



Teacher material

Old fears and new threats: Western European defence negotiations

Contextual notes for teachers

The European Defence Community was one of the most ambitious projects of the supporters of European unity in the 1950s. The attempt to build a European army tied to the political institutions of a supranational Europe was nevertheless too ambitious for the time. However, the whole period is very revealing of the decision and dilemmas that are faced when trying to build peace and cooperation in Europe. Many of these have contemporary resonance. For example:

- Perhaps because defence is so much more emotive and 'live' for people and countries, the negotiations are revealing about the way that leaders did, or did not, or were not able to take the lead.
- They are also very revealing about the mind shift that took place (at very different rates) about who the enemy was - 'but shouldn't we still be scared of Germany?' is still a big theme in the early years after World War Two.
- They are revealing of political courage, in so far as no one did actually know that Germany would not resurge as a hostile power.
- They are revealing of outside factors in shaping Europe - e.g. here the role of the USA (and the USSR)
- Despite the failure to ratify the Treaty, they are revealing of a very positive time in trying to work around difficulties. The debates about supranational vs inter-governmental cooperation and active. There are mixed models, for example the position of the British as cooperative, but non-integrationist. In this there are comparisons and contrasts to be drawn with Europe today.

If you don't know much about these negotiations yourself, here is a simple summary. It is designed for teachers in a hurry. Of course, it is far from comprehensive and only one interpretation, but it is designed to help you keep ahead of the students and also to be able to facilitate their debates and discussions on the topic.

The defence negotiations – a potted history

The US government wanted a secure Western Europe. They were worried about the USSR, not Germany. European countries, except Britain, were worried about Germany too and didn't like US and British government proposals to enlarge NATO to include Germany, let alone having Germany re-arm. Many Germans were also not very happy about possible re-armament. However, only the French government was so hostile to the idea that it came up with another plan, now known as the Pleven plan. France feared isolation on the issue and the discussions were slow until the Italian government were encouraged to complement the Pleven plan with their own far-reaching plan (written by De Gasperi with the cooperation of Spinelli). The US government applied pressure to European governments by threatening to re-arm



Germany themselves and threatening to reduce their troop presence in Europe. This led to the pact being signed. However, the new European Defence Treaty of 1952 had to be ratified. Stalin died in 1953, thus reducing for a while the idea that the Soviet Union was a threat. The French National Assembly did not vote on the matter until 1954, and then it voted to reject the treaty. The Italian Parliament had waited to see what happened in France. The Treaty was dead. Fearing that the US government might act on threats to start to disengage from Europe unless Europeans took on some responsibility for their own defence, the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden thought up a plan in his bath. The Eden Plan found an acceptable way forwards, which brought West Germany into NATO, committed the US and UK to the continued defence of continental Europe and calmed US concerns about lack of Western European participation in West Europe's defence.

For a longer and very useful text on this topic see:

'Military Cooperation in Europe'. From World War Two to the Treaty of the Western European Union (WEU)' Author: Engelina Johanna Maria Aimée van Rens. Masterclass Montesquieu Institute: Behind the Scenes of the EU. 5 June 2008.

Available at:

http://www.parlement.com/9353202/d/papers%20masterclass/paper_eveline_van_rens.pdf

There are some really interesting issues and motivations at work in these negotiations that can be debated in class. Ideas for questions that can be used after the activity and follow up work are provided. Here are some more thoughts that may help you to prepare for the post-activity discussion.

Leadership: Was Adenauer right to criticise Mendes-France for the defeat by the National Assembly? That is, was it a matter of poor leadership? Or, was it the case that French public opinion was still more concerned about the threat of Germany, whereas German people, on the frontline of the new Cold War, were more aware of the new threat to Western Europe? Or perhaps the French public were more engaged in politics, whereas in Western Germany the sense of 'ohne mich' (without me) allowed Adenauer to develop foreign policy because West Germans were more concerned about economic developments.

European vs national interests – do the nations of Europe ever act against their national interests? How do they decide what their national interests are? It seems that the British Foreign Secretary, Eden, rescued something from failed negotiations, but was this purely because the British were terrified that the USA would threaten to leave Europe to defend itself and that Britain would once more be tied to fighting on the continent? Would Adenauer have been so keen to sign up to the EDC if the benefits of removing the Occupation Statute and Germany once more having an army were not offered? Was Pleven right that France's national interests would be best served by an EDC, or was the National Assembly right to be cautious to trust Germany?