The first organisations and cooperative ventures in post-war Europe — Introduction

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At the end of World War II, a series of diplomatic initiatives were taken in an attempt to rebuild the economies of Europe left devastated by five years of conflict. In addition to the urgent need for the bare essentials such as coal and steel, the aim was to revive economic activity and to promote trade and the modernisation of production structures, either via monetary agreements (such as the EPU), by means of regional measures for dismantling customs barriers (Benelux, Fritalux, Finebel) or the establishment of organisations for economic cooperation (the Tripartite Council for Economic Cooperation, the European Coal Organisation, the Economic Commission for Europe, etc.).

The countries of Western Europe decided to take their fate into their own hands and tentatively explored new forms of sectoral cooperation that might lead to greater things. On 16 April 1948, in Paris, the representatives of the 16 European states that had accepted US economic and financial aid under the Marshall Plan signed the Convention establishing the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC).

European cooperation also took on a political dimension. The idea of convening a European assembly first arose at the Congress of Europe in The Hague on from 7 to 10 May 1948, organised by the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity. The Congress closed with the participants adopting a political resolution calling for the convening of a European assembly, the drafting of a charter of human rights and the setting up of a court of justice responsible for ensuring compliance with that charter. On 5 May 1949, at St James's Palace, London, the Foreign Ministers of Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom signed the Treaty establishing the Council of Europe. The central aim assigned to the Council of Europe was an ambitious one, namely 'to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress'.

The countries of Europe also pursued military cooperation. The establishment of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the massive presence of Soviet troops in those countries, gave rise to a feeling of apprehension in Western Europe. The French and British Governments reacted and were soon joined by the governments of the Benelux countries. On 17 March 1948, the Brussels Treaty establishing Western Union was signed, marking the start of European military cooperation. The creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on 4 April 1949 was a further step towards more effective military cooperation between Europe and the United States.

Alongside European economic, political and military cooperation, scientists in Europe in the post-war period called for a revival of university exchanges between countries and for the setting up of research programmes which were often too sophisticated and too costly for national laboratories acting on their own. A further aim was to achieve levels of technological and nuclear advancement comparable to those of the United States and the Soviet Union.

The pioneering period, when everything still seemed possible, was also the period when some impulsive ideas, bearing the imprint of hastiness or utopianism, fell victim to events or to the inertia of governments. It was followed by a period when more tangible achievements were able to take shape. Recourse to consensus and intergovernmental methods in the immediate post-war period gave way to initiatives of a kind that placed hope in a supranational approach.

The fledgling European Community, born of the Schuman Plan of 9 May 1950, took its first steps and began to acquire organisational shape. The establishment of the European Community is covered in detail in the research corpus 'From the Schuman Plan to the Paris Treaty (1950–1952)'.