


Towards the ‘States-General’ of Europe in the Hague

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Towards the ‘States-General’ of Europe in the Hague

When it emerged from the Second World War, Europe was in ruins. Everywhere there was social upheaval and poverty. Europe seemed, as it were, to have lost its moral credentials. A vanquished Germany was hardest hit. The Western Powers were envisaging the creation of an international authority to control Ruhr coal and steel. Across the continent, the number of displaced persons ran into millions. Shortages persisted, and rationing was still in force. There was no freedom of currency transactions. Exchange volumes were controlled, and Europe suffered from a shortage of dollars. At the same time, the first signs of decolonisation could be seen in Indonesia, Indochina, India and Madagascar. Europe was vulnerable and in retreat. And the United States and the Soviet Union, the true victors of the world conflict, were not long in coming face to face on the European stage. The Iron Curtain came down across Europe, and the Cold War set in for more than 40 years. Democratic Europe was confined to the west of the continent and its Atlantic fringe. The United States, in a bid to contain Communist influence, hastened to meet the European nations’ most urgent needs. The USA also urged the Europeans to join forces. The United Nations Organisation (UN), founded on the ashes of the pre-war League of Nations, was dominated by a Directory of the ‘five Great Powers’. It seemed that the hour of the great geopolitical units had come. Europe, divided among States which had been rivals for so long, now seemed something of an anachronism. And its lack of equilibrium still posed a threat to the world. That Europe’s weakness resulted from its fragmentation became increasingly clear as the political and economic difficulties piled up. The question of European unity was thus very clearly posed. Europe must unite before the pressures endangering it became too strong. It must now build something new if it was to prepare for peace and if, indeed, it was not to disappear.

Everywhere, initiatives began to take shape. During the war itself, some Resistance movements had advocated the idea of a united Europe. But it was not until 1 September 1946 that the former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, speaking with the prestige that came from victory over Nazi barbarity, declared in a memorable address given at the University of Zurich: ‘We must build a kind of United States of Europe [...] the first practical step would be to form a Council of Europe.’ On 5 June 1947, General Marshall, US Secretary of State, in turn delivered a historic speech at Harvard University in which he proposed to all the countries of Europe an increase in economic aid from the United States but on condition that the beneficiary States would agree among themselves on how to manage jointly the aid coming from America. A conference on European economic cooperation opened in Paris on 12 July 1947. But the Soviet Union boycotted the meeting and vetoed the attendance of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In a counter-initiative, the USSR created the Cominform, on 22 September 1947, to be responsible for liaising between the European Communist and workers’ parties. The Prague Coup of 25 February 1948, which imposed a Communist regime on Czechoslovakia, put a final end to any lingering hopes that an understanding might be achieved. Meanwhile, in Paris, no time was lost in producing an assessment of economic needs. This was the prelude to the creation of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), whose Convention was signed in Paris on 16 April 1948. Again on the economic front, the Benelux Customs Union was up and running, and a possible customs union between France and Italy was also under consideration.

On the military side, France and the United Kingdom showed the way when they concluded a Treaty of Alliance and Mutual Assistance on 4 March 1947 in Dunkirk. This was shortly followed, on 17 March 1948, by the Brussels Treaty of Economic, Social and Cultural Collaboration and Collective Self-Defence. It involved France, the United Kingdom and the three countries which now formed Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg).

These developments were accompanied by the emergence in ever greater number of private movements militating actively in favour of European unity. The full range of political persuasions was represented, apart from the Communists. But the resources available to these movements and the European doctrines advocated by them differed widely. Unifying these various pro-European movements therefore came to be seen as an urgent requirement. A focused effort was clearly essential to ensure more effective action and a message that could be heard; bringing that message home to the general public was part of that task. Hence the creation, on 11 November 1947 in Paris, of the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity (ICMEU), combining the Union of European Federalists (UEF), led by Henri Brugmans of the

Netherlands, the United Europe Movement, led by the former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, the Independent League for European Cooperation (ILEC), led by the former Belgian Prime Minister, Paul van Zeeland, the French Council for a United Europe, whose President was Raoul Dautry, and the *Nouvelles Équipes Internationales* (New International Teams — NEI), led by Robert Bichet of France. The European Parliamentary Union (EPU) under the aegis of Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi did not join them until April 1948. The British were very quick to take matters in hand. Duncan Sandys, the MP and former Conservative Minister, who was Winston Churchill's son-in-law and Secretary-General of the United Europe Movement, became the Committee's President; its Secretary-General was Joseph Retinger, the Polish co-founder of the ILEC, and its Deputy Secretary-General was Georges Rebattet of France.

The International Committee, which had its headquarters in London and an office in Paris, set itself the immediate objective of organising a major congress in support of a united Europe. This would be the Congress of Europe, which took place in The Hague from 7 to 10 May 1948. The Dutch Catholic MP Pieter Kerstens, Vice-President of the ILEC, was appointed Chairman of the Organising Committee. For six months, all efforts were focused on preparing for the Congress.