BRITISH POLICY TOWARDS FRANCE, 1945–51

British Policy towards France, 1945–51

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To Kate

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Preface

This book is based on a doctoral thesis written between 1989 and 1993 in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham, under the supervision of Dr Martin Kolinsky. The final year of research was supported by the University by the award of the Kirkcaldy Scholarship.

R.W.

Introduction

As German armies were sweeping across Europe in June 1940 the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, made an unprecedented offer: faced with a common enemy, Great Britain and France would cease to be two sovereign states but would merge to form an Anglo-French Union with a common citizenship. The prime mover in this plan was the Frenchman co-ordinating the mobilisation of the material and productive resources of the two countries: Jean Monnet. The offer came too late, however, for any response. A plane took Monnet and other leading figures in an eleventh-hour dash to Bordeaux, to where the remnants of the French government had fled in disarray, but no authority could be salvaged to bestow upon the Union any degree of legitimacy.¹ For the next four years France remained under German domination while a bloody and destructive war raged around the world. In February 1945, with France finally liberated and Germany facing total defeat, the proposal resurfaced. However, questioned in the House of Commons, the Foreign Secretary, Sir Anthony Eden, replied that no renewed offer of an Anglo-French Union had been made.² In April, Churchill himself, when asked whether such a move was still government policy, answered that it was not.³

To some extent this reflected the attitude of the Prime Minister to General Charles de Gaulle, wartime leader of the Free French and now head of the French provisional government. Churchill thought it preferable to await overtures from France, as any display of eagerness '...would give de Gaulle every opportunity for misbehaviour'.⁴ In the event, however, the task of steering Anglo-French relations through the conflicting interests in the aftermath of war did not fall to Churchill and Eden. Following the outright victory of the Labour Party in the General Election of 26 July 1945 it was the new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, and his Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, who took their seats at the Potsdam Conference already in progress with the Soviet Union and the United States. Among other things, that conference agreed the principle that, although divided into separate zones of occupation, Germany would be treated as a single economic unit. Details on this and all outstanding matters were to be finalised by a Council of Foreign Ministers which would meet as required. France, not represented at the conference, had been granted a zone of occupation and was now invited to participate in future decisions through the medium of this quadripartite machinery.⁵

Britain and France were therefore to be partners in the process of remodelling Europe for the post-war era. It was fitting that they should be. Though France had been rapidly overrun, leaving Britain to stand alone, the fight against Hitler's Germany was a struggle upon which the two countries had embarked together. Mightier powers had later become embroiled in the conflict but the war had its beginnings in Anglo-French opposition to German territorial ambitions. Britain's commitment to this common cause had been symbolised by the offer to marry her destiny to that of a France already succumbing to the German onslaught. Five years later, with the enemy subdued under four occupying armies, the Allies were engaged in fixing the post-war international order with Germany helpless at their feet. Yet, by the Summer of 1950, Britain was reduced to the role of bystander as France and a rehabilitated and vigorous German Federal Republic buried their differences to become the nucleus of a new Europe.

Jean Monnet, who had made a flight to Bordeaux even as France fell, in the hope of cementing an Anglo-French Union, was now building a union of a different kind and with a partner few would have guessed in the days after Allied forces had evicted the armies of the Third Reich from French soil. The announcement on 9 May 1950, that France and West Germany were to place their coal and steel production under a common supreme authority, was a landmark in European integration but was also a watershed in Anglo-French relations. Britain was, of course, welcome to join the Franco-German scheme. Something had been lost, however. After five years of war the idea that the unity of Britain and France was paramount still survived. After another five years of peace that vision had been eclipsed by the reality of a new Europe in the making.

With hindsight, there is a compelling sense of the inevitable in the development of the modern European Community from its genesis in the Schuman Plan, via the Treaty of Rome, Single European Act and Maastricht. From this perspective the moment of creation is scarcely separated from the decision of the United Kingdom not immediately to join France and Germany in the venture. The impression is one of an idea whose time had come, a snap decision by a short-sighted British government, and an opportunity missed.

In fact, the shape of post-war Europe, the future of its coal and steel industries in general and those of Germany in particular, were questions with which Britain and France had long grappled. Production and demand, control and military occupation were woven together in a thread which ran through Anglo-French relations as the two allies sought order in the chaos left by the war against Hitler. The resources of Germany's industrial

heartlands in the Ruhr and the Saar, their role in the recovery of Europe and their ultimate place in the post-war European economy were subjects to which Britain and France had returned time and again. In such matters the Schuman Plan was on well-trodden ground. True, the Franco-German initiative, although concerned with coal and steel, was ennobled by a vision of the future in which it was the first step to a new community of nations. The choice of the sectors in which economic integration would start was not without its particular history, however. Neither was the conduct of Anglo-French relations in the years before the Schuman Plan without its own guiding vision of a Europe to come. Against this background, caught between hope and necessity, Britain and France arrived at the crossroads.