Note from the Netherlands mission in Germany (3 February 1951)

Caption: On 3 February 1951, the Netherlands mission in Germany draws up a note which sets out the attitudes of the general public and the West German press towards the negotiations under way in Paris on the Schuman Plan.

Source: Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam. NVV - J.G. van Wouwe 1945-1973. Stukken betreffende Europese en internationale organisaties. Stukken betr. het Schuman Plan. 1950-1954. Diverse commissie. 1950-1952, 106.

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URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/note_from_the_netherlands_mission_in_germany_3_february_1951-en-4bab866d-d79a-4203-8320-b54be5cc93b3.html

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Public opinion on the Schuman Plan — West Germany (3 February 1951)

Note from the Netherlands Missions in Germany

Public opinion in Germany on the Schuman Plan is not, of course, based on information about the substance of the talks in Paris, which only one or two people know about. It is centred on people's own impressions of the basic ideas behind the Plan and how these might be achieved.

Initially the Schuman Plan was seen as a progressive idea which was designed to lay the foundations for Franco-German economic union in one fell swoop, and in which the supranational authority was the most important element because it was seen as necessary in order both to bridge historical Franco-German differences and to eliminate the post-war inequality in their positions as a result of the measures imposed on Germany.

Many people gave this idea an enthusiastic welcome, while others, particularly the socialists, were decidedly sceptical. But everyone basically had the same impression of the Schuman concept itself, although not of its feasibility.

Public debate focused on the political aspect of the Plan. The general assumption was that although there were plenty of technical economic problems to be resolved, the crucial question for the success of the Plan was whether a solution could be found to the political problems.

People were not worried that closer cooperation with France would give France the upper hand economically, provided that there was an affirmative answer to the political question of whether France was seriously prepared to sweep aside the causes of traditional Franco-German differences and to negotiate as equal partners on the creation of a common economic area.

This original impression has been somewhat affected by the slow progress of the Paris talks, and, in particular, the visionary aspect of the Plan, which appealed to people's emotions, has largely been undermined.

The touchstone of France's good faith in the public's eyes was its readiness to help to lift the restrictions imposed on the German economy after the war.

The point at which the German people subconsciously started to have second thoughts about the significance of the Schuman idea was the conference of deputy Foreign Ministers in London, and the signal for this change of heart was the surprising fact that it was actually the French who were objecting to the removal of the restrictions on German production.

People's original hopes and fears here gave way to the general conviction that France was seeking to use the Schuman Plan to force Germany to agree to maintain the production restrictions temporarily, in order to ensure that it had a valuable head start over German competition once Europe's economies merged in one form or another, as they were ultimately bound to do.

This change in public opinion explains the position of the German delegation in Paris, which was originally authorised to discuss the unconditional arrangements for a Treaty to implement the Schuman Plan, but which has now been instructed to make its approval of the Treaty subject to certain absolute conditions. The content of these conditions, as far as we know, is in line with the public's views: equal rights for the Treaty partners, production restrictions to be lifted, account to be taken of Germany's wishes concerning vertical combination in the new organisation of heavy industry, the abolition or, at the very least, reorganisation of the Ruhr Authority, and retention of the existing centralised system for selling coal.

We assume from all these *desiderata* that the other parties to the Treaty take it for granted that their own wishes and those of their industries will be met, so that failure to meet Germany's conditions would be discriminating against Germany.

The growing suspicions about France's intentions have also led to rejection of any thoughts of linking the Schuman agreement with the rearmament question. The French evidently gave up this idea when it became clear that the German people were anything but eager to get back into military uniform.

In addition to these general comments, I would also stress that in coal, iron and steel industry circles there is a certain disappointment that hopes have faded that the Schuman Plan would help to rationalise these industries and make them more profitable.

In trade union circles and the SPD there were initially fears that the effect of the Schuman Plan on the legal position concerning ownership would be detrimental for workers and would in practice be tantamount to forming a new type of cartel. This objection has evidently been shelved now that the Federal Government has been persuaded to come up with an acceptable settlement of the demands on co-determination.

The SPD is still making the point that once the Schuman Plan comes into practice too much coal will be taken out of the German economy, so that there will not be enough left for domestic fuel, for instance, in Germany. This argument in particular is put forward as evidence of what the SPD calls the Plan's 'economically impossible objectives'.

Finally, I should point out that it is generally assumed in Germany that the Paris talks will shortly produce an agreement, but opinions are still divided on whether Parliament will approve the Schuman Treaty.

3 February 1951