

The Zurich speech

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After the Conservatives' defeat in the 1945 British elections, Winston Churchill, former Prime Minister and hero of the war that had just ended, turned into a keen supporter of Franco-German reconciliation. As leader of the Opposition, he made a united Europe his principal foreign policy objective. On several occasions during his visits to Europe and America, he expressed his views on the future of Europe. On 19 September 1946, at the University of Zurich, he gave a speech on European unity that caused a sensation. Churchill was actually the first eminent politician to take sides in a debate that until then had been the rather introverted battleground of a few activists. Momentarily free from any electoral constraints, Churchill aimed his speech specifically at the world leaders.

In his speech, Churchill rehearsed well-worn arguments, but this time he gave them an unprecedented impact. By advocating Franco-German rapprochement and proposing 'a kind of United States of Europe' (but without the involvement of Great Britain), Churchill set the scene for a future federation of non-Communist Western European nations. He declared himself in favour of a European third way, which might find its niche between the USA and the USSR. He also advocated the creation of a Council of Europe.

Winston Churchill's Zurich speech may be deemed to be the true starting point for the tide of opinion in favour of a united post-war Europe. Indeed, at the same time, several militant associations were being formed across Europe, and they directly benefited from the impact of the Zurich speech to emerge from their media isolation.