

'The Saar' from Le Peuple (1 June 1954)

Caption: On 1 June 1954, the Belgian Socialist daily newspaper Le Peuple reviews the conduct of the debates on the European Statute for the Saar, as proposed by the Dutchman Marinus van der Goes van Naters, rapporteur for the General Affairs Committee of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe.

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The Saar

by Eugène Peeters

There has been a great deal of talk about the Saar issue over the last two weeks. It was discussed in Strasbourg, where the question of a European Statute was on the agenda for the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe. It came up in Paris and statements were made about it in Bonn, capital of Federal Germany.

The commentaries on this issue vary widely, ranging from positive optimism to the most complete denial of all progress on the question.

What set it all going was a long conversation in Strasbourg on 18 May between Chancellor Adenauer and Mr Pierre-Henri Teitgen, Vice-President of the French Council, in the presence of Mr Johannes Hoffmann, Regional Prime Minister of the Saar. These discussions were secret. We did learn, however, that the foundations for them had been laid by Paul-Henri Spaak during a lunch he gave, where he had the opportunity of putting before his guests a draft solution which was subsequently considered by the three figures mentioned above.

The basis of the Spaak draft was the report on the European Statute of the Saar submitted to the Assembly by the Dutch Socialist Member Marinus van der Goes van Naters.

Van Naters was instructed to look into this serious question in September 1952, and in the introduction to the report tabled before the Assembly in 1954 he noted that the reason for the failure of the first plan for Europeanising the Saar, as discussed by Mr Robert Schuman and Mr Adenauer in 1952, was that there were queries about what Europeanisation actually meant and that it looked as if both sides had only pursued essentially national objectives. To the Germans it seemed that the Europeanisation of the Saar which France proposed was simply a way for France to detach the Saar from Germany for good and camouflage its economic hegemony. In the eyes of the French, the kind of Europeanisation the Germans wanted was just a way for them to mark time and, while waiting, manipulate public opinion and secure an immediate guarantee of Germany's economic penetration of the Saar.

There was deadlock, and van Naters put forward a new draft European Statute as an attempt at finding a way out of it.

This plan says that the Saar will become a European territory as soon as the European Political Community is set up, subject to the provisions of the Peace Treaty or of a ruling in lieu of it.

During the interim period, the Saar's foreign policy and defence interests will be entrusted to a European Commissioner, who will be appointed by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers and will be neither French, German nor from the Saar. He will be assisted in his work by an advisory committee of five members, nationals of Member States of the Council of Europe or of States which have stood guarantor of the Saar's European Statute. Until the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community is ratified, the defence of the Saar will be carried out by forces under the Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

In the economic sphere, the Statute provides for the common market between France and the Saar to be maintained. There is provision for measures to avoid jeopardising the trade balance between France and the Saar on the one hand and Germany and the Saar on the other. It appears that the German economy will be given a place in the common market.

No authorisation will be required for political parties, associations, newspapers or public meetings. A cultural agreement will be concluded between the Saar, France and Federal Germany, the main object of which will be to preserve the German culture and language of the Saar population in all respects. The University of the Saar will be turned into a European university.

To conclude, there is an article, and a very important one, which provides that the governments of France, Federal Germany, Britain and the United States will undertake to support and guarantee the European Statute of the Saar pending a peace treaty. These governments will, in addition, undertake to propose and support the acceptance of this solution as a final settlement at the negotiations preceding such a treaty, and when it is put into effect. The German government will give its assent to this undertaking.

The Saar population will be freely consulted on this Statute by referendum.

Those are the main points of the Van Naters report.

Just after the Teitgen–Adenauer discussion there was general optimism in the circles concerned in Strasbourg. The talk was only of an agreement between the two statesmen, an agreement which would finally eliminate one of the main obstacles to the establishment of a united Europe. France, it was said, having made the finding of a solution to the Saar problem a ‘precondition’ to any consideration of the EDC, would at last be able to discuss this plan for a common defence system and probably ratify it.

The first reactions came from the Quai d’Orsay. The Foreign Ministry denied that any agreement had been reached in Strasbourg, and said that furthermore Mr Teitgen had no power to reach agreements.

Harried with questions on his return to Bonn, Chancellor Adenauer also had to acknowledge that there was no official agreement.

There was then talk of a draft declaration of principle. There was an announcement that the governments in Bonn and Paris were to study the terms of it and a solution would be reached before long.

Meanwhile, the debate on the European Statute of the Saar began in the Assembly in Strasbourg as planned.

Van der Goes van Naters explained the scope of the question. The status quo cannot be maintained, he declared in substance. It has no foundation in either law or fact. No one wants it. The Europeanisation of the Saar is the only valid solution. It destroys nothing and leaves no one either victors or vanquished. It does not alter the situation as it stands at present: it supplies a harmonious solution to it, one which respects the principles of justice and international law.

Mr de Menthon then tabled before the Assembly, which adopted it virtually unanimously, a resolution that the question be deferred until the next meeting of the Assembly, in September. The Assembly delivered an opinion to the effect that a public debate on the Saar question would be inadvisable at the most delicate point in the negotiations, but that the question should nevertheless remain on the agenda.

And then, last Friday, Paris made public the reasons for its hesitation. A dispatch was issued officially recognising that Paul-Henri Spaak had played an active part in the Adenauer–Teitgen talks on the Saar problem; that it was he who had put forward the draft agreement providing for gradual economic equality between France and Germany; and that the draft had been considered by the French and German statesmen.

The view in Paris is that the Spaak draft makes serious changes to the Van Naters plan in the economic sphere, in ways which run counter to the French viewpoint; that, furthermore, the draft abolishes the guarantee of the Saar’s European Statute which Britain and the United States are to give, which would mean that the Statute would cease to apply as soon as the peace treaty was signed, and for these reasons it does not seem acceptable to the French government.

Does that mean that the Saar problem is log-jammed once again?

We do not think so.

Just after the Teitgen–Adenauer talks, one of the German Chancellor’s assistants noted that, given the level on which these conversations had taken place, it was hard to imagine the whole thing being called back into question or referred to subordinates.

There is also the fact that the Assembly in Strasbourg was concerned not to interfere in the negotiations at their most sensitive point by holding a public debate.

There is also the fact, lastly, that the obstacle of the Spaak amendment which has been invoked as grounds for disagreement does not really seem to be insurmountable, and that there is a growing belief that the status quo has become intolerable.