

Did Churchill want a United States of Europe?

Yes – in Zurich in 1946 Churchill called for “a kind of United States of Europe.” He just didn’t plan for Britain to join it.



Both halves of that sentence are load-bearing, and both are usually quoted without the other. What he actually said repays close reading.

The scene

University of Zurich, 19 September 1946. Europe is sixteen months past the war: cities in rubble, borders full of refugees, the continent already hardening into two blocs. The speaker is out of office – British voters dismissed him the year before – but he is still the most famous living European, the man whose voice carried the fight against Hitler.

What he proposes is, by his own framing, designed to shock. “I am now going to say something that will astonish you,” he warns. “The first step in the re-creation of the European Family must be a partnership between France and Germany.”

Germany. In 1946. From him.

What he actually said

The famous sentence – “We must build a kind of United States of Europe” – sits inside an argument, and the argument has structure. There can be no revival of Europe, he says, without “a spiritually great France and a spiritually great Germany.” The new structure must make “the material strength of a single State less important. Small nations will count as much as large ones and gain their honour by a contribution to the common cause.”

Read that last line again from a small country’s perspective. It is the same promise [George of Poděbrady](#) drafted in 1464 and the promise on

which the EU still runs: a structure where weight matters less than membership.

And then the caveat that Brexit made famous. Britain does not appear among the builders. “Great Britain, the British Commonwealth of Nations, mighty America, and I trust Soviet Russia... must be the friends and sponsors of the new Europe and must champion its right to live and shine.” Sponsors. Champions. Not members. Churchill had written the position sixteen years earlier in an American magazine: “We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not comprised.”

What happened next

The speech did real work. It made European unity respectable at the moment respectability required a victor’s endorsement, and it led somewhere concrete: Churchill presided at the Hague Congress of 1948, from which the Council of Europe was born in 1949. But the decisive step took a different path – [Schuman’s 1950 coal-and-steel pool](#), which bound its members with real shared institutions rather than declarations. Britain was invited and declined, exactly as the Zurich logic implied it would. It applied twelve years later, joined in 1973, argued with the project for five decades, and left in 2020.

Why it still stings

The Zurich speech is the cleanest statement ever made of Britain’s unresolved European question – enthusiasm for the structure, allergy to membership – which is why Leavers and Remainers both

claim it and both have a point. But its larger content belongs to the continent: the insight that Europe's revival required its two old enemies to lead it together, said aloud by the one man with the standing to say it a year after the war. On that point history has simply agreed with him. Whether the structure he sketched ever gets its finished form is the part still being written.

All questions →

FREQUENTLY ASKED

What exactly did Churchill say in Zurich?

On 19 September 1946: "We must build a kind of United States of Europe." He proposed starting with "a partnership between France and Germany" – a year after the war – and predicted small nations would count as much as large ones.

Did Churchill want Britain inside it?

No. Britain, the Commonwealth, America and, he hoped, Soviet Russia were to be "the friends and sponsors of the new Europe" – champions from outside. His 1930 line held: "We are with Europe, but not of it."

Why is the Zurich speech considered so important?

Timing and messenger. A year after the war, with hatred of Germany at its peak, the man who defeated Hitler told Europeans their first step must be Franco-German partnership. It gave the idea a victor's legitimacy.

Did Churchill's vision lead to anything concrete?

Yes – he presided over the 1948 Hague Congress and championed the Council of Europe, founded 1949. The economic community of 1950 followed Schuman's different, more binding method, which Britain declined to join.

Would Churchill have supported Brexit?

Unknowable, and both sides quote him. What the record shows: he wanted a united continental Europe with Britain as its close ally and sponsor rather than a member – a position that fits neither camp's poster.

SOURCES

- Churchill, speech at the University of Zurich, 19 September 1946 (full text, churchill-in-zurich.ch / International Churchill Society)
- Churchill, "The United States of Europe," Saturday Evening Post, 15 February 1930
- Hague Congress 1948; Statute of the Council of Europe, 1949
- Schuman Declaration, 9 May 1950 (Britain's decision to stand aside)