

'The Franco-German combine' from Combat (10 May 1950)


Caption: Following the French declaration on the pooling of Europe’s coal and steel resources, the French daily newspaper Combat identifies the obstacles to be overcome in the implementation of the Schuman Plan.

Source: Combat. de la Résistance à la Révolution. dir. de publ. SMADJA, Henry. 10.05.1950, n° 1818; 9e année. Paris: Combat. "Le combinat franco-allemand", auteur:Cimont, Marcel , p. 1;3.

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Approved by the Council of Ministers at its meeting yesterday morning

The Franco-German combine

proposed by Mr Schuman

CAN IT REALLY SERVE AS THE BASIS FOR AN INDEPENDENT EUROPE?

The Council of Ministers approved a proposal submitted by Mr Robert Schuman that French and German resources in the coal and steel industries be pooled. According to its author, this 'combine' has two aims: the first is to eliminate the competition between France and Germany that has been the cause of three bloody conflicts in the last 80 years. The second is to establish the foundations of a united Europe, on the economic level, which all nations of the East and West will be welcome to join.

Let us take the first point again. Without doubt, the price war has already been rekindled. Belgium and Great Britain are suffering the consequences to the point at which yesterday, the British journal representing the steel industry, 'Metal Bulletin', feared the possible re-establishment of a European steel cartel. Mr Schuman replied that the envisaged 'combine' was not like a restrictive cartel, only interested in price maintenance. On the contrary, the abolition of customs, freedom of movement and the implementation of an investment strategy, will all lead to an increase in production which will benefit the whole of Europe and its African colonies.

In fact, the idea is not new. As long ago as 1946, the Germans had suggested it to counter the plan to internationalise the Ruhr, the central theme of Mr Georges Bidault's policy.

How can control by the French State be ensured?

Some preliminary thoughts: although the Ruhr has not been nationalised, it is at least subject to a Control Commission that manages its undertakings. This is not the case of the French iron and steel companies that belong exclusively to powerful capitalists. This brings me to my first question: how can the French State, without more legislation, control what it does not own? In other words, how, under current circumstances, can we have French iron ore sent to the Ruhr and impose product specialisation on our industrialists?

Yes, Mr Robert Schuman did hint at preliminary negotiations. These will be lengthy. Two sets of social legislation, two different standards of living, cannot be unified overnight in order to obtain a single price structure. And this leads us to a wider issue, the political future of Europe.

It is obvious that Mr Robert Schuman's proposal takes over at an economic level the strategy which the OEEC and the Council of Europe attempted unsuccessfully to follow at a political level. As we all know, responsibility for the failure of these two organisations lies with Great Britain. This being the case, how can one imagine that London, which is opposed to any monetary union and concerned primarily with increasing its exports in order to strengthen sterling, will subscribe to a European 'combine', even if the monetary and economic problems were settled? In other words, having rejected the modest proposals for a European 'clearing' system, would Great Britain expose its industry and currency in a grouping in which it would be in the minority? The feeling of 'relief' which, according to initial sources, was apparent in London is one thing but integration is quite another. And, anyway, London never says 'no' immediately.

Could we, if need be, continue without Great Britain? Mr Dean Acheson was the first to admit the possibility when he advised Mr Robert Schuman last September in Washington to 'make overtures' to Bonn. This proved a fruitless exercise because of Dr Adenauer's demands and bargaining tactics. Although Mr Robert Schuman is reaching out once more towards Germany, this time it is different: he is trying to achieve at an economic level what he was unable to obtain at a political level. London's final decision has yet to be made. Bonn has already answered, which is not surprising, since the Germans are not in a position to ignore Mr Dean Acheson's views.

Once again, shorn of all its pacific or economic frills, the Schuman Plan remains within the 'general scheme

of things'. Washington wants to consolidate its position of influence on the Continent, and Mr Schuman wishes to divert attention from certain still-born proposals such as those of the High Atlantic Council. But is it possible to imagine an independent Europe without Britain and its customers on the Continent? Finally, following through this train of thought to its logical conclusion, what will happen to the restriction of 11 100 000 tonnes on German steel production?

Is this not just another case of the weak having to bow before the strong?

Marcel Gimont