

Europe Between the Black Mesa Incident and the Seven Hour War

Initial Context: The Chaos of 2001

When the Black Mesa catastrophe tore through Earth's dimensional fabric in 2001, Europe was quickly overwhelmed by a wave of Xen incursions. Unlike the United States, which had Black Mesa as its epicenter, the Old Continent faced scattered but devastating portal storms. Hungary was among the first hit, with the Carpathian Basin becoming what would later be called XMZ-4 "Iron Hollow," a zone where electronic equipment ceased to function and ghostly voices haunted survivors.

The first days were marked by total confusion. The mechanisms of the European Union, already weakened by persistent divisions regarding the intervention in Iraq, collapsed almost immediately. Brussels, faced with the impossibility of coordinating an effective response to threats that were simultaneously emerging in Hungary, France, and Italy, quickly became obsolete. The European Parliament was evacuated urgently to Oslo, where it would be reduced to a mere skeletal consultative body.

The Collapse of NATO and the American Question

European Expeditionary Forces in the USA (May-June 2001)

During the first weeks of the crisis, NATO still seemed functional. When the United States, overwhelmed by Xen incursions on their East Coast, requested the activation of Article 5, several European nations responded. Expeditionary forces were rapidly deployed:

- **United Kingdom:** 12,000 soldiers, mainly Royal Marines and SAS
- **France:** 8,000 soldiers, including Foreign Legion and special forces
- **Germany:** 6,000 Bundeswehr soldiers
- **Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark:** smaller contingents (2,000-3,000 each)

These forces arrived in New York and Boston in early June, discovering indescribable chaos. American cities were ravaged, command chains broken, and Xen creatures swarmed everywhere. More troubling still, the Europeans quickly discovered the truth: Black Mesa was a man-made incident, the result of forbidden experiments on extraterrestrial materials.

The diplomatic scandal was immediate. European commanders, furious at being sent to die cleaning up an American disaster, demanded immediate repatriation. But at the same moment, incursions began to multiply in Europe. Expeditionary forces were recalled urgently, leaving only a few liaison units.

The Problem of American Bases in Europe

The revelation about Black Mesa created a major crisis concerning American military bases in Europe. NATO installations – Ramstein in Germany, Aviano in Italy, British bases – housed tens of thousands of American soldiers. Faced with their country's collapse, these troops became problematic:

- Failed repatriation attempts to the USA (June-July 2001) due to transatlantic portal storms
- Growing tensions between desperate American soldiers and local populations
- Mutinies in certain bases when Washington ordered troops to remain in Europe
- Mass desertions of American soldiers seeking to return by their own means

By August 2001, most American bases had been either chaotically evacuated or forcibly absorbed by European national armies. American equipment was seized and redistributed, de facto creating the end of NATO as an operational structure.

The Establishment of the Oslo Defense Council

It was in this context of institutional panic that an alternative emerged. At the end of May 2001, as portal storms intensified and Xen flora began to infest Europe's major metropolises, defense ministers from several nations met informally in Oslo. The Norwegian capital offered several strategic advantages: its geographical position removed from major rift zones, its proven diplomatic infrastructure, and above all, its relative neutrality in the quarrels dividing Paris, London, and Berlin.

What began as informal consultations quickly transformed into a permanent European Defense Council. Faced with NATO's collapse whose command structure had disintegrated in just a few weeks and the manifest impotence of the EU, Oslo became the new nerve center of continental defense.

The Council quickly equipped itself with an operational structure: the European Continental Defense Army (ECDA). Unlike traditional military structures, the ECDA was designed as a rapid intervention force capable of responding to Xen incursions without getting lost in the bureaucratic maze that had paralyzed the EU.

The Rise of General Hägglund and Military Integration

To command this new force, the Council turned to General Gustav Hägglund. Of Finnish origin, Hägglund was then President of the European Union Military Committee, a position that, ironically, had lost all relevance with the EU's collapse but which gave him precious institutional legitimacy. More importantly, his Finnish nationality made him an acceptable compromise for all: neither too close to the Franco-German axis, nor subservient to the British, and possessing substantial international experience acquired during multiple peacekeeping missions.

The integration of national armed forces into the ECDA was a chaotic and uneven process. The fifteen EU member states of the time reacted differently to the urgency of the situation:

The Major Military Powers quickly accepted the unified command structure, but with ulterior motives. France transferred its regional headquarters to the ECDA while secretly maintaining control of its nuclear strike force Hägglund would only learn much later that launch codes remained in Paris. The United Kingdom, traumatized by Southampton's rapid fall to Xen incursions, formally ceded its territorial commands but jealously kept control of the Royal Navy. Germany, whose Panzergrenadiers formed the backbone of the ECDA's ground forces, demanded and obtained that its generals occupy key positions within the new command.

Medium Nations like Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands adopted a pragmatic approach. Their general staffs were gradually integrated into the ECDA structure, their senior officers accepting subordinate positions in exchange for protection guarantees for their national territories. Italy, whose north was already compromised by Alpine incursions, had little choice. Spain fiercely

negotiated the maintenance of its operational autonomy in the Iberian Peninsula, de facto creating a semi-independent command zone.

Small Nations and Nordic Countries Denmark, Belgium, Luxembourg, Austria, Portugal, Ireland, Finland, and Sweden merged their forces almost immediately with the ECDA. Some, like Luxembourg, simply lacked the capacity to resist alone. Others, like Finland, saw in this integration a chance for disproportionate influence thanks to Hägglund's position. Greece, geographically isolated and facing heavy incursions in the Balkans, was the last country to join the ECDA. However, in 2003, it faced a major catastrophe with the massive portal storm known as **“the Wild Hunt.”** Already weakened by areas under enemy control, the country was brought to ruin. Nevertheless, Greek refugees were resettled across the **SSZs**, fostering greater cultural diversity throughout these zones.

The "Framework Nation" model was quickly adopted: the United Kingdom and France provided projection capabilities and naval command, Germany provided armored forces, while smaller nations contributed specialized units the Dutch excelled in amphibious warfare, the Finns in contaminated zone operations, and the Spanish in urban guerrilla warfare.

The Vortigaunts: Persecution and Exile

Following their appearance in Europe after the Black Mesa incident, Vortigaunts were deliberately reviled by human populations. Despite some evidence of their sentience, widespread fear and xenophobia led to organized hunts against these creatures. Vortigaunts became heavily persecuted and were driven into extreme exile, forced to hide in remote areas to avoid human extermination efforts. Most European governments either actively participated in or deliberately ignored these persecution campaigns, viewing the Vortigaunts as unwanted alien threats regardless of their apparent intelligence and peaceful nature.

The Fate of Non-European Union Nations

The situation of non-EU European countries was even more dramatic. Without the institutional infrastructure, even weakened, that had allowed the formation of the Oslo Council, these nations had to face the Xen catastrophe in complete isolation.

Norway, despite its role as host of the Defense Council, fiercely maintained its military independence. Its NATO membership now dysfunctional and its relatively protected geographical

position allowed it to negotiate a special status: Oslo provided infrastructure and logistics, but Norwegian Armed Forces remained under national command. This exception created constant tensions with Hägglund, who saw in this "semi-cooperation" a dangerous precedent.

Switzerland made its mountains and bunkers into a citadel, cut off from the outside world after the Saint-Bernard Tragedy. Behind destroyed borders and mined passes, the Confederation survived in total isolation thanks to the Swiss Civil Protection System, which imposed strict order: rationing, underground agriculture, and rotation between surface life and underground shelter.

Despite this confinement, the country preserved its singular identity: elections continued to be held, sometimes in fortified halls, maintaining the fragile illusion of a living democracy at the heart of a collapsed world. Every citizen, enrolled in the militia and collective discipline logic, became simultaneously soldier, worker, and guardian of national survival.

Thus, Switzerland achieved this paradox: remaining a functioning democracy while living under an iron regime, protected by an implacable organization that made it a bastion of freedom... but a freedom confined in the depths of its shelters.

The Balkans plunged into absolute chaos. Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Albania already weakened by the 1990s wars were overwhelmed by Xen incursions. Without modern military infrastructure and with weak governments, these nations imploded within weeks. Warlords emerged, controlling small fortified territories. Some made deals with the ECDA in exchange for protection, becoming de facto vassal states. Others sank into barbarism, even using captured Xen fauna as weapons against rivals. The region became what ECDA military called "the Gray Zone" neither controlled nor abandoned, but in perpetual war.

Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, caught between Western Europe and Russia, desperately tried to play both sides. Ukraine proposed its ECDA membership in exchange for protection against incursions from the east, but Hägglund refused, judging the country "indefensible" and fearing to irritate Moscow. Belarus turned to Russia, which de facto annexed it under the pretext of "fraternal protection." Moldova, abandoned by all, simply ceased to exist as a functional state in autumn 2001.

Iceland knew a particular destiny. Relatively spared from portal storms thanks to its geographical isolation, the small island nation became a refuge for European elites fleeing the continent. Scientists, artists, politicians, and wealthy industrialists flocked to Reykjavik, transforming the island into a sort of cultural Noah's ark. The ECDA established secondary command installations and research centers on Xen phenomena there. Hägglund himself made several stays there, fueling rumors that he was preparing a "government in exile" in case the continent was lost.

First Victories and Power Consolidation

The first weeks under Hägglund's unified command were marked by relative successes that considerably strengthened his position. The ECDA managed to establish security perimeters around major urban zones still intact, evacuate civilians from emerging XMZs, and coordinate surveillance efforts via the Global Rift Monitoring Network.

The most notable operation was the "Battle of Lyon" in June 2001, where a combined Franco-German force repelled a massive incursion of Xen creatures threatening to engulf the city. The victory was presented by ECDA propaganda as proof that European unity could triumph over the extraterrestrial threat. Medals were distributed, monuments erected, and Hägglund was hailed as the "Savior of Europe" by media now under military control.

This victory, however, masked a darker reality. Civilian losses had been catastrophic it was estimated that nearly 40% of Lyon's population had perished. And the city itself had become uninhabitable, contaminated by Xen spores that resisted all decontamination efforts. Lyon was finally abandoned and declared XMZ-12 "Purple Valley" in August 2001.

Fractures Within the Command

Despite the apparent unity of the ECDA, deep tensions undermined the command structure. National generals, accustomed to operational autonomy, poorly tolerated the centralization imposed by Hägglund. French General Bertrand Ract-Madoux, commander of ground forces, regularly opposed the Finn's strategies, which he judged "too defensive." British Marshal Sir Timothy Granville-Chapman openly criticized the "waste of resources" in defending Eastern Europe, suggesting a strategic retreat to an "anti-Xen Maginot Line" running from Calais to Marseille.

These divisions erupted during the "Prague Crisis" in October 2001. The Czech capital, surrounded by Xen incursions, desperately requested reinforcements. Hägglund ordered a major rescue operation, mobilizing German, Polish, and Austrian units. But the British and a faction of the French general staff refused to participate, arguing that resources would be better employed defending Paris and London. The operation took place nonetheless, but failed Prague fell, and nearly 15,000 ECDA soldiers were lost in the debacle.

Hägglund used this failure to purge his opponents. Accusing the "nationalists" of having sabotaged the operation through their inaction, he dismissed several recalcitrant generals and replaced them with loyal officers. General Ract-Madoux was "promoted" to an administrative position in Reykjavik a golden exile but effective sidelining. Sir Granville-Chapman resigned in protest and was immediately arrested for "wartime desertion." He would spend the following years in detention at a Norwegian military base.

This purge marked a turning point. National general staffs, witnessing the fate reserved for those who defied the Supreme Commander, submitted. The ECDA command structure became de facto a military dictatorship, where Hägglund's decisions were executed without discussion.

The Authoritarian Drift

But it was during the summer of 2001, as portal storms intensified and new XMZs appeared in Eastern Europe, that Hägglund began to extend his authority beyond his initial mandate.

The turning point came in September 2001. Officially to "ensure the security of Council deliberations," Hägglund deployed ECDA units around the buildings where civilian representatives sat. These soldiers, presented as an "honor guard," were actually a control force. The Council's communications with national capitals were gradually filtered through military command. Strategic decisions, once debated and voted on, became simple ratifications of directives issued by the ECDA general staff.

The General justified this centralization by the necessity of reactivity against Xen threats. And he wasn't entirely wrong: parliamentary deliberations, even in crisis times, couldn't keep pace with incursions. But what had begun as a temporary emergency measure transformed into permanent governance.

By the end of 2001, the Oslo Defense Council was nothing more than a facade. Civilian representatives signed orders they didn't always understand, under constant surveillance by ECDA officers. Hägglund, now called "European Supreme Commander," concentrated in his hands power that far exceeded what any European leader had possessed for generations.

The Precarious Stability of Controlled Zones

Despite this authoritarian drift, the ECDA managed to maintain a form of stability in territories under its control. "Secured Settlement Zones" (SSZs) were established around major metropolises still intact: Paris, London, Berlin, Stockholm, Madrid. These zones, heavily fortified, offered relative protection against Xen incursions and allowed the maintenance of minimal civilian life.

Xen flora was systematically burned or uprooted within several kilometers around each SSZ. Perimeter walls were erected first temporary barriers, then permanent reinforced concrete structures. Constant patrols monitored perimeters, while scientific teams studied means to counter the rapid growth of extraterrestrial vegetation.

Life in these zones was far from normal. Rationing was widespread, civil liberties drastically reduced, and permanent martial law in effect. But for many, it was preferable to the alternative: wild zones infested with Xen creatures, where Earth's laws of physics seemed no longer to apply.

Nationalist Tensions

A major problem quickly emerged within SSZs: the national question. While the ECDA officially promoted European unity against the extraterrestrial threat, populations remained deeply attached to their national identities. Refugees flowing from compromised zones were often poorly received, perceived as additional mouths to feed in a context of growing shortage.

The French reproached the British for their "insular selfishness," while the latter accused continentals of mismanagement. Germans, traumatized by Munich's rapid fall to Xen incursions, developed a collective paranoia toward anything from the East. Central and Eastern European nations, whose territories had been most devastated, felt abandoned by the "privileged" West.

Hägglund attempted to contain these tensions by imposing an ideology of "collective survival" the idea that old national divisions were obsolete in the face of an existential threat. The ECDA was presented as a trans-national force, with units deliberately composed of soldiers of different nationalities. National flags were gradually replaced by the ECDA emblem a stylized shield surrounding the stars of the former European flag.

But these efforts remained superficial. In barracks, soldiers grouped by linguistic affinities. In SSZs, informal ghettos formed along ethnic lines. And when resources became particularly scarce, tensions erupted in open violence riots, looting, and sometimes even armed clashes between communities.

The Yellowstone Collapse (2002)

In August 2002, Europe received the first seismic alerts from North America, followed hours later by satellite images showing the unthinkable: the Yellowstone supervolcano had collapsed upon itself in an apocalyptic explosion. An F7 Portal Storm, dubbed "Kaboom" by terrified observers, had torn through the volcano's depths, triggering an eruption of unimaginable violence. The explosion was so colossal that it annihilated half of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming within minutes, creating a titanic crater visible from space. European seismic sensors recorded tremors comparable to a magnitude 9 earthquake, and atmospheric shock waves circled the planet three times. But the worst was yet to come. In the days following the eruption, European skies began to darken. Billions of tons of volcanic aerosols were propelled into the stratosphere, forming a planetary veil that blocked a significant portion of sunlight. General Hägglund urgently convened ECDA scientific advisors, who confirmed catastrophic predictions: an artificial ice age was inevitable and would last at minimum two years. European temperatures began to plummet as early as September 2002. The ECDA immediately declared maximum climate emergency status, launching Operation "Winter Refuge" a continental survival plan involving accelerated construction of thermal shelters, requisition of all fuel reserves, and massive conversion of buildings into heated greenhouses. Civilian populations were ordered to regroup in SSZ urban centers where collective heating was

possible. Paradoxically, the Portal Storms themselves had absorbed a considerable portion of the explosion scientists estimated that without the F7 "Kaboom's" interference, the eruption could have been even more devastating. Nevertheless, the approaching winter of 2002-2003 promised to be the deadliest humanity had known in millennia, and the ECDA was preparing to fight on two fronts: Xen incursions and the mortal cold of a world plunged into volcanic darkness.

The Wild Hunt and the Greek Catastrophe (2003)

In March 2003, while Europe was already battling the volcanic winter, the sky above Athens tore apart in a cataclysm of unprecedented magnitude. The Wild Hunt, classified F10 the highest category ever recorded materialized in a roar that was heard as far as Italy. Unlike previous Portal Storms that dissipated after hours or days, this one persisted, transforming into a permanent wound in reality. Its mere appearance was terrifying: a titanic maelstrom of purple and black, streaked with violet lightning, from which emerged what appeared to be spectral silhouettes riding deformed mounts hence its name inspired by the mythological legend of the Wild Hunt. Television images of this cosmic abomination triggered a wave of panic across all of Europe. General Hägglund immediately made the decision to abandon all of continental Greece, ordering an emergency evacuation toward the Aegean islands and Crete. ECDA units conducted desperate delaying actions, sacrificing entire regiments to allow civilians to flee. Command established the "Purple Curtain," a quarantine line extending from southern Albania to western Turkey, mobilizing three complete divisions and tens of thousands of soldiers. Reports from the first weeks were nightmarish: entities emerging from the Wild Hunt were not the usual Xen creatures, but shifting forms, spectral echoes, and phenomena defying all physical logic. In six months, more than 40,000 ECDA soldiers disappeared in the contaminated zone. The Wild Hunt didn't merely pour out creatures it transformed space itself, creating zones where time flowed differently, where gravity fluctuated, where the dead seemed to walk alongside the living. For the first time, ECDA command realized with horror that they weren't just fighting an invasion, but a permanent existential anomaly.

Winter Lifts, But Darkness Remains (Approaching 2004)

As 2004 approached, Europe slowly emerged from the ice age triggered by Yellowstone. The veil of volcanic ash was finally beginning to dissipate, allowing the sun to pierce through the grayish haze for the first time in two years. Temperatures were gradually rising, but the damage was irreversible: two consecutive years without viable harvests had decimated food reserves, and famine had killed as many as Xen incursions. The ECDA, drained after mobilizing 40% of its

personnel to keep populations alive during the endless winter, struggled to catch its breath.

In this context of general exhaustion, a strange lull manifested in Xen incursions across the continent but only *outside* of Greece. Portal Storms, once omnipresent, were becoming less frequent. Xen fauna, once aggressive and coordinated, now seemed erratic, almost disorganized. Vortigaunts, those humanoid creatures that had terrorized the early years, had practically disappeared from controlled zones some reports suggested they had taken refuge in remote areas, avoiding all contact with humanity.

But this lull was only a cruel illusion. To the south, the Wild Hunt continued to howl above Athens' ruins, as fierce as on day one. The Purple Curtain, that 200-kilometer quarantine line, still swallowed soldiers by the hundreds every week. The three divisions mobilized there were now ghost units, constantly reconstituted with new recruits to replace the disappeared. General Hägglund no longer spoke of "reconquering" Greece he spoke simply of "containing the abomination" for as long as possible.

The ECDA took advantage of the relative respite in the rest of Europe to attempt rebuilding what could be rebuilt. Existing security perimeters were consolidated, but no new SSZs were established resources were desperately lacking. Hägglund, now nicknamed "the Keeper of Ruins" by his detractors, launched salvage operations in certain abandoned zones, desperately searching for food stocks and equipment. The "restoration of European civilization" he had dreamed of had transformed into a daily struggle to simply keep survivors alive.

It was then that fragmentary reports began reaching the most advanced outposts troubling observations that corresponded to nothing known. Bipedal silhouettes in smooth armor, moving with mechanical precision near active rift zones. Tower-shaped structures appeared and disappeared within minutes, leaving behind burned craters. Surveillance equipment mysteriously ceased functioning, and entire patrols disappeared without a trace.

Within ECDA command, certain intelligence officers began formulating disturbing hypotheses: what if the Xen creatures had been only the vanguard? What if something else, something far more formidable, had been observing Earth from the beginning? What if this apparent respite was merely the calm before a storm of yet unseen magnitude?

Hägglund systematically suppressed these reports, classifying them as "unconfirmed speculation." He didn't want to alarm a population already on the brink of breaking, a Europe that had barely survived an apocalyptic winter and was still bleeding against the Wild Hunt. But in the secrecy of his office, late at night, the Supreme Commander studied these reports with growing concern. The pieces of a nightmarish puzzle were beginning to assemble.

Europe had survived Black Mesa. It had survived the four disasters. It had survived Yellowstone and its endless winter. It was surviving, barely, the Wild Hunt.

But for how much longer?

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