

'Rescuing Europe from chaos' from Le Carrefour (23 July 1947)

Caption: On 23 July 1947, in an article published in the French daily newspaper Le Carrefour, Anthony Eden, British Prime Minister, analyses the outcome of the Conference on European Economic Cooperation held in Paris on 12 July 1947.

Source: Le Carrefour. 23.07.1947. [s.l.]. "Pour tirer l'Europe du chaos", auteur:Eden, Anthony , p. 1;2.

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Rescuing Europe from chaos

by Anthony Eden

There is not a single man of sense in Western Europe who wants to see our continent divided into two. It is precisely because of the repugnance which we feel towards such a solution that the Western powers have delayed so long in concluding an agreement among themselves. Yet that repugnance was quite understandable. It is difficult to admit, in an age when the interdependence of nations is constantly increasing, that the policy that we have to pursue should be based on the division of a continent. However, there is a peril even more threatening than the division of Europe, and that is its economic collapse. We were heading directly towards that collapse when Mr Marshall threw us his lifeline.

Foreigners have always regarded Russia as an in many ways unfathomable entity, and it is true that certain aspects of the Soviet Union's current policy are difficult to understand on grounds of national interest alone.

The Soviet Union's need for aid is unquestionable: all those who have seen the devastation of its territory caused by the brutal German invader are in no doubt about that. Nor is there any doubt about the fact that, if the Soviet Union were to agree to play a constructive role in the recovery of the world economy, which is in such a sorry state at the present time, its contribution would be of great value. The resources of the Soviet Union are immense, even though they have, hitherto, been exploited only in part.

Moreover, its citizens' capacity for endurance is truly phenomenal. That is why, if the Kremlin decides that they must go on enduring privations in order to attain political objectives, they will endure them.

What is more, we must never forget that Soviet economic cooperation with the capitalist world is possible only if contacts between the two parties are increased and if they help one another to gain a better understanding of their respective ways of life. It is there, I believe, that we should look for the key to the Soviet refusal.

The standard of living in the Soviet Union is so much lower than in the Western world, despite the devastation and dislocation suffered by the latter as a result of the war, that it is difficult for a Russian, unless he is the most fanatical of Communists, to observe this contrast without questioning the infallibility of his own system.

It would be unfair to blame the current leaders of Soviet Russia for the fact that the material standard of living that prevails in their country is so much lower. To tell the truth, there was a time when the wisest among them fully realised, as they were carrying out their revolutionary experiment, that their country was at least one generation behind Western Europe. Since then, German depredations on Russian soil have delayed the country's progress.

The mistake which the Soviet leaders have made lies in the extent to which their propaganda has thought fit to belittle the achievements of the capitalist world. Even now, they constantly maintain that it is doomed to failure. All these false arguments make the psychological chaos caused by the contrast between propaganda and reality even more severe. That is not all, however. Political contacts, in the broadest sense of the term, also give rise to problems of their own.

Soviet Russia has never enjoyed freedom in the way that Western nations understand the word. Under the current regime, where the activities of the State police are known only too well, it is doubtful whether its citizens can even imagine what such a word means.

Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to criticise, and the free play of parliamentary government — all these are concepts of which the Russian Communist mind is now completely ignorant.

Let me to take as an example our parliamentary institutions. No citizen in the Russia of 1947 can possibly understand the significance of a parliamentary debate and of a majority decision taken after a free vote. I

remember seeing, one day in Moscow, the room in which, so I was told at the time, the Supreme Soviet was accustomed to meet. The room was beautifully proportioned, but it was more than anything else a vast theatre where the audience listened to speeches delivered from the stage.

The fact that Mr Stalin and Mr Molotov and other leading figures in the Soviet Union occasionally sat among the audience was confided to me in tones of admiration and was evidently interpreted as a highly democratic innovation.

Of course, it is not possible for any Soviet leader to hear such an assembly mete out to him anything other than praise. It may happen that these gentlemen become bored after a time, but at least there is no risk of their ever being offended. The words 'parliament', 'opposition' or 'two-party system' are meaningless to them.

The Communist belief is the object of religious fervour, and the Communist system does not allow the existence of two points of view. Such a fervent belief is not an error in itself. What is an error is the fact that that belief is utterly intolerant and refuses to admit that there is any merit in a belief shared by other peoples. That is a dogma of the Communist credo.

Unless there can be continuous contact between the supporters of the two ideologies, this tendency to exaggerate each party's traditional conceptions can only deepen their differences of opinion and, consequently, increase the tension between the two sides.

Our ultimate objective is to enable both East and West to make a full contribution, using their respective talents and resources, towards solving modern problems. However, as long as the critical isolation in which Russia insists on remaining is combined with its invariable intransigence, it will not be possible for us, the countries of the West, to cooperate freely and effectively with her.

That is why, even though the existence of a demarcation line between East and West is deplorable, we shall have to resign ourselves to it for the time being.

The meetings which took place in Paris showed how far the Western powers are prepared to go in leaving the door open to Russia. However, those powers now have a much more urgent duty to perform. They must press ahead in pursuing their policy of cooperation with the other countries who agree to help them, and, together with those countries, they must implement a plan in response to Mr Marshall's historic offer. It was vital that the response to that offer should not be delayed. The European economic situation is much too serious to allow any new hesitations and never-ending discussions.

The rapidity with which such action was taken in Paris proves that the representatives of Western Europe are fully aware of their responsibilities.

Foremost among the problems confronting the wisdom of our governments is the situation in Germany. At Potsdam, it was proposed that, in principle, Germany should be treated as an economic entity. If the attitude of the Soviet Union had made it possible to give full force to that decision in a spirit of true cooperation, the outcome would have been much better for everyone.

Unfortunately, the Soviet Union has never shown the slightest inclination to turn either the spirit or the letter of that agreement into a reality. Its representatives have always been quick to invoke it whenever they have been able to profit from it, but, whenever they have been asked for a contribution, they have repeatedly ignored it.

The result of all this has been a considerable waste of time and the imminent economic collapse of Germany, the main burden of which will fall upon the United States and Britain.

That is why it is perfectly clear that, in any agreement that may be reached on the Marshall proposals in order to assist in the recovery of Europe, Germany, or at least the three Western zones, cannot be excluded.

The coal mines of the Ruhr form the heart of the European economy and, together with other branches of German industry, must be given the opportunity of playing their part in the task of reconstruction. It would be pointless to pretend that the decision to include the Western zones of Germany in the European economic order will not have any political consequences, but we must face up to that decision.

As Mr Bidault wisely pointed out at the Conference in Paris last week, ‘the resources of Germany must be used by a Europe which includes Germany itself’, and also, ‘the whole of Europe is not present, but those who are here have the right to speak in Europe’s name and to act on its behalf.’

What we are no longer able to tolerate is the fact that it has to be the United States of America and Great Britain who are, in practice, paying reparations to Germany, while the Soviet Union is extracting reparations for itself from that same Germany.

The immediate task of this Conference is, therefore, to establish a plan in response to Mr Marshall’s offer and to create an organisation which is capable of assessing the total resources and needs of Europe, and to do all this rapidly.

It would certainly be unreasonable to underestimate the difficulty of this task, but, despite its difficulty, this task, which marks a turning point in history, must not be allowed to fail.

This is already a reality from the viewpoint of the Western nations themselves. If they can reach an agreement, they will have taken the essential first steps towards the recovery of Europe and will also, I am convinced of it, have proved that they are capable of recovering by their own efforts and will not simply wait for assistance from outside.

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