

The European Coal Organisation

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At the end of World War II, Europe was facing a dire shortage of coal. The coal industry had been the target of massive attacks for military and strategic reasons. As a result, Europe's coal industry was totally disorganised, traditional supplies were interrupted, and output was much lower than during the interwar years. Placed under Allied control, Germany no longer had the means to control its own production and exports. From 1945, the coal shortage, working conditions in the mines and difficult living conditions aggravated social tension. Many industrial regions were hit by strikes that further decreased output. Moreover, the critical situation in road, rail and inland waterway transport did little to facilitate international trade.

The United States and the United Kingdom, determined to restore the coal industry to its role as the driving force behind Europe's energy sector and economy, decided to create an emergency agency to enable the coal-importing and coal-exporting countries to meet and plan their deliveries. The European Coal Organisation (ECO), designed as a financially-independent international body, held its first meeting on 18 May 1945, although its official status was not established until 1 January 1946. The ECO drew on the experience of the Solid Fuels Section, an Allied military body that, in 1944–1945, was responsible for the distribution of coal to the Allied forces in Europe. The members of the ECO, apart from the United States and the United Kingdom, were Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway, later joined by Austria, Czechoslovakia, Ireland, Italy, Poland and Turkey, and by Finland, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland as neutral associated countries. Germany was represented by an Anglo-American military body. The Soviet Union was formally invited by the United States to join the ECO, but the offer was turned down because of disagreement over reparations required from defeated Germany.

The logistics of the London-based ECO were handled by the United Kingdom. Its task was to make recommendations to the governments of coal-producing countries in order to ensure the smooth and fair distribution of coal. The bulk of coal deliveries were made by the United States and had to cover military, civilian and commercial needs so as to revive the European economy. Facing monetary problems and a shortage of foreign exchange, the ECO also promoted the bartering of coke for essential equipment and food. Originally set up for one year, the ECO wound up its activities on 31 December 1947 after handing over to the Coal Committee of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), established in Geneva in 1947 by the United Nations.