

Preparations for the Hague Congress

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Preparations for the Hague Congress

As soon as the decision had been taken to convene, in spring 1948, a European ‘States-General’, the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity (ICMEU) got down to work. It operated independently of governments and of the established authorities. Looking beyond party-political divides, the aim was, above all, to recruit eminent figures capable of giving life to the idea of European unity. This was to be a very ambitious Congress, pursuing three objectives: to demonstrate the existence, in all free countries of Europe, of a body of public opinion in support of European unity, to discuss the challenges posed by European unity and propose practical solutions to governments and to give new impetus to the international publicity campaign. Speaking on behalf of the Independent League for European Cooperation (ILEC), the Catholic Senator, Pieter A. Kerstens, former Minister for Economic Affairs of the Netherlands, proposed that the Congress be held in The Hague. This was a means of paying tribute to the pioneering role played by the three Benelux countries. Kerstens was Chairman of the Organising Committee from the outset. In liaison with the Netherlands Foreign Ministry and the Hague city authorities, he oversaw the logistical and other practical arrangements and ensured the involvement of the Dutch royal family. Given the exchange problems between European currencies, the Organising Committee collected in the Netherlands the money required to host the participants — who thus had to cover only their travel costs. Popular enthusiasm was such that, with a shortage of hotel facilities, some delegates were put up in private homes.

For practical and financial reasons, it was soon decided to limit the number of delegates to 800. Included in this figure were the observers sent by the United States, Canada and the Vatican. Spain and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were represented by members of the exile communities in the West. Their presence signified the organisers’ concern to show that they did not regard as definitive the division of Europe into two opposing blocs. They preferred rather to affirm that European unity could be understood only as an open constituent of a new world order. Delegates included statesmen, parliamentarians, industrialists, trade unionists, church leaders, journalists and academics. In each country, a national committee was set up which, in the final instance, took the requisite decisions. Thus the governments did not have the possibility of directly appointing their representatives. The task was by no means straightforward. It had to be ensured that each delegation was varied and representative in its composition, yet, at the same time, no individual delegate was to be constrained by a specific mandate. In the three occupation zones in West Germany, the organisers had to negotiate with the Allied occupation authorities to obtain the necessary passes and residence permits.

In the United Kingdom, matters were greatly complicated by political tensions. A number of Labour leaders were concerned that the Congress, which was to be held under the honorary chairmanship of Winston Churchill, the former British Prime Minister, might unduly further the plans of the Conservative MP, who was known for his strongly anti-Communist stance. They pointed in particular to the fact that the ICMEU was led in London by Duncan Sandys, MP, former Conservative Minister and, moreover, Winston Churchill’s son-in-law. Out of solidarity with Labour, many European Socialists were unsure whether to go to The Hague. The issue was put to the International Socialist Conference held in Paris in April 1948. And, while the Congress was meant to be more a gathering of eminent persons than of parties, the uncertainty persisted to the very eve of the Congress. The wish of certain federalist militants to direct the deliberations of the Congress in accordance with their concept of a united Europe gave rise to further difficulties. Finally, in the absence of any agreement on its composition, the idea of a Sponsoring Committee had to be dropped. These tensions inevitably affected the event itself. So it was that, just one month later, Alexandre Marc, French Head of the Institutional Department of the Union of European Federalists (UEF) and linchpin of the Hague Congress, resigned from the ICMEU. At the end of the Congress, the UEF was also to issue a press statement deploring the limited political progress made during the course of the proceedings.

These various difficulties did not, however, prevent the establishment, in January 1948, of the coordinating and preparatory committees that would draw up the reports and draft resolutions that were to form the basis for discussion at the Congress. This preparatory work provided an opportunity to compare points of view; it also demonstrated the plethora of European projects. The French Council for a United Europe and the United Europe Movement dealt in particular with the drafting of the Political Committee’s report, while the report of the Economic and Social Committee was put into final form by Lord Walter Layton and by Daniel

Serruys, President of the French Section of the ILEC. Finally, the Cultural Committee's report was finalised by Denis de Rougemont, the Swiss federalist. To focus discussion on essentials, the organisers decided to keep the number of plenary sessions to a minimum, giving preference to meetings of the specialist committees. In the same vein, the time allowed for individual interventions was limited, as far as possible, to five minutes in French or English. Votes on proposed amendments to the draft resolutions were to be taken by a show of hands.