

The Post-1945 Reconstruction of France and Western Europe

Dr Martin Conway, Balliol College, Oxford

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Q. What were the most important political parties between 1945 and 1947? Where did their support come from?

A. The most obvious feature of the European political landscape in the years immediately following the Second World War was its newness. In most European states (notably in France), new political parties dominated political life and in those areas, such as the Low Countries, where the pre-war parties remained influential, they made considerable efforts to present themselves as new in both personnel and policies. This newness reflected the way in which the war had changed the coordinates of political life. Movements and parties sympathetic to the authoritarian ideas of the 1930s had disappeared; and parties such as the Communists who had been a vocal but marginal presence in European political life during the inter-war years acquired a much greater popular base and influence in politics.

This change was, above all, a reflection of the way in which the war years had wrought considerable changes at the level of political elites. The suspension of orthodox political life during the war had created a much less formal political environment in which new parties and movements were able to emerge. There was little spirit of nostalgia in 1945, anywhere in Europe, and pre-war political leaders (even those with the prestige of the Socialist leader, Léon Blum, in France) struggled to regain their former influence. Instead, the new men (and a very few women) who emerged as the leaders of post-war Europe were predominantly new political figures. This did not mean that they were people who had been drawn into political life by the events of the war years. The Resistance movements of Europe produced few genuinely new political figures and most of Europe's post-war leaders had been active in political life during the 1930s. But the war years offered them the opportunity to come to the fore, both in local politics and in the restored arenas of national politics, such as the parliaments elected during the first post-war years.

What is less evident is that this newness of parties and elites indicated a real change in Europe's political culture. The frontiers between left and right remained resilient, even if the parties that composed each camp had changed. Moreover, though it is often said that the Second World War had moved Europe to the left, this appears to have been a circumstantial and temporary phenomenon, that reflected the disarray on the political right in the aftermath of liberation, rather than a genuine change of political heart on the part of most Europeans. What was perhaps more important was the new attitude displayed by Europeans towards their political leaders. The war had done much to undermine the established forms of political socialization, and the European electors of the post-war years were more eager to hold their leaders to account, to assess how political programmes served their self-interest, and to distrust grand ideological programmes.

Q. What impact did the Cold War have upon Western Europe?

A. The way that this question is phrased invites an answer which assesses the way in which an external event rather akin to a storm or a disease changed the internal politics of Western Europe. That is indeed the approach adopted by many historians of post-war European politics towards the Cold War. Thus, they emphasize the way in which it led to the departure of the Communists from the coalition governments in France, Italy and Belgium in 1947 and reinforced the ascendancy of the parties of the centre-right, notably the Christian Democrats.

Such an interpretation is not fundamentally wrong. The Cold War did indeed have manifold impacts on the still-fluid politics of post-liberation Western Europe. American material support assisted the resurgence of the centre-right (notably in the decisive Italian elections of 1948) and hastened the division of most European trade union movements into competing Socialist and Communist federations. More generally, too, the Cold War provided a new mobilizing theme for those Europeans who were not of the extreme left. Fear of the perceived Soviet threat, and more immediately of the political challenge presented by the national Communist parties, brought together wide coalitions of European political forces, including many non-Communist Socialists who in the 1930s had been sympathetic to the rhetoric of a Popular Front with the Communists.

Nevertheless, this focus on the impact of the Cold War presents two problems. First, it does not reflect the degree to which the Cold War was 'made in Europe'. Far from having been a consequence of the external actions of the United States of America and the Soviet Union, the Cold War had its initial geographical focus in Western Europe (notably in disputes over the future of Germany) and owed much to the actions of European political leaders, both Communist and non-Communist, who encouraged and lobbied their external patrons to support their cause. This is most evident, or at least most visible, in the way in which political leaders in Britain, France and Italy encouraged the United States to become more directly involved in post-war European politics both economically through the Marshall Plan and militarily through the process of alliance building which culminated in the creation of NATO.

The second problem presented by the conventional image of the Cold War is that it is perceived as an accident that derailed European politics from what would otherwise have been their post-war trajectory. This is most evident in the writing of historians sympathetic to the political left who tend to assume that post-war Europe would have evolved towards some progressive, or even Communist, political identity had it not been for the impact of the Cold War. For the reasons outlined in answers to other questions, I find this to be a dubious assumption. Once the initial euphoria of liberation had passed, Communists and other radical-left forces had considerable difficulty in maintaining their political and social influence, for reasons which were far more profound than the actions of American ambassadors or of the CIA.

Q. How do you account for the emergence of Christian Democrat parties?

A. The history of Christian Democracy is a subject to which it is difficult to warm. The emergence of a cohort of parties which acquired major positions in the politics of nine European states (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Austria, Switzerland and, in a modified form, in Ireland) and became the pillars of the governing coalitions of the centre-right has an undeniable dullness. Christian Democrat parties were bureaucratic machines, their leaders were predominantly unremarkable, and their policies were conventional and moderate.

Nevertheless, the extent to which they represented a revolution in European politics can hardly be exaggerated. With the exception of the Low Countries, Christian Democrat parties had had little role in 1930s' Europe, and their sudden rise to prominence marked a major change in the electoral and political map of Europe.

Confessional politics were of course not new. Since at least the 1870s, Catholic and, to a lesser extent, Protestant parties had been active in many European states, defending the perceived interests of the Church and of the faithful against the hostile attacks of Socialists and Liberals. Moreover, those parties increasingly developed a sense that Christianity provided a distinctive solution to the social, economic and political problems of the contemporary age. The ideology of the Christian Democrat parties after 1945 did not therefore come 'out of the blue' and Christian democrat leaders rightly looked back to an intellectual heritage which had its origins in the nineteenth century.

It would be wrong, however, to see the sudden victory of Christian Democracy in post-war Europe as a primarily ideological or even confessional phenomenon. Confessional loyalty provided the organizational milieu and electoral bedrock on which the parties built. Their political success was, however, based on more mundane realities. The discrediting of many conservative and right-wing parties in the events and choices of the 1930s and the war years left many non-Socialist voters without a natural home after 1945. Christian Democracy provided that home, and was able to do so because it succeeded in combining its confessional image with other more pressing political priorities. Anti-communism was rooted in a Christian identity, but the Christian Democrat parties proved predominantly successful in appealing also to the sectional interests of groups such as farmers and the middle classes who were looking for a protector in the post-war political world. This tactic was not successful everywhere. In France, the MRP failed to build successfully on its initial post-war gains, but in many other areas of Catholic Europe the Christian Democrat parties established themselves as the dominant electoral and governmental force until the 1970s.

Q. Who were the champions of greater European unity during this period?

A. This is a question which it is tempting to invert. So much of the historical writing on post-1945 Europe has emphasized the remorseless progress towards greater European union, it is easy to forget how little progress took place towards unification in the thirty years following the Second World War. In many years the post-1945 decades marked not merely 'the rescue of the European nation-state' (Milward, 1992) but the zenith of its importance as the defining institution of the post-war world.

The issue for historians is not therefore one of charting a long-term evolution towards union but the rather more subtle one of investigating how a pragmatic politics of limited sharing of sovereignty developed among the core six states (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) in the 1950s and 1960s, while largely excluding the majority of West European states. Two answers come to the fore. One is related to the Christian Democrat revolution discussed above. Christian Democrat parties did possess a greater sense of shared endeavour, crossing national frontiers, than most other political forces with the exception of the Communists. They found it easy to work together, even if they were vigilant in their defence of national interests. Christian Democrat political leadership therefore created for the first time a common European political culture in which the same attitudes towards the social and economic issues of the time could come to the fore. The second

issue lies in the development of a new bureaucratic mentality in post-1945 nation-states. The enhanced importance that the state acquired in post-1945 European societies meant that almost for the first time they had the resources in human, technical and financial terms to address issues such as economic planning and management of markets. These new domains of state action spilled over easily into forms of European decision-making. In contrast to the demise of grand plans for political unity or the much more sensitive issue of military co-operation, the problems of the iron and coal industries and the vexed problem of ensuring a viable future for Europe's farmers (many of whom were Christian Democrat voters) were ones which could best be solved at a pan-national level without thereby appearing to undermine the shibboleths of national sovereignty.

Q. How did Western European politics and society change between 1945 and 1953?

A. Most obviously, the immediate post-war years saw a remarkably rapid recovery of European living standards after the mass destruction and chaos of the Second World War and its related conflicts. This was not universal. Spain and Greece remained locked in the material sufferings of the war years until at least the 1960s. But for the inhabitants of Hamburg and Bordeaux or Brussels and Milan, the immediate post-war years did for the first time in most people's lifetimes seem to offer a genuine prospect of rising living standards and consequent material prosperity.

Post-war Europe is, however, more interesting than the story of fridges, cars and foreign travel which often predominate in text books. If the large story was one of rising prosperity, that prosperity was not distributed equally and, as the Poujadist movement in France well demonstrated, there were many who regarded themselves as losers in the new world. Much the same might also be said of Europe's industrial working class. If the working class had been at the centre of European political life in the first half of the twentieth century, so too did their influence diminish after the Second World War. Workers, often rooted in a Communist loyalty, lacked political influence and found themselves increasingly marginalized in the corridors of power. In their place it was the cadres of the new Europe who came to the fore: technical workers, state officials, and professionals in the burgeoning state and para-statal institutions of education, planning and engineering. Most strikingly, the post-war years also saw the resurgence of the influence of Europe's commercial farmers. If small-scale peasants were increasingly forced to move to Europe's cities, the commercial farmers who remained on the land benefited from agricultural protectionism against the vagaries of world markets and enhanced structures of welfare.

In sum, Europe might have recovered from the Second World War. But it had also acquired a new and less revolutionary shape.

Key publications by Martin Conway

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