

Division and Realignment in Europe, 1945 – 1992 | Sample answer

Why, and to what extent, did Europe move towards unity, 1945-1973? (2012)

Europe moved towards unity after 1945 because there was strong political will and public support to do so. It was a gradual evolution rather than a grand decision following the end of World War II. The concept of a federal European Union was one where power would be shared between a central authority, and the member states' individual governments. This essay will detail the reasons why it was necessary, how it began, its progress in the early stages and expansion, its successes and also its many difficulties and challenges.

In 1945 political leaders were in a position to make significant changes in their task of reorganising their countries. They looked back at the mistakes of the past and looked to threats of the future. They wanted to create a Europe where devastating conflict would not occur. The mistakes made in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 were a contributing factor in the outbreak of World War II. Therefore, the allies did not punish Germany but rather integrate it with fellow European countries. This would enable countries such as France to keep Germany in line while simultaneously allowing Germany to regain respect.

The devastation of World war II had substantially damaged many prominent European countries' economies. The rise of the superpowers, the USSR and the USA, led many to question could Europe potentially be a third superpower. By pooling their resources, Western European countries could compete with the superpowers more effectively. The USA believed it was essential that Western Europe returned to its economic prosperity in order to prevent the spread of communism. Creating broader markets collectively would ensure the growth of post-war European economies.

Following World War II, many organisations were set up to deal with the economic recovery of the continent. Benelux, the first significant European economic alliance, was established in 1947 between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. By removing custom duties and other trading restrictions between the Benelux countries, trade between them had tripled by 1957.

Through their Marshall plan, the USA encouraged European Unity. In order to distribute Marshall Aid, the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation was set up in 1948. In the same year, the Congress of Europe was held in the Hague with delegates from 16 European countries, which recommended that European countries should work hand in hand for economic unity. Following this, the council of Europe met. Many disagreements took place around the idea of supranational identity and giving up power to a central body. The council had relatively little power but encouraged further cooperation.

The 'Schuman Plan' issued by Robert Schuman in 1950 outlined his idea of the merging of German and French coal and steel industries. This developed into the European Steel and Coal Community, which was a pivotal point in the development of European unity. It was a supranational organisation in which six countries joined to pool their steel and coal. The Community was highly successful. Steel production within members increased by 50%. Despite it being the biggest producer of coal, Britain refused to join and only received half the growth compared to its members. The European Steel and Coal Community proved to the world that the proposal that countries coming together for successful economic benefit was possible.

The fear of communism progressing throughout Europe encouraged many countries to form alliances with one another. Following the Berlin Blockade and the realisation of their weakness alone, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was formed between 10 Western European countries, the USA and Canada. The countries involved pledged to help each other if attacked. While it was not entirely European, NATO aided in unifying European countries. Calls for a European Defence Community began following the Pleven Plan but ultimately failed as both the French and British governments felt uncomfortable rearming Germany so soon after the Second World War. The failure of the European Defence Community made it clear that an economic model of cooperation was likely to be the best way forward for closer integration.

The Spaak report of 1956 paved the way for the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Commission. It found that more European integration was required. The signing of the Treaty of Rome 1957 officially established the EEC which included a common market for its members. This included the free movement of goods, people, services and capital. The EEC aimed to raise living standards, promote economic activity and to promote unity. The Community was made up of a Council of Ministers for national issues, the European Commission for the Community interests, and the European Parliament representing the interests of the people. A Common Agricultural Policy was developed, giving guaranteed prices to farmers. The

EEC was highly successful. Between 1958 and 1963 trade doubled between its members and unemployment was reduced by 50 per cent.

The prosperous development of the EEC quickly slowed down as a result of the Empty Chair Crisis in 1956. President of France Charles de Gaulle favoured national interests over the Community. His refusal to take his seat at the Council of Ministers due to a dispute over CAP funding and majority funding led to the crisis which lasted seven months. The Luxembourg Compromise eventually solved this dispute, allowing countries to veto proposals. The Empty Chair Crisis halted progress within the Community as decision making was difficult. As a result, national issues were more likely to be favoured, and development in the EEC during the 1960s and 1970s was slow.

Despite having a prominent role in European politics, Britain was reluctant to join the EEC and the ECSC. The British government felt that joining a supranational body would weaken their power and damage their close links with the commonwealth countries. After the success of joining the European Free Trade Area, Britain applied to join the EEC. Due to their close links with the USA, Charles de Gaulle vetoed their application twice, both in 1961 and 1967. Following de Gaulle's retirement, Britain joined the European Economic Community in 1973 alongside Ireland and Denmark.

The movement towards a federal Europe, from the despair of post-war Europe to the European Union of today, has been a long and challenging road. From the initial Benelux agreement to European Coal and Steel Community to the Treaty of Rome, Europe had been carried from a place of economic doom to prosperity. Its successes outweigh its failures, preserving peaceful cooperation within Europe. In the words of one of the most prominent figures of the movement towards European unity Robert Schuman, "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity."