

Interview with Paul Collowald: the European Defence Community – preparations and failure (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What can you tell us about the preparations for the European Defence Community and its failure?

[Paul Collowald] One should always remember the origin of the plans for the European Defence Community. After having set out on a clearly defined path based on the Schuman Declaration — they had to start somewhere, and they started with coal and steel — the creators, the founders of Europe did not simply one fine day ask one another ‘What is the next thing we can invent in order to progress towards a European federation?’ — the phrase was there in the Schuman declaration. No, one should always remember the dates. On 9 May 1950 there was the Schuman Declaration and on 25 June 1950 the Korean War began. You have to imagine the period. The Cold War seemed to be warming up. I have seen some of the interviews made at the time. There is even one of the only interviews that General de Gaulle gave an American agency where there is the phrase ‘Third World War’ — the journalist poses the question. So it was quite a dramatic situation. How do you tackle it? This is a vast question, and a great many historians have written about it, both to set down the facts, but also because there are at the very least, let’s call them two schools of thought. On the one hand some say ‘it was really premature; how could they throw themselves into something like that? Considering that national sovereignty, the flag, the army were at stake, frankly, it was all far too hasty, too early.’ Then the others reply: ‘So it was all too hasty, too early. But it was not that we made a reasoned choice to go ahead: it was a response that we were obliged to make. We had to confront the issue. Can you imagine our American friends, who had already come to give us a hand on several occasions, saying “Fine, OK, we’ll look after you again, we’ll protect you. Our boys are on the continent and you can finance it a bit and then just sit back and watch”? It was inconceivable.’ As a result, the practical question followed on: in this European army, in order to confront the problem and build up European defence, how could we avoid including German contingents at division, battalion or some other level? The answer is clear. But how is it to be done? The war was still fresh in our memories, and there were those who had suffered and held very clear and very vivid memories of what not just the Wehrmacht, but also the Nazis had been like and so forth, but we are well aware of the result. So might not the German army be reborn along with some form of nationalism? This had to be avoided, but how? For some, the answer was ‘Let us build a European army!’ This had already been suggested, almost paradoxically, by Winston Churchill at the Council of Europe in August 1950. This may have been suggested, but it still had to be put into practice, and it was René Pleven, the French Prime Minister, who proposed creating a European Defence Community in October 1950.

After this, the whole process was set in motion: the signing of the treaties and technical discussions against a political backdrop. As journalists we try to discuss the whys and wherefores without going into too much technical detail, but at a certain point we have to remember the political situation in France. These are the historical details that we sometimes forget. There are two points to make. In France, seen from the position of the coalitions of the Fourth Republic, the Gaullists were always in Opposition — for most of the time, de facto, with the Communists. Within the majorities there were the MRP (the Popular Republican Movement), the Christian Democrats, the Socialists and the Radicals — essentially, but with minor variations. Then in 1952 and 1953 a section of the Gaullists entered the Government, and, at first, General de Gaulle regarded them most severely. ‘They are jumping on the bandwagon — they are becoming ministers!’ To cut a long story short, at a certain point there was a change of Government, a new crisis and the price to pay for entry and to obtain a majority was Robert Schuman’s having to leave the Quai d’Orsay. As a result, in January 1953, Georges Bidault became Minister for Foreign Affairs, replacing Schuman at the Quai d’Orsay. Successive governments found themselves faced with internal, economic and political problems, but at the same time there was Indo-China. Thus, in France you had, between two largely pro-European terms, a term that became less and less European because the Gaullists were inside and the MRP was outside.

So, to be brief, there was the Government of Pierre Mendès France, which settled the Indo-China problem, but then Mendès France was faced with having to solve the problem of the EDC, since in the meantime France’s partners had ratified, Italy was about to do so, and France was the only one who had not. Thus we come to August 1954 when Mendès France’s political agenda was to put the French economy back on its feet after all the bloodshed in Indo-China, that was his priority. Europe, yes, of course, but the EDC could

wait. Right. But in order to get a vote ratifying it, since retreat was impossible, a majority was necessary. Naturally, attempts were made behind the scenes to make certain additions to the treaty, but this proved to be rather difficult, so President Mendès France went to Brussels where a conference was held to try to find protocols that would settle the matter. But, in fact, when you examine the protocols proposed by Pierre Mendès France, they practically voided the treaty of its content. There was then a situation that, as journalists, we were following closely, both in the political analyses, but at the same time, right across France there were anti-EDC and pro-EDC factions with rallies, debates, polemics, and so forth. Great efforts were made to win over public opinion, for, in the words of a French historian, Pierre Gerbet: ‘In certain families and in certain political debates, this anti-EDC affair began to resemble the Dreyfus affair.’ So it was not something trivial.

In August 1954 we reached the point where, from a rational perspective, all the arguments sustained that, in order to cope with the situation, which no one disputed, there had to be German contingents. Would it not be better to put them in the European army than to allow them to create a Wehrmacht? Fine. Others said: ‘Ah, but in the conditions in which this is being done, one part of the army will still be outside; we shall be inferior to the Germans.’ In May there was the defeat in Dien Bien Phu, which was a terrible humiliation for the French army. The effect was that generals like Alphonse Juin or Édouard Herriot, who were, politically speaking, more or less neutral or partisan, all switched to the anti-EDC camp. Why was this so? Because on the one hand it was a case of rational, political analysis, and on the other, it was emotional. The mother country, national sovereignty, the French army and those Germans ... At which point, Pierre Mendès France decided to put it on the agenda and he authorised, he even advised, his ministers — there were about twenty of them — not to vote. Which goes to show that the Government did not take sides. I remember that in a book by Françoise Giroud, who was very close to the *Express*–Mendès France group and who admired Pierre Mendès France greatly, she wrote: ‘It is one of the things that I have never understood and which greatly disappointed me. Pierre Mendès France was a meticulous, prudent man; I have never understood how he could enter this debate saying: I will not take sides.’ But I digress — this was just to describe the atmosphere. At that moment, the debate commenced and it ended badly, in two ways. The journalists tried to understand what was happening on 30 August, because they had been told: ‘There is going to be an important debate: the opposing arguments will be put forward.’ In the end the partisans of the EDC realised that they were heading for disaster, and asked for a motion of adjournment. However, in the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly — I will not go into the technical details, but it is important — the rules state that a preliminary motion comes first, chronologically. So the opponents of EDC proposed a preliminary motion, saying: ‘No, we will continue, we will vote!’ And the preliminary motion was passed. Therefore, rejection of the EDC came about via a debate on procedure. It is somewhat unfortunate that what was a really important political debate affecting the fate of Europe and France should be virtually hijacked by a debate on procedure. Accordingly, on 30 August 1954, the collapse of the late EDC, the European Defence Community, carried with it the entire project for a political Community together with the plans for the Ad Hoc Assembly ... for there too, rationally speaking, if there is a European army there must be a political authority. The project was coherent, correct, but in the end, it failed.