

The European Centre for Culture

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The establishment of a permanent European Centre for Culture, proposed in early 1948 in a preparatory report and immediately recommended by the Cultural Resolution adopted unanimously on 10 May 1948 at the end of the Congress of Europe held in The Hague, was not without its difficulties. Immediately after the Congress had finished, the Swiss federalist writer, Denis de Rougemont, rapporteur for the Cultural Committee, championed the establishment of such a Centre and advocated the idea of European spiritual unity. Culture was thrust to the forefront of the ideological issues that were resonating throughout the continent. Accordingly, at the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defence of Peace held in August 1948 in Wrocław (formerly Breslau), the Communists gained ground, confirming the division of Europe into two opposing camps.

The West was quick to retaliate. In October 1948, the newly founded European Movement established a Cultural Committee chaired by the Spanish writer and former diplomat, Salvador de Madariaga. It was he who had chaired the Cultural Committee at the Hague Congress. Without delay, the European Movement's Cultural Committee carried out a survey which revealed that Switzerland was the best placed country to accommodate the Centre. In addition to its central geographical location and various financing facilities, Switzerland enjoyed neutral status which lent itself particularly well to the field of cultural activities. Moreover, it had emerged as a sort of intact European oasis. Traditionally cosmopolitan, the city of Geneva was, at all events, no stranger to European cultural debates. As early as September 1946, the 'Rencontres Internationales de Genève' provided an opportunity for intellectuals, writers, artists and musicians to meet and discuss the state and the future of the 'European spirit'. Denis de Rougemont was one of the speakers who had been called upon to give his views on the foundations and the role of European civilisation.

On 5 February 1949, the European Movement approved the immediate establishment of a Planning Board for the European Centre for Culture placed under the supervision of Denis de Rougemont, assisted by the French journalist and publicist, Raymond Silva. Ten days later, in Geneva, the Planning Board was set up at the Palais Wilson. The main tasks of the Planning Board were to coordinate the compilation of a bibliography of all the writings on the subject of European union, to gather existing documentation on all the cultural activities that actively supported the establishment of a European union, to make preparations for the forthcoming European Conference on Culture, to organise joint programmes for broadcasting on European radio and to train senior members of the European Movement by offering them courses on European issues.

On 6 September 1949, at its very first session in Strasbourg and on a proposal from its Committee on Cultural and Scientific Questions, the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted unanimously a resolution on the establishment of the Centre. With Rougemont at the head of the Planning Board, it naturally fell to him to organise the European Conference on Culture — for which he was general rapporteur — held in Lausanne from 8 to 12 December 1949. Paul-Henri Spaak, Belgian President of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, formally opened the Conference. The debates, based on a questionnaire forwarded in the July to the European Movement's national cultural groups, were structured around a Committee on European Institutions, an Exchanges Committee and an Educational Committee. The proposed European Centre for Culture was the focus of the work of the Committee on European Institutions. The Conference approved the activities of the Geneva-based Planning Board and adopted a resolution calling for this Board to be made into a European Centre for Culture as soon as possible. Finally, on 21 January 1950, in London, the Executive Committee of the European Movement formally approved the proposal. The role accorded to the Centre was threefold: to draw up an inventory of cultural forces in Europe, to coordinate individual efforts and to take all necessary steps to develop, express and demonstrate a European identity.

The Centre, designed as a catalyst for cultural exchanges and a meeting place for all those involved in creating and facilitating culture, sought to provide instruments for coordinating efforts (library, documentary resources and archives, etc.), a study centre and initiatives in the field of education. The institution was also intended to serve as a basis for a new *politique de l'esprit*, or 'intellectual policy', at European level. With the help of the European Movement's Cultural Committee, the European Centre for Culture, placed under

the supervision of Denis de Rougemont, was inaugurated in Geneva on 7 October 1950. It received funding in the form of donations, private and public subsidies and member subscriptions. Its Secretariat continued to be housed in the Palais Wilson, former headquarters of the League of Nations, but the Centre held its meetings and conferences at the Château de Coppet, formerly owned by Madame de Staël, on the shores of Lake Geneva. It subsequently moved to the Villa Moynier. Its aim was to promote European culture with a view to establishing it as the basis for European union. Despite having limited material resources at its disposal, the European Centre for Culture sought to establish cultural networks and raise awareness of the federalist principles of European unity among the world of education and intellectuals by holding numerous meetings and by encouraging the translation and distribution of European literary works. It adopted the motto 'May nothing be mine that may be someone else's', which intentionally places emphasis on the idea of cultural networks. The European Centre for Culture was entirely independent of any international organisation or governmental body. During the first few years of its existence, the European Centre for Culture focused primarily on issues such as the dialogue between Europe and America, the European music scene, cultural exchanges between Europe and the Soviet Union, European education and civics, the European University and the world of publishing in Europe.

The European Centre for Culture, which now has branches in several EU Member States and is also active in other regions such as the Balkans, is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) under Swiss law that consistently supports projects whose objective is to promote dialogue between cultures, especially among young people.