

# Book Review: The 50 days that changed Europe

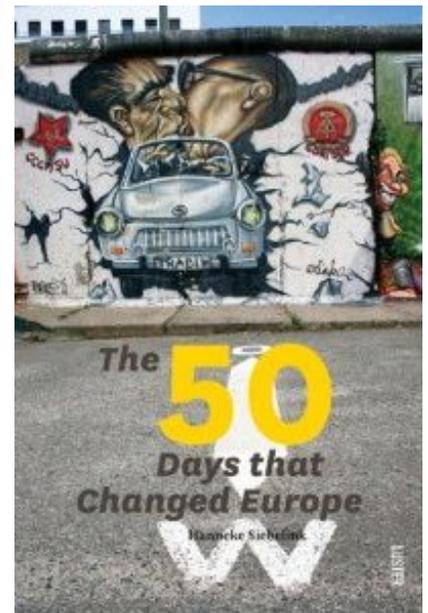
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*This book covers a selection of key dates in the history of Europe, covering some key failures, crises and blunders, but also the extraordinary achievements such as the abolition of border posts, the reunification of Germany and the introduction of the Euro. **Wolfram Kaiser** finds that **Hanneke Siebelink's** book makes for a light read for the casual reader with interests in the EU and its history.*



**The 50 Days That Changed Europe. Hanneke Siebelink. Luster Publishing. July 2011.**

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What future for the European Union? Greece has just sworn in Antonis Samaras, head of the conservative New Democracy party, as the country's new prime minister, but instability still lurks. Spain has grave difficulties restructuring its banking sector and borrowing money at acceptable interest rates. Many British observers predict the imminent collapse of the Euro. If the Euro breaks down, no doubt the EU will follow suit, or so it seems.

The EU has a growing past, however, which should caution us against rash predictions of this kind. But historians have not even tried to write about this past in a way that is really accessible for EU citizens. Research on the history of the EU has improved in quality and proliferated. Younger historians no longer subscribe to the teleological thrust of the pioneers in the field. Nevertheless, they find it difficult enough to get historians of modern Europe to recognize the importance of European integration and to induce them to take their findings into account. They have not written readable books for beginners.

With *50 Days That Changed Europe*, [Hanneke Siebelink](#) attempts to fill this gap. Siebelink worked as an advisor to the US mission to the EU for ten years and has a general interest in its history. Accordingly, her book makes for a light read for a casual reader with the same general interest in the EU and its history. In her book, Siebelink attempts to narrate this history via 50 short stories of two to three pages about what she

regards as momentous dates and decisions, from the announcement of the Schuman Plan on 9 May 1950 through to the first bailout plan during the Euro crisis sixty years later. As she reminds us in her dedication, “if you don’t know where you come from, you don’t know who you are”.

This selection of key dates, covering the failures, the crises and the blunders but also the extraordinary achievements such as the abolition of border posts, the reunification of Germany and the introduction of the Euro, should make it easier to bring out the drama in European integration which so rarely comes across at televised press conferences after EU summits.

However, academics may find the book a problematic choice in two ways. First, the book begins on 9 May 1950, with the announcement by Robert Schuman which eventually led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community. Arguably, 28 July 1914, the start of the First World War, or 30 January 1933, the proclamation of Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor, might have made for better starting dates. They could have helped the readers to understand the background to post-war ‘core Europe’ integration and the motives of political leaders like Schuman and Adenauer.

Second, the focus on short descriptions of events prevents Siebelink from drawing a more nuanced picture. Thus, the European Defence Community (EDC) did not fail in the French parliament in 1954 (p.17) because “the mere thought of Germans in uniform again was enough to get the French running for cover”. In fact, according to almost all opinion polls the majority of the French believed that Germans in uniforms in the EDC would be good for France. Only, the majority of the French political party elites did not think so at the time. Jacques Delors announced the Internal Market project in the European Parliament on 14 January 1985. Its pre-history, however, was not just Lord Cockfield’s White Paper mentioned here, but the Commission’s futile attempts at harmonization combined with growing industry pressure which became more vocal with the formation of the European Round Table of Industrialists formed in 1983 (p.50-51).

The sparse footnoting of a very limited amount of secondary reading, which is not research-informed, already indicates that the description of events does not draw on the state of the art in research on the EU and its history. Monnet was not a French “diplomat” (p.13), but a high official with a private business background who despised diplomats as serving nationalist causes. He worked hard to exclude them as much as possible from Community decision-making. Siebelink quotes the poor British official from the Board of Trade who allegedly ridiculed the attempts by the six ECSC member states to create a customs union in 1955 (p.19). Only, we have known for decades that Russell Bretherton was comparatively pro-integration and never said anything of the kind. Repeating such misinformation from a book about Delors, who was not even active in French politics in the 1950s, is a bad idea.

*The 50 days that changed Europe* may very well appeal to casual readers or perhaps high school students seeking their first look into the history of Europe, but for academic readers at undergraduate level and above it does lack any deeper insights or new perspectives. It is the view of this reviewer that the definite history of the EU for the casual reader, which is easy to read but also well-informed, remains to be written.

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