

Jean-Pierre Gouzy, The Congress of Europe (7-10 May 1948)

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The Congress of Europe (7-10 May 1948)

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The following contribution is the full text of the lecture given by Jean-Pierre Gouzy on 10 February 2008 at the Pont d'Oye Meeting Centre in Habay-la-Neuve, Belgium. This event, organised by the Meeting Centre in cooperation with the European Movement International (EMI) and the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (Virtual Resource Centre for Knowledge about Europe — CVCE), was accompanied by an exhibition on the Congress of Europe in The Hague featuring a wide range of historical material including archives, photos, newspapers and video footage.

Sixty years have gone by since the last meeting of the “Congress of Europe” which took place in the country of polders and Rembrandt, of William of Orange and Erasmus, in the Ridderzaal, the historical Hall of Knights of the Dutch Parliament, in that sunny atmosphere of early Spring 1948.

The Second World War had just come to an end. Three years prior, almost to the very day, to this sitting of the European Renaissance, the IIIrd Reich had finally capitulated, leaving under its ashes an old continent blood-stained and on its knees. The price of this capitulation had been paid at the Yalta conference in February 1945 when Stalin had managed to transform Eastern Europe and a part of Central Europe into as many socialist systems as there were States with the help of his armies. Thirty-eight million people had died in the fight for freedom, but millions more men and women had simply passed from one master to another and would have to wait another 40 years to join their brothers in the West, in a European Union that was finally reconciled. Currency was under strict control; in France, bread coupons were still in use; trains were being stopped at every border for thorough searches.

At the time of the The Hague Congress, I was not yet 23. Nonetheless, I was already involved in the federalist movement emerging in France and was lucky enough to be chosen, among so many prestigious persons, as the youngest member of the French delegation (168 members). I would simultaneously be covering the event for a Parisian morning paper, in my capacity as a journalist.

Our French delegation was the largest, despite the fact that these “States General” debates, as they were somewhat exaggeratedly being referred to by some, took place under the leadership of Winston Churchill and the main organiser, Duncan Sandys, was no other than his very own son-in-law. The composition of the delegations and the key figures who left their mark on this event will be addressed after the following two questions:

- Why Churchill?
- Who were the instigators of the Congress of Europe?

First of all, Why Churchill?

The descendant of the Dukes of Marlborough was not satisfied with having resisted Hitler's efforts with remarkable tenacity. He also kept the memory of the disastrous consequences of the European order brought about by the Treaties of Versailles (June 1919), Saint Germain and Trianon (Austria, 1919- Hungary, June 1920) alive, and remembered that Clémenceau's nationalist peace, combined with Woodrow Wilson's pacifism had been one of the worst solutions conceivable as barely a generation later Europe had been plunged once more into world war.

Thus, on 19 September 1946, at the University of Zürich, Winston Churchill, who had already spoken out at Fulton on 5 March that same year, when he denounced the soviet “iron curtain”, and with all the prestige gained from his actions between 1940 and 1945, caught the public's attention when he delivered his famous speech, today mentioned in all the anthologies of European construction, and which can be summed up in one sentence:

We must build a kind of United States of Europe (...) I am now going to say something that will astonish you. The first step in the re-creation of the European Family must be a partnership between France and Germany. In this way only can France recover the moral and cultural leadership of Europe (...) In order that this should be accomplished there must be an act of faith. (However), I must give you a warning. Time may be short. (...) If we are to form the United States of Europe, or whatever name it may take, we must begin now. If at first all the States of Europe are not willing or able to join the Union, we must nevertheless proceed to assemble and combine those who will and those who can. Therefore I say to you: let Europe arise!

The instigators of the congress of Europe

The idea of a European Union, of a “United Europe”, was latent in the aftermath of the world war. The liberal-minded Belgian Christian Socialist, Paul Van Zeeland, former Prime Minister, had set up an independent league for economic co-operation as of March 1946, which later became the “European League for Economic Co-operation” and proved to be very influential in the industrial sphere and amongst economic decision-makers.

Count Richard Coudenhove Kalergi, pioneer of the European idea and of the pan-European movement, as of the 1920s, had come back to Europe in June 1946, with the intention of creating a European Parliamentary Union, the first congress of which would be held in Gstaad in September 1947.

Thus, when Churchill was delivering his speech in Zürich, federalist activists were holding a meeting on the banks of the Swiss lake of Quatre-Cantons, at Hertenstein, to set up the Union of European Federalists, that would be officially founded in Paris, in December 1946, and would hold its first international congress in Montreux in August 1947.

The emergence of pro-Europeans continued to take shape in 1947 with the creation of a movement for a socialist united States of Europe (MEUSE) in London, then in Montrouge near Paris.

European Christian Democrats, for their part, set up their own organisation in June 1947, named “Nouvelles équipes internationales”, following a meeting in Chaudfontaine, near Liège.

And, lastly, the United Europe Movement was launched at Albert Hall in London, under the chairmanship of Churchill.

Those living in this period witnessed, and in some cases participated in an overflow of ideas that would solidify with the organisation of an “International Committee of the Movements for European Unity”. Duncan Sandys became its Chairman in 1947 in order to organise the future “Congress of Europe” with the help of a former official of the Polish government who had taken refuge in London during the war, Joseph Retinger. Only the MEUSE refused, as such, to participate, although this did not prevent many socialist figures from attending the Congress in The Hague.

The scene was therefore set, as of the end of 1947, for the undertaking of the new European adventure.

Furthermore, the time was now ripe for the idea of a “United Europe” to take shape. On 4 March, the French and British governments had signed an Alliance Treaty in Dunquerque, and the speech of US Secretary of State, General Marshall at Harvard, on 5 June 1947, marked a turning point when he offered European countries unprecedented levels of economic aid that would be free and decisive in preventing Europe from falling into “economic, social, and political deterioration”.

Not a single country under Soviet rule - not even Czechoslovakia who made a valiant attempt - was allowed to accept this aid, whereas the countries of Western Europe decided to set up a comprehensive recovery plan by establishing, together with the United States and Canada, a common organisation for economic co-operation in Spring 1948: the EOEC. At the beginning of that same year, the first indicators of the Cold War

were being confirmed with the creation of the Kominform, the communist *coup d'État* in Prague on 25 February and a first reaction: the creation of the defensive alliance on 17 March between London, Paris, Brussels, The Hague and Luxemburg, named the “Western European Union”.

The Confrontations at the Ridderzaal

It was in the context of these newly alarming developments for the future of Old Europe that the Congress of Europe brought together, in a “Ridderzaal” that was full to bursting, almost a thousand political figures, among whom over 750 delegates and official observers, including 200 parliamentarians, several former Prime Ministers and a large number of former or future ministers.

The medieval surroundings chosen for the debate remained engraved in our memories. Churchill stood on a stand draped in a purple and gold velvet canopy, in the presence of Princess Juliana and Prince Bernhard of The Netherlands, and the room was decorated with luxurious tapestries and a European flag boasting a red “E” on a white background.

The chairmanship of the political committee had been handed to Paul Ramadier, a socialist and Freemason, President of the French Cabinet in 1947, and mayor of Decazeville, a small industrial town in Aveyron. In addition to the day sessions, the committee sat until 2 o'clock in the morning on the night of 8 to 9 May, and then until 3h30 the next day.

The economic committee was chaired by Paul Van Zeeland, who was assisted by Lord Layton, President of the liberal newspaper “News Chronicle”, and Daniel Serruys, former President of the economic council of the League of Nations, at the time in charge of the League for Economic Co-operation in France. This committee broke the record: its final meeting lasted from 22pm to 7am.

Lastly, the Spanish writer Salvador de Madariaga, also a liberal, chaired the cultural committee, and was assisted by two representatives of federalist and personalist leanings: Alexandre Marc and Denis de Rougemont, political writers well-known since the 1930s.

In addition to the imposing French delegation, were present 145 Britons, 68 Belgian delegates, 59 Italians, 58 Germans (the federal Republic would not be created until May 1949), 39 Swiss, including a former President of the Confederation, Austrians, Danes, Greeks, Norwegians, Swedes, a few Irish delegates, one Icelander, a Turk, three delegates from Liechtenstein, amongst whom Prince Constantin who was announced as the President of the Liechtenstein Movement for the Federal Union of Europe and lastly, observers referred to as such by the Congress: Bulgarians, Canadians, Czechoslovakians, Finns, Hungarians, Poles, Romanians, Spaniards, Americans and Yugoslavians.

- Noteworthy among the Belgian delegation were the Rector of the University of Brussels; professors from the Universities of Gent, Liège, Louvain; trade-unionists including Auguste Cool, President of the Christian trade-union; Paul Finet, Secretary general of the socialist trade-union (FGTB); industrialists; representatives of the economic sector; politicians such as Albert Coppé, future Vice-Président of the ECSC High Authority and member of the European Commission; Étienne de la Valée Poussin, future President of the European Movement Belgium; clerics, such as Father Verleye; militant socialists like Raymond Rifflet, who would later become Director General of Social Affairs and council of Jacques Delors at the European Commission.

- The German delegation comprised figures such as Konrad Adenauer, future Chancellor; Heinrich von Brentano, future member of the federal Government; Professor Walter Hallstein, then rector of the University of Frankfurt; the Prime Minister of the Land of North-Rhine-Westphalia; the President of the Council of Ministers of the Saar; and the President of the Baden Wurtemberg Parliament.

- As for the UK, in addition to Winston Churchill and the members of his team, others present included Anthony Eden, former Minister of Foreign Affairs; Leslie Hore Belisha, former war minister; Harold Macmillan, former Minister and future Prime Minister who would, in 1961, request the adhesion of the UK to the Treaty of Rome; Ronald Mac Kay, President of the British European Parliamentary Union; and well-

known European activists such as Miss Josephy, President of the Federal Union.

- Representing France were the writer Raymond Aron; Jacques Chaban-Delmas, future Prime Minister; Edgar Faure, future Prime Minister; François Mitterrand, future President of the Republic and at the time Minister of war veterans; Maurice Schumann, future Minister of Foreign Affairs; Édouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud, former Presidents of the Council of Ministers, André François-Poncet, Ambassador and future President of the European Movement; Pierre Henri Teitgen, Minister of the Army; members of the Institute, such as Jacques Rueff or Jacques Chastenet; academics such as Georges Scelle; parliamentarians; former Ministers; local politicians; journalists; trade-unionists; major figures from the worlds of industry, banking, civil society; clerics; future members of the European Commission (Robert Lemaignan, Henri Rochereau), etc...
- Several Italians were also present, including Adriano Olivetti, a major pillar of industry; Enzo Giaccherio, future member of the ECSC High Authority and President of UEF; Ignazio Silone, future President of UEF; Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi, authors of the Ventotene Manifesto and founders of the Movimento federalista europeo.
- Representing The Netherlands were Marinus van der Goes van Naters; Henri Nord; Emmanuel Sassen, a future member of the Euratom commission, etc...
- Two main currents emerged from this Congress: the “unionists”, who supported the idea of a united Europe in the wider sense, respecting Human rights; preoccupied with reinserting Germany into the “collective of European nations” and ensuring the security of the European peoples, particularly with regard to the Soviet threat.
- The federalists who were mainly present amongst the delegations from Belgium; France; Italy; Switzerland (the writer Denis de Rougemont for instance); and the Netherlands (with Henri Brugmans, future rector and founder of the College of Europe).
- In the solemn setting of the Ridderzaal, Paul Reynaud, former President of the French Council of Ministers, caused a sensation by proposing the election without delay, and by universal suffrage, of a European assembly numbering one deputy per million inhabitants. This proposal, which had the benefit of simplicity and seemed above all capable of awakening a public opinion traumatised by the consequences of war, was however rejected. The British were entirely hostile to the idea and the delegates of smaller countries opposed it.
- It is also in these circumstances that the federalist current, of proudhonian and personalist nature, and notably with the support of French and Belgian trade-unionists, reacted passionately, especially to the proposal to allow large economic, cultural and social organisations, considered as the “live forces” of European countries, to freely designate non-parliamentary constituents.

These were the early beginnings of today’s currents that demand a “participatory” democracy rather than a “representative” one. This current expressed itself at the Congress, sometimes loudly, demanding the creation of a European Supreme Court or a Court of Justice and a Charter of Human Rights that would be legally binding through a Convention between States.

Furthermore, these delegates fought for the creation of a European Economic and Social Committee by the Congress. The idea gained ground as it materialised in the Treaty of Rome of March 1957, after having been taken into account by the Conference of the European Movement in Westminster of 20/25 April 1949.

- In accordance with a protocol of the European Human Rights Convention, signed in Rome on 4 November 1950, today’s unique and permanent European Court of Human Rights can receive complaints through inter-State procedures or through individual requests. Its rulings are binding. This is mainly thanks to the initial initiative taken by the Congress of Europe in May 1948.

Moreover, it must be noted that ever since the Treaty of Rome, we have a Court of Justice in Luxembourg for the community that deals with cases relative to the application of community law and secondary legislation, as well as a Court of First Instance.

Finally, the text of a European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights was adopted in October 2000 by a Convention. It was officially proclaimed on 12 December 2007 in Strasbourg by the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament, in anticipation of becoming legally binding after the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in the framework of the European Union.

In my view, it is in the field of Law that the European construction has made the most progress.

A “message to Europeans” written by Denis de Rougemont and read by him in person at the official closing of the Congress of Europe, recalled the main objectives of the federalists: a European Charter of Human Rights, a Court of Justice, a European Assembly where the “civil society” would be represented.

The Conclusions of the Congress

The conclusions of the Congress of Europe that were unanimously adopted grew out of three postulates:

1. To reach a consensus amongst delegates, the Congress refrained from choosing between the two main concepts in contention: the Union or the Federation. In the resolution adopted by the political committee, the writers, combining all political leanings, agreed that the time had come for the nations of Europe to transfer some of their sovereign rights so as to apply-them jointly. This, they said, was an urgent duty, but they gave the “Union or the Federation” the tasks of ensuring security, solving the “German issue”, and staying open to all democratic nations willing to respect the Charter of Human Rights, etc...
2. Any project aiming to create a European Union without the participation of Great Britain would be worthless; and the process of unification could only be carried out progressively.
3. To reach these goals, it was necessary to set up an Extraordinary Council of Europe without delay, whose role would be to take common measures regarding democratic freedoms and to prepare the different stages of an economic and political construction.

Since governments would only be allowed to take part in the activities of the new Europe once they had subscribed to a common declaration of fundamental rights, a European army could even be envisaged to restore order; and a deliberative European Assembly would be set up. The members of the Assembly would be named by the national parliaments or externally. They could later be elected.

Projects could be later developed to create a common citizenship, a single army, a full-fledged federation...

Ah! how beautiful was the “Europe of Europeans” of this symbolic Congress, which really seemed within reach for so many delegates. How comforting it was to see this vast and brilliant assembly learnings the lessons of the hitlerian tidal wave, fearing further hardships, and declaring that we shouldn’t wait for events to happen and be forced to act by obligation; and how refreshing to hear the President of the appropriate committee of the Congress, a wily old politician as was Ramadier, assert rather naïvely “We have witnessed in The Hague that the reactionary idea of national sovereignty receives almost no support today”.

Indeed, the results of the “Congress of Europe” were certainly decisive for the process of European unification, but the way leading to it has been long and winding, much more so than could have been imagined at the time, because we – the delegates who had chosen together to lay the foundations of a new Europe – were animated by a rare feeling in the life of a man or woman: that of experiencing a unique moment, of finding oneself at the beginning of a political process of an exceptional scale.

- What happened later also belongs to History:

1. The socialists of the MEUSE joined the “Committee for the Co-ordination of the European Movements” that would later become the European Movement in 1948. As for the MEUSE, it later changed its name to MSEUE (Mouvement socialiste pur les Etats-Unis d’Europe). The first honorary Presidents of the new European Movement were: Léon Blum, Winston Churchill, Alcide de Gasperi and Paul-Henri Spaak.

2. After much negotiating (I will not go into the details), a Treaty was signed in London on 5 May 1949, one year and two days after the beginning of the Congress in the Ridderzaal. It established the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

Ten countries were part of this very first European institution set up after the Second World War: Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Sweden. The Federal Republic of Germany joined in 1951, after the adoption of its fundamental law. All the countries of Old Europe are now members of the Council of Europe, except for Belarus as it does not respect Human Rights.

On 10 August 1949, an enormous demonstration was organised in Strasbourg for the inauguration of the Council of Europe’s “Consultative” Assembly (now known as the “Parliamentary Assembly”). Churchill, who had made the trip, was applauded at length at a meeting organised on place Kléber.

Two other bodies were created following decisions made at the Congress of Europe in 1948: the European Centre for Culture, set up in October 1950 at Villa Moynier in Geneva by the federalist writer Denis de Rougemont, and the College of Europe founded that same year in Bruges by Henri Brugmans, its first Rector and first President of the Union of European Federalists.

The main actors of the Congress of May 1948 never forgot this event. Twenty years later, they answered our questions:

- “What I remember most, said Henri Brugmans, “can be summarised with one word ‘overflow’. Indeed, there was a striking contrast between the heavy atmosphere (...) of the Committee for the Co-ordination of the European Movements on the one hand, and the joyful, creative feeling (...) of the Congress.

The fervour and enthusiasm of 1948 has never been equalled”.

- “What I remember most”, declared Salvador de Madariaga, “was the applause I received from this roomful of experienced, seasoned men, who had seen it all, when I called, not on the tariffs, markets or public institutions, but on the very soul of Europe alive in us all”.

- There were great moments, according to Denis de Rougemont, author of the final message of the Congress, “of euphoria alternating with frustration, sleepless nights, and the feeling, right from the start of the opening session, that a process had been launched that we simply had to follow, regardless of whether it led where we wanted to go.

- Twenty years later, the impression that Duncan Sandys had was that of “hope and determination, and the general feeling that we were all taking part in a historical event that would change the course of History”.

- For Paul van Zeeland, the most vivid memory was that of “the enthusiasm of participants of the Congress. The war had just ended, but we all felt how important it was to avoid falling back into the nationalist antagonisms that had been one of the causes of the catastrophe”.

The commitments made at the Ridderzaal were the beginning of a process and of a good work aiming to achieve “public salvation”. Those of us who are still there to bear witness still feel the same way.