

'Europe's military weakness' from Die Welt (20 February 1951)

Caption: On 20 February 1951, reporting on the Paris Conference on the European Defence Community (EDC), the German daily newspaper Die Welt identifies Europe's military weakness.

Source: Die Welt. Unabhängige Tageszeitung. Hrsg. Schulte, Heinrich ; Herausgeber Helbig, Adolf. 20.02.1951, Nr. 43; 6. Jg. Hamburg: Die Welt. "Europas militärische Schwäche", auteur:Polybios , p. 2.

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Europe's military weakness

Long-term tasks for the Paris Conference / POLYBIOS

Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal have met in Paris to discuss the French plan for a European army. Spain and Switzerland have not been invited to attend, while Canada, the United Kingdom and the USA are being represented by observers. While the actual theme of the Conference is the creation and organisation of a European army, issues concerning European defence will be involved and will have to constitute the framework.

The delegates meeting in Paris are united by one common concern: the alarming military weakness of Western Europe. A number of figures reflect this: France, which had 142 military divisions during the First World War and sent 115 divisions into battle during the Second World War, today has only five divisions throughout Europe. The comparable figures for the UK are 47, 16 and 11, of which the majority consist of permanent staff. Italy's numbers have declined from 162 divisions during the First World War and 62 during the Second World War to just eight today. Belgium's military force has a basic structure of three divisions, and the Netherlands one. Norway likewise has permanent staff for only 12 divisions, while Denmark retains only one weak division. Air forces are not included in these statistics; however, these, too, are undoubtedly weak, and it is only Britain and the USA which retain considerable airborne divisions.

These figures highlight a significant difference between the types of divisions of 1914 and 1940. Thanks to increasing mechanisation, what were previously organised, lightly armed troops are rapidly evolving into technically advanced units. Tanks have changed the face of the military, and air support has become a decisive factor during combat on the ground as well as in the air. However, the question remains: how could this weakness have come about?

There are various answers to this question.

Underestimation of the Kremlin

The main reason, noted in Roosevelt's foreign policy, was certainly the hope that Germany's defeat would be followed by world peace. The Western world became aware only slowly of Russia's efforts to seize power, and the hope that peace may be achieved without preparations for defensive action has still not entirely gone away. This hope sprang from an inner need for peace. That leads to disarmament more quickly in democratic nations than in authoritarian states.

This was also the case following the end of World War I. The need to manufacture the essentials of a civilised life of which people had been deprived in wartime led to a rapid changeover from wartime to peacetime products.

Production levels in industry are, however, a decisive factor in modern armament. In no country will it be possible to satisfy equally the demands of both war and peacetime.

This is confirmed by comparing some basic military statistics: the initial equipment of an American infantry division during the World War II cost 19.3 million US dollars; however, by June 1950, this figure had risen to 80 million. Meanwhile, the equipping of a tank regiment, previously costing 40 million dollars, now costs 200 million. Admittedly, price increases are in part responsible for this increase, but the increase in the scale of equipment is also to blame. Large defence budgets are again giving rise to domestic political difficulties. It is no coincidence that France and Italy, the most heavily populated countries, have proportionally the most Communists, that is to say anti-military in the Western sense.

Lessons from Korea

As concerns costs, there is a constant worry that modern weaponry becomes obsolete more rapidly and must be replaced regularly if it is to remain adequate. After all, nuclear madness has been a cause for concern on

both sides of the ocean. The illusion that we need only to press a button for ten engineers to win the war whilst the millions who would have fought in the past sleep through it, has quickly been shattered. The Korean War has demolished the underestimation, fed by such illusions, of the 'old' weaponry.

Europe is aware of her military weakness. The danger is understood, and the will to overcome this is there. Even the Paris Conference cannot create armies out of nothing, and the lead-up times remain long. An intelligent policy and an alert and strong air force are needed if we are to bridge the gap in peace. The Paris Conference is a positive beginning, and Rome was not built in a day.