

Memorandum of Robert Boothby on a Western Union (Spring 1948)

Caption: In spring 1948, Robert Boothby, a former colleague of Winston Churchill, Scottish Conservative MP and leader, with his Labour colleague, Ronald Mackay, of a pro-European All-Party Group in the House of Commons, drafts a proposal for a Western European Union which takes into account, in particular, the fact that the United Kingdom is an imperial power and the economic and political situation in Germany.

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Memorandum on United Europe

Events are now moving with such rapidity as to impose on those movements and organizations which advocate the ideal of European unity the necessity of giving more concrete form to their proposals, if they are to continue to arouse and attract public interest. It is important to emphasize the fact that effective practical action can only be taken by responsible Governments. But we must, I think, be in a position to suggest the broad lines along which we should now endeavour to advance; and to answer at least some of the many questions that will inevitably be put to us.

I suggest that we should begin with a very brief historical survey; follow it up with a bald statement of the alternatives which now confront Europe; and conclude with a summary of the practical steps which should, in our opinion, be taken. And I have accordingly divided this memorandum into three main parts, under these heads.

I. HISTORICAL

During the twentieth century Europe has gone back as far as she advanced in the nineteenth. The age of steam was accompanied by extensive political consolidation and economic integration, e.g. the creation and development of the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Kingdom of Italy. The age of oil and air should logically have been accompanied by a continuation and extension of this process in Eastern and Western Europe, culminating in the political federation and economic integration of the whole. It was not so accompanied. On the contrary it witnessed a progressive political disruption and economic disintegration. The Treaty of Versailles, following the first abortive German attempt to impose integration upon Europe by force, set the seal of allied approval on this process; and paved the way for a second attempt. A number of small separate sovereign Nation-States - Poland, Austria, Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary - were brought into existence, which made no sense either from a political or an economic point of view. Finally, the Grand Alliance was itself dissolved. The free nations were indoctrinated with the principles of disarmament, of isolation, and of secession - all in the name of self-determination"; and chloroformed themselves with what Litvinov called "the new narcotic, neutrality" As a result, the disarmed, disunified, and isolated Democracies were thrown into utter moral confusion when those negative principles, which had been proclaimed the only moral principles, were invoked against them in the Rhineland, in Austria, and at Munich. The second German attempt to impose Integration by force came much nearer to success. A third, by Russia will inevitably succeed, unless we can find, and apply, a new set of positive principles in time.

The argument is even stronger on the economic than on the political side. The conditions which gave rise to the contemporary Nation-States of Europe no longer exist. The era of cheap food, empty spaces, and free migration is over. The era of mass production has arrived. The primary producer has at last come into his own. Throughout Western Europe, imports have steadily overtaken exports. Trade in manufactures has as steadily fallen. Britain used to have two-fifths of the world's trade in manufactured goods. She has to-day one-fifth of a much smaller volume. Mass production involves planned production and trade, within large areas. Europe has neither the one nor the other. She has altogether failed to keep pace with modern scientific and industrial progress. Not one single European country to-day is, by itself, an effective political or economic unit.

Political and economic power has, in consequence, passed to the USA and the USSR. Europe has become a power vacuum, instead of a balancing force between these two contending leviathans - one half enslaved, the other ruined. Yet there are 250 million of the most civilized and intelligent people in the world in the sixteen "Marshall" countries alone, with a productive potential as great as that of the United States. Unless this potential is brought within striking distance of realization, there can be no hope of preventing the total collapse of Western Europe, of arresting the Communist advance, or of restoring any kind of equilibrium between the New World and the Old.

II. THE ALTERNATIVES

The breakdown of the international political order, accompanied by the development of industrial economies of world-wide scope, has produced a crisis for Western civilization; and also a renewal of the attempt to impose integration upon the Continent of Europe by force. I don't think we can any longer advocate democratic European unity without facing up to the fact that Communism has developed, during the past two years, into a world-wide conspiracy for the capture of monopolistic power. This is an attempt at world conquest no less formidable than that of Hitler. For Pan-Germanism there has been substituted Pan-Slavism. For the mystique of Nazism, the mystique of totalitarian Communism. The object and method are identical. The establishment of bureaucratic absolutism through terror. To a point which, a year ago, it seemed reasonable to hope might be avoided, the campaign for European unity has become a campaign against Communism. In half Europe the values of Western civilisation are being systematically destroyed. Behind the Stettin-Trieste line the Russian power is absolute. As Mr. Voight has pointed out: "All these countries are severally and collectively a means to her ends - not one of them can live for itself", no one person in them can live for himself, or for his country, or for Europe, for mankind, for science, art, or religion, but only for Russia. And yet, save for a few zealots, there are none who wish to live for Russia - ninety-nine out of a hundred at least have the wish that the Russians may leave Europe, never to return". Czecho-Slovakia is next on the list. And, after that, Germany. For, unless and until Russia succeeds in uniting the whole of Germany under a totalitarian Communist regime controlled from Moscow, she cannot be master of the entire European Continent.

Two alternatives confront the Kremlin. To continue the well-planned campaign of aggression against which the Western Democracies have so far lurched, in impotent isolation and sustained futility; or to recoil. Two alternatives confront the Western Democracies. Economic strangulation, followed by absorption into the suffocating totalitarian unity of the Communist Empire. Or the creation in Western Europe and her Colonial Dependencies of a strategic area powerful enough to resist – with initial American support – further Soviet aggression; and of a trading area large enough to enable its component parts to breathe and live. We can no longer blind ourselves to the fact that we are inextricably involved in a terrific struggle for world power. With or without a third World War, it will be decided – and in our time. The ultimate result will be a Democratic World Order or a Communist World Order. Freedom or slavery for the human race.

III. THE PRACTICAL STEPS

There is no need to become involved, at this stage, in theoretical discussions about federation. We want the maximum support. At the same time it is idle to suppose that you can have effective economic integration without the sanction of sovereign political power, in one form or another; or that you can have it without abandoning the nineteenth-century conceptions of "laissez faire" and free multilateral trade, and accepting the necessity of planned production and planned trade. Equally, it is idle to suppose that we can all plunge simultaneously into a complete Customs Union. The European economy is far too complicated for that.

Effective strategic co-operation can be achieved overnight - and should be. That the strategic interdependence of the nations of Western Europe is absolute has been proved by two frightful wars in a single generation. But political unification and economic integration can be achieved only in stages. We must build on solid foundations, from the bottom upwards. There is no other way.

This involves discrimination, at least in the first phase. A revival of the Sterling Area and the dollar pool. Reciprocal trade agreements in terms of goods. Payment agreements, which in themselves provide the finance for international trade. And preferential customs duties. All of which run counter to the policy hitherto pursued by the United States. But there is good reason to suppose that a marked change has recently taken place in the attitude of the State Department. They are beginning to realize that what they have to fear is not European competition, but European collapse. The Marshall Plan is, after all, designed to save Europe not to sink it; and there are no strings attached to it. Mr. Marshall has repeatedly said that the fundamental objective of the Plan is the achievement of Western European unity; and in this he has been supported by the overwhelming mass of American public opinion. If it can be shown to the Americans that the doctrine of non-discrimination is a fatal impediment to progress in this direction, they are bound to accept a measure of discrimination. In a recent speech Mr. John McCloy, President of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, urged the countries of Western Europe to take immediate steps towards the achievement

of a Customs Union. This can only mean preferential duties.

When we come to the deliberate planning of production and trade, we are on trickier ground. Nevertheless, until the heavy industries of the Ruhr, of Belgium, of Luxembourg and Lorraine are rationalized and co-ordinated under the supreme direction of an International Authority, we cannot hope to make Western Europe an economic unit capable of standing up against the Soviet Union or the United States in the modern world. Nor is there much sense in talking about economic integration if, for example, France and ourselves embark upon cut-throat competition to capture foreign markets for the export of motor-cars. There must be some direction and co-ordination of output, if any valuable results are to be achieved. In other words, an over-all planning of production.

So far as trade is concerned, we have to face the fact that there is little hope of any substantial exchange of goods between Eastern and Western Europe except by means of trade agreements negotiated directly between the Governments concerned. I can see no possibility, short of a bloody revolution, of private enterprise being allowed to function freely within the confines of the closed Soviet economy. Yet there must be trade between East and West Europe, if either is to survive. The truth is that both multilateralism and bilateralism are obsolete. The future lies in the development, by means of Clearing Unions, of large trading areas; and the exchange of goods, by means of reciprocal trade agreements, between them.

I have posed these Issues with somewhat brutal frankness because, unless we can achieve a measure of agreement about them, we shall never get beyond a beneficant but vague approval of the conception of European unity. On the other hand, the acceptance by the principal democratic Parties of the necessity for some measure of discrimination, and some planning of production and trade, would render meaningless the divisions between them which certain people are so anxious to foster and aggravate. The alternative, as I see it, is to reduce the whole campaign for European unity from the level of democracy to the level of party - with disastrous results.

There remain two problems which must be touched upon before we come to concrete proposals - the problem of the British Empire, and the problem of Germany.

To the question "Can we enter a Western European Union and simultaneously maintain our ties with the Empire?", my answer is an emphatic "Yes". The two policies are, in essence, complimentary. For the Empire must have the markets of Europe, and Europe must have the markets of the Empire, if either are to regain a permanent and well-found prosperity. The task, not an easy one, is to graft the preference system of the one upon the other. It is not without significance that two of the most ardent advocates of a Western European unity, in which Britain shall take the leading part, have been Field-Marshal Smuts and Mr. Mackenzie King. We are apt to forget that the population of South Africa is half Dutch, and the population of Canada is half French. But the issue cuts deeper than the emotional satisfaction to which a closer association must inevitably give rise in these Dominions. The truth of the matter is that, by herself, Britain can no longer play the role towards the Dominions that she played in the nineteenth century, either as a provider of immigrants, or as a market, or as a protector. Although they are too kind and too tactful to say so, we have become, for them, a liability rather than an asset. The only way in which we can become, once again, a central bastion of security for the Dominions, and provide them, once again, with an outlet for their primary products, is by union with Western Europe.

The argument becomes even stronger when applied to the Colonial Empire. Two great areas, rich in natural resources and capable of immense development and expansion, remain - to an almost miraculous extent - under the control of Britain, France, Holland and Belgium. The East Indies, including Malaya, Indonesia, and Indo-China; and the Continent of Africa. The case for constructive federation, for regional councils in these areas designed to secure a common and dynamic approach to the vital questions of security, economic development and social welfare, in which the native populations shall participate, is overwhelming. The conclusion is inescapable. The most effective Imperial policy for Britain in the modern world is to become the acknowledged leader of a United Western Europe.

In that Union Germany must be included. Nothing can now restore her old political and economic unity. By

handing one fifth of this country, including a quarter of the total arable land, to Russia, the Potsdam Agreement destroyed it beyond diplomatic repair. "Bizonia" is no answer to the problem. It infuriates the Germans, to the vast majority of whom Frankfurt doesn't mean a thing; and at the same time it fills the French with apprehension. Thus we get the worst of both worlds. The only method by which Germany can be brought back, on equal terms, to the community of European nations, is political federation on the basis of the old States, accompanied by the creation of supra-national economic authorities. Those who advocate the political "unity" of Germany as such not only betray a continuing emotional subjection to the old spirit of virulent nationalism, but are in fact advocating a policy which would keep the Germans in permanent military occupation, poverty and enslavement. For no-one is prepared to run the risk of a second German war of revenge. The recovery of Germany, as of Western Europe, is more dependent on the forging of new economic links between the Hanseatic towns and the West, between the Ruhr, the Low Countries and France, than upon the re-establishment of old political ties between Hanover, the Rhineland, Wurtemberg and Bavaria.

All those issues have to be faced and decided, before any real progress can be made. Not until we have done so can we legitimately put forward a realistic plan, based on sound principles.

We cannot expect to achieve results which compare, in magnitude or speed, with those obtained under the ruthless direction of a master totalitarian Power. The penalty of democracy is that it is slow. I think we should limit ourselves, for the time being, to three main proposals.

1. The establishment of a Council of Western Europe, to lay down the broad lines of common action over the whole field.
2. The setting up of a permanent International General Staff, to co-ordinate defence.
3. The setting up of a permanent International Economic Staff, on the lines of SHAEF. This Staff would be the focal point for the co-ordination and integration of the Western European economy. Its first and most important tasks would be to frame concrete proposals for the stabilization of the currencies of the participating countries, for the development of trade between them, for the execution of the European Recovery Plan, for a comprehensive production Plan, and for Colonial development.

Both staffs would have to sit continuously; and both would act under the direction, and by the authority, of the Western European Council.

Beyond this I feel that we should not, at present, attempt to go. It is enough, in all conscience. If the proposals I have outlined were adopted, the foundations of union would have been laid.

Robert Boothby