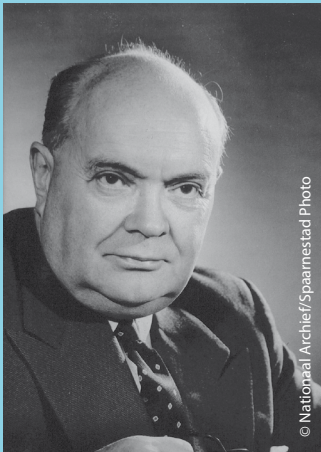




Paul-Henri Spaak: a European visionary and talented persuader



Paul-Henri Spaak 1899 - 1972

'A European statesman' – Belgian Paul-Henri Spaak's long political career fully merits this title.

Lying about his age, he was accepted into the Belgian Army during the First World War, and consequently spent two years as a German prisoner of war. During the Second World War, now as foreign minister, he attempted in vain to preserve Belgium's neutrality. Together with the government he went into exile, first to Paris, and later to London.

After the liberation of Belgium, Spaak served both as Foreign Minister and as Prime Minister. Even during the Second World War, he had formulated plans for a merger of the Benelux countries, and directly after the war he campaigned for the unification of Europe, supporting the European Coal and Steel Community and a

European defence community.

For Spaak, uniting countries through binding treaty obligations was the most effective means of guaranteeing peace and stability. He was able to help achieve these aims as president of the first full meeting of the United Nations (1946) and as Secretary General of NATO (1957-61).

Spaak was a leading figure in formulating the content of the Treaty of Rome. At the 'Messina Conference' in 1955, the six participating governments appointed him president of the working committee that prepared the Treaty.

Rise through Belgian politics

Born on 25 January 1899 in Schaerbeek, Belgium, Paul-Henri Spaak was brought up in a prominent politically active Belgian family. His grandfather, Paul Janson, was a distinguished member of the Liberal Party whilst his socialist mother, Marie Janson, became the first woman in the Belgian Senate. He also had an uncle in politics, Paul-Emile Janson, who was Prime Minister of Belgium in the late 1930s.

Spaak joined the Belgian army during the First World War, after lying about his age. However, he was soon captured by the

Germans and spent the next two years imprisoned in a war camp. After the war, Spaak studied law. At this time, he also developed a love of sport, even playing for the Belgian tennis team in the 1922 Davis Cup tournament.

After receiving his degree, Spaak entered a law practice in Brussels. In 1920 he became a member of the Socialist Belgian Labour Party. He made a swift rise through national politics to become Belgium's Prime Minister in 1938. During the Second World War he was Foreign Minister in the Belgian government-in-exile

in London. When he returned to Brussels in 1944, he served in post-war governments both as Foreign and Prime Minister. In 1945 Spaak rose to international prominence on his election as Chairman of the first session of the General Assembly of the United Nations. In 1956 he was chosen by the Council of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to be its Secretary General.

Contribution to Europe

Spaak was famous for his talented rhetoric: he was someone who was able to make people listen, and he possessed the art of persuasion. These talents, combined with his vision of European cooperation, made him one of the greatest contributors to the project of European integration.

Forming the Benelux

Although most of Europe was in ruins after the Second World War, Spaak saw an opportunity to make Europe a strong continent again through economic and political cooperation. The war made it clear in his mind that working together towards a common goal was far more productive than fighting each other. Spaak was one of the men we now consider as a Founding Father of the EU because he saw the potential in unifying post-war Europe. A testament to this is the forming of the Benelux in 1944.

While Spaak worked from London, on the continent the war was running its destructive course. But, together with his colleagues from the Netherlands and Luxembourg, Spaak was working on a completely new and highly ambitious project. In 1944, the Benelux was born: the customs union between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. It was a simple idea, but never seen or done before. Within the borders of the three countries, free traffic of money, people, services and goods would be guaranteed: an inspiration for further European integration.

The Messina Conference

In 1955, the Messina Conference of European leaders chose Spaak as chairman of a committee (the Spaak Committee) in charge

of the preparation of a report on the creation of this common European market. During the Messina Conference the three Benelux states proposed a relaunch of European integration to come about on the basis of a common market and integration in the sectors of transport and atomic energy. This 'Spaak Report' was the basis of the Intergovernmental Conference on the Common Market and Euratom in 1956, and led to the Treaties of Rome, signed on 25 March 1957, establishing a European Economic Community in 1958. Spaak signed the treaty for Belgium.

Throughout his political life, Spaak always defended the importance of European integration and the independence of the European Commission with great vigour: "The Europe of tomorrow must be a supranational Europe," he stated to rebuff French President de Gaulle's 1962 'Fouchet Plan', attempting to block both the British entry to the European Communities and undermine their supranational foundation. The European unity Spaak envisaged was mostly economic. The Belgian statesman desired political unification but not on the basis of the Common Market countries alone. He was therefore against any further actions until economic integration of Britain into the union had taken place. He retired from politics in 1966 and died in Brussels in 1972.



Spaak signing a European treaty on behalf of Belgium in 1965.

A staunch European

Spaak has been written into the history books as the driving force behind European integration. Even before the actual start of any European economic and political cooperation, he believed in the European project. He was a staunch European and looked beyond the borders of his own country.