

## 'The European spirit' from Il nuovo Corriere della Sera (24 September 1946)

**Caption:** On 24 September 1946, commenting on the fact that several federalist Congresses have been held in Switzerland, the Italian daily newspaper Il nuovo Corriere della Sera attempts to define the notion of a European spirit and emphasises its characteristic values.

**Source:** Il nuovo Corriere della Sera. 24.09.1946, n° 117; anno 71. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Spirito europeo", auteur:Flora, Francesco , p. 1.

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**Last updated:** 05/07/2016

## The European spirit

These ‘Rencontres Internationales de Genève’, organised by a committee that brought together Switzerland’s most famous names, and attended by scholars, philosophers and political theorists from all parts of Europe, have certainly succeeded in providing motivation and stimuli culturally and, indeed, politically as well: we need think only of Winston Churchill’s recent speech on the United States of Europe, which was itself delivered in Switzerland and very clearly reflected the influence of these discussions.

Those who foregathered in the lecture hall of the University of Geneva, from Benda to Jaspers, from Rougemont to De Salis, from Guéhenno to Spender, from Lucács and Bernanos to the present writer, may have come from different cultural backgrounds and expressed themselves in terms that were anything but univocal, yet they were able to find extensive common ground on the meaning of the European spirit, and even went so far as to expound it in specifically political terms, although there was, rightly, a prevalent concern for cultural matters.

It was my turn to speak after Benda, on the second day of the proceedings: my brief was to express in historical terms the essence of the European spirit (in the sense, so specific to our culture, that the word ‘history’ has acquired since Croce): that is, the result of processes of historical synthesis, where the mind can seek enlightenment on present actions.

The European spirit cannot be confined within rigid geographical boundaries or tied to fixed dates within a thousand-year calendar. At a vital point in human development, the spirit of Europe, in its positive aspects, embodied the civilisations of Greece and Rome, which paved the way for Christianity; it comprised that constant Orphism and humanism that mediocre and presumptuous schoolboys confuse with certain manifestations of academic pedantry, yet which thinkers identify with the arts of the intellect and with human responsibility, the only virtues that brought man forth from the ever-regenerating primeval forest and carry him forward still.

That is not to deny that non-European themes within, and contributions to, our unique human civilisation are also valid; but there is no doubt that it was Europe that established in universal terms the ideas and the arts that are available to us today as a premise for future action, that is, as works of freedom. It was Europe, too, with that propensity for synthesis that I have traced back to verbal and moral classicism — in short, classicism of the mind and classicism of action — that formulated the very concept of universal humanity, for all the peoples of the earth. One need only think of the *Propaganda fide* or, in secular terms, the colonial spirit.

Throughout European history, there have been varying degrees of that European spirit that I have linked to classicism and liberty — in other words, to the virtues that find their common origin in man. A great country like Germany, for example, has made a gigantic effort throughout its history to master that total humanism and spread it worldwide: many layers of our souls are nourished by the philosophy of Kant, the poetry of Goethe, the music of Bach. Yet, for all its genius, Germany has never permanently mastered the Olympian and tragic harmony that is classicism, in thought and in deed.

Thus it happened that Germany, at the centre of that Europe where it seemed naturally destined to act as a force for cohesion and unity, became instead a terrible force for disintegration which, with its inhuman and decadent racist myth of the warrior people, eventually endeavoured to bring about not only its own suicide but also that of Europe itself. And yet there is still enormous European virtue in the inventive and industrious German people, a Goethean virtue which Germany will have to re-embrace in order to work among equals for our common civilisation; after all, a Europe without that Goethean Germany, tomorrow’s democratic Germany, is inconceivable.

Russia is today flexing its muscles and casting its spells on the world — the Russia that Dostoevsky said was not and could not be understood in Europe, attributing that incomprehension to the utterly different natures of the Russian and European characters. Russia too emerged from pre-history when it came into contact with the Greeks of Byzantium and then gradually embraced Christianity, as revealed to it by the art

of reading and writing, through religion and its sacred texts. In more recent times, the Russian genius forged ever closer links with European civilisation, until the great narrative fiction and great music of Russia came to influence Europe in their turn. And when communism reached Russia from the old Europe, Russia adopted it in an experiment that was completely its own and completely original, in a society that had not experienced the upheavals of the previous century in Europe and the European colonies, or participated in the economic, political or philosophical cycle of the Europeans. But Russia, too, will inevitably be led to look deeper into its European past as the operative virtue of future action.

As for America, whose industrial and mechanised civilisation was after all created by the children of Europe (and is sustained by the Christian faith, which by the time it reached the Americans had already been pacified, following the cruel religious wars in Europe), geography may have placed it in a different continent, but history makes demands on it in the world that must be referred to as European. America, in giving deeper thought to its past, will be unable to return to the pre-Columbian era but will have to look to the history of Europe.

If the European spirit is that humanistic synthesis that I have called it, deepening and broadening freedom throughout the world, so that each individual not only bears the responsibility for his own thoughts and deeds but also for the universal from which he cannot escape, it is evident that there has grown up, within Europe itself, the antithesis of the European spirit, in practice and in theory, whenever — questioning, as we must, the principles that govern civil society — we go too far and find ourselves questioning the human mind and conscience, which are themselves the sources of doubt and inquiry. On the mental and moral level, the European spirit, as a golden standard and form of classicism, in deed and in thought, must restore the positive values as opposed to those negative values that reduced contemporary society to sickness and contributed to the outbreak of war.

It appeared at one time that unreason, unmasked of necessity by reason, was taking the place of reason, that the unconscious, unmasked by the conscious mind, was taking the place of the conscious, sleep that of wakefulness, arbitrary intent that of will, enslavement to instinct that of moral responsibility, the ferocity of war that of Christian compassion, fatalistic subjection to the senses or sex that of freedom, action for action's sake that of informed action, madness that of simple wisdom, anarchy that of order. Culture, rather than politics, had reduced man to that level, and that is the responsibility of culture. Now we must try to rediscover in the European spirit its vital and positive characteristics; the negative characteristics serving only to provide the stimulus of contrast.

On a more strictly political level, a European federation, a federation of the peoples of the old Europe, appears to be a necessity, although extremely difficult to achieve, since today we measure the world on a genuinely universal scale. The issue is not to establish a new bloc to oppose existing blocs and thus create, alas, the conditions for further wars, but to establish Europe as a historical province in the society of peoples.

I do not know what purer mission the European spirit could have. But in a world whose inhabitants, having split the atom, seem to be unafraid of cosmic suicide, which is fortunately impossible, the sceptics will try to tell us that our enterprise is doomed before it begins. Let us say, rather, that it is succeeding before it begins: a work of truth is never futile, even when it seems completely overwhelmed. No one can escape from his own duty and his own responsibility.

Francesco Flora