

The story of the European Union

The Second World War ended in 1945. It had been a time of terrible destruction and killing, and it had started in Europe. How could the leaders of European countries stop such dreadful things from ever happening again? They needed a really good plan that had never been tried before.



Robert Schuman.



Jean Monnet.

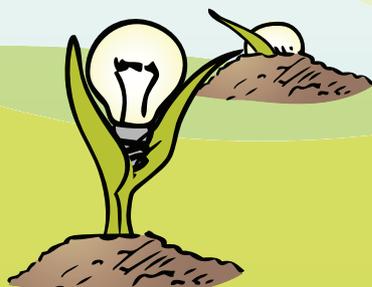
A brand new idea

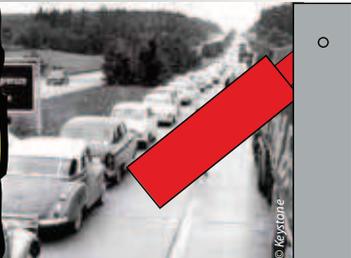
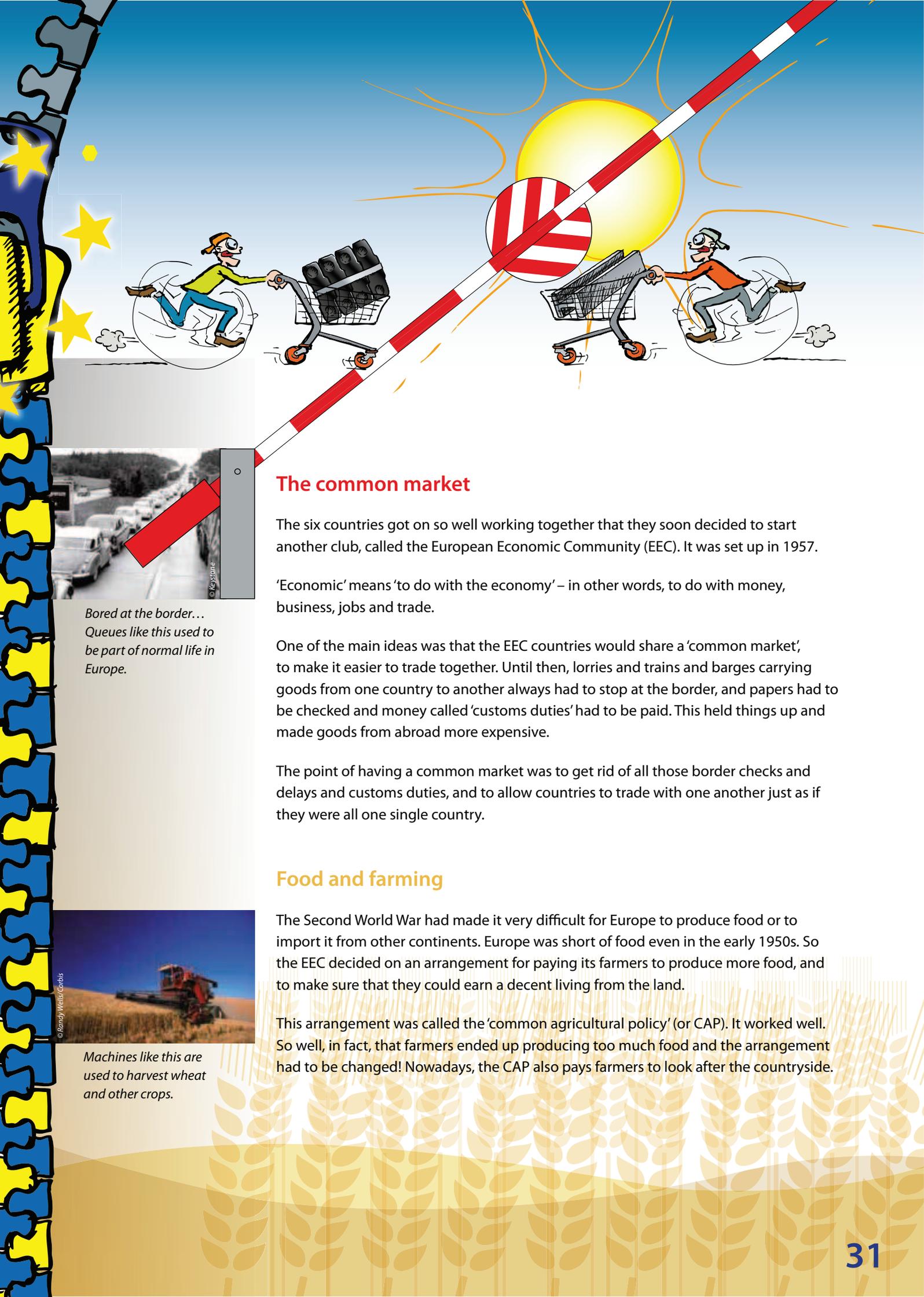
A Frenchman called Jean Monnet thought hard about this. He realised that there were two things a country needed before it could make war: iron for producing steel (to make tanks, guns, bombs and so on) and coal to provide the energy for factories and railways. Europe had plenty of coal and steel: that's why European countries had easily been able to make weapons and go to war.

So Jean Monnet came up with a very daring new idea. His idea was that the governments of France and Germany – and perhaps of other European countries too – should no longer run their own coal and steel industries. Instead, these industries should be organised by people from all the countries involved, and they would sit around a table and discuss and decide things together. That way, war between them would be impossible!

Jean Monnet felt that his plan really would work if only European leaders were willing to try it. He spoke about it to his friend Robert Schuman, who was a minister in the French government. Robert Schuman thought it was a brilliant idea and he announced it in an important speech on 9 May 1950.

The speech convinced not only the French and German leaders but also the leaders of Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. They all decided to put their coal and steel industries together and to form a club they called the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). It would work for peaceful purposes and help rebuild Europe from the ruins of war. The ECSC was set up in 1951.





The common market

The six countries got on so well working together that they soon decided to start another club, called the European Economic Community (EEC). It was set up in 1957.

'Economic' means 'to do with the economy' – in other words, to do with money, business, jobs and trade.

One of the main ideas was that the EEC countries would share a 'common market', to make it easier to trade together. Until then, lorries and trains and barges carrying goods from one country to another always had to stop at the border, and papers had to be checked and money called 'customs duties' had to be paid. This held things up and made goods from abroad more expensive.

The point of having a common market was to get rid of all those border checks and delays and customs duties, and to allow countries to trade with one another just as if they were all one single country.

Food and farming

The Second World War had made it very difficult for Europe to produce food or to import it from other continents. Europe was short of food even in the early 1950s. So the EEC decided on an arrangement for paying its farmers to produce more food, and to make sure that they could earn a decent living from the land.

This arrangement was called the 'common agricultural policy' (or CAP). It worked well. So well, in fact, that farmers ended up producing too much food and the arrangement had to be changed! Nowadays, the CAP also pays farmers to look after the countryside.



Machines like this are used to harvest wheat and other crops.