

The Resistance and the European idea

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The Resistance and the European idea

The New Order, European and racist, as promoted during the war by the Nazis, had not discouraged keen supporters of European unity. On the contrary, some resistance groups, inspired initially by patriotic sentiments, had gradually been forced to think more at a European level. They believed more than ever in the need to build a democratic Europe along the lines proposed by the militant anti-fascists and federalists Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi in their *Manifesto for a free and united Europe*. Written on Ventotene, a small island belonging to the Ponza Archipelago in the Tyrrhenian Sea, to which they had been exiled and placed under constant surveillance, the Manifesto was secretly broadcast in the summer of 1941. In this original text, Spinelli compared the union of Europe to the formation of a state. He saw the European Federation as a pillar of world peace. In 1943, Spinelli founded the Italian European Federalist Movement in Milan.

At the same time, transnational contacts between various resistance movements were formally established and culminated on 20 May 1944 in the adoption in Geneva of a *Manifesto of the European Resistance*. In this anti-fascist declaration, which bears the signatures of Léon Blum, Pastor Willem Visser 't Hooft and Altiero Spinelli, the resistance movements urged the creation of a federal union between the peoples of Europe. The text declared that the objectives of the Resistance could be attained only if all countries agreed to abandon the dogma of the absolute sovereignty of states and to accept integration into a federal organisation, which alone would be capable of ensuring the peaceful participation of the German people in European life. The Manifesto also argued the case for the establishment of a government that would be accountable to the peoples of the Member States of the federation, for an army subject to the federal government and excluding all national contingents, and for a supreme court competent to rule on issues relating to the interpretation of the federal constitution and to resolve any possible disagreements between Member States of the federation. Finally, the Geneva Declaration called for the implementation of universal values such as democracy, social justice and respect for human rights. A Provisional Committee for the European Federation was also set up to act as a liaison office. On 7 July 1944, the participants in the Geneva international conference approved a new draft declaration of European resistance fighters which, disseminated in secret, secured majority support.

In London, some intellectuals and politicians in exile were also thinking about the Europe of the future and drew up various plans for a European federation. In late 1942, the fortunes of war turned more and more in favour of the Allies. The German debacle in Russia and the entry of the United States into the war against the Axis forces (in December 1941) effectively changed the course of events and strengthened the confidence of the Allies in ultimate victory. The various governments-in-exile, sensing that German defeat was in sight, concentrated their minds more keenly on their future as part of a reorganised post-war world. From that time on, the major world powers occupied the international stage on their own, with the small European countries feeling excluded. For their part, they were most alarmed about American plans to simplify the geopolitical map of Europe. Those plans envisaged in particular the elimination of small countries deemed to be factors for international instability. American and British financial experts also reviewed the possibility of establishing a new international monetary system and the revival of world trade under Anglo-American leadership.

The small countries, which had no intention whatsoever of abandoning their sovereignty, immediately stepped up their mutual contacts and developed alliances and regional groupings in order to defend their interests more effectively, both in the new international economy and as part of the UN. The fight for the rights of small nations became a foreign policy objective for these countries. During the winter of 1942-1943, the Polish General W. Sikorski proposed a comprehensive plan for European regional federations. An economic union consisting of the countries bordering the North Atlantic was also under consideration. But the only concrete achievement of that period was the creation of a customs union between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg in the immediate post-war period. The Benelux monetary agreement was signed on 21 October 1943 in London. It laid down a fixed exchange rate between the Belgian franc and the Dutch guilder and established a bilateral clearing mechanism. The Belgian-Netherlands-Luxembourg Customs Convention was signed on 5 September 1944. It established a tariff community and envisaged, in the long term, the creation of an economic union between the three countries.