

'German rearmament and the European army' from Le Populaire (23 November 1951)

Caption: On 23 November 1951, the French daily newspaper Le Populaire publishes an article in which Paul-Henri Spaak outlines the United States' attitude towards German rearmament.

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German rearmament and the European army

by Paul-Henri Spaak

Reprinted below are some lengthy excerpts from the editorial that Paul-Henri Spaak published in yesterday's *Le Peuple*. We feel obliged to use this opportunity as a reminder that a debate will shortly take place before the National Assembly on the issue of the European army, which, given the inevitably complex nature of such a bold, new project, must be discussed at length.

To gain a clear idea of German rearmament today, we cannot ignore or pretend to ignore how the question was raised, now a little over one year ago.

It was in late summer in 1950, if memory serves, when we received the sudden news that, before any war was declared, even before the international situation had worsened, Mr Acheson proposed that a number of American divisions be sent to Europe. At the same time, he proposed the creation of a German army that would be responsible for its share in defending our continent. Mr Acheson's initiative was a rare and daring gesture indeed. It demonstrated great generosity and established without the shadow of a doubt the American willingness to keep European integrity and freedom unscathed. One cannot stress its enormous practical and symbolic value too highly. One can affirm, I think, without fear of being proved wrong, that, if such action had been taken before 4 August 1914 or before 3 September 1939, Europe would have been spared two horrendous wars and that the course of history would have been changed.

Mr Acheson should therefore be highly praised for having dared and having wanted to act in time, for not having left the USSR in any doubt, with any illusions as to the consequences of a possible attack. Perhaps he saved the peace by doing so — but shall we ever know?

Unfortunately, this grand idea carried with it a logical counterpart, inevitable when seen from the American perspective. It was impossible for the Secretary of State to announce to the people of the United States that several American divisions would be stationed henceforth in Germany and that they would be among the first to be sent to war, should one break out in that part of the world, if, at the same time, he could not announce that all of Europe, without exception and thus including Germany, would play its part in the battle.

Can we possibly imagine that the American people would accept the idea of its children fighting on the Elbe to defend Germany, while the Germans stood idly by?

And so implacable logic forced Mr Acheson to pose the problem of German rearmament and, by posing the problem, it turned out that, in fact, all the German problems were posed together: the end of the occupation, equal rights, unity and borders. Was this not premature? We can believe so.

I do not think it would be fair to criticise the Germans for having taken advantage of the trump card that they had been dealt and for having affirmed that they could imagine participating in shared defence only on an equal footing with the other European countries.

And that is where the French Government stepped in, understandably worried at the idea that a purely national German army would be reborn: even more worried when they considered the potential size of this army and the objectives that it would inevitably set itself.

The position of France and Belgium was hardly easy. It was impossible for them to refuse the United States' offer, to deny themselves the presence of American divisions on the Elbe; at the same time, it was very difficult to agree to the resurrection of the German army.

At this point, Mr Pleven looked again at the idea proposed a few months earlier in Strasbourg: the idea of a European army. This idea had double merit: firstly, it offered a compromise solution to the difficulty at

hand, since it prevented the creation of a German national army whilst allowing the German forces to integrate within a larger entity, receiving orders from an international general staff; secondly, it could be considered another stone laid for the foundation of a new Europe, since Mr Robert Schuman had already set things in motion with his Plan.

At that moment, the Belgian Government should have stood firmly, and without hesitation, behind French policy in this respect. But it did so feebly. What is even more serious is that over the last few weeks, it has gone into reverse.

And yet the time for humming and hawing is past. The Americans are growing impatient, the Russians are getting ready: the Rome Conference is imminent.

There are three possible solutions. Ignoring the objections, the prevarications and the endless European discussions, the United States carry on regardless to recreate and rearm a German army without asking our opinion. This would be disastrous.

Or else the Americans grow weary, change their policy, interpret their Atlantic obligations strictly and pull their troops out of Germany and Europe. That would be equally disastrous.

Or, finally, France, Western Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries, with the approval and assured cooperation of Great Britain, come to a decision and create a true European army. In the current state of affairs, it is a solution that is not without difficulties — nor even without dangers, perhaps — but it is by far the best solution and one that requires urgent action.

Fortunately, there are intelligent military leaders who recommend and support it. But there are also all the retrograde military leaders who tremble at the thought of having to do something other than what they have always done, who condemn anything bold and new and who would prefer to face the possibility of losing with the methods they know rather than of winning with those that they would have to learn.