

'Origins of the Schuman Plan' from The Manchester Guardian (30 May 1950)

Caption: On 30 May 1950, in an article in the British daily newspaper The Manchester Guardian, philosopher Raymond Aron considers the origins of the Schuman Plan and speculates on the chances of success of the French initiative.

Source: The Manchester Guardian. 30.05.1950. Manchester.

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Origins of the Schuman Plan – Why it may succeed

By Raymond Aron

The Schuman proposal for a pool of French and German heavy industry, which revives an idea already worn thin by use in every blue-print of European Union in the past, has acquired – and rightly – prestige as a bold and constructive plan. One may ask how it is that an idea as banal as this one should now be accepted as something vital and new?

There is no doubt in my own mind about the reason. The offer M. Schuman has made, and which has been approved by the whole French Cabinet, implies a basic reversal of France's German policy since 1945. Instead of acting within the Allied councils to maintain unilateral controls on the political and economic life of the Federal Republic, it is we who are recognising an equal partner in Germany by proposing to associate in a partnership that can only be based on each party's freedom to make decisions. Instead of referring Herr Adenauer back to the Council of Europe, instead of begging our British Allies not to leave us in a tête-à-tête with the German ogre, it is we who have opened direct negotiations with our "hereditary enemies," and who, turning round to our Allies, seem to say: "Follow me who dare."

The reversal of the policy is so sudden, and so apparently inexplicable, that in France, as elsewhere, people are asking themselves whether or not the conversion is sincere. Have the French really decided to risk an entente with Germany? In my view, the conversion of French diplomacy is sincere, though certain public men may not have understood all its implications yet, and though a section of public opinion is hesitant or restive. But then, the English reader, used to the notion of a France that is at one in its hatred and fear of Germany, will ask what can have brought about this change?

Favourable factors

I have for many years declared that foreigners have a false idea, bred of information simplified to the point of caricature, of the French attitude to the Germans. Having never harboured any illusions about their neighbours, the French were perhaps less surprised and shocked than other peoples by the events of 1939 to 1945. If unimaginable atrocities were committed, particularly in its last months, the occupation, which left deep and bitter memories behind it, did not arouse in the mass of the population a hatred of the Germans as such. Very soon the Russian menace and the realisation that Europe as a whole was the real victim of two world wars made it seem absolutely necessary, if the Old Continent were to recover, that an end should be put to this traditional conflict. One sometimes has the impression that Englishmen, feeling uneasy about British mistakes after the first war, were expressing themselves in a language the French used thirty years before.

To be sure, the anti-German fanatics, along with the Communists who joined them for tactical reasons, still occupied the front of the stage. One could, not without reason, complain that the French preached reconciliation but that on any practical issue they always adopted a stand as opposed as possible to German interests and aspirations. Nevertheless the idea of an entente, or at least of direct negotiations, was gaining more and more support. General de Gaulle a few months ago gave a favourable reply to an interview given by Herr Adenauer on the subject of a Franco-German union. The uncrowned king of French nationalism had thus become the advocate of the diplomatic revolution.

Meanwhile, the Quai d'Orsay, like the Foreign Office, continue to argue over the authorised tonnage for cargo-boats or the ultimate fate of the works listed for dismantling. But the diplomatists themselves could not but notice the sterility of such methods. The International Ruhr Authority, on which so many hopes have been laid, did not take root. The minute precautions taken by the Military Security Board to prevent concealed rearmament (of which there is no example in history) came to give a burlesque character to Allied policy. Everyone felt the need to make an end of bureaucratic diplomacy and to make a new start.

In the meantime the French experts grouped round M. Jean Monnet, at the Commissariat of the French Re-equipment Plan, were drawing up a balance-sheet of progress made towards European economic

collaboration. They judged this progress to be all the more depressing in that other Ministerial departments than theirs were responsible for it. The liberation of trade had changed appearances more than the reality. The obstacles to collaboration between British Labour policies and Continental capitalism, to the satisfaction at once of the Imperial and of the European interests of Great Britain, seemed to be well nigh insurmountable. It was to be feared that American opinion, disappointed by Europe's slowness in integrating itself, might lose all interest in the Old Continent as soon as or even before Marshall aid ended. The idea of combining French and German heavy industry was accepted by politicians, who had until then always opposed a Franco-German agreement without third parties, because it seemed to be an almost miraculous way out of the impasse into which European policy had been misled.

By a single stroke the American Administration was given the means of persuading Congress and American opinion that Europe was sincere in its will to unite. Instead of defending an International Ruhr Authority that had been stillborn, or a ceiling on steel production which must in a very short while recover, instead of a useless prolongation of unilateral controls, why not negotiate openly a free agreement? In spite of the myths, Franco-German hostility never had an essentially economic cause. Whatever the frontier lines, the industries of Lorraine and the Ruhr have always traded together (coal against steel) and come to an understanding. But if economic rivalry has never been the cause of Franco-German wars, an association between the two heavy industries would consecrate the beginning of a new era.

Finally, another argument, to my mind singularly irrelevant, influenced many minds. The campaign against the Atlantic Pact in favour of a sort of French or European neutrality has not gone without attracting certain groups, even in the Governmental majority. To these neutralists or present title-holders of the Third Force idea, the Franco-German pool seemed a way of giving some measure of autonomy back to Europe. Once organised, Europe would contribute to the relaxing of the present international tension. One would be moving away from the "total diplomacy" favoured in Washington while at the same time falling in with the expressed wishes of the State Department. Those that believed in the Atlantic Pact, those that believed in neutrality, and those that believed in a Third Force, in the end unanimously approved the plan while retaining their own ulterior motives.

The obstacles

In spite of these subtle and partly contradictory arguments in favour of the plan, it is far from being universally accepted, even in principle and before matters of practical application are tackled. Opposition to it has arisen from every quarter. The free traders have denounced an attempt at super-national planning. Already, their argument runs, in the national framework, the Monnet re-equipment planners have committed expensive mistakes and given priority to investment, the value and urgency of which is, to say the least, a matter for criticism. What would it be to-morrow if the same planners were to plan Franco-German, and indeed European, heavy industry? The Socialists, for their part, accept the principle but fear the resurgence of the pre-war cartels and want to exclude from the organisation all those persons who have had "financial relations with the private companies" – in other words, almost anything about the subject. The industrialists who are involved fear that the project will in the end mean their subordination to a State authority, deprive them of their freedom of action, and expose them to competition from an industry that is more favoured by natural factors and better equipped. The spokesmen of traditional anti-Germanism denounce a move which would destroy or profoundly modify the "guarantees of security" that French diplomacy has been demanding for the past five years.

Against all this opposition the project is defended by the very men, the very parties who a few weeks ago were still denouncing any suggestion of direct agreement and were staking their hopes exclusively on the Council of Europe with British participation. Those who, like the author of the present article, had put forward for years the thesis which has so suddenly become the official one are left once more to admire the frivolity with which politicians burn what they once worshipped, and worship what they once burned.

In spite of the number and ardour of the converts to the plan, one would normally admit (without even examining the technical problems of putting the project into practice and which are outside the scope of this article) that its chances of success are slender, when the strength of its support is measured against that of

the opposition. If I do not subscribe to this pessimistic view it is for two principal reasons.

Contrary to the normal belief, compromises and agreements are always possible between economic interests even when these are in part discordant. It is power politics and mass passions which make differences irreconcilable. If the Governments are determined to create a common body, the private leaders of the coal and steel industries will find the necessary means of arriving at an agreement – on condition, of course, that national opinion is not inflamed every time one decides to reorganise a factory or close it down in favour of the broader scheme.

The second reason is even more important. The breathing-space afforded to Europe between now and the end of Marshall aid is a short one. Efforts to integrate Europe have been made again and again without any substantial results issuing from them. I am not one of those who believe that some mysterious integration would solve, by a miracle, the many problems which face a European economy that has been weakened by war and the changes that have taken place all over the world. But only the attempt to overcome the obstacles afforded by the division of Europe into national formations which are too narrow offers one hope that in the long run there are chances of a second expansionary phase, a renewal of youth, in the Old Continent. Politically, to stand up to Soviet imperialism as well as in their own relations with their ally across the Atlantic, the European nations obviously need to be able to present a substantial and publicly proclaimed united front. The Schuman plan is a last attempt at this.

The general consciousness of the grave consequences of the plan's possible failure gives it in spite of all the opposition to it, some chances of success.