

Theme 5 – The Cost of War

Presentation: The Commitment to Reconciliation and Co-operation

Presenter: Tom Spencer

Charles Peguy asserts, “Everything begins in Mysticism and ends in politics”. The European Union is too often represented as an institution obsessed by economics and devoid of spiritual intent. I wish to assert that the intent of the Union has reconciliation at its heart. It is not by chance that the twelve gold stars in a circle, on the blue of heaven, were chosen for the flag of Europe as a symbol of perfectibility and balance.

The aim of the Union was, and remains, the healing of Europe after millennia in which the great bellows of European history has alternated between the urge to unity of a Judeo-Christian civilisation and the urge to diversity reflecting the geographic, ethnic and religious diversity of this cape of Eurasia.

It is not by chance that Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, has recently spoken of the prospect of the unification of all Europe. For the first time since Diocletian’s division of the Empire, the countries of the Danube will, within a generation, fall again under a single imperium: a Europe whole and free, a Europe where we are both separately ourselves in the spirit of diversity and jointly ourselves in the spirit of unity.

As an environmentalist, I am aware that 80% of the environment policies of Europe are established at the level of the Union. This is true of our water policies, which relate directly to our great rivers. It is true of the other policies that we jointly create to try to heal the fabric of Europe that we have so wantonly torn.

Our marine biologists will, I know, be the first to recognise that our land-use policies, both agricultural and industrial, our energy policies, both nuclear and sustainable, and our trade and competition policies impact directly on this great river. The surface of the Danube is a mirror that reflects all the follies and shortcomings that we, as Europeans, perpetrate. I am sure that we all recognise that the Danube is more than a river. We can make no sense of it unless we look at it as the Danube Basin, with all its climatic, ethnic and industrial complexity holistically interacting. We have been floating on water that first fell as rain, not only in the great cities of the river, in Vienna, Budapest and Belgrade, but also on Albanians repairing their roofs in Kosovo and on Bosnians rebuilding their lives in Sarajevo. The rain on which we float fell first on ruined Serb houses in the Krajina and on the shell-destroyed remnants of Vukovar. I regret the absence of Bosnians and Albanians from this Symposium. Like the Romanies and the Jews, the heretics and the religious, the Marxists and the capitalists, they are part of the story of these provinces, the story of the European idea.

As Chairman of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, I made a speech in the European Parliament in 1998 warning the Serbian Government that “Europe would fight and Europe would be right”. If ever there has been a just war, this was one: a war conducted not for oil or power, but out of public outrage at a mass abuse of human rights that spoke directly to the angst and guilt in the heart of every European. The fact that the war was conducted in a stupid and cowardly way does not alter my belief in its rightness. It was ethically unsupportable to forbid NATO’s pilots to fly below 15,000 feet, thus transferring some of the casualties of war from professional servicemen to a civilian population. The belief in Washington and elsewhere that one can exercise power without body bags is an obscenity. The belief that the electorates of Europe and America would abandon a just cause at the first roll call of casualties was a failure of leadership. The initial refusal to contemplate a land war was part of the worship of technology that is corroding our civilisation.

The only value of war is in the lessons that we learn from it.

To understand Europe's response to the war in Kosovo we have to go back ten years to the inadequacy of our response to the fall of Communism. We concentrated exclusively on that which touched us most closely - the reunification of Germany and the creation of a political Europe that would bind 80 million Germans irreversibly into the body of Europe. Thereafter, we concentrated on the stabilisation of Germany's and Europe's eastern boundaries by the early enlargement of the Union to encompass Poland and the Baltic States, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia.

The Spring Summit in Berlin roughly solved the internal deal. The Helsinki Summit in December 1999 formalised the external negotiations.

We ignored the other consequence of the fall of the Berlin Wall. We in the North and West did not see that the removal of Communist imperium in South-East Europe would release once again the disaster of a territorial nationalism amongst states whose development and extent had been disrupted in mediaeval Europe by the arrival of the Turks.

We treated each incident in the Balkans as foreign policy. We may have made promises of membership to Slovenia and Hungary and Romania and Bulgaria - but we did not draw the conclusion that the Union had become a Balkan power, because for us the Balkans were a place where we dumped our own psychological waste, a place, we told ourselves, of poverty and ancient feuds, of the intolerance and barbarity that we had put behind us. How short is the historical memory! On any headcount of barbarity, North-West and Central Europe have been bloodier than the South-East, the Rhine darker than the Danube.

We did not act early in Yugoslavia because we lacked the institutions, the knowledge and the focus; but also because we regarded the Balkans as "other". Why was this? We define ourselves as the heirs of Greece and Rome - but, by a peculiarity of our educational system, we talk only about classical Greece and Imperial Rome. We blind ourselves to the glories of Byzantium; we ignore the centuries of Constantinople's greatness; we excise from our thoughts and our prayers the tradition of Orthodoxy. We unconsciously echo the words of the Austrian Trade Minister "that Europe ends where Orthodoxy begins".

Yet something miraculous happened in the chaos and adhocery of May 1999. It occurred to the collective mind of Europe that Serbia and Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria, Romania and Greece are all European states, sharing a European heritage. It occurred to Brussels that the European Union could not ignore them if it wants to live in peace. The dim understanding dawned that if we do not recognise our roots and responsibilities, our shared fears and half-spoken hopes, we cannot expect to be immune to a chaos that expresses itself in war and mafias, in drug smuggling and theft, in migration and misery.

In March 1999, President designate Romano Prodi said what many of us had been saying for years. We have to treat the problem of South-East Europe as part of the Enlargement process, not as foreign policy. We have to recognise the deep suspicion of the West in the Balkans, a suspicion that goes back millennia and certainly to the sack of Constantinople by Frankish knights in 1204. We have to offer, and feel, and live an historic reconciliation that pledges to the people of the Balkans their rightful place as full members of the European family. President Prodi took up the proposals of the Centre for European Policy Studies, which suggested the creation of an early free trade area, the replacement of the uncollectable customs duties of states such as Albania, Macedonia and Bosnia with subventions from the European budget, and the joint policing of a European Common Area of Justice. The Centre also urged the early adoption of the euro by the countries of the region, a coherent infrastructure and transport plan and a realistic timetable for environmental renewal.

At the core is membership, the one guarantee that only the Union can make: a membership that is not impossibly distant and that is preceded by observer membership for the states of the former Yugoslavia and Albania, which are not included in the existing Enlargement process. The Stability Pact is but a first inadequate attempt at such a mission.

Such a package, using all the resources of the Union, would be a modern application to the Danube of the community method that has worked over the last generation on the Rhine. John Paul Spaak once said:

“borders are the scars left on the face of Europe by war”. If the Rhine has one lesson for the Danube, it is that of porous borders through which people and ideas flow easily and naturally.

This Symposium has understandably concentrated on how to deal with a wounded carcass of Serbian pride sprawled across the Danube, leaking chemical and political toxins into the river and the body politic of the Balkans. But Serbia is only an extreme case of the general condition of the region. We need to say to the people of Serbia that the condition of national trauma is shared by every Member State of the Union. Civil war, defeat and occupation, and loss of empire have throughout our continent required every one of us to look again at our national myths.

Reconciliation at a personal and spiritual level is the key: recognition of a shared past, a shared present and a shared future. With love and honesty in our hearts, we can and we will master the politics of the dangerous few years that lie ahead.