

The origins of WEU: Western Union

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The origins of Western European Union: Western Union

The 'Treaty of Economic, Social and Cultural Collaboration and Collective Self-Defence' between France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg was signed in Brussels on 17 March 1948, and entered into force on 25 August of the same year. Although the Treaty goes no further than providing for 'cooperation' between the contracting parties, 'which will be effected through the Consultative Council referred to in Article VII as well as through other bodies', in practice the arrangement was referred to as 'Western Union' or the 'Brussels Treaty Organisation'.

Three factors had led to the Brussels Treaty of 17 March 1948. One was the urge to promote economic, social and cultural cooperation and collective self-defence as East-West tension mounted, with the Soviet Union soon being seen as posing a threat through its determination to impose control over the countries of Central Europe. In addition, the Treaty reflected the resolve of the contracting States to take precautions against the potential resurgence of any threat from Germany; there was already a sign of this solidarity in the Franco-British Treaty of Dunkirk of 4 March 1947. Thirdly, the Brussels Treaty was confirmation of the wish of certain European countries to organise themselves jointly, indirectly prompting the United States and Canada to commit themselves militarily in Europe as well through the emergence of the Atlantic Alliance in April 1949⁽¹⁾. The *sine qua non* for American support for the defence of Europe was primarily European economic integration (as well as military cooperation), which would result in the setting aside of many reservations and a great deal of historic rivalry between European nations. The aim of the Americans was to bring defence resources and policies under one head.

The Brussels Treaty also owes much to the call by the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, to extend the Treaty of Dunkirk concluded with France the previous year to other signatory powers⁽²⁾. The object was to work towards consolidating Western Europe by opening up to the Benelux countries, to satisfy the United States and to give advance notice of the eventual incorporation of Italy, and then Germany, into the Treaty. The negotiating conference (held on 4 March 1948) took place a few days after the coup in Prague; thanks to this, the three smaller countries were able to persuade the others to agree to the concept of automatic and immediate mutual assistance in the event of aggression, and to the idea of setting up a regional organisation (a multilateral alliance in accordance with Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations).

The most important action taken by the Brussels Treaty Organisation was, beyond any doubt, the subsequent political decision to set up a Standing Military Committee (London) on 30 April 1948, three major commands⁽³⁾ and a joint staff forming the Western Union Defence Organisation (WUDO), which would be in place even in peacetime. The task of the Military Committee was to draw up defence plans, take stock of resources and coordinate military resources. The Committee of Inter-Allied Commanders-in-Chief (a joint staff of the five Member States), which was set up on 4 October the same year and headed by British Field Marshal Montgomery of Alamein, was run from Fontainebleau in France.

There was provision for integration only as regards air forces and the production of military equipment (examined by the Military Equipment Committee). Military resources remained under the control of the Member States (on-call forces only) and ground troops were too few in number⁽⁴⁾ to meet the estimated requirements for the defence of Western Europe, which was mainly organised along the Rhine.

Given these weaknesses and the tensions between Britain and France over command and geostrategy, the requests for military assistance within Europe eventually found an American solution by opening the way to the establishment of the Atlantic Alliance, thereby forcing Western Union to 'enter a period of dormancy'. American predominance in a wider alliance (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) was, at the time, seen as preferable to British dominance in the framework of the Brussels Treaty.

(December 2009)

(1) The Alliance was made possible by the Vandenberg Resolution adopted by the United States Senate on 11 June 1948 authorising the Administration to conclude external alliances in peacetime.

(2) Cf. the speech to the House of Commons on 22 January 1948.

- (3) Land, air and sea.
- (4) One Belgian, four British and four French divisions.