are changing from sellers to buyers, in view of their considerable reconstruction needs and their costly development of the Saar (The Times, 5 September 1949).

At the moment the Saarlanders are in a favourable position. Although workers in the Saar have the right to strike, they have not been involved in any strike action in France. The Communists and their propaganda have very little influence.

On the other hand, the old Nazi element is still widespread and the rapid emancipation of the Saarlanders has perhaps not helped to eradicate this, less as an ideology than as a state of mind. Time will tell how deserving the Saarlanders are of the development opportunities offered to them.

It remains to be seen whether the Saarlanders will be homesick for their former fatherland as West Germany recovers economically and becomes a new state. For the time being, it seems that they have really learned their lesson from the ten years between 1935 and 1945.

Rapprochement in other areas

The French have their own opinions.

When is a German no longer a German? The French say it is when he is a Saarlander. For France, the future of the Saar region is as a small autonomous state (it still has a population of less than 900 000), and the Saarlanders themselves feel that they are Germans who have to be a model for mutual understanding between France and Germany. According to the *New York Herald Tribune*, in the Saar region the German problem seems understandable and almost soluble. Living on the border, the people of the Saar have more experience and adaptability than other Germans, and it is certainly not purely because of the material advantages that the Saarlanders have friendly relations with the French occupying force, now no longer an occupying force.

Since January 1948 Colonel Grandval has been High Commissioner and the region has been under French civil control. Legally, the Saar has not been an occupied zone since then.

At the same time an agreement was signed between France and the Saar on the administration of justice, as provided for in the Statute.

Since the 1947 elections the Saar has had its own parliament, consisting of 28 Christian Democrats, 17 Social Democrats, 3 Democrats and 2 Communists. The Government is a coalition between the CDU and the SPD. The Prime Minister is the Christian Democrat Johannes Hoffmann, who fled to France at the time of the *Anschluss*.

In contrast to the situation after the First World War, the French are certainly not simply seeking an economic relationship. According to General Grandval, the success of the Nazis in the 1935 elections was mainly due to the fact that the French paid insufficient attention to intellectual and moral concerns at the time.

In the new Constitution the desirability of cultural links is established in Article 30:

‘The history of the Saar and its political development make it an obligation for all schools to develop a spirit of reconciliation between nations. In the context of Christian and European culture, they shall teach German culture and shall foster the development of cultural relations between France and the territory of the Saar by teaching the French language’.

The French are cultivating these mutual relations deliberately and actively. The border with Germany is virtually closed to Saarlanders, most of whom have relatives there, and this creates discontent. German newspapers are rarely seen. On the other hand, French universities provide study bursaries, a university has been set up in the ruins of Saarbrücken and a conservatory in Homburg, plays and concerts are promoted, and so on.

This policy plays a part in gradually influencing the views of the Saarlanders, although they have already been strongly criticised by their fellow Germans.

Yet the French consistently say that they do not want to annex the Saar politically. Opinion is divided within the parties as regards its final status. On 22 August Guy Mollet, Secretary-General of the French Socialist Party (SFIO), stated in Strasbourg that the Saar region should certainly remain linked to France economically, but it must be part of Germany politically. The Popular Republican Movement (MRP) is in favour of political independence for the Saar.

Admission to the Council of Europe

Where political separation from Germany is now a fact, whilst overall political status cannot be resolved legally for the time being, the Council of Europe, whose Statute expressly provides for the possibility of including non-sovereign states, offers an opportunity for the Saar region, whose foreign relations are being looked after by France, to be admitted as a de facto autonomous state. The debate on the admission of West Germany gave France the opportunity to intervene on behalf of the Saar. On 11 August Robert Schuman applied for membership. On 3 September talks took place between Schuman and Johann Hoffmann and other political leaders from the Saar on this issue, resulting in a press statement by Hoffmann in Strasbourg in which he emphasised that the Saar region, just like Luxembourg, wanted to be independent, that it was grateful to France for the way in which it had fulfilled that ambition by offering economic union and political autonomy and, as the country with responsibility for the political affairs of the region, had proposed admission to the Council of Europe.

West Germany will most probably be accepted as a member of the Council of Europe in due course, after the Saar. It is consistent with the French-Saar policy of rapprochement in a framework of political autonomy that France will do all it can to promote that membership. It can only help to do this by forming cultural and political links in addition to the legally established economic links.

M. M.

1) The position of that Commission according to a letter from the President to the Secretary-General of the League of Nations (4 July 1921):

‘It is a territory completely removed from the Government of Germany. That Power retains sovereignty, but none of the sovereign rights is exercised. The exercise of sovereign rights belongs to the Society of Nations, acting through the Governing Commission.’

2) On 20 June 1948, when the D-Mark was introduced in West Germany, 10 D-Marks were paid for 100 old Reichsmarks, equivalent to 3.33 dollars, up to the sum of 40 D-Marks.