Why was the EU created?

To make another Franco-German war impossible – by placing coal and steel, the raw materials of war, under one shared authority in 1950.

Not bureaucracy, not flags, not curved-banana regulations. The EU began as a security device, and you understand the whole machine better once you see the problem it was engineered for.

The problem: three wars in seventy years

Between 1870 and 1945, France and Germany fought three times. Each war was larger than the last; the third burned down the continent, killed tens of millions and ended with Europe partitioned between two outside powers. Every diplomatic instrument of the age had been tried between the two countries – alliances, disarmament clauses, reparations, occupation – and all of it had failed within a generation.

The insight of 1950 was that the problem was structural, not moral. As long as two sovereign industrial states sat next to each other with separate steel industries, each could rearm, so each had to assume the other might. Goodwill could not fix that geometry. Only removing the capability could.

The trick: make it materially impossible

On 9 May 1950, French foreign minister Robert Schuman proposed – in a scheme drafted by Jean Monnet – that France and Germany place their entire coal and steel production under a single shared High Authority, open to other European countries. The declaration's key sentence is engineering, not poetry: war between France and Germany would become "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible."

Notice what this is: not a peace treaty (a promise), but a fusion of the war-making industries themselves (a fact). Neither country could build tanks without the other seeing every ton of steel. Six countries signed – France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg – and the Coal and Steel Community began work in 1952.

Schuman's declaration contained a second design principle that explains the EU's whole subsequent character: Europe, it said, "will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan," but through "concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity." Not a constitution – a ratchet.

The ratchet turns

The method worked, so it was repeated. Coal and steel became a full common market in 1957 (the European Economic Community), which became a single market with open internal borders, which acquired a court whose rulings bind governments, a directly elected parliament, and in 1992, at Maastricht, a common currency and the name European Union. Each step followed the Monnet recipe: pool a concrete thing, let the solidarity become fact, repeat.

That origin also explains the EU's oddness – the reason nobody can quite say what it is. It was never designed as a state, or as anything, really; it accreted, sector by sector, around a security core. The parts that got pooled work federally. The parts that never did – armies, foreign policy, taxes – still run on unanimous agreement between 27 governments, which is why the EU can regulate a market of 450 million but struggles to answer a phone call in a crisis.

The measure of success

Judge the device by its specification: its job was to make war between its members impossible, and for 75 years – after a millennium in which every unification of Europe was attempted by force and the continent averaged a major war per generation – there has not been one. The founders' problem is solved so thoroughly that their solution is now mistaken for a trade club with opinions about bananas.

The open question is the other half of the specification, the half left unbuilt in 1950 because America was handling it: defending the peace from outside threats. That bill has recently come due.

All questions →

FREQUENTLY ASKED

When was the EU founded?

In stages: the Coal and Steel Community in 1951, the European Economic Community in 1957, and the European Union proper with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The 1950 Schuman Declaration is the founding moment.

Was the EU created for peace or for trade?

Peace, through trade. The founders pooled the coal and steel industries – the raw materials of war – precisely so that France and Germany could not secretly rearm against each other. The common market was the method, not the motive.

Who actually designed it?

Jean Monnet, a French planner, drafted the scheme; foreign minister Robert Schuman put his name and political weight behind it on 9 May 1950. Adenauer's Germany accepted immediately; Italy and the Benelux countries joined in.

Why did Britain not join at the start?

London declined the 1950 invitation – a victor with an empire saw no need to pool sovereignty with the defeated. Britain applied twelve years later, was vetoed twice by de Gaulle, and joined in 1973.

Did it work?

On its own terms, remarkably: war between EU members, three of them in seventy years before 1950, has been unthinkable since. The unfinished parts – defense, foreign policy – are where today's arguments live.

SOURCES

- Schuman Declaration, 9 May 1950 (full text)
- Treaty of Paris (ECSC, 1951); Treaties of Rome (1957); Maastricht Treaty (1992)
- Monnet, Memoirs (origin of the coal-and-steel scheme)
- Franco-German wars: 1870–71, 1914–18, 1939–45