

Address given by Joseph Retinger on the future of the European continent (London, 7 May 1946)

Caption: On 7 May 1946, Joseph Retinger, Polish co-founder of the Independent League for European Cooperation (ILEC), delivers an address at the Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs in London in which he calls on Europeans of good will to welcome closer relations between the Western and Eastern parts of the Old Continent.

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The European Continent?

From the fall of the Roman Empire down to this emergence of the present critical situation the European Continent has always been a spiritual, intellectual, moral and artistic entity. Often, as in the Middle Ages, this entity was boxed and crowned by a political and moral superstructure, but even when this was not the case, even during the darkest periods of Continental wars, the component states were constantly under the cultural influence of each other and mutually interdependent, if not politically, at least economically and intellectually.

For us members of the White Race the Continent is practically our only source of inspiration in ethics, art, science and in our social activities. The achievements of the European Continent in these spheres have been so inter-related and to so large an extent shared by several, that it is impossible to single out any one nation as the predominant one in any given activity. That the Continent was, a unity used to be manifest to all and has been many times proclaimed both by the churches and by temporal powers. During long centuries it was an accepted fact that the Continent was ruled by the doctrine of the Universal Roman Church, whose sway was for a long time supported by the hierarchy of the Feudal system. Even after it had revolted against Rome, the Protestant Church still continued to champion and fight for the unity of the Continent.

Some two hundred years ago, however, conditions began to change. They changed very slowly and so imperceptibly, that right up to modern times neither the overwhelming importance of the Continent as a whole, nor its unity ever came to be questioned. But the changes did occur and now the Continent is no longer a unit, I hope, for only a very short time. This change has been brought about mainly by three things. In the first place the Continental populations transplanted overseas came to feel at home in their new countries and turned their eyes away from Europe. Then, secondly, ultra-European Powers have been driven (or permitted) to take a major interest in Continental affairs and, obviously, their interests have always run counter to the maintenance of Continental unity. Lastly, since 1914 the principal Big Powers of the Continent have failed to exercise their continental functions and still do so, while the smaller states alone have not the power to preserve the cohesion of the Continent, nor have they all the will, since some are manifestly marginal and others have in the course of the years become satellites of non-European Powers.

It was at the beginning of the 10th century that the peoples of the Continent found homes for themselves, and permanent homes at that, in the Americas, in South Africa, in Australia and in New Zealand. In Boston a Winthrop, in Brazil a Braganza, in New Zealand a Mackintosh, they settled there for better or for worse, with no idea or even plan of ever returning to their home countries, with which they remained attached only by the ties of sentiment or because they required their economic or cultural support.

Sine the beginning of the 19th century the White Race has no longer been confined to the Continent of Europe and its activities overseas have become as important as they are at home. (In our own times the United States of America have achieved a happiness and wealth far exceeding anything dreamed of by the European.) This change in the relative importance of the various parts of the world was first realized by England, which, from being a mere annex to the Continent, as she used to be before the days of Queen Elisabeth, became an Oceanic Power. By the middle of the Victorian era her overseas activities and interests already exceeded her continental ones and consequently in the period that followed she could at last afford a policy of "splendid isolation".

The Europeans, however, found their way not only to the so-called "new" countries, but to others as well, so that the influence of European achievements became a permanent factor in the states with which they came in contact and not just sporadic, as it had been before. The result of the thought and politics of these extra-European states being permanently subjected to European influence was that they were no longer able to do without the Continent, but were obliged to watch most closely what was going on there. This being so, they in their turn were bound to exert some influence upon it. For example, even before the Spanish-American war the United States were subjecting every movement of European politics and every social trend to the

most careful scrutiny, while within our own time they have taken a most important, part in Continental politics, at the same time turning from a debtor country into a creditor one. The same can be said, though to a lesser extent, of South America, while for two generations Japan tried, though rather clumsily, to penetrate the mind and heart of the Continent.

The extra-Continental Power to become most interested, in Europe has been Russia. Though it may seem exaggerated to call Russia extra-European, seeing that her territory extends far into Europe, yet up to the end of the 18th century her main interests were in Asia and her way of life Asiatic, rather than European. That, at least, was the opinion of the Western European countries and it must be remembered that in the politics of the Church, both of Rome and of the Reformation, as well as in the vast international schemes of Henry IV and Louis XIV's policy, Russia was always considered an extraneous body.

The end of the period during which the white man spread out activities over the whole globe saw the Continent itself undergoing a process of internal disruption. Previously and for many centuries every important step in international politics was taken in the name and based on the unity of the European Continent and on the cohesion of its states. The Treaty of Westphalia, the Congress of Vienna, the very doctrine of the Balance of Power assumed not only the existence of several Big Powers and several smaller, but opulent and independent states, but also a certain degree of cohesion among them. Major questions were settled by the more or less equally powerful states of France, Austria, Spain, Prussia and later, Italy, with Russia, England and, to a lesser extent; Turkey taking a hand in questions that affected the geographical fringes of the Continent; yet the smaller states like Poland and Sweden, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium and Denmark, and even the Balkan countries, were always important members of the European community of nations and there were times when some of them played almost leading roles in the affairs of the Continent, as Poland did, in the 16th and 17th centuries, Sweden in the 17th century and the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th.

On the Continent today there are no Big Powers, for they have ceased to function as such. Austria was knocked out after the Great War; the recent conflict has put Italy and Germany out of the running for many years to come; Spain has long been in decline and France is not in a position, for the time being at any rate, to fulfil her function of a Great Power on anything like terms of equality with the victorious Powers. This position would not have been so disastrous, if the smaller states had gained in power and influence, but their position is, at the best, little better than that of the German principalities during the Congress of Erfurt. Those that are not satellites of one or other of the Great Powers must, at least, be most circumspect in any independent action they may take in foreign politics.

At the present moment the fate of the Continent lies in the hands of the Big Five, only one of which, France, is of the Continent. China, obviously, has as yet nothing to do with the Continent, the United States of North America, which for a hundred years have been the protagonists of the Monroe doctrine, do not pretend to be a European Power, while Russia, according to her greatest thinker and statesman, Lenin, should be more interested in Asiatic, than in, Continental affairs, were it not for the struggle against capitalism, which is supposed to be centred on the Continent. Alone, Britain, though not strictly a Continental Power, is trying to keep the peace within the Continent, for, notwithstanding the changes that have taken place in her politics, she is atavistically Continental and she is, besides, its nearest neighbour, its culture is also hers while it represents her most essential and most logical market.

The problem of whether or not the Continent is to remain the main source of inspiration for our spiritual, intellectual and artistic endeavour, has today lost in importance beside that of the present and future welfare, the existence even, of its inhabitants, who, after all, represent the most valuable human element in the world. Our main problem, therefore, is that of achieving peace and security for the Continent.

In modern times there have been put forward only two proposals for the unification of the Continent, the one based on economic theory, Hitler's "New Order," and the other on socialist ideology, the communist state. Now these are both extremes and the Poles, who stood at the confluence of these two ideas, rejected them both, since neither offers them the least chance of preserving their national culture and spiritual independence.

But, perceiving the changes taking place in the international complexion of the Continent and wishing to participate fully in Continental activities, the Poles, or at least some of them, put forward and tried to carry through another idea, which would have ensured the full co-operation of all Continental nations in the affairs of the Continent for their mutual benefit and which would yet not conflict with the legitimate aspirations of the Poles or any other nation.

It was General Sikorski, the late Prime Minister of Poland, who with the help of a handful of his friends and colleagues succeeded in elaborating such a new framework for the political and economic system of the Continent and in taking the first steps towards putting it into effect.

General Sikorski and his friends had been active in public life since before the First World War. They were familiar with the difficulties of Poland's international situation and knew how she suffered from the mutual jealousies of the Big Powers, from the lack of co-operation among the smaller ones and from the spirit of mutual suspicion that everywhere prevailed. Poland suffered from the imperialistic schemes of some of her neighbours, but she suffered, too, from the expansionist plans of Marshal Pilsudski and his followers and from the isolation these brought upon her in international affairs.

As early as some years before the last war General Sikorski, myself and a few others came to realize that Poland could not remain a marginal country, nor must she indulge in schemes that might appear to threaten her neighbours, but must do her best to achieve the greatest possible degree of co-operation both with her immediate neighbours and also with all those other states, which found themselves in analogous positions. Any solution of the Continental problem had to be Constructive and not negative; more it would have to be based on equality of terms and reciprocity of duties. For Poland, as for any other of the smaller states, perhaps for the larger, ones as well, there can be no unilateral solution of international problems. Present conditions demand a long series of far-reaching political compromises, if a happier and more peaceful political future is to be achieved.

The transitory period between the two wars taught us many things, but there was no lesson it brought home to us more forcibly than that there is no future for any nation that has not a sound economic basis, that only if its economic foundations are sound can any country flourish or a government lead it to prosperity. There was another lesson, too, we learned from this period of transition, namely that commercial treaties are no safeguard for the leaser countries, because they may be changed unexpectedly by agreements among the bigger Powers, which take no account of the necessities of the smaller ones, or may at any time be nullified by sudden unilateral decisions, such as the Ottawa Agreements or the German denunciation of the German-Polish Economic Agreements.

Ways and means must be found of making agreements, whether signed or not, lasting and reliable. In other words, nations and their governments must be linked with ties that cannot be broken. It was out of the necessity for this that emerged the idea of blocks of nations federated in such a way as to ensure their cohesion and the maximum amount of willing co-operation among them.

There is a precedent for such a federal block of nations in the past history of Poland herself. In the 15th century she concluded a union with Lithuania (incorporating the White Russians), which worked most successfully for all concerned until the downfall of Poland, and it was this which inspired my late chief and friend, General Sikorski, to try, almost as soon as he became the guardian of the Polish State abroad, to find a way of getting the Continental states to co-operate for the benefit of them all. His idea and that of his handful of assistants was for a system of co-operation between the different states and not, I repeat, not a unification of the whole Continent.

We spent 1939 and 1940 maturing our ideas. The first public indication of them was given as early as November, 1939, in a speech General Sikorski made before the Foreign Prow Association in London. He said then, that he could not envisage any hopeful outcome of the war, unless it produced some system of democratic co-operation among the nations of the Continent, which would allow of the problems of economic reconstruction being peacefully settled and produce a true balance of power. It was not enough for

the peoples to be democratic, but their Governments must be so too and also the method of their co-operation.

Sikorski was also the first active European statesman to indicate publicly and officially, that the European states ought to relinquish part of their sovereignty for the common interest.

This Polish proposal for the co-operation of the Continental States was arrived at after many consultations with the foremost statesmen and politicians of the various countries, whom General Sikorski or I were able to reach during those turbulent days. We approached three British Cabinet Ministers, the leading lights among the Belgians, the Yugoslavs, the Dutch, and the Greeks. Everybody knows that Benes and Masaryk were for a long time in open agreement with us. General Sikorski devoted a large portion of the time he spent talking with Stalin to this subject and he never lost an opportunity of discussing it with Winston Churchill or President Roosevelt.

Briefly our idea was to establish in Europe some five or six regional, federal blocks more or less equal in economic and military potentialities which, though strong enough to defend themselves against attack, would be economic organizations whose foremost need would be Peace. I remember that once in 1941, in a three-cornered conversation between General Sikorski, Mr. Bevin and myself, Bevin insisted that peace could only be established in the world, if the Continental states were so fully occupied and interested in improving their economic lot, that they had no time to think about imperialistic expansion. From the point of view of British Labour, Mr. Bevin insisted, everything must be done to raise the economic level of the Continental peoples, especially that of the undernourished population of Eastern Europe, if for no other reason than to prevent their cheap labour from competing too acutely with the workers of Britain and the West, whose standards of living had been higher for generations. These regional, federal blocks were to be so composed as to exclude, or at least diminish, the danger of their harbouring desires for territorial expansion. Thus the Polish block, for instance, was to include Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and, perhaps, Austria. There was little likelihood of the desire to conquer neighbouring countries arising here. Nor was a Balkan Union likely to lead to dissension among the Bulgars, Serbs or Greeks, since all would be participating in the blessings of an improved economic fabric.

I must emphasize that behind our proposals there was never any thought or intention of creating so-called "sanitary" or other cordons; nor were our schemes in any way inspired by the British, though Mr. Churchill and Mr. Eden regarded the constructive part of them without displeasure and they did receive great moral support from Mr. Bevin and Sir Stafford Cripps. That was why General Sikorski was no confident, that he could not be suspected of disloyalty or double-dealing, when he discussed his proposals at length with Mr. Stalin. To him he confided his plans and they certainly did not meet with disapproval, as is obvious if you read the text of the Stalin-Sikorski declaration of 4th December, 1941, especially that part referring to mutual co-operation. Our plan was above-board and, therefore, we hid it from nobody, neither from the British Government, nor from President Roosevelt, nor from the Communists. As a preliminary to achieving this co-operation we initiated the periodical, informal gatherings of the Continental Prime Ministers, which were to last until Sikorski's tragic death and it was on our initiative that a committee of the Foreign Ministers of the Continental Countries was set up, which met periodically over a period of two years and produced some excellent work. We made a provisional agreement with President Benes for the creation of a Central-Eastern block and this was followed by much practical work towards Polish-Czech economic and military collaboration.

In all that we did, however, we were most careful not to be carried away by unrealistic Utopianism. Conscious of the impossibility of attaining perfection and realizing that we should have to approach our goal with the utmost circumspection, especially as we, after all, represented but a small section of the Continent, we refrained from embarking on schemes or dreaming dreams beyond our strength to carry out. Anxious as we were to have our ideas adopted by the smaller Western countries and the Scandinavian ones, we confined our proposals to regional blocks within our own sphere of natural influence, namely the Central-Eastern and Balkan blocks. A world federation was not for us to suggest.

Collaboration we strove for, but Fate has willed it otherwise. Post-war mental chaos, the technique of the

final military operations, mutual suspicion, the suspension of diplomatic relations between Soviet Russia and Poland and, not least, the death of General Sikorski himself, have caused all our schemes to come to nothing — for the time being only, I hope. Instead of collaboration, the complacency of some of the Big Powers and the rivalries between them have led to the division, in fact if not in theory, of the Continent into two zones of influence and thus sewn the seed, perhaps, of a much greater conflict. Indeed, this physical division of the Continent is rapidly leading up to another catastrophe, for it has renewed the eternal conflict between East and West.

Whatever the geo-political or psychological reasons may be, they are the consequences of changes in the rate of increase of the populations of Asia and the Continent and the need for “Lebenstraum,” now for the barbarians of the East, now for the civilizators of the West, the fact remains that since times immemorial there has always existed a tremendous antagonism between the Orient and the Occident. From time to time this antagonism has flared up and caused a major conflagration. The attack has been launched from either side: the Persians, Attila, Ghenghis Khan, the Turks; then Augustus, the Crusades and the invasion of the Far East by Europeans during the age of geographical discoveries. One thing, however, stands out clear and that is, that there is a profound cleavage between the Eastern and Western mentality and general psychological make-up and, hence, misunderstanding of one another. The Western societies have developed an individualistic way of life and thought, realistic in their actions and judgments. The peoples of the East are dominated by the tendency to think collectively. In the West the mainspring of public activity has for many centuries been the individual; the ferment of the individual is at the back of the greatest factor in European public life, namely PUBLIC OPINION, which even during those periods of temporary autocratic rule has always risen up and broken through every chain. The political achievements of the East, however, have usually been the result of collectivist ways of thinking and that is why discipline is so much easier to achieve in the East than it is in the West (caste against hierarchy); that is why collective mysticism is the rule of Eastern religions and practical ethics: the basis of the European ones. The individual with his egotistical formula for the attainment of happiness and salvation is the deciding factor in Europe, while the Eastern civilizations are ruled by mass psychology.

Remembering all this, I cannot but be afraid that this division of the Continent into two zones of interest may transfer the scene of the conflict to Europe itself. Unintentionally and almost without seeming to pay attention to it, we are sliding into a renewal of the conflict between the East and the West, in which Russia will be the champion of the East and the Anglo-Saxons the protagonists of the West. Both are extra-European Powers, with this difference that the Anglo-Saxons are slowly withdrawing from the Continent, while Russia is getting closer and closer to it. The battlefield will be the Continent. The Continent will become the victor's spoils and may well be destroyed in the process

But is this conflict inevitable? I believe that, at the present stage, it is not. Both parties contributed too much towards winning the last war; there have been too many exchanges of views, too many lessons learned from each other, for there not to be some hope, that the abyss may be bridged.

I can observe a real lessening in the suspicions of the East, nor is the West nearly so sure of its superiority, as it was before it learned to admire the fantastic courage of the East. That in itself is a consolation and a breath of hope. Another hopeful sign is the very length of the present deadlock. The West is enlisting the help of its traditional arm: procrastination, experience, patience; while the East is producing all its old tricks out of the bag: surprise, frontal attack, war-of-nerves.

Some people compare the present crisis to the period of appeasement of 1938-1939, but I cannot perceive the resemblance. The appeasement policy those years was due to fear, to a lack of preparedness, while the length of the present crisis is due on the one hand to the humanitarian instinct of politicians unwilling to involve their peoples in more sacrifices and, on the other, to the desire to consolidate what has already been won. Also both sides are tired.

Suspicion can be removed and geo-politics can give way to economic co-operation, providing there is a free area of neutral ground between the contending parties, a free strip of insulating material between the contending parties, a free strip of insulating material between the two points of view... the European

Continent an entity again.

Postscript, 30th August, 1946

Strip the present situation of its superficialities and it's evident that the fight is on. Across its body East and West are grappling, while the Continent lies helpless, disunited and feverishly gasping for breath. Occasionally its voice can be heard through the mouth of the Belgians or the Dutch, but more often its spokesman is Australia, Canada or South Africa, for it is the Dominions, who are not themselves directly threatened and to whom the perspective of distance gives a broader outlook, that have the better opportunity of voicing the danger to the Future in the scramble for the Present.

Their perception is clearer than that of the Big Powers of whom they have less reason to be scared, than have the smaller European states, and they can see that the disintegration of the Continent is bound to entail further restrictions on the liberty of the individual in relation to the state and to decrease the share the Continent can take in the mechanism of international economic exchange.

At the moment there are only four ways of solving the problem of the Continent of Europe:

1. To make it a free market for Anglo-Saxon expansion, or,
2. To let it become an appendage to the Russian Empire and a laboratory for experiments in Communism.

In the first event the lack of any internal ideological, psychological or political framework is bound to perpetuate its present state of general chaos, while, if it becomes an appendage of the Russian Empire, there is no doubt whatever that its peoples will engage in a continuous struggle against the culturally alien system that will be imposed upon them, while their economic standard is bound to be lowered to the level prevailing in the paramount Russian Empire.

3. The Continent might be permanently divided into two zones, but this per se will automatically perpetuate the present conflict.

4. Or one could create a free Continent, economically cohesive and politically unified, and, hence, anti-authoritarian.

The present disastrous position of the Continent is a direct result of three unfortunate facts: 1. although it contains the greatest agglomeration of mankind at its highest from the economic, social and spiritual aspect, it is either incapable of presenting or ignorant of how to present its grievances and projects; 2. it lacks the physical power to back up its point of view; 3. it is devoid of any unifying framework and consequently cannot work out its own salvation.

It is proverbially the act of a fool to try and make an omelette without eggs, but that is what the Big Powers are trying to do. Without the Continent, without even consulting it, they are trying to shape its destiny. The East because it wishes to dictate the shape of the Continent, which it will fashion by means of coercion or that other terror called propaganda. The West because it considers itself both wise enough and strong enough to do without the Continent.

As things are at present the chance of the Continent taking any unified or organised part in Continental affairs is small, but still it does exist. That it should do so, is not yet outside the bounds of possibility.

To arrive at a practical plan for creating a measure of cohesion among the Continental states, one must proceed by the process of elimination. The obvious solution, a Congress of all the Continental Powers, must be ruled out, because there are several factors that would make it unacceptable. In the first place it would have to include enemy countries, which none of the victorious ones would stomach, and also the neutral countries would have to be represented at it, but the belligerent nations still refuse to treat them on a basis of equality. Then the whole plan would be unacceptable to Russia and its satellites, nor would it find great

favour in Western eyes, for it would mean that the Continent would cease to be a pawn in their own campaign.

However, it would be possible for the smaller of the Western Continental powers to initiate consultations and upon this framework a unified Continent might well be built. France cannot take this step, for she is too busy trying to adapt herself to the new order of post-war things, but some of the smaller countries which are displaying such tremendous energy in their internal re-construction, might well take the initiative.

At present the Continental states have their eyes glued each on its patch of ground, which they are busily trying to weed. If this weeding is to serve any purpose, they must raise their eyes and look both back and forward: back to the old unity of the Continent and forward to its renewed unification.

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