

The birth of the community of Europe

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_birth_of_the_community_of_europe-en-cb445439-c469-47d1-9c35-c0b3bfd25cb3.html

Last updated: 06/07/2016



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In 1945, Europe was on its knees, bled dry. The United Kingdom and France may well have emerged as victors in the conflict with Hitler's Germany, annihilated and forced to surrender, but Britain, despite the laurels won by resisting the Nazis, was exhausted and in ruins as a result of the war, while France, having been occupied and then partly destroyed by the violence of the fighting, was no longer capable of defending and rebuilding itself without considerable Allied help. As the Cold War dawned, and for the first time in its history, a [divided Europe](#) had become dependent on the two undisputed victors in the World War: the United States and the Soviet Union.

Europe, nevertheless, sought to rise again from the ashes and build a future that depended on a peaceful and sustainable solution. Germany and France, hereditary enemies, were at the heart of the plans to establish a new order in Europe. Aware that Britain would oppose a federal Europe, France turned towards its German neighbour. The issue of the coalfields of the Saar and the Ruhr was, however, poisoning relations between the two countries. France was still haunted by the threat posed by Germany.

Determined to find a way out of the deadlock by turning these divisive factors into the ingredients for unity, the French Foreign Minister, [Robert Schuman](#), made a momentous [declaration](#) to the press on 9 May 1950. Inspired by the European plans of another Frenchman, [Jean Monnet](#), General Commissioner of the National Planning Board, he proposed that the [joint output of coal and steel](#) in the two countries be placed within the framework of a strong, supranational structure, the High Authority. Designed mainly as a bulwark against a future remilitarisation of Germany and as an effective means of avoiding a steel surplus in Western Europe, this plan for sectoral economic integration created mutual interests that automatically linked the two countries. In practice, it made another Franco-German war impossible. The [Schuman Plan](#) also had the advantage of ensuring that the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) became firmly anchored in the free, Western world. The plan, which was immediately welcomed enthusiastically by the German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, and then by Italy and the three Benelux countries, led to the signing, on 18 April 1951, of the [Paris Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community \(ECSC\)](#).

The Schuman Declaration is, indeed, a major milestone in the history European unification. It may be seen as the 'birth certificate' of the community of Europe. In essence, the Schuman Plan sought to end centuries of Franco-German hostility, to remedy the shortcomings of the European organisations then in existence and to open the way towards a federation. Just five years after the end of the Second World War, there were great hopes for peace and prosperity in Europe.

The organisation of European defence was also attracting the attention of the countries of Western Europe. In summer 1950, the communist threat, which became a reality with the start of the [Korean War](#) in June, raised the question of the establishment of a European system of defence that would include German armed forces. But the idea of German [rearmament](#), advocated by the United States to guard against the [communist threat](#) in Western Europe, divided the countries of Europe. [Memories of the Second World War](#) and the Nazi occupation had not yet faded and were still painful in the minds of the public.

On 24 October 1950, [René Pleven](#), President of the French Council, proposed to the French National Assembly that, following the signing of the ECSC Treaty, a European army should be created, with the eventual involvement of German units, and that the whole be placed under a single military and political European authority. But the international climate was not favourable to the plan for a [European Defence Community \(EDC\)](#). Whilst France was suffering serious military setbacks in Indo-China, the nationalist right feared a further weakening of the French army. The death of Stalin in May 1953 and the signing of the armistice ending the Korean War four months later appeared to herald a

period of détente in which the EDC no longer seemed quite as urgent. Furthermore, strong American pressure for ratification ended up irritating French MPs, who did not want to be told what to do.

While the Treaty had already been ratified by France's partners, with the exception of Italy, which was ready to do so, the political friction and impassioned debates came to a head on 30 August 1954, when the [French National Assembly](#) decided by 319 votes to 264 to postpone discussion of the document that would allow the President to ratify the EDC Treaty. This procedural artifice meant that France had, in effect, rejected the proposal for a European army that it had instigated. For the federalists, the '[crime of 30 August](#)' put an end, for the moment at least, to a climate favourable to supranationality in Europe. France's course of action met with considerable consternation in Western Europe and the United States. There was intense disappointment, especially in the [Federal Republic of Germany](#). France, which had for many years been the champion of the European cause, found itself seriously discredited by its refusal to ratify the EDC Treaty. German rearmament did soon get under way, however, from [5 May 1955](#) — despite French criticism — under the aegis of the [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation \(NATO\)](#).