

Why does the EU matter? It is easy today to criticize its impact, mired as we are in the nuanced policy debates that are pressing now. But in 1951, when the European Coal and Steel Community was proposed, the world was seen through a much darker lens. It had only been six years since the Third Reich dominated almost the entirety of the European continent, with millions having perished in cities, battlefields, and extermination camps. The generation before had been forced to fight in the trenches at Verdun, Tannenberg, and countless other sites, facing gas and industrialized warfare that had never been seen before. The previous generation had experienced the wars of German and Italian unification. Their grandparents had suffered through the Napoleonic wars, and so on. Prior to the beginning of European integration, the continent had known almost constant warfare for centuries.

Since then, the major powers of Europe have not gone to war. Excluding the effects of the nuclear balance between the Eastern and Western military alliances, the powers of France, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Italy, and the Nordic countries have not experienced a single day of interstate war between one another. For Europe, such a historical aberration cannot be taken lightly. To return to the question at hand, “why does the EU matter?”, one must focus their analysis on the historical impact of the organization. The EU not only outlawed war between its members (like the earlier Kellogg-Briand Pact), but made the waging of a war between them functionally impossible. Previously, arms build ups and strategic industry investment could occur unhindered, often in secret. After 1951, none of the ECSC members could have possibly begun a campaign against its neighbors. The fundamental element of the European Union, the idea that sparked its Big Bang moment in the 1950s, was the elimination of war on a continent that had known nothing but strife for generations.

The European Union has also changed how we refer to Europe itself. Historically, the borders and identities of “Europe” were in contention, however now Europe is now synonymous with the European Union. Put simply, if you’re not in the EU, you’re not European. This was particularly evident after the end of the Cold War, when Soviet bloc states began their “return to Europe”. It has once again raised its head after the Brexit referendum. Are the people of the United Kingdom European? Without upholding the tenets of the European treaties, ascribing to the *acquis communautaire*, or belonging to the single market, some would argue no. Being a part of the bloc implies a level of commitment to democratic values and a free economic system, a commitment that shuns protectionism and illiberalism. Naturally, this is a disputed concept. Norway, Northern Cyprus, Bosnia, Serbia, and Turkey all share common historical traits with EU member states that would lend them a certain “Europeanness”. Regardless, the European Union has reinvented the conceptual debate over what Europe is, with clear lines of delineation drawn along membership status.

There is even more to consider. After the Second World War, Europe was devastated. Its population decimated, infrastructure destroyed, and morale crushed, the great powers of the Old World quickly lost influence to the superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. Structurally, it became impossible for Europe to compete strategically on the world stage. Decolonization had torn down the economic basis for many European states, and the bloody wars these states fought to try to maintain their empires only further damaged their reputation and morale. The great step that was taken economically by merging into a single bloc was able to turn this trend on its head, where now in a world of geoeconomics and soft power, Europe is once again a force to be reckoned with. It would seem the European Union has defied nearly every sceptic from Anglo-American academics to Continental nationalists. Each institution has

only increased in power, as states become more and more functionally and socially tied to one another. Since 1951, European institutions have adopted competencies in trade, foreign policy, and migration that would have surprised even Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. Andrew Moravcsik has argued persuasively that a superpower is a “political entity that can consistently project military, economic, and soft power transcontinentally with a reasonable chance of success.” The ability to pool and project power allows the states of Europe to extend their influence in ways that would have been impossible without the union. Europe matters on the world stage because the European Union, being a powerful economic and political force, matters.

Europe, that continent that had ignited some of the world’s worst conflicts and spawned the cruelest political ideologies of any time, suddenly turned from both war and extremism, embracing liberal notions of democracy and building a single market in which all of its members could prosper. Centuries old enmity turned quickly to partnership and then friendship, building a foundation that would allow the Old World to reverse its terminal decline and maintain a forceful position on the world stage, not in the forms of imperialism or militarism, but rather through economic and social outreach. A region that had long defied strict definition, Europe is now defined based on the membership in a bloc of states that have committed themselves to democratic values and open societies. This union of European states is unprecedented in history, building new institutions to collectively solve shared problems. That this union is under threat from illiberalism and separatism only highlights its importance. It is the European Union that promotes stability and prosperity on the continent, and will continue to do so as long as its people can keep it.