

The post-war European idea and the first European movements (1945–1949) – Introduction

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Introduction

The Second World War had devastating consequences for Europe. The human losses were extremely severe, and people were shocked to [discover the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi regime](#). The economies of several European countries were left in tatters: industrial and agricultural infrastructures had been destroyed, towns and cities had been razed to the ground by bombing raids, means of communication had been damaged and there were shortages of foodstuffs.

- [Destruction in the Netherlands \(Rotterdam, 14 May 1940\)](#)
- [Germany at the end of the Second World War: the destruction in Dresden \(1946\)](#)
- [Cartoon by Szewczuk on the shortage of supplies in Germany \(1946\)](#)

Soon relegated to second fiddle on the international stage by the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as two new superpowers, Western Europe realised that its recovery would come through unity, through the pooling of its economic resources — where necessary with US financial, technical and military support — and through the creation of jointly run, efficient institutions.

Given the rise in influence of the United States and the Soviet Union and their increasing rivalry, the countries of Europe, exhausted by the global conflict, were faced with three fundamental questions. The first was economic: how could material damage be repaired and economic activity revived on the old continent? The second was political: how could they prevent the return of a conflict that had laid the continent and the world to waste? The third was cultural: how could the survival and renaissance of European civilisation be ensured in the face of the increasing threats represented by the ideological schism and confrontation between the victorious American and Soviet blocs? Western Europe hoped to reclaim its place on the international stage by uniting the peoples of Europe.

Pro-European movements, some of which originated in the Resistance, moved into action and vigorously promoted the idea of European unification. The ideal of a united Europe, which had already been popularised by certain elite circles during the interwar period, rapidly gained ground in the wake of the Second World War. Thousands of young people dreamed of a united Europe, sometimes even of a unified and peaceful world. While reconstruction was an immediate priority in the post-war period, many people advocated the creation of an autonomous European entity. In order to avoid the world being divided into two antagonistic blocs and to prevent the inevitably ensuing war, it seemed essential to establish a third European pole. In this context, there were calls for Western countries to adopt a neutral stance in the face of American materialism and Soviet totalitarianism. However, non-alignment, which became increasingly difficult to implement as the Cold War intensified, was soon defended only by the pacifist and internationalist movements.

With regard to the form that European unification might take and the procedures that might be involved, ideas often diverged according to political and ideological affiliation. While some favoured a federation led by a federal authority — or even a European government — others preferred a simple association of sovereign states.

In 1946, various supporters of European federal unity, aware of the need to promote the European ideal in political circles and among the general public, founded the Union of European Federalists (UEF), bringing together some 50 federalist movements. Within

national parliaments, particularly those of the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Italy, the number of supporters of federalism was progressively increasing.

In 1947, Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, founder of the Paneuropean Union in the early 1920s, decided to unite these members of parliament in the European Parliamentary Union (EPU). Being organised more efficiently, they could now bring pressure to bear on national governments.

Several international congresses (Montreux, Gstaad, The Hague, etc.) were also held to push for European unity. In the light of the successful outcome of the Hague Congress in May 1948, the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity, which had organised the congress, decided to take things further, and in October 1948 it changed its name to the European Movement (EM). The support of the general public in building a united Europe took on a fundamental importance.