

Address given by Winston Churchill (Zurich, 19 September 1946)

Caption: On 19 September 1946, Winston Churchill, British Conservative leader, gives an address at the University of Zurich in which he identifies Franco-German reconciliation and the establishment of a European organisation as conditions for peace and liberty throughout the continent.

Source: Winston Churchill, speech delivered at the University of Zurich, 19 September 1946. [EN LIGNE]. [Strasbourg]: Council of Europe - Conseil de l'Europe, mise à jour 21.11.2005[21.11.2005]. Disponible sur http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/About_Coe/DiscoursChurchill.asp.

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I wish to speak about the tragedy of Europe, this noble continent, the home of all the great parent races of the Western world, the foundation of Christian faith and ethics, the origin of most of the culture, arts, philosophy and science both of ancient and modern times. If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance there would be no limit to the happiness, prosperity and glory which its 300 million or 400 million people would enjoy. Yet it is from Europe that has sprung that series of frightful nationalistic quarrels, originated by the Teutonic nations in their rise to power, which we have seen in this 20th century and in our own lifetime wreck the peace and mar the prospects of all mankind.

What is this plight to which Europe has been reduced? Some of the smaller states have indeed made a good recovery, but over wide areas are a vast, quivering mass of tormented, hungry, careworn and bewildered human beings, who wait in the ruins of their cities and homes and scan the dark horizons for the approach of some new form of tyranny or terror. Among the victors there is a Babel of voices, among the vanquished the sullen silence of despair. That is all that Europeans, grouped in so many ancient states and nations, and that is all that the Germanic races have got by tearing each other to pieces and spreading havoc far and wide. Indeed, but for the fact that the great republic across the Atlantic realised that the ruin or enslavement of Europe would involve her own fate as well, and stretched out hands of succour and guidance, the Dark Ages would have returned in all their cruelty and squalor. They may still return.

Yet all the while there is a remedy which, if it were generally and spontaneously adopted by the great majority of people in many lands, would as by a miracle transform the whole scene and would in a few years make all Europe, or the greater part of it, as free and happy as Switzerland is today. What is this sovereign remedy? It is to recreate the European fabric, or as much of it as we can, and to provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, safety and freedom. We must build a kind of United States of Europe. In this way only will hundreds of millions of toilers be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living. The process is simple. All that is needed is the resolve of hundreds of millions of men and women to do right instead of wrong and to gain as their reward blessing instead of cursing.

Much work has been done upon this task by the exertions of the Pan-European Union, which owes so much to the famous French patriot and statesman Aristide Briand. There is also that immense body which was brought into being amidst high hopes after the First World War — the League of Nations. The League did not fail because of its principles or conceptions. It failed because those principles were deserted by those states which brought it into being, because the governments of those states feared to face the facts and act while time remained. This disaster must not be repeated. There is, therefore, much knowledge and material with which to build and also bitter, dearly bought experience to spur.

There is no reason why a regional organisation of Europe should in any way conflict with the world organisation of the United Nations. On the contrary, I believe that the larger synthesis can only survive if it is founded upon broad natural groupings. There is already a natural grouping in the Western Hemisphere. We British have our own Commonwealth of Nations. These do not weaken, on the contrary they strengthen, the world organisation. They are in fact its main support. And why should there not be a European group which could give a sense of enlarged patriotism and common citizenship to the distracted peoples of this mighty continent? And why should it not take its rightful place with other great groupings and help to shape the honourable destiny of man? In order that this may be accomplished there must be an act of faith in which the millions of families speaking many languages must consciously take part.

We all know that the two World Wars through which we have passed arose out of the vain passion of Germany to play a dominating part in the world. In this last struggle crimes and massacres have been committed for which there is no parallel since the Mongol invasion of the 13th century, no equal at any time in human history. The guilty must be punished. Germany must be deprived of the power to rearm and make another aggressive war. But when all this has been done, as it will be done, as it is being done, there must be an end to retribution. There must be what Mr Gladstone many years ago called a “blessed act of oblivion”. We must all turn our backs upon the horrors of the past and look to the future. We cannot afford to drag forward across the years to come hatreds and revenges which have sprung from the injuries of the past. If Europe is to be saved

from infinite misery, and indeed from final doom, there must be this act of faith in the European family, this act of oblivion against all crimes and follies of the past. Can the peoples of Europe rise to the heights of the soul and of the instinct and spirit of man? If they could, the wrongs and injuries which have been inflicted would have been washed away on all sides by the miseries which have been endured. Is there any need for further floods of agony? Is the only lesson of history to be that mankind is unteachable? Let there be justice, mercy and freedom. The peoples have only to will it and all will achieve their heart's desire.

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. There can be no revival of Europe without a spiritually great France and a spiritually great Germany. The structure of the United States of Europe will be such as to make the material strength of a single State less important. Small nations will count as much as large ones and gain their honour by a contribution to the common cause. The ancient States and principalities of Germany, freely joined for mutual convenience in a federal system, might take their individual places among the United States of Europe.

But I must give you warning, time may be short. At present there is a breathing space. The cannons have ceased firing. The fighting has stopped. But the dangers have not stopped. If we are to form a United States of Europe, or whatever name it may take, we must begin now. In these present days we dwell strangely and precariously under the shield, and I even say protection, of the atomic bomb. The atomic bomb is still only in the hands of a nation which, we know, will never use it except in the cause of right and freedom, but it may well be that in a few years this awful agency of destruction will be widespread and that the catastrophe following from its use by several warring nations will not only bring to an end all that we call civilisation but may possibly disintegrate the globe itself.

I now sum up the propositions which are before you. Our constant aim must be to build and fortify the United Nations Organisation. Under and within that world concept we must re-create the European family in a regional structure called, it may be, the United States of Europe, and the first practical step will be to form a Council of Europe. If at first all the States of Europe are not willing or able to join a union we must nevertheless proceed to assemble and combine those who will and who can. The salvation of the common people of every race and every land from war and servitude must be established on solid foundations, and must be created by the readiness of all men and women to die rather than to submit to tyranny. In this urgent work France and Germany must take the lead together. Great Britain, the British Commonwealth of Nations, mighty America — and, I trust, Soviet Russia, for then indeed all would be well — must be the friends and sponsors of the new Europe and must champion its right to live. Therefore I say to you “Let Europe arise!”