

Address given by Paul Reynaud to the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 9 August 1950)

Caption: On 9 August 1950, commenting on the geopolitical implications of the Korean War from the platform of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Frenchman, Paul Reynaud, urges European countries to organise their common defence.

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[...]

So much for our mistakes. Allow me now to say a word about the Message, this “Speech from the Throne” from the Committee of Ministers.

The main interest of the Message is to be found in the last sentence. Everyone is agreed on that. We are asked to express our solidarity with the action taken by the United Nations, that is, to approve of its armed intervention in Korea. We are therefore asked by implication whether the United Nations Organisation has not over-estimated its strength, by employing it to the maximum in a secondary theatre of action, and if it is not in danger of losing the decisive battle in the principal theatre, Europe, upon which the fate of mankind depends. Therefore, the problem put before us by the Committee of Ministers is the whole problem of defending what I might almost describe as the life and the democratic basis of Europe.

What is the significance of the fact that this question has been put to us by the Committee? It means that life is stronger than documents, because if we were forbidden to speak of the life and death of Europe, we should likewise be incapable of speaking of the economic problems of Europe, for it goes without saying — it is an elementary truth — that an armaments race as intensive as that which has just begun upsets the whole of economic life. Nothing would remain for our deliberations here but cultural questions, and our Assembly would be like an old lady crocheting to the distant sound of massing enemy armies. And so the Committee has been forced to take down the notice from our walls: “Reference to the imminent danger of death which hangs over Europe is strictly prohibited in the European Assembly.”

I make this answer to the Committee: Yes, we approve of the United Nations’ decision, despite the dangers which may spring therefrom. We do so because there are moral values which command our lives in democratic countries, which are the mortar binding the democracies on each side of the Atlantic. Yes, we here in Europe, are following with the same passionate interest as our American friends the deeds of valour of their soldiers who have crossed an ocean, travelled thousands upon thousands of miles to fight, in the most difficult conditions, to defend our common ideal. I do ask permission, however, to draw for Europe the lessons of this experience. They urgently require to be drawn. Supposing that to-morrow an American troopship were to be torpedoed between Korea and Japan. Even if the submarine which sank it were to fly the Korean flag, there is every chance that it would mean war. In these circumstances, it is now, immediately, that we must solve the problem.

Korea is one sector of the front among so many others. It is a sector in which men are fighting, I shall be told, but it is not the only one. In Indo-China men are fighting. For the last five years Frenchmen have been dying there in the defence of our common ideal just as American soldiers are dying today in Korea. In British Malaya our British friends are being killed also for the same cause. Perhaps we shall see to-morrow other fronts springing into flame, other sectors of the “hot-war” front, as the saying is to-day. But let us make no mistake about it! The major stake lies in Western Europe. Remember Lenin’s letter to Clara Zetkin: “The shortest route from Moscow to Paris lies through Peking, Tokio and Calcutta.”

The Korean pawn has been pushed forward by the Soviet finger, but another pawn may well be pushed forward elsewhere. The long and careful preparation of the Communist army in North Korea, wonderfully well armed and equipped, has other and similar parallels elsewhere. Not very far from where we speak, in Eastern Germany, we see the levy of another army, under the guise of a police force — a police with a marine section, which is rather odd. Is this pawn to be moved forward one day, as was the Korean pawn? That day will bring war.

Let us glance for a moment at what the situation would be if there were war. Mr. Edelman said yesterday that I had alarmed Europe — I hope I did — by the figures which I gave about Russian strength. In actual fact, the figures which I gave to the French Chamber on the strength of Russia were those drawn from a source which my friend Mr. Edelman will not contest, since that source was Mr. Shinwell. What I contributed to that Debate was one question and one reply. Here is the question: Against what army have the

Russians piled up such strength: 175 active divisions, 25,000 tanks, 19,000 military aircraft? Where is the army these are meant to meet? The answer is that it is a phantom army, for on this side of the Iron Curtain there stand but a dozen divisions.

It is upon this point that reproaches have been levelled at me. I have heard it said that it is unwise to tell the people the truth. But this is a truth that the enemy knows, and it would be really rather strange if it were impossible to tell it to our own peoples, as if we were not fully grown-up, and as if there were any better way of bending their energies to the task before us than to place them squarely face to face with reality, that is to say, present danger. And so I do not take it as a reproach that I have aroused public opinion. I think it is the duty of all of us to do so.

The democracies up till now have been particularly fond of one method: they have waited till war broke out before preparing themselves for it.

Well, this time, I regret to say, we shall simply have to change our methods, because the problem is no longer that of winning the last battle (which we certainly should, yet again); the problem is that of avoiding invasion, that is to say, the destruction of the élite in every country, both among the workers and among the middle classes; that is to say, to avoid those great displacements of population such as the one we have just seen in Germany — the biggest movement of population in the world's history — and the replacement of the populations driven far afield by tribes coming themselves from afar.

You remember the reply made by a Russian field-marshal to one of the Allied leaders who said to him: "You cannot start a war, you know, because you realise perfectly well you would draw down upon your heads the entire stock of American atom bombs." The Russian field-marshal replied: "That may well be, but just remember this: in the business of occupying other countries, the Germans are mere babes. If we were to occupy your country for three months, you would not recognise it any more."

That is the truth, Ladies and Gentlemen, and that is what radically alters the whole problem of war preparations. As a result, our present unpreparedness is infinitely more culpable than that which existed before the Second World War.

We have been told: "We are unprepared because we have suffered very heavy losses." True. We have been occupied, with damage both to our morale and our material wealth. But did not Soviet Russia lose some 17 million dead, according to the figures given by Mr. Vyshinsky? Did not Soviet Russia undergo material losses infinitely heavier than those of Western Europe? And, over and above all that, did not Russia, of her own accord, deprive herself of Marshall Aid?

And yet, if Europe were united, it would have at its disposal a grand total of 260 million Europeans — and of what undoubted quality, when we compare them with the inhabitants of the East, or of the Far East! — it would have scientists, more numerous and better equipped laboratories; it would have much more coal, much more steel, three times as much rolling stock, fifteen times as many ships upon the seas.

We hear a great deal about the terror inspired by the Russian masses, but something should be said also about the contempt which we should feel for Western stupidity.

We must take action. To-morrow, the steel works of the Ruhr and those of France, England and elsewhere, must be working for the re-armament of Western Europe, since it has, up till now, criminally failed to arm itself.

Yesterday M. André Philip, speaking of the European Army, said that it ought to be open to German contingents. On this point, our German colleagues, naturally, must give us their views.

Oh! I am well aware, Ladies and Gentlemen, that some are saying: "Take action? But you know perfectly well that everything depends on the United States."

No! Everything does *not* depend on the United States.

In the eyes of the United States, Europe is one front, the most important front, the one upon which they are determined to make the greatest sacrifices. But we should understand that in military matters, as in economic matters, we are living in a three-storey house; the ground floor is that of the nations, above that is the floor or Europe, and above that again is the Atlantic floor. Those who think that they can jump straight from the nations' floor to the Atlantic floor are making a great mistake, both in the military and in the economic field. American support will be all the stronger, both in the military and in the economic field, if we have been able to build a Europe which will stand erect, because we shall have had the courage to make it a reality.

How can we organise Europe? What has been so far produced by the system of intergovernmental agreements? Through force of circumstances, it has brought into being a host of committees in which eminent civil and military officials have been bogged down in impotent futility, because they have no power to act outside strict terms of reference. At every point they are obliged to ask their Government's permission.

Some time ago, our President, quite rightly, in my opinion, advised us to pass from the stage of being State officials to the stage of being statesmen. I think that therein lies the solution.

At the point which we have now reached, when we think of the incredible discrepancy between the forces facing one another, when we think of the disappointment felt by our British friends who are conscripting their young men for a period of 18 months, which is most courageous, and who find themselves in no way rewarded by the tangible results of their efforts, we reach the conclusion that it is now too late for further hesitation. We must refuse to allow ourselves to sink deeper into the quicksands of countless committees. We must place the defence of Europe in the hands of the statesmen. We must have a Minister of War for Europe, with the full powers of a Minister of War. If one were to seek a statesman whose prestige is without comparison throughout the world, who has been first among all war leaders, there would be no need, Ladies and Gentlemen, to go outside the bounds of this Assembly to find him.

Whether we like it or not, we must take the plunge, we must surrender a portion of our sovereignty. Are we to give the world the spectacle of our clinging to our respective sovereignties up to, and beyond, the point of suicide? Are we to deserve to have Mr. Baldwin's words applied to us, spoken two or three years before the War, in the House of Commons, "A democracy is always two years behind a dictatorship."

I have put precise proposals before you. But, I shall be asked, if the Committee of Ministers, completely out of touch with the dramatic nature of the times in which we live, rejects all such reforms, if it refuses to crystallise in action the spirit of Europe which is alive in this Assembly, if the refusal of a single one of its members is to be allowed to continue to make the Committee of Ministers a machine for saying "No" — what, then, are you going to do about it?

Well, Ladies and Gentlemen, if we had to choose between Europe and a Council of Europe which refused to allow itself to develop, there would be many among us here who would leave the Council of Europe by the wayside, and go on without it.