

Note from Alexandre Marc on the objectives of the Hague Congress (April 1948)

Caption: In April 1948, Alexandre Marc, French Head of the Institutional Department of the Union of European Federalists (UEF), identifies the main objectives and focus of the Congress of Europe in The Hague, which he will attend in May as rapporteur of the Cultural Committee.

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Europe, our destiny

by Alexandre Marc

Without wishing to subscribe to the grand ideas presented by the promotional articles on the coming event, we are nevertheless hopeful that the Congress of Europe (due to be held from 7 to 10 May in The Hague) will mark a milestone in the history of our continent.

Several hundred Europeans from all backgrounds, all social classes, all faiths and almost all political parties (only one has so far abstained) will meet in The Hague to consider together the problem on which the survival or demise of Europe depend: the problem of European union.

Having long been considered merely as a utopian aspiration, and having long been the subject of publicity campaigns, European union is about to become a topical political issue. Although the agreement signed in Paris by the 16 nations is economic in nature, it would be futile to ignore the fact that — at the risk of its remaining a dead letter — the implications of the agreement tend towards the promotion of federal structures. In the House of Commons, a motion tabled by Ronald Mackay (Labour) and Bob Boothby (Conservative) concluding that a federalist European organisation was urgently needed received more than 150 signatures in just a few days. A similar motion was endorsed in the French National Assembly by a large number of MPs belonging to the French Federalist Group. Countless other steps are being taken along the same lines in other countries. The statesmen themselves, under the pressure of events, feel the need to react against paralysing routines and ossified traditions. If the general public, the great majority of whom do not show any opposition to the federalist idea, turns this passive acquiescence into active support, then the cornerstone of a European Federation could be laid, whether the sceptics like it or not, within a period of time that even the greatest optimists would not have dared to imagine just a few months ago.

The first objective that the Congress of Europe should seek to achieve is to reveal the state of public opinion to the public itself. If men as different from each other as Winston Churchill and Léon Jouhaux, Paul Ramadier and Paul van Zeeland or Ignazio Silone and Paul Reynaud address the Congress and state quite unequivocally their belief in Europe, this virtual unanimity will then have the effect of making a still-uncertain general public aware of its strength and its power. If Conservatives, Liberals and Socialists, Christians and non-believers, industrialists and trade unionists, technicians and academics — who are separated for so many reasons and are often in opposition at national level — can publicly express not merely ‘platonic’ but ‘active’ commitment to achieve unity, will not such convergence then prove that most of the problems that have become intractable because of supposed national sovereignty will have to be transferred to a supranational level with a view to coordination, solidarity and genuine union?

I note in passing that, although for several months it may have appeared doubtful that the Socialists would participate in the work of the Hague Congress, this is not due to underlying causes but rather to a series of misunderstandings. As the eminent and, admittedly, ebullient Mr Churchill had raised some misgivings within the Labour Party, this party said that it would not be represented officially at the Congress. This decision gave rise to misunderstanding; it is therefore important to know, firstly, that the International Coordination Committee (of which the signatory of these lines is a member), which is solely responsible for the Congress of Europe, has on no occasion invited to The Hague any political party as such; and, secondly, that many Labour supporters (approximately 50, including 30 MPs) will participate, under the same conditions as members of all parties, in the work of the first European Congress. That said, it should be noted that the aim of the undertaking in The Hague is not merely to bring about a dramatic, albeit indispensable, swing in opinion: it is true that the establishment of a federated Europe requires enthusiasm, but it also requires clear and distinct ideas.

For several months now, politicians, economists, lawyers and scholars, thinkers of all kinds and of all persuasions, have worked relentlessly — and this is no exaggeration — on the preparation of a number of preliminary drafts that will be submitted to delegates upon their arrival in The Hague.

After the first plenary session, three Committees will be formed (leaving aside the various subcommittees):

political, economic and cultural. Each of these Committees, rather than having to start from scratch, may draw on texts in which their authors have already outlined, with the greatest possible objectivity, trends and common aspirations, together with the basic principles of a united Europe.

These three Committees will be chaired by Mr Ramadier, Mr van Zeeland and Mr Silone, respectively. Among the rapporteurs, suffice it to mention the names of Duncan Sandys, Henri Brugmans, René Courtin, Lord Layton, Daniel Serruys, Kenneth Lindsay, Robert Aron and Denis de Rougemont, whilst the participation of a large number of eminent figures and representatives in the debates and development work should, of course, not be overlooked.

With the preliminary work done by the organisers of the Congress, it is not overly optimistic to assume that the various Committees, following discussions that are guaranteed to be lively, will succeed in reaching agreement, not on proposals set out in black and white but on many specific issues that will be used as a basis for determining, in clearly defined terms, the binding requirements and the free choices that European federalism involves.

It is expected that these issues will mark out the path towards unity: some will lay down immediate requirements that will need to be addressed without delay by the general public, parliaments and governments in order to consolidate the first European-inspired steps and pave the way for more effective achievements; some will set out the methods and procedures whose implementation will enable the rapid completion of the various stages of a 'European assembly'; and some will determine the objective that we intend to achieve and that could be nothing other, need I recall, than the establishment of a European Federation, a constituent part of a World Confederation.

In a Europe that, like the rest of the world, is so tragically divided, reiterating the motto of the Union of European Federalists — 'One Europe in a united world' — will perhaps appear remarkably pretentious. However, it is more important than ever to define our ultimate goal boldly, for — in order to avoid the risk of diversion or betrayal — it is on the basis of this goal alone that it will be possible to choose the appropriate means.

Once this has been done, will the first Congress of Europe have completed its task? It will be up to the delegates themselves to answer this question.

In any case, we may quite legitimately conclude that the Hague Congress will not merely raise awareness among the general public and encourage the grass roots to engage in peaceful action in favour of a united Europe; nor will it limit its ambitions to devising a programme; rather it will seek to undertake even greater efforts, beyond spectacular statements and 'theoretical' recommendations, however important, necessary or urgent that they may seem to us.

Should this be the case, the first Congress of Europe would probably have to launch the most challenging task of all: institutional development, and not merely 'theoretically' but by actually planting the seeds of permanent institutions. And could not the first of these institutions be the 'Congress' itself, which — like its namesake, to which India owes its emancipation — would seek to become an instrument for giving shape to the live forces of our continent and a body for expressing the will for salvation, renewal and peaceful development of a federated Europe?

We must not make any further commitment on the basis of rash speculation. If an awareness is created at the Hague Congress that will provide Europe with the certainty to accept its destiny from now on, then, despite all the obstacles that they will still have to face, the pioneers of federalism will be justifiably satisfied.