

The revival of European integration and the Rome Treaties

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The revival of European integration and the Rome Treaties

The rejection by the French National Assembly of the European Defence Community (EDC) Treaty on 30 August 1954, together with the automatic shelving of the European Political Community (EPC) proposal, put an end, at least temporarily, to any form of political and military union in Western Europe on a supranational level. It was not long, however, before plans promoting a European revival were being put forward, the main impetus coming from the three Benelux countries. The economic and the nuclear energy sectors were seen as the most promising, even though the Six had not opted to pursue sectoral integration or establish a general common market based on a customs union.

Things then moved very fast, given the need to take advantage of what was seen as a propitious political constellation and international situation. Only 21 months were to elapse between the Messina Conference, held on 1, 2 and 3 June 1955, and 25 March 1957, the date when the Treaties establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC) were signed in the Capitoline Palace in Rome. This brief period, however, was a time of feverish activity and of the sometimes gruelling quest for a compromise among the six European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) Member States. Guided by the influence and clearly-defined objectives of certain figures, including Jean Monnet and Paul-Henri Spaak, the process got under way, despite the reservations of the United Kingdom — albeit associated with the ECSC — and the despondency of ardent supporters of federalism after the failure of the EDC. Conflicting positions eventually converged: Adenauer's Germany accepted the political inevitability of integration, the Gaullists suffered defeat in the 1956 elections, and the Suez Crisis left a profound impact.

The Community institutions were established in Brussels in January 1958, at the same time as the United Kingdom decided to submit a proposal for a large free trade area which would have included the new Community. Paradoxically, it was General de Gaulle's accession to power which helped get the EEC off the ground by bringing the British counter-plan to a halt. The establishment of the EEC and Euratom marked a decisive step towards integration in a Europe that was still confined to the Six but that allowed scope for expansion and might pave the way for political union.