

The Tripartite Council for Economic Cooperation

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In February 1944, in response to repeated requests from France that a bilateral customs union be set up, Belgium suggested that the Netherlands should be included in the talks already under way on the establishment of a joint council for economic cooperation on regeneration and reconstruction. The Belgian authorities were anxious to counterbalance France and therefore insisted on the participation of the Netherlands, with whom they planned to sign a Benelux customs convention in September 1944 in succession to the Benelux monetary agreement signed on 21 October 1943. For their part, and in spite of all their efforts, the Dutch were unable to persuade France to accept the participation of Great Britain, traditionally considered by the Dutch to be the best guarantor of their interests. On 2 January 1945, the Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union and the Netherlands presented France with a new document setting out, in particular, conciliation procedures to be completed before any changes were made to customs tariffs with regard to the coordination of industrial equipment resources and to the supply of foodstuffs. On 24 February 1945, while these negotiations were taking place, Belgium and France signed limited economic agreements on the resumption of trade, on the exchange of tax information concerning assets held in one country by a person residing in the other country, and on payment facilities between the two national banks.

On 20 March 1945, two months before the total liberation of the Netherlands, the Economic Agreement on Mutual Consultation was finally signed in Paris, setting up a Joint Council for Economic Cooperation, or a Tripartite Council for Economic Cooperation, which was responsible for investigating the feasibility of coordinating customs duties, quota measures, price controls, social security systems and measures to combat unemployment. Specialised committees for coal, steel, industry, textiles, agriculture and maritime transport were also set up with the task of carrying out studies and considering the production situation in occupied Germany. In this way, the Council helped to facilitate the delivery of raw materials and also made available to its members a number of German industrial and scientific patents that had been sequestered. However, France did encounter some reluctance on the part of its partners with regard to the issue of plans for the economic and territorial dismantling of a defeated Germany.

On 15 August 1947, France used the Marshall Plan and US pressure for greater economic cooperation in Europe to its advantage and informed its partners on the Tripartite Council of its wish to set up a customs union with interested governments. But the Benelux countries, who did not want to give the British the impression that they went along only with French policy, took no action on the invitation. As a result, France, which was already dissatisfied with the achievements of the Tripartite Council, sealed its fate by announcing, on 7 October 1948, its decision not to attend any further meetings of the Council, which comprised France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. France preferred instead to work with the enlarged forums created, in particular, under the Marshall Plan.