

Peace in our time

Sep 23rd 2004

From The Economist print edition

Europe has largely avoided war for nearly six decades, but the European Union no longer gets the credit

AFP



Mitterrand and Kohl made history

IN THE whole of Europe there is probably no more blood-soaked battlefield than Verdun. In 1916 some 800,000 French and German soldiers were killed or wounded, fighting inconclusively over a few square miles of territory near the Franco-German border. The young Charles de Gaulle was wounded three times and captured at Verdun. Louis Delors, a 21-year-old French private, suffered terrible injuries there and was almost killed by a German officer who was finishing off the French wounded with a pistol. In the 1990s his son, Jacques Delors, became the founding father of a monetary union of France, Germany and ten other European countries. Mr Delors's two great collaborators were Helmut Kohl, the

German chancellor, whose father had also fought at Verdun, and François Mitterrand, the French president. In 1984 these two leaders, in a historic act of Franco-German reconciliation, walked hand in hand across the battlefield that had been a killing ground for so many young men from both countries.

Many of the European Union's most ardent supporters still see the EU as a crucial bulwark against the return of war to Europe. In pressing the case for monetary union, Mr Kohl argued that adopting the euro was ultimately a question of war and peace in Europe. When efforts to write a European constitution looked like stalling, Elmar Brok, a prominent German member of the EU's constitutional convention (and confidant of Mr Kohl), gave warning that if Europe failed to agree on a constitution, it risked sliding back into the kind of national rivalries that had led to the outbreak of the first world war.

Remember the bad old days?

Such arguments resonate particularly strongly among an older generation of French and German politicians, but also have wider currency. Timothy Garton Ash of St Antony's College, Oxford, one of Britain's most astute observers of European affairs, says in a recent book that the Union is needed "to prevent us falling back into the bad old ways of war and European barbarism which stalked the Balkans into the very last year of the last century." Mr Garton Ash concedes that "we can never prove that a continent-wide collection of independent, fully sovereign European democracies would not behave in the same broadly pacific way without the existence of any European Union. Maybe they would, but would you care to risk it?"

Believers in the pacifying effects of the drive for European unity acknowledge the contributions to peace in post-war Europe made by American troops and by the spread of prosperity and democracy. But they argue that the EU has played the central role, by forcing European leaders to co-operate intensively and continuously, by proving that membership of the Union brings prosperity and by demanding that all EU countries adhere to basic principles of democracy, human rights and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Seen in this light, EU enlargement is part of the same "peace project" that was initially centred on reconciliation between France and Germany. Countries that apply to join the EU first have to meet a set of basic democratic criteria, and have to put aside old territorial disputes. Eight former members of the Soviet block were admitted to the EU this year, and Romania and Bulgaria are lined up for entry in 2007. But the idea that enlargement of the European Union will inevitably resolve conflicts and spread freedom and democracy will face even bigger tests in future.



The European Commission in Brussels has already made it clear that all the Balkan countries are potentially eligible for membership, in the hope of encouraging them to make peace and introduce democratic reforms. Croatia, which earlier this year became the first major combatant in the Balkan wars to be formally accepted as a candidate for EU membership, had to step up its co-operation with the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague before negotiations became possible.

The EU was rightly castigated for its inability to prevent war in the Balkans in the 1990s, and many Europeans felt humiliated by the need for American military intervention to end the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo. But the EU is taking over the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia from NATO later this year in what will be the Union's biggest ever military operation. In the longer term, it is hoped, the prospect of EU membership may help to cement the fragile democracies and the peace settlements now in place across the Balkans.

An ever wider Union

A similarly ambitious logic is being applied to Turkey's aspirations to join the Union. Although many EU politicians and citizens are worried about admitting a large Muslim nation into the Union, the proponents of Turkish membership have the upper hand. Turkey is likely to be invited to start negotiations to join the EU later this year. Once again, the key arguments are about peace and the spread of freedom and democracy.

At a time when relations between the West and the Islamic world are so delicate, most EU leaders seem to feel that refusing to admit a large Islamic country into the Union would be seen as a disastrous confirmation of the “clash of civilisations”. European diplomats, for their part, hope that admitting Turkey to the EU will bring confirmation that Islam is not incompatible with western values. They point out with some pride that the prospect of EU membership has already driven forward reforms in Turkey such as increased political and civil rights for the Kurdish minority and the abolition of the death penalty.

Many citizens fear that rather than exporting stability, the EU will import instability

For geo-strategic thinkers sitting in foreign ministries in London, Paris and Berlin, the arguments for using the EU to spread peace and democratic stability seem compelling. But ordinary European citizens find them much less convincing. Many fear that rather than exporting stability, the EU will import instability. In western Europe, public debate about EU enlargement has tended to concentrate on fears about competition from low-cost labour and waves of immigration. So far such fears have proved containable, and the admission of the new members from central Europe has not caused too much of a fuss. But the new central European members, though poorer than the European average, are smallish (except for Poland), and all are predominantly Christian.

Turkey, which on current trends will have a larger population than any current EU member by 2020, is a different proposition. Because all EU citizens are free to live and work anywhere in the EU, there could be serious resistance to Turkish membership in France, Germany and the Netherlands, where the rapid growth of Muslim populations in the past 30 years is already a highly sensitive issue.

Even without such worries, the traditional arguments for European integration as a “peace project” have anyway been losing force with the passing years. The current generation of EU leaders still has some memories of the depredations of

war in Europe. Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, never knew his father, who was killed in the second world war; Jacques Chirac, the French president, lived through the war as a child. But for most younger Europeans, the threat of war in western Europe now seems almost unimaginably remote.

The expansion of the EU beyond the original six also added new countries with different historical experiences. Although some Britons, such as Mr Garton Ash, take the threat of a recurrence of war in Europe seriously, the British have generally approached the Union in a very different spirit from the French and Germans. Whereas statesmen such as Monnet and Schuman considered the 1939-45 war as the final proof that traditional European political structures needed to be radically changed, the British tended to see it as a vindication of their own long-established democracy and as confirmation of their anti-continental prejudices. As Margaret Thatcher, a famously Eurosceptic British prime minister, remarked: "In my lifetime all our problems have come from mainland Europe and all the solutions from the English-speaking nations across the world." The British are wary of dreams for political union in Europe. Unlike their French and German counterparts, British politicians have always wanted the EU to be above all about free trade.

Changing the mix

As the EU has expanded, so Britain has become less isolated in its resistance to the idea that European unity is essential for the maintenance of peace. When in 2003 Sweden held a referendum on whether to join the euro, Goran Persson, the Swedish prime minister, used the peace argument, but watched it fall flat in a neutral country that has been at peace for nearly 200 years. The Swedes voted "no". The new EU members in central Europe also bring a different perspective to the European Union. Whereas the traditional "builders of Europe" were suspicious of nationalism and keen to build up supranational institutions at the expense of the nation-state, many of the central Europeans are still joyfully re-asserting their own national identities after decades of Soviet domination.

Nonetheless, all these countries were eager to join the EU. They saw membership as an assertion of their European identity, as well as a ticket to prosperity and some protection against any threat from a resurgent Russia. But they are also much less enthusiastic than western European federalists about an "ever closer union" for Europe as spelled out in the Treaty of Rome. Vaclav Havel, the hero of the Velvet Revolution and former president of the Czech Republic, explains that for countries that have recently thrown off Soviet domination, "the concept of national sovereignty is something inviolable".

For a variety of reasons, then, the most powerful traditional argument for European unity, peace, has been losing force. European federalists are beginning to look for new rationales for European unity.