

Anthony Eden, Full Circle: extract on Western European Union


Caption: In his memoirs, Anthony Eden, British Foreign Secretary from 1951 to 1955, describes the final negotiations and the signing, on 23 October 1954 in Paris, of the Agreements establishing Western European Union (WEU).

Source: EDEN, Anthony. Full Circle. The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Sir Anthony Eden. London: Cassell, 1960. 619 p. p. 169-171; 174.

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Last updated: 13/10/2016



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On October 20th I flew to Paris to take part in the final shaping and signature of the Paris Agreements which gave effect to the decisions of our conference and transformed them into formal instruments. The expanded Brussels Treaty organization was renamed Western European Union, and its headquarters were set up in London. The occupation regime in Germany was brought to an end as soon as the practical arrangements could be made. The German Federal Republic was invited to become a member of N.A.T.O., while Western European Union was accepted by the North Atlantic Council as part of the N.A.T.O. defence system. Finally, W.E.U. provided a framework for agreement on a most vexatious European problem, the Saar.

In 1947 the Saar was detached from occupied Germany and included in the French economic and monetary system. Its final status had to be decided when a peace treaty with Germany was eventually concluded. With the establishment of the German Federal Republic and the growth of the German 'economic miracle', the Saarlanders began to chafe under the economic bonds which tied them to France. In Germany, some were quick to seize upon the issue, comparing it to the loss of the east German territories. The French argued that the coal and steel production of the Saar was essential to them, if they were to maintain parity with Germany in the European Coal and Steel Community. This was true, but despite concessions from the French Government relaxing their economic control, the Saar again became the focus of bitterness in Franco-German relations. The success of the conference in London provided a stimulus for its settlement in direct negotiations between Dr. Adenauer and M. Mendès France.

I was only involved in this at second remove, the final negotiations taking place late one evening at the British Embassy in Paris, where I was staying. I left Dr. Adenauer and M. Mendès France closeted with their advisers in the beautiful library which Duff Cooper had given the Embassy. After they had been there some hours, I became troubled at the delay and asked that discreet inquiries should be made as to how they were getting on. I learnt that they had finished some time before and had tip-toed from the Embassy, thinking that we had already gone to bed. So ended, I hoped for good, disputes about a territory with which I had first been concerned twenty years before by advocating the despatch of British troops to supervise the voting in the Saar.*

It remained for the Paris Agreements to be ratified by all concerned. Our own vote in the House of Commons was overwhelming, 264 to 4, the official Opposition being divided on the issue and deciding to abstain. For the other countries, save France, the parliamentary position presented no problems. In Paris, the end was dramatic. At 5 a.m. on Christmas Eve the National Assembly rejected Article I of the bill authorizing ratification of the Paris Agreements by 280 votes to 258. This article governed the establishment of the Western European Union and the entry of Germany into N.A.T.O. Mendès France then put the question of confidence on the reversal of this decision. That vote was to be taken a few days later.

The defeat was a serious event and there were at once suggestions for vigorous allied declarations, preferably by the President and the Prime Minister, to make clear the consequences. I thought it essential to state our position firmly, but better not in such a way as to provoke French resentment, as a high-level pronouncement would do. Therefore, I prepared a Foreign Office statement, which we put out that evening:

The Paris Treaties are still under discussion in the French Chamber, and there is to be a further vote on Monday. It is clear that what is at stake is the unity of the Western allies.

The rejection of the Paris Agreements would not mean that German rearmament would not take place. The issue is not whether the German Federal Republic will rearm, but how.

The United Kingdom commitment, offered at the London Conference, to maintain British forces on the continent of Europe, depends on the ratification of the Paris Agreements by all parties.

This warning made its contribution to the majority which M. Mendès France won. Deputies had been reluctant to believe that there could not be further concessions and yet another conference. Now the 'brutality', as some named it, of the British statement put the position beyond argument. Some brilliant speeches, notably by M. Mollet and M. Mendès France, came to the rescue and December 29th gave a favourable vote.

As we saw the New Year in with this good news, I felt we had reason to be satisfied with our work during the preceding months. Germany was now a sovereign partner in the defence of Europe, and the damage to European unity caused by the failure of E.D.C. had been mended. Russia's attempt to exploit the crisis had failed. We could now be sure that future negotiations with the Soviet Union could be conducted from a base of political and military strength.

I told four thousand Conservatives at our Party Conference in October how I justified our military share in the defence of Europe:

It is not the first time even in our lives that British forces have been stationed on the continent of Europe. They have been there for the last ten years. Within our own memory they have fought two bloody wars on those battlefields. What is different about this pledge is that it is given to prevent a war and not to win a war.

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The Paris Agreements have surpassed our hopes in some respects and fallen short of them in others. Franco-German relations are, at present, a happier chapter. Long may it so continue. It would be foolish in the extreme for our country to be other than gratified at closer understanding between Paris and Bonn. The failure to realize this earlier in the century has shadowed two generations. On the other hand, the United Kingdom's relations with France and Germany are not as close and cordial as they have been and should be. To perfect these should be the principal task of Western statesmanship.

When we had finished our task in Paris, I hoped that Western European Union would take its place as a leading authority in the new Europe. The responsibility for standardizing armaments, with which it is entrusted, is important though difficult to discharge. But I intended it to have also a wider scope. It has not worked out that way and of recent years little effort has been made to use the possibilities of W.E.U. In part this may be due to the fact that six countries have gone their own economic ways, though this should have made the political importance of the union all the greater. Certainly it would be of advantage to peace if the nations who are its members could meet regularly and informally, as its machinery allows, and concert their policies closely. Between them they command a wealth of wisdom and experience; it is a pity that it is not collectively at the disposal of the world.

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* The sequel was less happy. Thanks to a vehement campaign by the formerly banned pro-German parties in the Saar, the Saarlanders rejected the European Statute in October 1955. After prolonged negotiation, in which France secured important economic concessions, the Saar was reunited with Germany at the end of the following year.