EUROPEAN UNITY:

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH*

ABOUT two thousand years ago Rome held full sway in Europe. Julius Caesar had changed Rome from a Mediterranean power to a Continental one, through sheer personal initiative and military genius. His adopted son and heir Augustus completed the work by advancing the frontiers of the Empire to the Danube. His main task, and glory, was to organise Roman government within the natural limits formed by the Rhine and the Danube, the African deserts and the Atlantic Ocean. Roman provinces were treated for the first time as departments of a single State, thanks to the general proconsular authority vested in the Emperor. Two thousand years ago, therefore, a considerable part of Europe was truly united under the aegis of Rome.

The story is well known of how, under less capable and more greedy hands, the government grew inefficient and unwieldy, mainly due to the vast proportions of what had become a supercontinental empire. The barbarian penetration added the *coup de grace*. A great fragment of the Empire survived in the East, based at Constantinople; but the West divided into a multiplicity of small states, when the marauding German tribes straggled over into Britain, Gaul, Spain, Italy itself and established themselves within the provinces of the Empire. Medieval civilisation – says Marc Bloch – was born in pain: and the greatest pain was not, probably, the huge destruction of life and wealth as a result of the *volkerwanderung*, but rather the abolition of political unity in the West at the hands of the Germans, heedless, as it were, of the Poet's sigh: *Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem.*

Fortunately, however, the invaders were in a way as much victims as victors. As they advanced into the Roman provinces, they encountered a Christian Church, which had become strong, especially in the towns, after it had been practically adopted by the State since Constantine and Theodosius. Following the collapse of civil authority, the well-educated and well-born bishops assumed the defence and guidance of the cities, and particularly the bishops of Rome greatly enhanced their authority and prestige as supreme defenders of civilization.

It so happened that the pagan invaders were converted to Christianity; and thus, against the political disintegration of the area where Rome had reigned supreme, we must set the gradual unification accomplished in the field of reli-

gion and culture. The Middle Ages were, as a matter of fact, the unfolding and development of a Christian Society or *Respublica Christiana*; and the notion soon developed that the final division in the world was between Christianity and the rest, between Christians and infidels. The contact with an aggressive Islam, during the three hundred years that followed the death of the Prophet in 632 A.D., brought about a territorial view of Christianity, or its identification with Europe or the West.

But what about the internal political vicissitudes of the West? The Franks, who had settled in Gaul, proved to be by far the strongest of the German tribes: in 732, under Charles Martel, they drove back the Arabs from Poitiers in one of the world's decisive battles, and then gradually subdued the neighbouring tribes south and east. On Christmas day 800 A.D. Charlemagne was crowned Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in front of the Altar of St. Peter in Rome. He was hailed 'leader and guide of all Christians'; and also *rex pater Europae*, and *Europae venerandus apex*. Western Europe was therefore reunited, and handsomely run and organised by one of those men to whom history has reserved the title of 'Great'. But after Charlemagne's long reign and that of his son, the Carolingian Empire was divided among his three grandsons and hence practically dissolved: indeed the emergence of the kingdoms of Italy, France and Germany at the Treaty of Verdun in 843 may be considered in a way the date of birth of modern Europe, for it provided the basis of all later divisions. There was, of course, *a translatio imperii Romanorum*, as it was called, when Otho I was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 962, thus ushering a never-ending feud between German Emperors and Roman Pontiffs for supreme power over Europe or Christianity, and later also between the Emperors and the newly constituted city-states of Northern Italy, until finally the Empire shrunk back to Germany, after the concession of the Golden Bull of 1356, where it survived up to the very threshold of the 19th century: long before which time, however, it had ceased to be either holy, or Roman or indeed an empire. Attempts at reconstituting Roman unity in Europe in the Middle Ages had miserably failed.

Even the religious unity of the West was shattered at the dawn of the Modern Age, when Lutheranism broke loose in Germany, and then flourished in Switzerland and England, in Northern and Western countries. Fortunately, Europe retained its cultural unity, as the Reformation coincided with the Renaissance or revival of the common classical heritage coupled with an extraordinary and extensive development of culture; yet the Reformation itself would not have cropped up, let alone flourished, if there had not existed a general disposition among German princes and European monarchs towards self-assertion and absolute government within the boundaries of their kingdoms. The modern Age, in fact, is characterized by a multiplicity of strong and rival monarchical states tending to expand both within and outside Europe, often coming into conflict with one another, thus disturbing a precarious but all-important balance of power.

The principle of the balance of power – the key to the understanding of modern European history – is highly significant. It presupposes a multiplicity of states, an underlying tension between them, and at the same time a certain relationship or unity among them. This doctrine of equilibrium was first conceived by Machiavelli and Guicciardini while considering the balance existing among the city-states of *quattrocento* Italy: Milan, Venice, Rome, Naples, with Medicean Florence as watchdog. Then in the early 17th century it was applied to European politics, to show how England was keeping the balance between rival France and Spain; it was finally adopted and expounded by English writers of the age of Queen Anne as a supreme principle of justice: 'The peace of the United Kingdom, and the general peace of Europe', said Defoe, 'must prevail over any consideration of pure justice'. In the 18th century the balance of power was generally accepted as a sort of permanent European constitution, and Abbé Mably maintained that 15th century Italy had been, in his own words, 'an image of what today is Europe'.

Significantly enough, however, after every great war that took place on the Continent, efforts were made to establish some kind of supernational order which would replace abstract ideas by a legal system of relations. Thus at the close of the Thirty Years' War, in 1648, representatives from many European States assembled, for the first time in history, to sign the Treaty of Westphalia. The conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, that had shaken Europe as an earthquake, gave rise to the Holy Alliance, with its characteristic insistence on European solidarity and unity and its neglect of the principle of nationality. After the 1st World War we had the League of Nations; and the 2nd World War gave birth to the European institutions and popular movements whose ultimate aim is the political integration of the old Continent.

The idea that unity is the solution of many of Europe's problems, especially with regard to its internal peace, is not so new. Dante probably tops the list of those men of broad vision, who stood for unity. The greatest product of Mediaevalism, Dante has justly been defined as 'the glimmer of the dawn', as his profound urge for individual and universal renewal was a direct prelude to the Renaissance. In his *De Monarchia* he expounded his theory of a universal government, by which he meant first of all a union of Western Europe under an Emperor, with the Pope as its spiritual Lord. In 1464 Podiebrad, King of Bohemia, put forward a plan to unite Christian nations against the invading Turks. In 1638 the Duc de Sully, Minister of Henry IV of France, published a grandiose scheme for the unification of Europe, under the title of Grand Design of Henry IV. In 1693 William Penn, the English Quaker who founded Pennsylvania, proposed the creation of a European Diet or Parliament to meet annually to settle all disputes by negotiation. In 1712 Abbé de Saint Pierre, an experienced French diplomat, published his Plan for Perpetual Peace in Europe, consisting in a Senate of Peace permanently in session at Utrecht. Rousseau later published a

commentary on Saint-Pierre's project, in which he advocated a 'Commonwealth of Europe'. Montesqieu and Voltaire, though producing no specific plan for European unity, defined better than anybody else the essence of Europeanism, which they identified with liberty, culture and material progress as against the despotism, stagnation and isolation of the other continents and of Asia in particular. Kant wrote a book to prove how the final outcome of history was the creation of a universal political society governed by the same laws. And finally Mazzini founded the *Giovane Italia* in 1831 and the *Giovane Europa* three years later, thereby reconciling the apparently antithetic concepts of nationality and Europeanism, as long as every nation kept to its own particular mission towards the progress of humanity.

The agony of two World Wars has galvanised the leading European statesmen into action, thus heralding a new phase in the history of the European idea. In 1922 a Pan-Europa movement was founded by Austrian Count Richard Coudenhove Kalergi. In 1929 M. Briand, French Foreign Minister, took the initiative to bring the question of European Unity to the League of Nations, and as a result a commission of representatives of twenty seven European Governments met at Geneva in 1931 to discuss European unification. Since the end of the 2nd World War the political integration of Western Europe has been officially and practically in the making, mostly through the institution of the Council of Europe in 1949 and the European Economic Community in 1957. It is by no means improbable that future historians will refer to the 50's and 60's as the crucial, decisive period in the chequered history of the United States of Europe.

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