

Winston Churchill: calling for a United States of Europe



Winston Churchill 1874 - 1965

Winston Churchill, a former army officer, war reporter and British Prime Minister (1940-45 and 1951-55), was one of the first to call for the creation of a 'United States of Europe'. Following the Second World War, he was convinced that only a united Europe could guarantee peace. His aim was to eliminate the European ills of nationalism and war-mongering once and for all.

He formulated his conclusions drawn from the lessons of history in his famous 'Speech to the academic youth' held at the University of Zurich in 1946: "There is a remedy which ... would in a few years make all Europe ... free and ... happy. It is to re-create the European family, or as much of it as we can, and to provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom. We must build a kind of United States of Europe."

Thus the driving force behind the anti-Hitler coalition became an active campaigner for Europe's cause.

Winston Churchill also made a name for himself as a painter and writer: in 1953 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Early life

Winston Churchill was born on 30 November 1874 into the aristocratic Spencer-Churchill family of the noble Dukes of Marlborough, but his mother was born in America. After enjoying a privileged childhood, Churchill began his education in 1888 at Harrow, a top London boys' school. He did not prove to be an outstanding student and school was not therefore something he enjoyed.

On finishing school in 1893, it took him three attempts to pass the entry exam for Sandhurst, the Royal Military Academy. But after graduation he began a military career that, over the next five years, saw him fight battles on three continents, win four medals and an Order of Merit, write five books and win a seat in Parliament, all before his 26th birthday.

Political career

While serving in the British army, Churchill was also a newspaper correspondent. Whilst reporting on the Boer War in South Africa, he made headlines when he escaped from a prisoner of war camp there, returning to England in 1900 to embark on a political career. He was elected to Parliament and served in different Cabinets as Home Secretary and First Lord of the Admiralty (Minister responsible for the navy). In 1915 he was forced to resign after the failure of a particular military campaign. He decided to join the army again and led the men of the 6th Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers in the trenches of France. When in 1917 a new government was formed he became Minister of Munitions. In the years leading up to 1929, Churchill held all of the most important ministerial posts except that of Foreign Minister.

In 1929, he became estranged from his party, the Conservatives. This is the start of a period in Churchill's life known as the 'Wilderness Years'. He continued writing and became a very productive and well published author of articles and books. Churchill was among the very first few people to recognise the growing threat of Hitler long before the outset of the Second World War and the first to voice his concerns.



Churchill gives the 'V' for victory sign during a speech at the European Congress in The Hague in 1948.

Second World War

In 1939, Churchill's predictions became reality as the Second World War broke out. In 1940, he became Prime Minister and led Great Britain through the difficult war years, offering hope and determination to the British people with his inspirational speeches. His staunch refusal to consider defeat or to bargain with the Nazis inspired British resistance, especially at the start of the war when Britain stood alone in its active opposition to Hitler. Nevertheless, he lost the elections after the end of the war. He did not, however, lose his ability to interpret correctly how future events would play out, as proven by his famous speech in Fulton, Missouri about the threat from the Soviet Communists, in which he coined the well-known expression about the 'Iron Curtain'.

A 'United States of Europe'

In 1946 Churchill delivered another famous speech, at the University of Zurich, in which he advocated a 'United States of Europe', urging Europeans to turn their backs on the horrors of the past and look to the future. He declared that Europe could not afford to drag forward the hatred and revenge which sprung from the injuries of the past, and that the first step to recreate the 'European family' of justice, mercy and freedom was "to build a kind of United States of Europe. In this way only will hundreds of millions of toilers be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living".

Council of Europe

With this plea for a United States of Europe, Churchill was one of the first to advocate European integration to prevent the atrocities of two world wars from ever happening again, calling for the creation of a Council of Europe as a first step. In 1948, in The Hague, 800 delegates from all European countries met, with Churchill as honorary president, at a grand Congress of Europe.

This led to the creation of the Council of Europe on 5 May 1949, the first meeting of which was attended by Churchill himself. His call to action can be seen as propelling further integration as later agreed upon during the Messina Conference in 1955, which led to the Treaty of Rome two years later. It was also Churchill who would first moot the idea of a 'European army' designed to protect the continent and provide European diplomacy with some muscle. Furthermore, the European Court of Human Rights was created in 1959 — a decade after Churchill first championed the idea. Providing the inspiration to the people of Europe as the binding factor in the allied fight against Nazism and fascism, Winston Churchill consequently became a driving force behind European integration and an active fighter for its cause.