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Joseph BECH Abstract

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Joseph Bech (1887-1975) was a Luxembourg statesman and leading figure of the Christian Social Right, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs (1926-1958), President of the Government (1926-1937 and 1953-1958) and President of the Chamber of Deputies (1959-1964). A keen observer of the geopolitics of his time, a shrewd politician who worked for decades at the pinnacle of power, driven by both his patriotism for Luxembourg and internationalism, Bech skilfully manoeuvred before, during and after the Second World War to preserve his country's independence and defend the vital interests of a small state, on an equal footing with the major powers in a synergistic whole. Opinions remain divided on Bech's political positions in the 1930s, when, invoking the perpetual neutrality of the Luxembourg state (under the London Conference of 1867), he attempted to impose an authoritarian regime on the country. For his role in building contemporary Western multilateralism and European unification, for which he was awarded the Charlemagne Prize (1960), historiography ranks Bech, an outstanding diplomat and statesman, among the "founding fathers of Europe" alongside Konrad Adenauer (Germany), Paul Henri Spaak (Belgium), Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman (France), Alcide De Gasperi (Italy) and Johan Willem Beyen (Netherlands).

The formative years

Joseph Bech was born on 17 February 1887 in Diekirch, Luxembourg, into a family of country gentry¹, surrounded in particular by his father (a local banker and alderman in Diekirch) and his uncles (deputies or burgomasters on the clerical right). After primary school in Diekirch and secondary school in Echternach, he studied law in Fribourg (Switzerland) and Paris (France). In 1912 he became a doctor of law, then a barrister and in 1914 was called to the bar.

On 3 October 1918, he married Georgette Delahaye (1897-1983). The young family had two children - Charles (1919-2000) and Elisabeth.

When Philippe Bech - founding chairman of the Right Party (Catholic and conservative, forerunner of the Christian Social Party) - died suddenly, he was succeeded by his nephew Joseph, aged 27. On 30 June 1914 he was elected deputy for the canton of Grevenmacher by a censal vote (universal suffrage was not introduced until 1919). A month after his debut in the Chamber, Luxembourg's neutrality was violated by Germany.

Political rise and the lessons of the First World War

On 15 April 1921, Bech joined the government of Émile Reuter (1874-1973) as "Director General of the Interior and Public Education" and four years later, following

¹ Trausch, Gilbert, *Joseph Bech, a man in his century. Cinquante années d'histoire luxembourgeoise (1914-1964)*. Luxembourg: Imprimerie St Paul, 1978.

his party's defeat in the elections of 1^{er} March 1925, he joined the opposition. When the Right Party returned to power (15 July 1926), Bech was asked to form the new coalition government with the Liberal movement. He was its President ("Minister of State") and also held the portfolio of "Director-General" of Foreign Affairs and Viticulture, which he managed for eleven years.

On 6 June 1937, Bech narrowly lost the referendum on political and social order ("Loi muselière"²), which aimed to ban the Luxembourg Communist Party (KPL) and dissolve any organisation likely to "endanger constitutional institutions". Feeling disowned, he resigned as Prime Minister, but when a coalition - with the Workers' Party (Socialist) - emerged under Pierre Dupong (1885-1953), Bech joined the new government as Minister for Foreign Affairs, Viticulture, Arts and Sciences.

Luxembourg diplomats at work to guarantee the country's territorial security and integrity

On his arrival at the Foreign Office, Bech was confronted with the deterioration of Belgian-Luxembourg relations and the undermining of the Belgian-Luxembourg Economic Union (BLEU) concluded in 1921. In the wake of the Franco-German détente and the Locarno Agreements (16 October 1925), which introduced collective security in Europe, he took the initiative of establishing treaties with neighbouring countries, in particular France and Belgium (in 1927), to guarantee Luxembourg's territorial integrity and security. This was followed by treaties with Spain and Poland (1928); Portugal, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia and the United States (1929); Romania (1930), Italy and Norway (1932). In September 1926 he attended the League of Nations Assembly in Geneva for the first time, and soon became familiar with Aristide Briand's (1862-1932) plan for a federal European Union. Bech took part in the Conference on Disarmament in The Hague (1932) and in the meetings of the Oslo Alliance of small states (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg). The Luxembourg government also signed the Paris Pact (1928), in which 68 countries undertook to renounce war as an instrument of national policy.

From 1937 to 1940, foreign policy remained more than ever the domain of Bech, who displayed Luxembourg's neutrality on all occasions, but who had understood that Hitler wanted to absorb Luxembourg as he had absorbed the Sudetenland and Austria. There was no question of Bech allowing himself to be trapped and confined to a puppet role.

With pragmatism and perspicacity, Bech implemented a policy of active presence on the international stage, convinced that his small country, without renouncing neutrality, could be better protected and defend its vital interests against the great powers on an equal footing. His longevity in the diplomatic arena enabled him to forge lasting personal relationships with other European political leaders.

² "Law of 12 May 1937 on the organisation of the Referendum of 6 June 1937" on [legilux.public.lu](https://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/1937/05/12/n1/jo), Mémorial. Source: <https://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/1937/05/12/n1/jo> (consulted on 8 November 2024).

Second World War: exile in London and rapprochement with the Western powers

When Germany invaded Luxembourg on 10 May 1940, Grand Duchess Charlotte (1896-1985) and her government went into exile and opted for two seats: Montreal (Canada) for the Grand Ducal family, Pierre Dupong and, initially, Justice Minister Victor Bodson (1902-1984), and London (UK) for Bech and Social Security and Labour Minister Antoine Krier (1897-1983). From 1943 to 1944, the government met in London³.

In the British capital, where other governments in exile were sitting, including those of Belgium and the Netherlands, Bech worked for closer political, economic and military ties with the Western powers. On 6 November 1940, he met the Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax (1881-1959), who invited him to the inter-allied conference in preparation and promised him the United Kingdom's support in re-establishing Luxembourg's independence.

Luxembourg signed the agreements that federated the Allied war effort and foreshadowed the post-war period, including the Declarations of St James's Palace (12 June 1941) and Washington (1^{er} January 1942), the Atlantic Charter (14 August 1941) and the Bretton Woods Conference (July 1944), which laid the foundations for a new international monetary system. On 31 August 1944, Luxembourg and Belgium signed an amendment restoring parity between the Belgian and Luxembourg francs within the BLEU.

In London, the Luxembourg and Belgian governments forged common positions on regional cooperation and Belgium was mandated to negotiate, on behalf of the BLEU, the project for an economic union with the Netherlands. On 21 October 1943, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Finance signed the Benelux Monetary Convention, while the Benelux Customs Convention (of a transitional nature) was concluded on 5 September 1944. As the Liberation approached, these three small states became increasingly involved in the new post-war world order.

Return to peace and the emergence of Euro-Atlantic multilateralism

Barely two weeks after the liberation of the capital, the Luxembourg government returned to Luxembourg on 23 September 1944. The elections of 21 October 1945 marked a return to normal political life and the "men from London" (Dupong, Bech, Krier and Bodson) were elected first or second on their lists. Bech joined the Government of National Unity as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Viticulture, a post he retained in successive governments. From 1953 to 1958, he became Minister of State and President of the Government, without relinquishing his portfolio as Minister of Foreign Affairs (which he held together with Foreign Trade, Agriculture and Viticulture). In 1959, Bech left the executive to become President of the Chamber of Deputies (1959-1964).

³ Thewes, Guy, *Les gouvernements du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg depuis 1848*, Imprimerie centrale, Luxembourg: Service Information et Presse du Gouvernement luxembourgeois, Département édition, May 2011. (1^{re} ed. 1989).

With his long experience of diplomacy and his keen eye for the balance of power between nations, sharpened by two wars, he set his sights on a foreign policy for Luxembourg that reflected the new geopolitics in the world. While in the 1920s and 1930s Bech was an advocate of neutrality, in the context dominated by the onset of the Cold War he was now a supporter of internationalism, convinced that his country should resolutely join the Western camp and join the system of alliances providing collective security. Luxembourg joined the UN (1945), the Brussels Pact (which founded the Western Union, 1948), NATO (1949), the European Defence Community (EDC, 1952) and normalised its relations with Germany. The Grand Duchy was also one of the beneficiaries of the Marshall Plan as part of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC, 1947).

On 5 May 1949, at the signing of the Statute of the Council of Europe in London, Bech spoke of the need to embark on the road to European unification with these words: *"My little country has too often in the past suffered from the conflicts which have ravaged our old Continent for me not to welcome with all my heart this first step towards the realisation of a closer European union. In putting my country's signature to the Statute of the Council of Europe, I proclaim my faith in Europe's future with the conviction that I am acting as a good European."*⁴ (Translation from the original French)

Forging European integration: ECSC, EEC, Euratom

Robert Schuman's (1886-1963) Declaration on 9 May 1950 had a particular resonance for Bech: the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) would not only anchor Franco-German reconciliation and peace in Europe in the long term, but would also open up new markets for Luxembourg's steel industry, which was dominated by ARBED (Acieries Réunies de Burbach-Eich-Dudelange). Bech signed the Treaty of Paris (18 April 1951), convinced that this new form of economic integration would enable Luxembourg to defend its vital interests in the long term. When the negotiations got bogged down, in the early hours of the morning he won unanimous support by proposing to "begin work [on the ECSC] in Luxembourg, pending a decision on the seat or provisional seat of the first of the European institutions".⁵

While this new status will enhance Luxembourg's prestige and influence, Bech fears that the influx of European civil servants will dilute Luxembourg's identity.

This new form of integration appeared to be beneficial for the Benelux countries, which, in order to relaunch European integration after the failure of the EDC, proposed a memorandum aimed at undertaking new actions in the fields of transport and energy (nuclear in particular) and a general Common Market. This document was at the heart of the conference chaired by Bech in Messina (1-3 June 1955), which led to a report by a

⁴ Archives Nationales du Luxembourg, Luxembourg. International organisations. Council of Europe - Constitution. Conference on the creation of a Council of Europe-London, 3 to 5 May 1949, AE 12379. Source: https://www.cvce.eu/obj/declaration_de_joseph_bech_londres_5_mai_1949-fr-8aca9daa-563e-45dc-8939-8afd4217c4ec.html (consulted on 8 November 2024)

⁵ Monnet, Jean. *Mémoires*. Paris : Fayard, 1976, pp. 432-434.

committee of experts chaired by the Belgian statesman Paul-Henri Spaak (1899-1972). This report then served as the basis for the intergovernmental negotiations that led to the Treaties of Rome (25 March 1957) creating the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom).

Given the existence of three Communities (ECSC, EEC and Euratom) with their own institutions, the Member States were unable to agree on a definitive seat, especially as the idea of a European district, launched by Jean Monnet (1888-1979), had found few supporters⁶. The dispersal of Community institutions became a reality when Brussels was chosen as the seat of the EEC Commission (1958). What could I do," recalls Monnet, "if Luxembourg wanted both to keep the ECSC and not lose its soul, in the words of Bech, who feared a second European invasion? .⁷

Giving its preference to a "dispersed headquarters", the Luxembourg government took measures with a twofold strategic approach: to ensure the infrastructure necessary for the sustainable establishment of the Community institutions (the urbanisation and development of the Kirchberg Plateau at the dawn of 1960 being proof of this) and, respectively, to negotiate advantageous compensation, adapted to the specific characteristics of the Grand Duchy. At the Edinburgh summit (1992), Luxembourg City became one of the three permanent capitals of the European Union, alongside Strasbourg and Brussels.

A Luxembourg and European statesman for the ages

Bech retired from politics on 6 May 1964 at the age of 77, although he continued to sit on the ARBED Board (1964-1968). He died on 8 March 1975.

If Paul Eyschen (1841-1915), President of the Government from 1888 to 1915, appears as the first guardian of Luxembourg's formal freedom in the face of the German giant, Joseph Bech, who worked on the political scene from 1921 to 1964, is without doubt the first true statesman of the Grand Duchy, constantly concerned with the independence of his country whose neighbours - Germany, Belgium, France - could be difficult.⁸

Appreciated for his lively intelligence, his humour, his genuine or feigned bonhomie, his ability to listen and his talent for finding compromises exercised over many decades at the pinnacle of power, Bech has become a personality whom his fellow citizens and the 'big boys' of the world appreciate as an elected official, colleague, adviser, friend or adversary.

"During those years, Joseph Bech's prestige as Foreign Minister was at its peak. Our consistent and active participation in the defence pacts, NATO and Western European Union, despite the weakness of our resources, commanded respect. The success

⁶ Rieben, Henri. *In Luxembourg, at the heart of the European project with Jean Monnet and Pierre Werner*. Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe, European Research Centre. Lausanne, 1993.

⁷ Trausch Gilbert. Opening up to Europe. In: *Histoire du Luxembourg*, coll. Nations d'Europe, Hatier, Paris 1992, pp.185-214. Here p. 212.

⁸ See Paul Eyschen, Joseph Bech, Pierre Werner: three politicians above the political parties? In: d'Letzeburger Land, 31. jg. no. 14 (06.04.1984), p. 13. Source: <https://persist.lu/ark:70795/spd7d8/pages/21/articles/DTL655> (consulted on 8 November 2024).

of “operation European Headquarters”, the serene good humour that Bech brought to international meetings, and his friendships with Spaak, Schuman and Adenauer gave our country a place in European diplomacy that it had never known. Having relieved me of some of his domestic political responsibilities, President Bech was able to make the most of this diplomatic situation abroad" .⁹

Further reading

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⁹ Werner, Pierre. *Itinéraires luxembourgeois et européens. Évolutions et souvenirs: 1945-1985*. Tmes I et II. Luxembourg: Éditions Saint-Paul. Here: Volume I, p.60.