

Europe as a Lifeline: The Rubber Industry in Times of Insecurity after the Second World War

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Introduction

The crucial historical juncture of the Second World War was followed by a period of high politics, of plans to reorganise the European continent, regional economic cooperation, the “end of empire” and the transition of the international system to the bipolarity of the Cold War. Naturally, states played a central role in all of this. They were, however, not alone. The following chapter represents a detailed examination of private actors from the rubber industry in three distinct settings, arguing that in each, these actors employed “securitisation moves”. The example of the rubber industry illustrates that private actors played a significant role in shaping international politics, particularly during transitional periods.

Initially, the chapter focuses on the demands of plantation managers and their supporters during the decolonisation of British Malaya, showing how the narrative of the situation changed when the conflict evolved. A second section portrays the calls of German industrialists for European cooperation immediately after the Second World War. Finally, the third section examines the communication of large tyre companies in the 1960s and 1970s, analysing the strategies they used to justify extraordinary business decisions to shareholders and competitors.

The application of securitisation theory reveals that in all three cases, the actors employed references to Europe: either a constructed and alleged European identity or the future prospect of European cooperation. Thus, business actors used “Europe” as a lifeline when they felt threatened.

In the following, securitisation is understood as the “process of presenting an issue in security terms, in other words, as an existential threat.”¹ The Copenhagen School of International Relations, most notably Ole Wæver

1 The work on this article was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – Project No. 227068724.
Buzan/Hansen, Evolution, 214.

and Barry Buzan, understands security as a discursive concept that is employed to justify or demand extraordinary (mostly political) reactions.² The theory assumes that “securitisation” is negotiated between a “securitising actor” and an audience which must be convinced that something constitutes a security issue.³ Moreover, security is seldom demanded for the “securitising actor” alone but rather framed with regard to a larger entity that is endangered but must survive.⁴ In the literature, “securitising” actors are usually assumed to be members of a political elite: political leaders, governments, decision-makers or lobby groups, and the audiences that securitising actors try to convince are institutions with political power, parliaments, or even the electorate.

To facilitate the comparative study of “securitisation” in a historical perspective, the collaborative research centre (CRC) *Dynamiken der Sicherheit* (Dynamics of Security) in Marburg and Gießen has proposed three concepts. *Security heuristics*, is understood as a “cognitive and semantic framework” used to analyse the historical context in which the identification and construction of a security issue takes place.⁵ *Security repertoires* comprise all measures and responses of actors to security issues.⁶ Finally, *security situations* mean all instances in which repertoires and heuristics can be identified and analysed.⁷

This chapter contributes to historicising the securitisation theory. It examines non-state actors and their securitisation acts, thereby addressing the criticism of securitisation theory as state-centred.⁸ By applying the theory to inter-business relations, the chapter reveals “securitisation moves” made by multinational companies as a justification strategy for extraordinary business decisions. The chapter highlights that private actors participated in framing situations as security-relevant in order to further their own interests. The reference to Europe in all three cases, underlines, as others have

2 See Buzan/Hansen, *Evolution*, 214.

3 See Conze, *Sicherheit*, 87–88.

4 See Conze, *Sicherheit*, 88.

5 Jakob/Kleinöder, *Security*, 15.

6 Conze, *Sicherheit*, 177.

7 See also Bonacker *et al.*, *Safety*.

8 See Daase, *Historisierung*, 403–404.

done, the early involvement of private actors in the multifaceted processes of Europeanisation after the Second World War.⁹

From Gangsters and Lawlessness. The Balancing Act of Securitising in British Malaya

During the Second World War, the Western Empire States' forced control and rule in Southeast Asia crumbled. The Japanese army conquered the European colonies in the region in a storm. According to a well-known argument by Eric Hobsbawm, as control collapsed, the nimbus of (military) superiority of Western Empire States broke down too, and ultimately heralded the "end of empires."¹⁰ Of course, the Second World War was not the end of European colonialism in Southeast Asia. On the contrary: even before the Second World War had officially ended, the British Empire began to plan the reestablishment of control in its former colony.¹¹ This was no surprise; after all, Malayan exports played a significant role in supplying the Empire with sufficient dollar reserves. In the interwar period, rubber exports from the British colony had earned nearly as many dollars as all exports from the UK to the US combined.¹² Considering that the rubber industry in British Malaya was, at that time, relatively new, this is all the more impressive.

A Step Back – How Rubber Became a European Colonial Project

Rubber possesses remarkable characteristics: it is water- and air-tight, insulates against electricity, and above all is elastic, returning to shape after the application of force.¹³ Yet the use of rubber only became common in Europe in the late nineteenth century, even though Europeans had known of it since their arrival in the Americas.¹⁴ Up until the twentieth century, as far

9 Lately, the scholarly debate about the early involvement of private actors in Europeanisation has been lively. See, for example, *Ramírez Pérez, Crises; Ballor, Agents; Komornicka, Support.*

10 See *Hobsbawm, Extremes*, 216.

11 See *Rudner, Strategy*, 24–28.

12 *Rudner, Strategy*, 23.

13 See *Pichersky, Plants*, 122.

14 See *Soentgen, Bedeutung*, 296–297.

as Europe was concerned, rubber was exclusively a natural product derived from the milk of certain plants (called latex), most of which grew naturally in Central and South America.¹⁵

Early European attempts to use the material failed because untreated rubber is unstable—rigid when cold and sticky when hot.¹⁶ Indigenous people from Latin America knew how to avoid the decomposition of rubber and, therefore, were able to produce quality rubber goods long before Europeans.¹⁷ Only with the invention of vulcanisation, a chemical process of adding sulphur to rubber under heat, did Europeans come up with their own mechanism to process the material.¹⁸ Subsequently, rubber became widely used not only in water-resistant clothing and decorative furniture but also for crucial industrial uses like seals, hoses and belts.¹⁹

Most natural rubber at the time came from the Amazon basin in Latin America, where a subcontractor-based industry developed.²⁰ Rubber collectors (*seringueiros*) tapped latex from wild *Hevea Brasiliensis* trees and sold it to (mostly indigenous) landowners (*patrão*). While the *seringueiros* were *de jure* independent, they were often bound by debt to the *patrão*.²¹

With the invention of the rubber tyre and the rapid spread of bicycles and cars, rubber prices rose dramatically. Consequently, the British government began to promote systematic cultivation in its colonies.²² After successful attempts to germinate seeds of the *Hevea Brasiliensis* in London, seedlings were distributed across the British Empire.²³ In Singapore, the director of the Botanical Garden, Henry Nicholas Ridley, initiated extensive research on the potential of large-scale rubber cultivation in British Malaya and promoted the crop to European planters in the British colony.²⁴ At the time, the colonial administration actively encouraged industrial agriculture as it promised revenues from new land, and it thus did what it could to ensure a friendly environment in the British colony for European in-

15 See Pichersky, *Plants*, 124–126.

16 See *Soentgen*, *Bedeutung*, 311.

17 See *Soentgen*, *Bedeutung*, 312–314.

18 See *Harp*, *Rubber*, 208–209.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Rubber was also collected and harvested in African colonies. See, for example, *Oestermann*, *Colony*.

21 See *Tully*, *Milk*, 77–84. For more details, see *Linneweh-Kaçmaz*, *Formbarkeit*, 62–73.

22 See *Tully*, *Milk*, 186–187.

23 See *Salisbury*, *Ridley*, 145.

24 *Salisbury*, *Ridley*, 145.

vestors.²⁵ As a result, large rubber plantations, mainly financed, owned and managed by Europeans, emerged all over British Malaya at the beginning of the twentieth century. Exports to the United States, driven by the latter's growing car industry, made Malaya the British Empire's key dollar earner in the interwar years.²⁶

Securitising the Emergency

Despite the undeniable and heavy setback to British imperialism after the Second World War, epitomised by the independence of India, the initial return of the British Empire to Southeast Asia was swift. Other than France and the Netherlands, which experienced harsh resistance as they attempted to re-establish colonial control after the war, the British return to Malaya was less problematic. However, plans to centralise the Federated Malayan States, the Unfederated Malayan States and the Straits Settlements into a larger Malayan Union failed due to opposition from the Malayan political community, and resulted in increasing Malayan nationalism and polarisation of the ethnic Chinese and Malay inhabitants. Although the British administration was able to resolve the crisis with the establishment of the Malayan Federation in 1948 and the separation of the predominantly Chinese-populated Singapore, the incident highlighted the potential for conflict after the British return.²⁷ Nevertheless, there were no indications in the 1940s that Britain intended to give up its economically valuable colonies in Southeast Asia.²⁸

In June 1948, just as the administrative crisis was resolved, the High Commissioner for Malaya, Sir Edward Gent, declared a national emergency as a reaction to the increasing violence that was targeting European-owned and managed rubber estates.²⁹ In public perception today, the "Malayan Emergency" is used as a *pars pro toto* to describe the militant insurgency led by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and fought by the Malayan National Liberation Army against the British colonial admin-

25 This included, among other things, the enforcement of Western understandings of land ownership and the assurance of a sufficiently large workforce by setting up a work migration program for workers from India; see *Drabble*, Rubber, 14–19.

26 *Rudner*, Strategy, 23.

27 *Tan*, Decolonization, 13–16.

28 *Tan*, Decolonization, 14.

29 *Deery*, Malaya, 29, 50–51.

istration. This conflict only ended in 1960, more than two years after the political independence of Malaysia.³⁰ The beginning of the conflict, which the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) called the Anti-British Liberation War, is typically dated to the declaration of the emergency in June 1948. However, there was a prelude to Gent's decision. In early 1946, Malaya experienced its first general strike, organized by the relatively new Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU), which stood under the influence of the MCP.³¹ Even though the umbrella trade union organisation initially backed down, in 1947 organised workers again laid down their work and vigorously and sometimes violently demanded substantially better working conditions.³² In this situation, private actors became vocal and demanded government action.

Already in 1946, Frank Ascoli, the chairman of Dunlop Plantations, for example, turned to decision-makers in London and not only voiced his worry about the situation in Malaya but also classified the situation as a system-relevant problem. As Nicholas White has shown, he named the "Chinese Communists" the perpetrators responsible for the labour conflicts in the colony.³³ However, the businessman's intervention in London was not just about pointing fingers. In his report, Dunlop's manager argued that the unrest had the potential to hinder the resumption of rubber production in general. He depicted the unrest as a security issue pertaining not only to the plantation industry but also likely to affect the prosperity of the whole colony at large. In a similar vein, Sydney Palmer, the president of the United Planting Association of Malaya (a British-dominated association of plantation owners), contacted the colonial government in Malaya and headed his letter with the word "COMMUNISM".³⁴ In doing so, Palmer situated the conflict in British Malaya in the context of rising tensions between East and West and clearly identified the deteriorating labour relations as an extraordinary security issue.

During the years from 1946 to 1948, militant activities against employers became more orchestrated as draconian reactions, violence on the part of planters, high unemployment and low rubber prices aggravated the already

30 Hack, Fear, 671.

31 See Deery, Malaya, 43.

32 See Deery, Malaya, 43–44.

33 NAK, BT 64/1878 as cited in: White, Counter-insurgency, 155.

34 White, Counter-insurgency, 155.

tense situation.³⁵ Reports on shootings and violent threats to white plantation managers became a common feature of the largest colonial newspaper *The Straits Times*, an organ closely aligned with the plantation industry.³⁶ Most of the conventional historiography has depicted these acts of violence as a part of a centrally planned militant campaign led by the Communist party. Indeed, there are indicators that suggest an increasing willingness to adopt a twin-track strategy of militant and legal action within the MCP.³⁷ This does not mean, however, that the MCP was well prepared for the underground guerilla war triggered when the party was prohibited after the declaration of a state of emergency following the execution of three white plantation managers by armed Chinese gunmen with connections to the MCP in June 1948, an event discussed in more detail below.

Publicly, however, the construction of a security issue that was both planned and could be responded to had begun much earlier. The *Straits Times*, for example, sided with plantation owners and other employers in British Malaya, and early in 1947 reported on the “lawlessness” that the “Communist-organised” “troublemakers” were spreading.³⁸ The article not only demanded the personal security of planters and employers; the anonymous author spoke in the name of the personalised “Singapore and the Malayan Union” and the “public”, which he portrayed as victims of “the bandits and murder gangs, the ineffectualness of authority and strike after strike.”³⁹

Organised interest groups of estate managers in British Malaya actively took part in the discussion of the situation, thus contributing to the discourse that surrounded it. When a European plantation manager, Archie Nicolson, was killed by three masked men in a robbery in October 1947, the chairman of the Johore Planters’ Association, Mr Boyd, publicly contemplated evacuating women and children from the plantations “until security conditions improved.”⁴⁰ By highlighting the concerns of the plantation managers for their families, the speaker of the association increased the pressure on the government to act. The article implied that the personal

35 Deery, Malaya, 44.

36 In September, a planters’ association even published an open thank-you note praising the newspaper for its reports on the situation, see: N.N., Thanks From Planters, in: *The Straits Times*, 29.09.1947, p. 1.

37 Deery, Malaya, 50.

38 N.N., Get Within Law!, in: *The Straits Times*, 09.02.1947, p. 6.

39 Ibid.

40 N.N., Planters May Send Wives Out Of Johore, in: *The Straits Times*, p. 1.

security of the plantation managers and their families was not clearly distinguishable from the security of the colony. After all, the planters' associations themselves disseminated the narrative that the personal attacks on managers were an attempt to destroy the Malayan rubber industry as a whole, an industry that played an essential role for decision-makers in the colony and in London.⁴¹

As time passed, the public statements issued by planters formulated concrete demands vis-à-vis a concrete audience. It was the colonial government that the planters addressed when they pictured the situation of "increasing lawlessness and the resultant insecurity to planters' lives". The planters demanded extraordinary measures like military patrols, "ruthless application of the sentences of death, banishment, and particularly flogging", and the armament of planters.⁴² The culminating demand for a "state of emergency" was met by Sir Edward Gent with his declaration in June 1948. In the media, it was underlined that these extraordinary measures would not only safeguard the planters, but by extension, "ordered life and public security in this country", as inoperable rubber estates would "ruin this country and everybody in it".⁴³

Planters' associations, the managing staff of rubber estates, and the employer-friendly newspaper all participated in the securitisation of the growing tensions in the colony. Rhetorically, the unrest was identified as "lawlessness", and the perpetrators were named "gangsters" or "bandits" and thus clearly portrayed as illegitimate and isolated from the larger population.⁴⁴ This was the framework or the *heuristics* of the early securitisation of the Malayan situation. Furthermore, the securitising actors underlined the impact of the situation for a broader entity (the public or the prosperity of the whole colony) while addressing a specific audience (decision-makers in Britain and British Malaya). The proposed *security repertoires* ranged from stricter enforcement of the law to the armament of planters and extraordinary measures; the last aspect was demanded, quite literally, with the call for a state of emergency. At this point, the already established narrative of lawlessness and banditry became the official language used to report on the conflict. Phillip Deery has shown that the terminology was

41 N.N., The Labour Unrest, in: The Straits Times Singapore, 09.06.1948, p. 4.

42 N.N., Planters in Malaya to be Armed. Gent's Answer to Delegation, in: The Straits Times, 28.10.1947, p. 7.

43 N.N., Reactions to Murder, in: The Straits Times Singapore, 02.06.1948, p. 6.

44 See Deery, Terminology, 236.

decided upon by the Information Research Department (IRD), a unit within the Foreign Office, to underscore that British troops were not fighting a “national uprising”.⁴⁵ This narrative was almost immediately adopted by an official from the colonial office, who argued during a House of Commons debate that it was not “a nationalist movement which Britain was engaged in putting down [...] but [...] the conduct of gangsters who were out to destroy the very foundations of human society and orderly life”.⁴⁶

Interestingly, securitisation acts did not end with the decision of Edward Gent to give in to the demands of the planters and declare a state of emergency in the colony. Other than had been anticipated by decision-makers in London and Malaya, the enforcement of emergency law and the following police action against the “bandits” did not end with a swift victory for the British. Instead, it developed into a long guerrilla war that lasted for twelve years.⁴⁷ During this period, it was seen as increasingly vital to underline that British allies were not fighting a politically mature independence movement. Consequently, the securitisation acts changed. By 1950, it was not enough to portray the insurgency as a security issue in relation to the prosperity of the British colony. After all, statements by the British prime minister and Labour politician, Clement Attlee, had caused confusion about Britain’s continuous commitment to the colony.⁴⁸ Now, actors interested in the rubber industry in Malaya began depicting a British withdrawal as the main security issue.

Herbert Ashplant, for example, a former plantation manager in Malaya, argued in 1950 in an article in an industry magazine that “a garment designed for nationally-conscious European wear would be utterly unserviceable for the politically unweakened, unblended racial groups of the once happy Peninsula”. His words implied that an independent Malaysia would end prosperity in the region and thus endanger economic interests not only of the rubber industry but Britain at large and that only a capable, i.e. European, government could guarantee the necessary conditions for prosperity.⁴⁹ Here, and in other articles, the journal followed a process of *othering*:

45 See Deery, Terminology, 233–236.

46 N.N., Government’s Pledge in House of Commons Debate, in: The India Rubber Journal 115/3 (1948), p. 3.

47 Deery, Malaya, 51–52.

48 UK Parliament, House of Commons Hansard (1950), Malaya (Government Policy), URL: <[https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1950-03-28/debates/3364445f-979a-4427-a323-e88e375fb7c7/Malaya\(GovernmentPolicy\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1950-03-28/debates/3364445f-979a-4427-a323-e88e375fb7c7/Malaya(GovernmentPolicy))> (Accessed October 14, 2025).

49 Ashplant, Whither Malaya, in: The India Rubber Journal 118/20 (1950), pp. 3–7, 3.

it constructed a collective European identity by grouping together a diverse set of actors and characteristics into one group of inferior, uncivilised and exotic “others” to legitimise colonial rule.⁵⁰ The colonised Malayan, Indian and Chinese people living in British Malaya were not only accused of being incapable of forming a democratic government, but also of being incapable of expressing valid political positions at all. The editors of the *India Rubber Journal* argued, for example, that it would be a “widespread characteristic of the Oriental [...] to give his European interrogator the sort of answers he senses they wish to get.”⁵¹ The reference to an alleged European identity served as a security heuristic. Only evoking the racist narrative of European superiority justified the speaker’s interpretation of the situation as a threat to security. To avert this constructed threat, he demanded a clear statement from the British government that they would commit to the colony and fight against the insurgency.⁵²

The opinion piece by Herbert Ashplant reveals another remarkable aspect of the securitisation of the Malayan emergency. The longer the conflict dragged on, the more British decision-makers and private actors alike were worried about losing international support. After all, the United States had shown the seriousness of its anti-colonial stance by granting independence to the Philippines and using payments of the European Recovery Programme as political leverage to convince the Netherlands to withdraw from Indonesia.⁵³ Extensive political leeway and support from London were not enough to protect British commercial interests in Malaya. Thus, the author argued, a British retreat would lead not to liberation or democracy (of which in any case he deemed the colonised people of Malaya incapable), but Communism, and ultimately Malaya falling under China’s influence.⁵⁴

Ashplant did not attempt to conceal the audience for whom his article was intended. He cynically addressed his “large-hearted American friends”, whom he thought too critical of British imperialism.⁵⁵ Interestingly, in this article, the perpetrators were not “bandits” but “Communist Terrorists

50 For more theoretical context, see *Thomas-Olalde/Velho*, Othering.

51 *N.N.*, Notes of the Week, in: *The India Rubber Journal* 122/1 (1952), p. 9.

52 *Ashplant*, Whither Malaya, in: *The India Rubber Journal* 118/20 (1950), pp. 3–7, 3.

53 *Stockwell*, Decolonization, 188.

54 *Ashplant*, Whither Malaya, in: *The India Rubber Journal* 118/20 (1950), 3–7, 7.

55 The United States in general, and the Truman administration specifically, were crucial audiences for the British at that time. British decision-makers were keen to safeguard American support to guarantee the stability in Southeast Asia and were

[sic] [which] are made of 99 per cent Chinese, Marxist-trained trouble makers".⁵⁶ The change of terminology was not accidental. Indeed, Philip Deery has shown that the switch from "bandits" to "communists" became the official policy in Britain two years later. In 1952, the Ministry of Defence published a memorandum underscoring that public documents would no longer refer to the enemies in Malaya as "bandits" but as "communist terrorists" instead.⁵⁷

Directing the securitisation move at American readers altered the framework again. Commercial interests and the need to maintain imperial stability were not sufficient reason to convince public opinion in the United States to accept Britain's colonial war in Malaya. In the context of the heating-up of the Cold War—Ashplant's opinion piece was, after all, published mere weeks before the Korean War broke out—a potential British withdrawal from Malaya was depicted as threatening the international order, as it would mean the advance of Communism in Southeast Asia.

The securitisation moves of private actors in British Malaya thus changed over time and according to audience. Initially, European planters and their allies depicted the growing aggression against employers as a security issue for the whole colony and demanded extraordinary political measures to protect their businesses (and their lives). After the 1948 declaration of a state of emergency, the Malayan insurgents were delegitimised and infantilised by categorising the uprising as "banditry" and underlining the alleged inferiority of the colonised people compared to Europeans. Finally, international industry magazines like the *India Rubber Journal* published articles in which the conflict was depicted as a Cold War fight against international Communism, as a way of securing the international tolerance of Britain's campaign and rule in the colony. It is safe to assume, however, that the private actors in British Malaya were less concerned about geopolitics in general and more about the protection of European ownership of property in Malaya.

attentive to public criticism of the campaign from the United States; see *Deery*, Terminology, 243–244.

56 *Ashplant*, Whither Malaya, in: *The India Rubber Journal* 118/20 (1950), pp. 3–7, 7.

57 *Deery*, Terminology, 245–246; see also footnote 65.

European Economic Cooperation: The Only Alternative!

Decolonisation was not the only transitional context in which private actors from the rubber industry resorted to securitisation moves. After the Second World War, the future of Germany was no longer in the hands of the Germans. Germany had lost substantial amounts of territory, and private actors feared for the future of German industry and its access to larger markets. The rubber industry, which had played a crucial role in the war effort of Nazi Germany, was especially concerned. In this context, private actors used securitisation to depict their preferred international policies as the only acceptable ones.

Rubber and the German War Effort

The German rubber industry had played a central role in Germany's attempt to build a racially hierarchical and Fascist empire on the European continent. Hitler himself had underscored the enormous relevance of continuous access to rubber in the armament efforts of the "Third Reich". In a secret memorandum on Germany's Four-Year Plan, the dictator explicitly cited the need for German mass production of synthetic rubber and simultaneously promised that the German state would obtain the product from German private companies at cost-covering prices.⁵⁸ This was by no means self-evident. After all, synthetic rubber was still far more expensive than natural rubber in the 1920s and 1930s, despite great technological advances in the field.⁵⁹ Only after the Nazi regime promised state contracts and pressured the German chemical cartel *I.G. Farben* to start mass production of synthetic rubber, did the German industry begin to build large-scale capacities for rubber production.⁶⁰

In the following years, Nazi Germany became one of the leading producers of synthetic rubber.⁶¹ The rubber-producing industry was not the only branch that profited from the economic policies of the Nazi regime. The largest German rubber processing company, *Continental*, was quick to welcome the regime change. In Paul Erker's words, *Continental* became

58 See *Streb*, *Technologiepolitik*, 98–99.

59 See *Soentgen*, *Synthesekautschuk*, 48–49.

60 See *Soentgen*, *Synthesekautschuk*, 50.

61 (*IRSG*), *Statistics*, 29., Table 10.

an “NS model company”, playing a crucial role in the German armament effort and attempting to restructure the European rubber market during the Second World War.⁶² In close collaboration with the Reich Economic Ministry (*Reichswirtschaftsministerium*), managers in the German rubber industry met with their Italian and French counterparts to discuss a European rubber and tyre market under German leadership.⁶³ Similarly, smaller companies, like the German family company *Freudenberg* that had diversified into the processing of synthetic rubber only in the 1930s, became suppliers to the German arms industry.⁶⁴ All in all, the German rubber industry played a central and supportive role in the German war effort during the Second World War.

After the war, however, the German rubber industry was in a precarious situation. The senior management of some companies in particular stood under the scrutiny of the Allies. Among them was Richard Freudenberg, who was initially appointed interim regional manager but was arrested by the Allies just weeks later.⁶⁵ He was not released for a further two years, when he was cleared of all charges (surprisingly, according to current knowledge).⁶⁶ The Allies initially agreed that Germany’s economic potential had to be tamed. Actors from the German rubber industry perceived this situation as threatening and tried to securitise the transition period.

Securitising the Transition

The Second World War ended with the unconditional surrender of the *Wehrmacht* and the occupation of Germany at the beginning of May 1945. Only weeks later, the victorious Allied powers of the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union met to discuss the fate of Germany and Europe. At the end of the conference that lasted several weeks, the Allies agreed to dismantle German cartels, decentralise Germany’s economy and “eliminate

62 See *Erker*, *Zulieferer*.

63 See *Erker*, *Zulieferer*, 610–613.

64 See *Scholtyssek*, *Familienunternehmen*, 261–271.

65 *Scholtyssek*, *Freudenberg*, 216.

66 See *Scholtyssek*, *Familienunternehmen*, 417.

Germany's war potential".⁶⁷ Germany lost substantial former territories and was divided into occupation zones administered by the Allies.⁶⁸

The occupation had immediate effects on the German rubber industry. With regard to the chemical industry, it meant a temporary end to synthetic rubber production. Given the importance of rubber to the German war effort, the Allies not only prohibited its production but also planned to dismantle production facilities in Germany completely.⁶⁹ However, different approaches to rubber production quickly became apparent in the occupation zones. While rubber production was strictly prohibited in the zones administered by the US and the British, and played no noticeable role in the French zone, rubber production in the Soviet occupation zone was, after initial plans to dismantle it, supported from 1946 onwards.⁷⁰

For the rubber processing industry, the picture was somewhat different. Frequently, rubber products proved so crucial that even the occupying forces had to rely on it. *Freudenberg's* sealing division, for example, even though the company was classified by the Allies as an armaments manufacturer, was able to resume production already in the autumn of 1945, not least because the American army was among its first customers after the war.⁷¹ Still, it was not all sunshine for the German rubber industry. Rubber imports were scarce, and the industry complained about bureaucratic barriers to exports.⁷² Moreover, the Allied powers stipulated maximum quotas of products that the industry was allowed to manufacture, although these quotas were adjusted and increased in 1948.⁷³ The adjustment was unsurprising given the influence of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der deutschen Kautschukindustrie in der britischen Zone* ("Working Group of the German Rubber Industry in the British Zone", AdK), led by two leading managers of Germany's second largest rubber company, *Phoenix*, Otto A. Friedrich

67 Protocol of the Proceedings of the Berlin Conference, Office of the Historian. URL: <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv02/d1383>> (accessed March 23, 2025).

68 See *Hilger*, Demontage, 198.

69 See *Streb*, Technologiepolitik, 152.

70 *N.N.*, Die Gummi-Industrie im Wiederaufbau, in: *Kautschuk und Gummi* 1.1 (1948), pp. 5–9, 7.

71 See *Scholtyssek*, Familienunternehmen, 426.

72 See, for example, *N.N.*, Gleichstellung im Exportgeschäft, in: *Kautschuk und Gummi* 2.5 (1949), pp. 138–139.

73 *N.N.*, Die Gummi-Industrie im Wiederaufbau, in: *Kautschuk und Gummi* 1.1 (1948), pp. 5–9, 7.

and Albert Schaefer.⁷⁴ Thus, the German rubber industry experienced, unsurprisingly, challenges after the Second World War.

The solution to the problems of the transition would be found in a gamble on European Economic Cooperation. In 1948, the beginning of negotiations about a European Recovery Program, financed by the United States, seemed to offer a way out for German industry. After all, the Marshall Plan counted on Germany's industrial potential for the reconstruction of the continent. The German magazine *Kautschuk und Gummi* was relieved to report on a growing international consensus that Europe's recovery would only succeed if all its "economic possibilities were used to reach this goal"⁷⁵ – including German industry, which thus needed to be spared further dismantling. According to the magazine, the decision was a "victory for reason".⁷⁶ At this point, closer European economic cooperation was still only a vague political ideal, although it was already inspiring various projects and giving rise to international organisations—sometimes with competing competencies.⁷⁷

Consequently, the German rubber industry attempted a balancing act, vehemently supporting still vague notions of European cooperation all while trying to push their own understanding of it. In some instances, actors from the German rubber industry resorted to securitisation measures to reach this goal. Richard Freudenberg, for example, once he had been released from prison, decided to run as a member of the Bundestag in the first elections after the war. In his campaign, he underscored the need for European economic cooperation, using a securitisation move that portrayed his demands as the only viable way forward. In 1949, he was convinced that Germany was in urgent need to be led out of its "confinement and lack of freedom".⁷⁸ He vigorously maintained that European cooperation was the only way out of the situation, as other alternatives had been tried and had failed before: "Not an extended national but a European space will bring us the necessary development opportunities and pave the way for peaceful and reassuring times".⁷⁹ He unequivocally pointed out that this was not

74 See *Erker*, Wettbewerb, 522.

75 *N.N.*, Demontagestop oder Demontage der deutschen Wirtschaft, in: *Kautschuk und Gummi* 1.11 (1948), pp. 293–294, 293.

76 *Ibid.*

77 See *Patel*, Project, for example, 17.

78 "An die Wahlberechtigten des Landkreises Mannheim-Land", July 1949, Stadtarchiv Weinheim (SA Weinheim) Rep. 56/15.2.1.

79 *Ibid.*

an ordinary political choice. Instead, according to Freudenberg, it was a question of life and death: a choice for European cooperation was not only about “preserving our European culture, but about the very preservation of all our lives”.⁸⁰ With this securitization move, he portrayed his demands as the only viable way forward.

The AdK agreed with Richard Freudenberg in principle. In a statement published in *Kautschuk und Gummi*, however, it also pointed to Germany’s alleged difficult starting conditions, stemming from war damage, industrial dismantlement, and the loss of its patents.⁸¹ Despite these difficulties that, according to the lobby group, put the German rubber industry at a disadvantage compared to neighbouring states, the AdK saw no alternative to European economic cooperation. The association argued that it was indeed the only solution to Europe’s economic misery after the war, as the alternative would surely mean “Europe’s Bolshevization”.⁸² It does not seem far-fetched to assume that the AdK really supported European cooperation because it would put an end to Allied plans to marginalise the German economy. In the same article, the author expressed the rubber industry’s hope for international concessions as “an impoverishment of the German economy [...] would necessarily impact the recovery of other European countries”.⁸³

In both examples, a representative from the German rubber industry used securitisation strategies to depict European economic cooperation as a *security repertoire* which represented the only viable policy alternative. The AdK constructed Bolshevism as the alternative to European economic liberalisation, while Freudenberg depicted the Nazis’ aggressive and ultimately failed attempt to establish a vast national empire as the negative correlate to the positive of European cooperation. Given such alternatives, the failure to support European economic liberalisation could by implication only mean poverty and death. The security heuristics in these cases were anecdotal references to systems of injustice but nonetheless based on collective experience. After all, the border between the Soviet Socialist system and the Western idea of capitalism now literally divided Germany in half, while

80 Ibid.

81 Heinz Fritz, Die Öffnung der Märkte, in: *Kautschuk und Gummi* 2/10 (1949), pp. 295–297, 295.

82 Heinz Fritz, Die Öffnung der Märkte, in: *Kautschuk und Gummi* 2/10 (1949), pp. 295–297, 296.

83 Ibid.

German citizens in 1949 were all too conscious of the consequences of Germany's expansionist past. In this instance, the representatives constructed a threat that would only materialise in a possible future scenario. The extraordinary policy action that was demanded from the decision-makers was thus not a reaction to the status quo but a choice of a policy instead of an alternative. Of course, the actors had specific ideas on how to implement European economic cooperation. Richard Freudenberg went on to become a member of the Bundestag and the Bundestag committee for foreign trade, positions that enabled him to discuss his ideas with the German chancellor and the German economic minister.⁸⁴ The AdK published a list of demands with its endorsement of European rapprochement.⁸⁵

American FDIs and Securitisation among Competitors

Fast forward twenty years, and the economic integration of Western Europe had indeed contributed to a reinvigoration of its economies. Of course, the high growth levels had benefited rubber companies. However, the economic success also attracted investments from overseas and increased competitive pressure on European markets.⁸⁶

European Rubber Companies and American FDIs

In 1967, the French journalist and intellectual Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber published his book *Le Défi Américain* and caused a stir. It became an immediate best-seller in France and was later published and read all over Europe.⁸⁷ In the first part of his book, Servan-Schreiber attempted to interpret the sharp increase of American investments in the European Common Market and called the situation an "assault on Europe".⁸⁸ He was not alone in his assessment. Already two years earlier, the West German current affairs magazine *Der Spiegel* had published an article in which the

84 See, for example, Richard Freudenberg to Konrad Adenauer, 22.02.1951; Richard Freudenberg to Ludwig Erhard, 01.12.1950, SA Weinheim Rep. 56/15.2.4.

85 Heinz Fritz, Die Öffnung der Märkte, in: Kautschuk und Gummi 2/10 (1949), pp. 295–297, 297.

86 Schaufelbuehl, Investments, 882.

87 See the foreword by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in the English version published by Avon Books in 1969, *Servan-Schreiber*, Challenge.

88 See *Servan-Schreiber*, Challenge, Part I.

American investments were compared to the invasion of Europe by the American troops during the Second World War:

*During the Second World War, Henry Kaiser contributed with his liberty ships [...] and his Jeeps to the military invasion of Europe. Today, he is a pioneer of a second invasion, an American economic conquest of Europe by American investments that trigger alarm in the capitals of the EEC member states.*⁸⁹

The high levels of economic growth in Europe and especially in the European Economic Community (EEC) were indeed attracting American businesses. Between 1955 and 1970, foreign direct investments (FDIs) by the US in the EEC increased by 460 percent (compared to a 180 percent increase in all FDIs).⁹⁰ Generally, American companies expected that the foundation of the EEC would lead to a decrease in American exports to Europe.⁹¹ On the other hand, private actors hoped that economic growth in the EEC would generally increase the standard of living and the demand for consumer goods, thus providing an excellent investment opportunity.⁹² As Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl underscores, American investments were directly triggered by efforts towards European economic rapprochement.⁹³ The larger trend of increasing investments also impacted the European rubber industry.

Even though rubber is a material used for a wide array of products, nearly 50 percent of all rubber is used for tyre production.⁹⁴ In the early twentieth century, driven by the demand from the automobile industry after the war, tyre companies grew quickly. In several industrialised nations, the national tyre markets experienced trends of concentration, ultimately leading to an international oligopolistic competition dominated by the leading American rubber companies.⁹⁵ International foreign investments by large American rubber companies were thus not an entirely new phenomenon in Europe in the late 1950s and 1960s, although in the 1920s

89 N.N., »WIR KAUFEN DIE GANZE DEUTSCHE INDUSTRIE«, in: DER SPIEGEL (05.10.1965); translation by the author.

90 Schaufelbuehl, Investments, 882–884.

91 See Schaufelbuehl, Investments, 883–884.

92 See Schaufelbuehl, Advantage, 667–668.

93 Schaufelbuehl, Investments, 883.

94 See Barlow/Jayasuriya/Tan, Rubber, 216.

95 See Erker, Wettbewerb, 379–389.

and 1930s, all the large American rubber companies had withdrawn from Europe to some extent, sensing an increasing risk of war.⁹⁶

The withdrawal was, however, only temporary. In the early 1960s, the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) reported reverently on the “great American dynamic” of foreign investments made by US rubber companies.⁹⁷ The large American rubber companies expanded their activities in Europe considerably during this period. The American *Goodyear* company acquired a smaller German tyre company in the 1960s, and its competitor *Goodrich* also established production facilities in Germany.⁹⁸ In France, *Firestone* and *Goodyear* invested in factories in the late 1950s,⁹⁹ and *Firestone* and *Goodrich* built production facilities in Italy.¹⁰⁰

Securitising American Investments

The issue European rubber companies faced with American competitors on their home markets was the size advantage. A study by the European Commission on the Concentration and Competition in the automobile industries stated accurately that there “are no small or medium-sized tiremakers [sic]”.¹⁰¹ But there were still significant differences between companies. The German rubber company *Veith*, for example, was a relatively small tyre-maker, albeit with a turnover of over 100 million DM in 1962.¹⁰² In 1963, the formerly independent company decided to sell a majority stake to the Italian rubber company *Pirelli*.

To the shareholders, the managing director, Gert Silber-Bonz, justified the decision with reference to a whole string of potential dangers: the threat to an independent company in a quasi-oligopolistic market structure, the rising costs of the necessary investments to keep up with the competition, and the international competition to supply the increasingly international

96 See *Erker*, Wettbewerb, 464.

97 *Wiborg*, Klaus: Europas Reifenindustrie ließ sich nicht überrollen, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) (21.10.1963), p. 23.

98 *Erker*, Wettbewerb, 533, 578.

99 *Dumond*, Modernisation, 98.

100 *Montenegro*, Pirelli, 195.

101 *Marfels*, Concentration, 200.

102 *Lingnau* (Li.), Gerold: Veith beginnt zusammen mit Pirelli eine neue Entwicklungsphase, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) (22.08.1963).

German automobile companies.¹⁰³ Silber-Bonz thereby constructed the future of the company as a security issue. Had *Veith* decided against the sale to *Pirelli*, claimed Silber-Bonz, this situation would have been even worse, as if *Pirelli* had bought another German company as part of their commitment to entering the German market *Veith* would have ended up with an even more powerful competitor.¹⁰⁴ By referring to the many economic and financial dangers for relatively small companies inherent in the internationalizing tyre market, *Veith's* managing director portrayed the decision to sell the majority stake to a European competitor as a decision to safeguard the company's, and more importantly, the shareholders' interests.

Interestingly, the media followed a similar rhetorical strategy. In the *FAZ* newspaper article cited above, the takeover of *Veith* by *Pirelli* was depicted as a victory against the American competition. Since *Veith* had collaborated with the American tyre company *Goodrich* before the deal with *Pirelli*, the takeover by a European company was a sign of "stiff resistance" from Europe. The threatening impression of a "dollar avalanche that would overrun the European tyre industry"¹⁰⁵ was averted. Instead, the European rubber industry had signalled to its global competitors that "the potent competition from overseas [was] definitely not always on the winning track."¹⁰⁶

In both cases, although directed at different audiences, the language of securitisation attempted to depict an alternative to an already chosen path—a *fait accompli*—as dangerous. To its shareholders, *Veith's* managing director underscored that the global development of the oligopolistic tyre market would have endangered *Veith* as an independent company. The economic editor of one of Germany's largest newspapers constructed a powerful image of the strength of American rubber companies as an avalanche. This threatening American avalanche had been stopped, so the narrative, by the European takeover of the German company. Interestingly, the state did not provide the security in this situation. Rather, the looming threat of a (hostile) American takeover was averted by the extraordinary measure of selling an independent business to a European partner.

Even European flagship companies like *Pirelli* (Italy), *Continental* (Germany), *Michelin* (France) and *Dunlop* (UK), contemplated extraordinary

103 Silber-Bonz, Gert: VEITH morgen, in: profile. 1 (1964), 1, pp. 37–40, 37–38.

104 Silber-Bonz, Gert: VEITH morgen, in: profile. 1 (1964), 1, pp. 37–40, 38.

105 Wiborg, Klaus: Europas Reifenindustrie ließ sich nicht überrollen, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) (21.10.1963), p. 23.

106 Ibid.

measures as a reaction to the growing American competition in Europe. In 1963, the chairmen of *Dunlop* and *Pirelli*, Sir Reay Geddes and Leopoldo Pirelli, met in Paris. In the protocol prepared for the Italian company, the first agenda point was simply titled “American” (Americans). The directors of both companies were concerned about the commercial decisions of American companies, most notably in France, where *Michelin* was being forced to offer extra discounts to automobile manufacturers.¹⁰⁷ Both men perceived the behaviour of the American companies in Europe as hostile. Linguistically, this was expressed by calling the strategic decisions of their American competitors *fighting acts* (“*azione di lotta*”), placing them in the semantic field of war and conflict.¹⁰⁸

The businessmen did not just talk. Members of the boards of directors of all four European companies agreed to coordinate their commercial strategy in response to the growing American competition. In 1966, a technical directors’ meeting took place in Zurich, at which the European rubber companies in the cartel agreed to adopt the price suggested by the respective market leader in every European country, which would have effectively forced other competitors to follow suit.¹⁰⁹ These secret agreements were possible since the four European companies, according to their own estimates, controlled around 60 percent of the Western European market, whereas majority American companies had a market share of 19 percent and companies with an American minority holding another 8.5 percent.¹¹⁰ However, these decisions were only the lowest common denominator on which all four companies agreed. *Pirelli*, *Dunlop*, and *Continental* were interested in even more extensive cooperation, such as collaborating on a technological level to counter the size advantage of the American competition. Much to their dismay, *Michelin* decided against any technological cooperation with its European competitors, not least because it felt it was way ahead of them.¹¹¹

Michelin’s withdrawal from closer cooperation did not hinder *Continental*, *Pirelli* and *Dunlop* from advancing their plans. In fact, the chairmen of the companies began to talk in more detail about a plan to form what

107 Dunlop – Incontro a Parigi, 10.12.1963, Fondazione Pirelli (FP), Presidenza Leopoldo Pirelli (LP), D1-Dunlop (1959–1968).

108 Ibid.

109 Incontro con Dunlop, Michelin e Continental a Zurigo, 29.11.1966, FP, LP, G/II-1 Continental.

110 Ibid.

111 Personal, 29.04.1965, FP, LP, D1/Contatti Ing. Leopoldo / Mr. Geddes 1959–1968.

they called, in more military language, a “European front”¹¹² against the Americans. Again, the businessmen chose wording from the semantic field of war. Ultimately, *Continental*, *Dunlop* and *Pirelli* came to an unusually far-reaching secret collaboration agreement.¹¹³ After the negotiations were complete, the actors again used securitisation to justify the extraordinary measure of collaborating with competitors. Leopoldo Pirelli even suggested that their agreement was the only way to survive:

*Looking into the future, the prosperity and survival of Europe itself can only be secured if collaboration amongst the Countries of our Continent continues to grow across all fields. This is true in politics and in culture, but it is particularly true in the economical [sic] field, where we need to place our work at the same level—and possibly at a better level—of efficiency compared with competitors from other continents.*¹¹⁴

In his letter to Georg von Opel, Leopoldo Pirelli depicted the cooperation agreement as a crucial step in a bigger rescue mission for the European continent. For the benefit of his business partner (his securitisation *audience*), he constructed the greater efficiency of American companies as a threat to the survival of the European continent (the securitisation *heuristics*). The cooperation agreement (the securitisation *repertoire*) would increase the competitiveness of the European companies. In this rhetoric, the European companies only stood a chance against the American rubber giants if they acted collectively. Thus, the economically risky decision to enter into technological cooperation with European competitors was constructed as providing security against the threat of a strong American market position. Although American competition was undoubtedly strong, Leopoldo Pirelli was engaging in securitisation in constructing it as potentially “fatal”. The European tyre companies were not alone in pushing this narrative when they talked about the strategies of their American competitors. On the contrary, books like *Le Défi Américain* or the quoted *Spiegel* article had already established the narrative of American investments as a threat.

112 Incontro Reay Geddes/ Leopoldo Pirelli a Milano, 20.10.1966, FP, LP, D.

113 See, CDP. Accordo ufficiale, 01.01.1968, FP, LP, GII/-1.

114 Letter of Leopoldo Pirelli to Georg von Opel, 06.12.1967, LP, FP, G/II-1.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has analysed three *security situations* in which the securitising actors had close connections to the European rubber industry. Interestingly, in all three situations, private actors constructed a threat as the alternative to a policy or choice they preferred. In such a narrative, the demanded policy, or strategic decision, was rhetorically depicted as the only way to ensure a more secure outcome. The example of the rubber industry shows how private actors engaged in *securitising moves* to influence international politics and global competition. While in some cases, the audience of these moves were state actors who were called upon to take extraordinary measures, in other cases companies addressed their competitors or shareholders, depicting the market context as dangerous.

During the emergency in Malaya, rubber producers framed violent attacks on rubber estates and their managing staff as a security issue for the colony at large. However, they were not only seeking government protection from the insurgents' attacks. They also wanted political continuity and thus framed not only the Communist insurgency as a threat but also the idea of an independent colony. In a first step, and primarily directed at the colonial government in British Malaya, the media close to the plantation industry promoted a narrative of an increasing lawlessness and criminality that was likely to endanger the colony's future prosperity, and demanded rigorous government action. This language was later officially adopted by state institutions as it attempted to avoid the impression that, in calling in the army to defeat the criminals, Britain was fighting a bigger independence movement. On the other hand, to ensure the continued support from the international community, the conflict was later framed as a Cold War conflict and the British military campaign as a fight against Communist terrorists. The example shows that private actors not only constructed a given situation as a security issue in order to support demands for an intervention, but that it was also crucial to categorise the situation as a certain *kind* of insecurity.

In the second situation, the German rubber industry was confronted with the Allies' plans to dismantle the German industry immediately after the Second World War. Soon, companies grasped that European economic cooperation could offer security, as virtually all plans for regional economic cooperation factored in the German industry. Thus, private actors like the business association AdK and the spokesman of a rubber processing company, Richard Freudenberg, adopted securitisation tactics, depicting any

policy alternative as fatally dangerous by portraying it as either leading to “Bolshevism” or associating it with the ultimately failed Nazi expansionist project.

Finally, we have seen how private companies made use of securitisation to justify business decisions. While it is not unusual for companies to navigate risk, this chapter shows that tyre companies securitised American investments in Europe. By portraying the competitive pressure from the United States as a security issue, *Veith's* managing director was able to justify the board's decision to sell the formerly independent German company to *Pirelli* through invoking the potential dangers that this decision had avoided. Only a few years later, Leopoldo Pirelli depicted the decision to engage in an unusually wide-reaching cooperation agreement with some of *Pirelli's* largest and most powerful European competitors as a step towards safeguarding the European continent from the American competition.

In all the above situations, European cooperation or a supposed European identity played a crucial role in developing repertoires to guard against threats. During the Malayan emergency, a constructed collective European, politically enlightened identity served to demarcate the Europeans from the people they had colonised, who, in a process of *othering*, were rhetorically denied the political maturity necessary to self-govern. This constructed European identity formed part of the *security heuristics*. In Germany after the Second World War, and among European rubber companies in the 1960s and 1970s, European Economic Cooperation was presented in terms of a *security repertoire*. The alignment of a national economic policy with Germany's European neighbours after a devastating war, and the decision to embark on a large-scale technological collaboration with large competitors, certainly qualify as extraordinary measures. By framing alternative solutions as existential dangers and threats, private actors legitimised strategic business decisions among themselves and formulated political demands to national decision-makers. The chapter has shown that historically, companies—not just state actors—have participated in securitisation. Moreover, it reveals that securitisation theory can be instructive for understanding extraordinary business decisions when private actors make use of securitisation moves without reference to the state as the provider of security. Lastly, it demonstrates how private actors in the second half of the twentieth century engaged in processes of Europeanisation, using ideas of a European identity and European cooperation as a lifeline in danger.

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