

The origins of the Council of Europe

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The origins of the Council of Europe

Founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Council of Europe is Europe's oldest political organisation.

The idea of convening a European assembly first arose at the Congress of Europe, held in The Hague on 10 May 1948 by the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity. In the years immediately following the Second World War, many pro-European movements actively promoted the establishment of an organisation that would prevent a return to totalitarian regimes and would defend fundamental freedoms, peace and democracy.

The Congress closed with the participants adopting a political resolution calling for the convening of a European assembly, the drafting of a charter of human rights and the setting up of a court of justice responsible for ensuring compliance with that charter.

The United States, which was already giving financial backing to the free countries of Europe, also promoted the idea of political cooperation among the democracies of Western Europe, which might include the future Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

In July 1948, the French Government took up the idea launched at the Hague Congress and proposed the establishment of a European assembly. But the British Government was doubtful and asked for more detailed information on how exactly such an assembly was to be convened. In order to clarify the matter, the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity drew up specific proposals and presented them to the governments concerned on 18 August 1948 in the form of a memorandum.

The French Government approved the proposals set out in the August 1948 memorandum and, supported by the Belgian Government, referred the plan to the Standing Committee of the Treaty of Brussels on 2 September 1948. Consequently, France and Belgium submitted proposals to the other signatory states to the Treaty of Brussels (Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) for the setting up of a European assembly which would have a consultative role and be responsible for representing the views of the European public. The assembly would consist of representatives appointed by the various national parliaments and would adopt resolutions by a majority of votes cast.

However, the British rejected the idea of an international institution whose members were not appointed by their governments. They envisaged the establishment of a ministerial committee whose composition would vary according to the issues to be addressed and which would be accompanied by parliamentary delegations and other experts.

On 26 October 1948, in order to reconcile both positions, the Consultative Council of the Brussels Treaty decided to establish a Committee for the Study of European Unity, chaired by Édouard Herriot, which met in Paris from November 1948 to January 1949. On 15 December 1948, the Committee entrusted the task to a sub-committee, which then submitted a draft constituent text for a European union.

On 18 January 1949, however, the British Government, which was still lukewarm about the plan, submitted a new proposal. No agreement had been reached when the Committee's work came to an end two days later. Finally, on 27 and 28 January 1949, the Foreign Ministers of the five Brussels Treaty countries reached a compromise at a meeting of the Consultative

Council of the Brussels Treaty. This involved the establishment of a ministerial committee endowed with the power to take decisions and of a consultative assembly whose members were to be appointed in accordance with their own government's procedures, as had been requested by the United Kingdom.

The five Brussels Treaty countries then invited Ireland, Italy, Denmark, Norway and Sweden to attend the Conference on the establishment of a Council of Europe, held at St James's Palace in London from 3 to 5 May 1949.

Following its signature on 5 May, the organisation's Statute entered into force on 3 August 1949, the date on which Luxembourg deposited the seventh instrument of ratification with the British Government.