

Who proposed a United States of Europe?

Victor Hugo made the phrase famous in 1849, but the relay is longer: a Czech king in 1464, Kant in 1795, Coudenhove-Kalergi, Churchill, Spinelli.



The idea of uniting Europe by agreement has been proposed, roughly once a century, by people out of power – kings in trouble, philosophers, prisoners. It is worth meeting them in order.

1464: a king five centuries early

The first worked-out design came from Prague. George of Poděbrady, the Czech king, proposed a league of European states with a permanent assembly, majority voting, a common court and a shared defense against the Ottoman threat. France's Louis XI declined, the Pope – whose authority the plan bypassed – killed it, and the king who proposed permanent peace spent his remaining years at war. Every institution in his draft would eventually be built. It took five hundred years.

1795: the philosopher's blueprint

Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace* gave the idea its intellectual spine: lasting peace between states is not a mood but a structure – a federation of free republics, law replacing force among nations as it had within them. Every subsequent federalist, knowingly or not, has been footnoting Kant.

1849: Hugo names it

On 21 August 1849, Victor Hugo opened the Paris Peace Congress with the speech the phrase comes from: "A day will come when you France, you Russia, you Italy, you England, you Germany – all you nations of the continent – will merge closely within a superior unit... as Normandy,

Brittany, Burgundy, Lorraine have merged into France." The audience applauded; the century that followed delivered Sedan, the Somme and Stalingrad instead. Hugo had named the destination, not the road.

1923: the first movement

After the First World War, Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi turned the idea from literature into organization. His book *Pan-Europa* founded the first mass movement for European union, drawing Einstein, Thomas Mann and, crucially, the French statesman Aristide Briand, who in 1929 made the first official government proposal for European federal union at the League of Nations. Germany's answer, four years later, was Hitler.

1941: written in prison

The founding text of modern federalism was written where its authors could watch nationalism's endgame from a cell. Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi, antifascist prisoners on the island of Ventotene, argued in their 1941 manifesto that the nation-state's absolute sovereignty was itself the war machine, and only a European federation could dismantle it. The document was smuggled to the mainland and became the founding charter of the European federalist movement – and Spinelli lived to lead the European Parliament's first draft treaty on union in 1984.

1946–1950: from speech to steel

In Zurich in September 1946, Winston Churchill – with a victor's authority – called for "a kind

of United States of Europe” built on a Franco-German partnership, with Britain as sponsor rather than member. Four years later Robert Schuman stopped proposing and started building: coal and steel first, institutions rather than declarations, “concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.” The relay passed from visionaries to engineers, and the phrase went quiet while its content was being poured as foundations.

The pattern across five centuries is hard to miss: the idea keeps arriving from the margins – a heretic king, prisoners, exiles – and each arrival lands a little closer to power. The most recent people to say it aloud are sitting presidents.

[All questions →](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED

Who first used the phrase “United States of Europe”?

Victor Hugo made it famous, presiding over the Paris Peace Congress on 21 August 1849. The phrase had appeared occasionally before, but Hugo’s speech is the moment it entered political language.

What exactly did Hugo say?

“A day will come when you France, you Russia, you Italy, you England, you Germany... will merge closely within a superior unit” – nations keeping their distinct qualities while forming a European brotherhood, as provinces had merged into France.

What was the earliest worked-out plan for European union?

The Czech king George of Poděbrady’s 1464 treaty project: a league of European states with a permanent assembly, majority voting, a common court and shared defense. France declined and the Pope buried it.

What is the Ventotene Manifesto?

The 1941 founding text of modern European federalism, written by Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi as antifascist prisoners on a Mussolini prison island – arguing that only a federation could stop Europe’s wars.

Did Churchill want Britain in a United States of Europe?

No. In Zurich in 1946 he called for “a kind of United States of Europe” built on Franco-German partnership – with Britain as its friend and sponsor, standing outside. Britain’s ambivalence started at the christening.

SOURCES

- Victor Hugo, address to the International Peace Congress, Paris, 21 August 1849
- Tractatus pacis toti christianitati fiendae (George of Poděbrady, 1464)
- Immanuel Kant, Perpetual Peace (1795)
- Coudenhove-Kalergi, Pan-Europa (1923); Briand memorandum to the League of Nations (1929–30)
- Ventotene Manifesto (Spinelli, Rossi, Colorni – June 1941); Churchill’s Zurich speech (19 September 1946)