

'The prophet of Zurich' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (20 September 1996)

Caption: Fifty years after the address given by Winston Churchill, former British Prime Minister, at the University of Zurich on 19 September 1946, the German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung analyses the repercussions of Churchill's vision of the future of Europe.

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The prophet of Zürich

by Josef Joffe

A ‘German-French partnership’, the ‘United States of Europe’, this was what he called for exactly 50 years ago in Zürich. And who was this? Jean Monnet? Konrad Adenauer? No, it was the British statesman Winston Churchill, the wartime Premier, who embodied the classic attitude of Albion: if necessary, go it alone against all-comers, in any event oppose the Euro-tyrant of the day, whether he be called Philip, Napoleon or Adolf. Suddenly, there he was, standing at the University of Zürich, only 16 months after the most terrible bloodbath in history, and preaching reconciliation with the Germans and the desirability of uniting all Europeans.

That this vision would ever become even a partial reality was something that no one could imagine in those days in 1946 — when Europe lay literally in ruins and Germany was the most hated country on earth. If we look behind the daily routine of quarrels about the single currency, subsidies for VW or regulations about bananas in 1996, we see a situation where no more wars have been waged between the states of Europe for 50 years, where, previously, peace had, for centuries, been a mere pause between two armed encounters.

France and Germany, the traditional arch enemies? When Churchill spoke of ‘partnership’ in 1946, he was rewarded with rage and remonstrance from France. And what about today? The ‘Boche’ and the ‘Frog’ have entered into a ‘marriage’ and are riding ‘a bicycle made for two’. We can fly from Munich to Nice without having to show a passport, we are establishing a joint army to be known as the Euro-corps, indeed we even like each other, or so the opinion polls keep on telling us.

The ‘United States of Europe’? First the good news. Even in those early days, the eagle-eyed Churchill had realised that an ice age was beginning to settle over Europe to the east of the ‘Iron Curtain’ (a term coined by him), and he therefore referred to those in the ‘European family’ who were not yet able to join the ‘Union’. Now, even this miracle has almost become a reality. Germany is unified, and the Central and Eastern Europeans would really have preferred to join the EU yesterday rather than tomorrow.

So what is the bad news? We have a common market, we have the beginnings of Community-wide policies everywhere, but there will be no ‘United States of Europe’ in our lifetime. The exuberance of the 1940s has long since disappeared, the people are enjoying the advantages, but they have not transferred their loyalties from Paris, Bonn and Rome to Brussels or Strasbourg. The ‘USE’ faces the same fate as the Euro-passport: the same colour everywhere, but it is the symbol of national sovereignty that is emblazoned on the burgundy background.

This is why Federal President Herzog was not quite right when he stated at the conference of historians in Munich that, ‘at the end of this century’, we are now in the process of ‘overcoming the form of the nation state’, that the nation state was ‘taking its leave’, having ‘outlived its usefulness’. It is not necessary to be a full-blown nationalist to recognise simply by looking around that the mature nation state that came into being 500 years ago is really still in pretty good health.

Of course, its limits have been penetrated at many different points. It can no longer determine its own exchange rates, or take independent, sovereign initiatives in its economic and defence policies. Only, we should remember: alliances had to be concluded by states even as long ago as the time of Sparta; exchange rates and interest rates were no longer the province of the individual state alone, when the gold standard applied in the 19th century. The fact that the individual sovereign state can tackle some tasks only in conjunction with other states is, firstly, not new and, secondly, no proof of its demise.

On the contrary, the modern nation state is blooming and flourishing, and it is stronger today than ever. If we take as an example the incessant growth of state expenditure during this century — it has now expanded to over 50 % of gross domestic product in Germany. That means, however, that the nation state has assumed more and more functions, that it controls and regulates to an increasing extent and that it forces its citizens, and, in fact, its neighbours as well, to recognise more and more that all roads lead to Rome: — that is, to the

capital city. An institution that has so much to do and to distribute is not a dwarf but a monster.

The nation itself (or what regards itself as a nation) is equally unprepared for abdication; in most recent times it is — on the contrary — making noisy and bloody attempts to claw back what was taken away from it during the Cold War: witness the Balkans, Chechnya, Northern Ireland, Kurdistan. If the nation state had really lost its role, new ones would not be created every day. After the end of the war, around 50 of them joined forces to create the United Nations; that number will soon be 200.

Yet the Churchillian vision has actually worked out well, in Europe at least. The evil aspects that accompanied the nation state, arrogant and bloodthirsty nationalism, have really outlived their time on this side of the Balkans. Can anyone really imagine that Germans and French will ever again lay into each other with songs of hatred on their lips? No, and that is the actual miracle that Churchill was only praying would come into being when he spoke in Zürich and that, since then, has become so firmly implanted in our minds that we are not even conscious of it any more. This is why the wannabe seducers of the new right, who spread whispers of ‘identity’, ‘fatherland’ and ‘national pride’, are hardly noticed. The nation state is functioning, but nationalism is like yesterday’s newspaper: read and discarded. *It is of this* that Germans and Europeans can be proud.