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France and the negotiations on the Treaty of Rome (1955–1957)

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The European Economic Community (EEC) was not the outcome of a smooth, linear process. The main obstacle to reaching an agreement, between the Messina Conference of 1–3 June 1955 and the signing of the Treaty of Rome establishing the EEC on 25 March 1957, was France. Agreeing to the project, still referred to at the time as the ‘Common Market’, caused France problems for three main reasons. First, the French thought that supporting the common market reflected a preference for cooperation between the Six, to the detriment of a broader view of Europe with its Franco-British basis, which was still popular among French decision-makers. Secondly, in institutional terms the scheme partly depended on a supranational dynamic which aroused a great deal of mistrust. It was largely due to this dynamic that the French Parliament had rejected the European Defence Community (EDC) in 1954. Thirdly, the common market had an essentially free-trade economic agenda that was difficult to accept for a country traditionally inclined towards colonial protectionism. What is more, between 1955 and 1957, France was faced with a crisis in its balance of trade and, more generally, in its balance of payments. Opening up its markets, to lay the foundations of the future EEC, thus seemed an impossible task.

What made opting for the common market even harder for France was that in 1955–57 it was not obviously necessary. Other forms of European organisation could have been adopted. Politically, the agreements on Western European Union, signed at the end of 1954 and brought into force just before the Conference of Messina, seemed to have relaunched cooperation with the United Kingdom. Economically, the key organisation of European cooperation at that time was not the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) but the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) and its sister institution, the European Payments Union (EPU). The OEEC and the EPU had carried out effective liberalisation of trade and payments, but this seemed to have reached its limits by 1955, with the focus switching to worldwide liberalisation. Many sectoral cooperation projects had also been developed since the success of the ECSC, but they did not always take the six-member framework as their baseline. Lastly, even among advocates of Europe as a Community, the common market project was sometimes relegated to second place. Jean Monnet, for instance, was much more interested in Euratom than in the EEC throughout the negotiations on the Treaties of Rome.

The question, then, is why France agreed to, and even opted for, the form of European cooperation enshrined in the EEC. There seem to have been several contributory factors. Initially the flexible method of negotiation defined at Messina in June 1955, which produced the Spaak report of April 1956, formed a solid basis. Then, the firm commitment of the French government under Guy Mollet, in power from January 1956, gave decisive impetus to the intergovernmental discussions. Lastly, staunch German support for France, particularly evident during the Suez crisis in November 1956, made it possible to conclude the tough negotiations and obtain a Treaty of Rome that was relatively advantageous to France.

1. A flexible method of negotiation

The French parliament’s rejection of the EDC on 30 August 1954, on a procedural question, did not end the quest for ways of strengthening European cooperation. Discussion of old schemes for economic integration continued, applied either generally (the Beyen plan of 1953) or in particular sectors (the Green Pool and, shortly afterwards, Euratom). The six Foreign Ministers of the ECSC countries met in Messina, Italy, from 1 to 3 June 1955 to give some political momentum to these discussions.

The French government, under Edgar Faure, was very cautious on Europe but the Foreign Minister, Antoine Pinay, who was at Messina, was more proactive. After stating France’s misgivings about the projected common market, Pinay nevertheless agreed to the Messina Conference’s final resolution, which provided that the Six would study a number of schemes for European cooperation.

But the Messina resolution was very ambiguous. It did not favour any particular model for Europe. The

common market was just one of the paths towards cooperation mentioned, along with the sectoral approach, which, in the discussions among experts, separated out into a great many projects involving nuclear energy but also postal services and telecommunications, and air transport. Nor was it clear where the discussions were supposed to lead. The French view was that they were merely expert studies, whereas other European leaders wanted to turn them into the first stage in negotiations between states.

This ambiguity was implicit in the method of negotiation adopted at Messina. This involved setting up a committee of experts who were very free in their discussions but were steered by a prominent political figure, in this case Paul-Henri Spaak. It offered a way round the different approaches adopted by the Six. Discussions in the committee were very difficult. In its memorandum of 14 October 1955, France only agreed to a common market on certain conditions (it was to last four years, with easily applicable safeguard clauses). The market would be offset by strict measures on social harmonisation and an investment fund. The stimulating effect of free trade was completely rejected. In its place there was to be government harmonisation of the conditions of production. The countries most in favour of free-market policies (Benelux and West Germany) rejected this approach.

Given these divergences, Spaak decided to draft a report which did not summarise work to date but offered an ambitious, original analysis. The Spaak report was a genuine political proposal mapping out the main features of the future EEC. It was mainly drafted by Pierre Uri of France and Hans von der Groeben of Germany. In particular it clearly defined one of the particularities of the EEC: its process of overall economic integration. As opposed to merely opening up trade (as in the OEEC), economic integration was based on merging and regulating markets by harmonising the framework for economic activity (legislation and economic policies).

In the first round of negotiations the French authorities were somewhat sidelined, though a few French delegates with close ties to pro-European networks, such as Félix Gaillard (Head of the French Delegation) and above all Pierre Uri, intervened to support the process. In Paris senior French officials regarded the Spaak Committee as a forum for experts and its report as just one of many working documents. So they were extremely surprised, in April 1956, by the scope of the Spaak report, which could well have been purely and simply shelved had the French authorities not supported it. The change of government in January 1956 played a decisive part in this respect.

2. Support from the Mollet government

In January 1956 a new government came to power in France. Several pro-European figures took charge of the common market portfolio. The new Prime Minister was the Socialist Guy Mollet. A former President of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, he was in favour of giving new impetus to European integration following the failure of the EDC, a view shared by his Foreign Minister, Christian Pineau, and State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Maurice Faure.

This government troika played a vital part in the spring of 1956. When the Spaak Report was tabled on 21 April 1956 a very large majority of senior French officials rejected it. They thought the opening up of French markets which underpinned it would be particularly dangerous for the French economy. It took the full political authority of Mollet and Pineau to push the report through. At the Venice Conference on 29 and 30 May 1956 Pineau, disregarding his advisors, accepted the report as the basis for intergovernmental negotiations, which started shortly afterwards. He did, however, ask for concessions in the form of flanking measures for the process of trade liberalisation (safeguard clauses, targeted social harmonisation measures, etc.), and for the overseas territories to be taken into account.

That summer opponents of the common market within the French administration maintained their resistance. At a decisive interministerial council meeting on 4 September 1956, Mollet forced the common market on his reluctant ministers, headed by the Minister for Finance and Economic Affairs, Paul Ramadier. Trusted senior officials, such as Robert Marjolin, subsequently took charge of spreading the word through the administration. A former deputy to Monnet in the Planning Ministry, he had served as the first OEEC Secretary-General from 1948 to 1955, before joining Christian Pineau's staff in 1956.

Mollet then set about convincing parliament. In July 1956 he organised a debate on Euratom, followed by one on the Common Market Treaty in January 1957. He thus prepared MPs for ratification of the EEC Treaty, avoiding a repetition of the 30 August 1954 fiasco.

The government troika played a vital role in gaining French acceptance of the common market, as recent accounts by historians have often emphasised, especially studies by Gérard Bossuat and Craig Parsons. However the three men did not only defend the European Community of Six. Mollet and Pineau, in particular, were firm believers in the need to take the Rome Treaties further, through wider agreement with the UK. So they committed France wholeheartedly to negotiating the free-trade area (FTA) proposed by London in summer 1956, which seemed a natural extension of the common market.

But despite support from the government troika, negotiations among the Six remained difficult. Only through close political agreement between France and Germany could economic divergences be overcome.

3. The Franco-German agreement and the importance of the Suez crisis

It had been clear since the Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950 that France and West Germany were moving closer together. The rapprochement was strengthened by the disappearance of most of the major points of contention between the two countries between 23 October 1954 (the Paris Agreements, which helped to settle the problem of German rearmament) and 27 October 1956 (the Saar Treaty). Konrad Adenauer's continuing hold on power also consolidated the Federal Republic's favourable stance towards the idea of Europe as a Community, despite the preferences of the powerful Minister for Economic Affairs, Ludwig Erhard, who favoured a looser form of cooperation as part of the OEEC (projected FTA) or even the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

But Franco-German rapprochement did not prevent deep-rooted differences of opinion on the economic direction of the common market, the Germans being strongly in favour of free trade and the French particularly wary of such policies. Negotiations among the Six ran into deadlock in October 1956, and Adenauer decided to go to Paris.

On 6 November 1956, the day he met his French counterpart Guy Mollet, Britain and France yielded to pressure from the Soviet Union and the United States and pulled their forces out of Suez. The humiliating withdrawal further accentuated the advantages for France of cooperation between the Six. Stirred by the Suez crisis, the French and German leaders agreed on a working basis enabling negotiations on the common market to be restarted.

Observers have often drawn attention to the shift that occurred after Suez. Mollet, they argue, opted to give the Franco-German partnership priority over Franco-British understanding. Nowadays historians take a much more cautious view. Gérard Bossuat, for example, stresses that the main features of the compromise position France adopted after Suez had actually been decided in September 1956. Bossuat thinks Suez was more a turning-point for French public opinion than for decision-makers. Hanns Jürgen Küsters, meanwhile, notes that Adenauer had offered Mollet concessions in a letter sent just before the 6 November meeting. Küsters also shows that the deadlock in negotiations by the Six in October 1956 was mainly due to Erhard's intransigence, for which Adenauer naturally strove to make amends later. Be that as it may, the Suez crisis clarified certain misunderstandings and opened the way for further negotiations. The outlines of a Treaty of Rome which would be to France's advantage began to appear.

4. A Treaty of Rome to France's advantage

The Treaty of Rome establishing the EEC fulfilled the wishes of many French decision-makers. First, politically and institutionally, the balance between supranational institutions (with the Commission alone having the power to make proposals, and with powers conferred on the Court of Justice) and the intergovernmental dynamic (the crucial role of the Council of Ministers) reflected a broad consensus. Pro-Europeans were happy to see the European Community idea relaunched after the failure of the EDC in 1954,

though the EEC was less supranational than the ECSC or the EDC. But this was not the whole story. Mollet, Pineau and many leading French figures were determined to round off the EEC with a wider economic agreement including Britain: the FTA. Others, such as Marjolin and Uri, were more suspicious of the FTA scheme, fearing it might threaten what they saw as the internal momentum of the EEC, institutionally (progress towards a supranational Europe) and economically (economic integration). A third group defended the EEC because it represented the best means of reasserting French power, with Paris dominating the Europe of the Six diplomatically and militarily, with no rivals. This was what General de Gaulle was counting on when he returned to power in May 1958.

The second attraction of the EEC for France was its drive for economic integration. It promised a liberalisation of trade which was vital to France if it was to boost its economy and avoid isolation on the international stage. To offset the opening up of the markets, the overall framework offered greater security than the FTA or GATT. The historians Alan Milward and Frances Lynch, and the political scientist Andrew Moravcsik, have emphasised the importance of economic factors in bringing France round to support the EEC.

The EEC offered many safeguard clauses, agricultural compensation and aid for overseas territories and former colonies, most of which were French. Contrary to France's demands in 1955, only a Community procedure (proposed by the Commission) could activate these concessions, with no scope for unilateral action, guaranteeing the consistency of economic integration. This gave economic agents the benefit of harmonisation of the most glaring distortions of competition (social and customs legislation, taxation, etc.) and of economic policies, while giving market forces a free rein in a suitable framework.

The EEC represented a balance between a supranational Europe and an intergovernmental Europe on the one hand, and between a deregulated Europe and an organised Europe on the other. It was able to satisfy a very wide range of decision-makers with contrasting aspirations for Europe.

Conclusion: France's decision to support the EEC

France agreed to the EEC because of a combination of three factors. Firstly, in fundamental terms, the common market scheme set out in the Spaak report proved both original and flexible. More ambitious and balanced than the OEEC and the FTA, the EEC also became less supranational than the ECSC and the EDC as intergovernmental negotiations progressed. Since 1955 western Europe had been looking for ways of rapidly restoring free international trade and payments; the EEC offered an attractive regional solution to prepare French industry for that eventuality. The moderate support of the President of the French Employers' Confederation (CNPF), Georges Villiers, for the projected common market plan as early as 1956 was evidence of the economic benefits it could bring France.

Looking at the larger picture, the dramatic events of 1955–57 strengthened the EEC's hand. Developments in the colonies (withdrawal from Suez and above all the war in Algeria) overshadowed the common market negotiations, preventing a repeat of the heated debates on the EDC. These events also highlighted France's decline, an impression accentuated by the financial crisis gripping the country. Cooperation as part of a European community seemed the only alternative. In the absence of any attractive alternative (the FTA plan was still very vague in 1956 and subsequently proved very disappointing for France), the EEC was the only possible choice.

Lastly, the role of individual players was essential. Pinay's part in Messina and above all Mollet's leadership in the Treaty of Rome negotiations were decisive. The governing elites were thus more important than the supranational figures who were so prominent in the birth of the ECSC and the EDC. Jean Monnet and his Action Committee for a United States of Europe were very effective in the latter negotiations because they focused on Euratom. But other pro-Europeans exerted decisive influence, like Uri on Spaak and Marjolin on the Mollet government.

The governing elites made a conscious choice in favour of the EEC, though it remains an open question how this choice should be interpreted. Mollet and Pineau, who, though both pro-British, based their support for

the EEC on essentially political convictions, did not see the Treaty of Rome in the same light as Marjolin and Uri, who tended to reason along economic and supranational lines.

Implementing the Treaty of Rome was, in any case, still fraught with difficulties in March 1957. In spring 1957 France plunged into the final crisis of the Fourth Republic, a period of government instability, financial difficulties and worsening bloodshed in Algeria. Events seemed to jeopardise the launch of the EEC, with the likelihood that it would gradually be replaced by the plan for an FTA in early 1958. The arrival in power of General de Gaulle put it back on track. The successful negotiation of the Treaty of Rome was therefore merely the first stage in the difficult task of establishing the EEC between 1955 and 1958.

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