

## From Geneva to Florence – EFTA in the Historical Archives of the EU

Blog | 19 April 2020

Mary Carr, archivist at the [Historical Archives of the European Union \(HAEU\)](#), responsible (among others) for the holdings of EFTA at the HAEU

The history of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) is an important, though often neglected part of the history of European integration. It is thus highly symbolic that the EFTA deposited its historical records in the Historical Archives of the European Union. In her blog, the responsible archivist Mary Carr highlights the relevance of this decision and describes some important events and documents in the EFTA holdings.

In late 2014 Adalsteinn Leifsson, Director at the EFTA Secretary-General's Office made contact with Dieter Schlenker, Director of the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU) to initiate the procedures for the eventual transfer of EFTA's historical records from their Headquarters in Geneva to Florence.

A contract of deposit was signed whereby EFTA's archives would be sent for long-term preservation to the HAEU, taking into account the 30-year rule governing access to historical papers. A first transfer was made on 19 May 2015 closely followed by a second transfer in October 2016 with a further deposit of a treasure trove of audio-visual material arriving in Florence in November 2017.

This rich and interesting fonds has proven to be a valuable addition to the HAEU's existing holdings. It gives another perspective to the various projects that were initiated in the post-War period to integrate Europe. Since the HAEU is the official repository for the historical papers of the European institutions, we now have a bird's eye view of the work of the "Inner Six" alongside the activities of the "Outer Seven", and the communal goals, which both shared in the area of trade.

While EFTA had been conceived as an alternative to the Community, it recognised immediately the need to collaborate in some form or other with the EEC. As a result, efforts had been made from the outset by the Association to avoid any type of unease in the European economy that would undoubtedly occur if the Six and Seven continued to drift apart. However, putting these good intentions into practice wasn't as easy as it seemed, and most EFTA countries were slow in instigating relations with the Community. It was only in 1965 that concrete steps were taken to bridge the gap that was developing between the two. During the EFTA Council meeting held at Ministerial level, on 24 May 1965 cooperation was established in the area of industrial standardisation, this proved to be a first in a series of tangible bridge-building initiatives that continued over the following decades. The confidential summary record of this meeting is conserved in the EFTA fonds and available for researchers.



*Photo of the Swiss delegation taken at the EFTA Ministerial Meeting of the Council and Joint Council in Vienna (Austria), 24-25 May 1965. Author: Brüder Basch; digitised by the Historical Archives of the EU (HAEU, EFTA 1320).*

A further step in integration was taken at the Hague Summit of 1969 where negotiations for British EEC membership began. Subsequent to the Summit, EFTA countries entered into talks with the EEC and the result was the Free Trade Agreements (FTA's). Each EFTA member signed these agreements with the EEC in 1972, three years after negotiations began, this represented a major landmark in EFTA-EEC relations.

The FTA's were very much a result of the United Kingdom's accession to the EEC. Even though the UK had been the instigator of the European Free Trade Area initiative in 1959, as it favoured trade liberalisation through inter-governmental cooperation rather than through a multinational integration as offered by the ECSC and the EEC. However, the opinion of the British government had changed radically in the early 1960's as they felt, ironically in hindsight, that their interests would be best served by EEC membership. As a result, when the UK left EFTA to join the EEC in 1973 the latter institution had to abolish customs barriers between the two organisations to take into account the existing commercial relations between the UK and EFTA countries.

Whilst the FTA's were a real step forward for the two trading blocs' relations as the Community had undertaken to remove all tariff barriers on industrial goods with EFTA member countries by the end of 1984. However, it wasn't always plain sailing as there was a new threat in Europe from rising protectionism from the late 1970's and this alarm was conveyed in a communique from the EFTA Council and the Joint Council of EFTA and Finland when they met at Ministerial level in Geneva in October 1977. Furthermore, this communique is an example of a document conserved in the EFTA fonds at HAEU.

Changing this trend became the hallmark of EFTA-EC relations and EFTA managed to convince the EC to initiate a new round of talks for non-tariff removal. These negotiations made great headway after the Luxembourg Declaration of 1984, which committed EFTA and the EC to establish a European Economic Space (EES). This gave EFTA members the possibility of defining their priorities in their cooperation with the Community. In all between 1984 and 1990, 20 new agreements were negotiated between EFTA and the EC.



*Photo taken at EFTA-EC Meeting in Brussels (Belgium), 24 July 1990. Author: Josef Jany; digitised by the Historical Archives of the EU (HAEU, EFTA 1528).*

Various other measures were put in place to abolish restrictions in trade, which saw an alignment of policies in many areas between EFTA and the EC, which led to the signing of the Treaty on the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1992. It was Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission who in January 1989 presented EFTA with a proposal for a new form of collaboration. This marked a major milestone in their relations as the newly established EEA brought with it an institutional framework, with a common decision-making and administrative structure. The Agreement governed the free movement of capital, services, people and goods between the EFTA states participating in the EEA and the EU. The EEA agreement was built on a two-tier system. In all there are 30 members divided between joint bodies (see for a detailed description of the [EEA EFTA institutions](#)).

The continued cooperation between the EFTA and the EU is necessary for the well-being of the two trading partners. The fact that both institutions have deposited their historical archives here at the HAEU in Florence, is symbolic of the importance of this special relationship in the past and in the future. The HAEU will thereby stick to its mission, which is to preserve and make accessible for research the archives deposited by EU and EFTA institutions and collect and preserve private papers of individuals, movements and international organizations involved in European integration. Also, the HAEU will facilitate research on the history of the EU and EFTA, promote public interest in European integration and enhance transparency in the functioning of EU and EFTA Institutions.

### To cite this article

Carr, Mary (2020): From Geneva to Florence – EFTA in the Historical Archives of the EU. Blog. [Efta-Studies.org](#).

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