

'United Europe – a first reckoning' from Le Monde (13 May 1950)

Caption: On 13 May 1950, Paul-Henri Spaak, former Belgian Prime Minister, gives a rather negative assessment of the influence of existing international organisations on the process of European integration.

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United Europe — a first reckoning

By Paul-Henri Spaak, former Belgian Prime Minister, President of the European Consultative Assembly

Europe has never properly recovered from the two wars that it had to endure in the first half of this century.

For France, the 1914 War meant appalling bloodshed from which it had not recovered when it was called on to suffer a new ordeal.

For Great Britain, the 1939 War entailed a financial effort of such dimensions that the very foundations of its economic life were completely transformed, obliging it to undergo a veritable revolution, firstly to save itself and, secondly, to survive.

Germany, defeated on both occasions, devastated and with much of its population cruelly slaughtered, became divided.

Russian policies mutilated Germany, removing from its influence everything situated to the east of the Iron Curtain.

Today Germany lives on, more or less conscious of the threats which hang over it, accepting with a kind of resigned fatalism the existence of the atom bomb and Bolshevism.

The will to live, or the habit of living, must be rooted remarkably strongly in the depths of man's heart for, in such circumstances, Europeans to have returned to work, building on the ruins and making plans for the future, and for some to have even retained a hope of better days to come.

But these are the ones who are right. Europe can survive. Europe can solve the problems which it faces. All that is required is for it to do what it must do. It must organise itself.

How I wish that everyone who has a say in the matter, who holds some share in power and its responsibilities, could be convinced of this, could be sure that it is both absolutely indispensable and perfectly feasible; indispensable for military, economic and intellectual reasons.

No longer can any European country, not even the largest and proudest, not even those whose military traditions are strongest and most glorious, defend itself today, on its own, against attack from the East. And all of them together can do so only with the help of the United States. This is a fact.

Not one of them, in isolation, can hope in the long run to maintain, let alone improve, the standard of living of its population in the face of competition both from the United States and from the USSR. But, by contrast, nothing could stop them regaining the prominent position that they occupied at the end of the previous century if they were to share the wealth of their natural resources, the skills of their workers and the proficiency of their leadership.

Then there is our civilisation to defend; one which has taught the world respect for the individual. A revolution threatens us. Communism is far more than an economic doctrine; its ambition is to be a rule of life, and its triumph would entail the end of everything in which we believe where the realm of the mind is concerned.

We can be spared such tribulations only if those who represent what is best in Europe take the decision to give our ancient continent new institutions, looking beyond the immediate difficulties, holding firmly on to essential truths, sweeping aside prejudices and rising above short-term economic self-interest.

During the second quarter of 1947, throughout 1948 and three quarters of 1949, we were able to hope that Europeans had understood this necessity.

On 16 April 1948, 16 countries founded the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), 'recognising that their economies are interdependent and that the prosperity of each of them depends on the prosperity of them all; judging that only their close and lasting cooperation will enable them to restore and maintain the prosperity of Europe and to rebuild from the ruins of the war.'

At the same time in Washington, 11 European countries concluded together with the United States the North Atlantic Treaty, declaring their 'determination to safeguard the freedom of their peoples, their common heritage and their civilisation, based on the principles of democracy, individual freedoms and the rule of law.'

Then, on 5 May 1949, ten European governments, soon to be joined by three others, set up the Council of Europe, declaring their 'devotion to the spiritual and moral values which are the common heritage of their peoples and the true source of individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law, principles which form the basis of all genuine democracy.' At the same time, they declared their 'conviction that, for the maintenance and further realisation of these ideals and in the interests of economic and social progress, there is a need of a closer unity between all like-minded countries of Europe.'

Thus, in one year, outstanding progress was made, and Western Europe appeared to have opted definitively and courageously for what was an entirely new path: the path of reconstruction, of security and of salvation. A great hope was not merely being born; it was being realised.

Since then, a whole year has passed, allowing us to make a first reckoning. It would be mistaken, even exaggeratedly pessimistic, to consider it a wholly negative one, but it may be said that it gives no satisfaction to those who regard the organisation of Europe as an urgent matter as well as a question of life or death.

Credit should certainly be given to the administration and to the officials of the OEEC. They have done a great deal of work, sparing neither time nor effort; they have produced a plethora of reports; numerous experts have made interesting suggestions, but, despite everything, the results overall are not very impressive. What the OEEC lacks is political perspective, a real will to apply the principles which seem to have been approved. In practice, no government has acted as if it truly believed — and I cannot stress the word 'truly' strongly enough — that the prosperity of each country depends on the prosperity of all.

Certainly, we have managed to share out the American dollars good-naturedly enough, but, on the whole, we have made exceedingly small progress towards European integration, and most of the excellent principles that have been so frequently proclaimed have remained a dead letter, destroyed by economic self-interest.

To sum up, at Strasbourg, the Council of Europe has taken its first steps: timid, hesitant steps, like those of a young child. The suspicion is that, if no power is conferred on it, it risks being merely a talking-shop: worthy of respect, but powerless. Some, nevertheless, are hesitant and force others to progress with a prudence that is somewhat excessive and sometimes even rather irritating.

After the real and spectacular successes of 1949, Europe is marking time, even retreating a little. Now is the time for all those who appreciate its essential importance to throw themselves into the battle and win it.

Paul-Henri Spaak