

The Congress of Europe in The Hague (7–10 May 1948) – Introduction

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a variety of movements militating actively in favour of European unity emerged in Western Europe. It soon became clear, however, that, while their diversity brought power and depth to the European endeavour, their fragmentation tended to weaken the cause they sought to defend. Was it not something of a paradox that the advocates of European union were not, in the first instance, striving for such union among themselves? Hence the decision to establish, in November 1947, an International Committee of the Movements for European Unity. This comprised the main movements, with the exception of the European Parliamentary Union (EPU) which, for a period, refused to join the Committee.

The Committee took the immediate decision to raise awareness of its project among the political and economic decision-makers. But it also wished, by organising a major gathering in support of a united Europe, to influence public opinion. This it did with the Hague Congress in May 1948. The Congress, which opened with an address by Princess Juliana of the Netherlands and a speech given by the former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was attended by over 800 eminent persons of all political hues. More than 30 countries were represented by a delegation or by observers. The Congress attracted statesmen, parliamentarians, industrialists, trade unionists, church leaders, journalists and academics. This was an ambitious Congress which set itself three objectives: to demonstrate the existence, in all free countries of Europe, of a body of public opinion in support of European unity, to discuss the challenges posed by European unity and propose practical solutions to governments and to give new impetus to the international publicity campaign. The work of the Congress was divided, over three days, among three committees: a Political Committee, an Economic and Social Committee and a Cultural Committee.

For the first time, a majority of pro-European militants, some of them active since the interwar period, met under one roof. The enthusiasm generated in this way created a quite special atmosphere. It was soon apparent, nevertheless, that the European movements were divided among themselves. Two tendencies could be distinguished. The 'unionists', on the one hand, remained resolutely opposed to anything which might limit state sovereignty. They were, admittedly, prepared to establish relations and international alliances, but they deemed it important to proceed gradually and with caution. The 'federalists', on the other hand, called for the creation, as a matter of urgency, of a federation vested with its own powers which could be enforced upon the Member States. Some were even supporters of a Proudhonian or 'integral' line, advocating prior modification of the Member States' internal structures by means of political, economic and cultural decentralisation. At the end of the deliberations, the participants in the Congress drafted a series of recommendations and adopted resolutions calling, in particular, for the prompt establishment of a European deliberative assembly, for the drafting of a Charter of Human Rights coupled with a Court of Justice that would enforce it, for a European economic union and for the creation of a European Cultural Centre. Thanks to the presence of 250 journalists, the event proved an unprecedented media success.

Encouraged by the success of the Hague Congress, the International Committee set about implementing the three resolutions. It was soon apparent, however, that the task was too great to be dealt with by the militant associations alone. So it was that, on 25 October 1948 in Brussels, the International Committee became the European Movement. From the outset, the Movement focused its efforts on convening a European Assembly, a project which, albeit with some adjustments, came to fruition in 1949 with the creation of the Council of Europe. The European Movement went on to organise many conferences on the economic, social and cultural issues associated with European unity. These various initiatives, arising out of the Hague Congress, mark the first steps on the long road to European unification.