

The organisation of post-war defence in Europe (1948–1954) — Introduction

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_organisation_of_post_war_defence_in_europe_1948_1954_introduction-en-40579162-d262-4ecd-8bcd-edf704395515.html

Last updated: 07/07/2016



Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, Europe was on its knees. People were living in constant fear of renewed German aggression and the Soviet grip on Central and Eastern Europe fuelled a sense of anxiety in Western Europe.

A divided Western Europe, utterly drained and relegated to second fiddle on the international stage by the rise in power of the United States and the Soviet Union, soon realised that its recovery would come through unity. To consolidate its newfound peace, which had been bought at such a high price, the idea of a common system of defence seemed to be the only solution.

On 17 March 1948, the Brussels Treaty establishing Western Union, a system of mutual assistance in the event of armed aggression, was concluded between the United Kingdom, France and the three Benelux countries. This alliance marked the start of European military cooperation.

The five European signatories to the Brussels Treaty soon realised that alone they would be incapable of mounting any effective resistance to an attack from the USSR. So Western Europe turned to the United States, a move which would result in the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington in April 1949, establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

But in 1950, the start of the Korean War proved how pressing the need was for a European defence organisation that would necessarily include German armed forces. Moreover, the need for German rearmament was constantly repeated by a US Administration anxious to thwart the ambitions of communism in Europe. NATO did guarantee the defence of Europe in an Atlantic context thanks to massive American support, but it did not provide a practical solution to the problem of rearming the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), which was not a signatory to the North Atlantic Treaty. Therefore, while West German participation in European defence was on the agenda, the former Allies were of widely differing opinions as to how this should be brought about.

In 1950, René Pleven proposed that, following the signing of the ECSC Treaty, a European army should be created, with the eventual involvement of German units, and that the whole be placed under a single military and political European authority. Although it was accepted by most Western countries, the plan for a European Defence Community (EDC) was rejected by the French National Assembly in August 1954.

Western European Union (WEU), which allowed Germany to accede to the Brussels Treaty in October 1954, would never be able to compensate for the failure of the EDC and European military integration.