

The origins of the Schuman Plan

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In economic terms, coal and steel were vital raw materials. Coal was still the principal source of energy, and the French Government, wanting to modernise its heavy industry, realised how much the steel industry in eastern France depended on substantial supplies of coal. But, at a time when the liberated countries were having difficulty in satisfying domestic demand, the only available coal deposits were to be found precisely in the Ruhr (since the United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands had temporarily withdrawn from international trade). The creation of a European 'pool' for coal and steel would, therefore, allow France to counter the threat of a shortage in Europe and, at the same time, meet its own needs for raw materials, despite the foreseeable dissolution of the International Authority for the Ruhr. In a broader sense, the Schuman Plan also sought to increase European coal and steel output in order to boost economic growth overall. In addition, it hinted at a major reduction in producer and consumer prices.

From the political point of view, the Schuman Plan was based on the assumption that the integration of Germany into a permanent European structure was the best way to prevent it from being a threat to its neighbours and, at the same time, guarantee peace in Europe. It allowed for an improvement in Franco-German relations on the basis of mutual interests, while creating a climate of cooperation in Europe, since it put Germany on an equal footing, something which was of great symbolic significance. The independence of the High Authority, the supranational body responsible for the operation of the European coal and steel pool, was also devised as a new way of counteracting the pursuit of narrow, national self-interests. Moreover, the United States, eager to see Western Europe rebuilt economically and militarily, urged France to take decisive steps, since the British had clearly expressed their aversion to a European customs union or to any supranational approach.

France also felt that those European institutions that did exist at the end of the 1940s were not functioning properly. On the basis of these considerations, France decided to go it alone by putting forward an original and practical proposal based on the pooling of coal and steel production in Europe.