

# **Pan-Europeanism and the Pursuit of a European Union in the Interwar Period**

*El Paneuropeísmo y la búsqueda de una unión europea en el periodo de entreguerras*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The impositions made during the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, following the First World War, resulted in a highly fragmented and insular European political map throughout the Interwar period. Attempts at establishing a federal union were explored within the framework of the League of Nations. However, European nations largely gravitated toward isolationism or heightened nationalism, which in some cases escalated into totalitarian movements. The idea of a united Europe has emerged repeatedly throughout history as a response to the continent's complex and diverse circumstances. During the Interwar period, the most notable initiatives for integration included Coudenhove-Kalergi's Pan-Europe proposal, the joint efforts of Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann, and the Briand Memorandum. These efforts laid the foundational groundwork for the European integration process, which was ultimately consolidated in 1950. The aim of this paper is to analyse the causes behind the development of the pro-European conviction and why the Pan-European model did not prosper, showing its possible shortcomings and the political and social context it faced.

**Keywords:** international relations, international organisations, federalism, Pan-European movement, armed conflict.

**JEL Classification:** K33, N14

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## **RESUMEN**

Las imposiciones aplicadas en la Conferencia de París de 1919 tras la Primera Guerra Mundial escenificaron en el período de Entreguerras un mapa político europeo totalmente fragmentado y hermético. Se estudiaron intentos de unión federal en la Sociedad de Naciones, pero los pueblos de Europa se inclinaron hacia posturas aislacionistas o de un exacerbado nacionalismo que evolucionaría en algunos casos a movimientos totalitarios. La idea de una Europa unida se manifiesta en numerosas ocasiones a lo largo de su historia debido a las diversas situaciones de los pueblos europeos y las alternativas de integración más significativas en este periodo fueron la propuesta de Paneuropa de Caudenhove-Kalergi y la iniciativa de Aristide Briand junto a Gustav Stresemann, seguida del Memorando Briand, asentando los cimientos del proceso de integración europea consolidado en 1950. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar las causas del desarrollo de la convicción europeísta y qué hizo no prosperar al modelo paneuropeo, mostrando sus posibles deficiencias y el contexto político y social al que se enfrentó.

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**Palabras clave:** relaciones internacionales, organizaciones internacionales, federalismo, movimiento paneuropeo, conflicto armado.

**Clasificación JEL:** K33, N14.



### INTRODUCTION

The dream of a united Europe, far from being a modern chimera, has its roots in the historical experience of a continent ravaged by fratricidal conflicts. The Europeanist conviction, that ideal of supranational cooperation and unity, did not emerge from nothing, but was rather the result of a complex interaction of political, economic, social, and intellectual factors that dramatically intensified after the horrors of the First World War.

Before the outbreak of the Great War, the idea of a cohesive Europe was, for the most part, a philosophical aspiration or a utopian project. Thinkers such as Immanuel Kant had already envisioned a "perpetual peace" through a federation of republican states. However, the reality of the 18th and 19th centuries was marked by the rise of nationalism, imperialist competition, and a series of wars that would culminate in the disaster of 1914.

The First World War acted as a brutal catalyst for the development of the Europeanist conviction. The unprecedented devastation, both in human lives and infrastructure, the economic ruin, and the profound disillusionment with the system of sovereign nation-states led many to question the viability of a divided continent. It became evident that economic interdependence and geographical proximity made the continuation of a policy of constant rivalry unsustainable. The war exposed the fragility of peace and the imperative need to find mechanisms to prevent the repetition of such a catastrophe.

In this post-war context, influential voices emerged advocating for a united Europe as the only way to achieve recovery and stability. Intellectuals, politicians, and pacifists of diverse ideologies began to articulate concrete proposals for European integration.

The objectives set for the development of this work will be to analyse the impact of the First World War as a catalyst and to investigate how the devastation, loss of life, economic ruin, and disillusionment with the system of sovereign nation-states after the First World War propelled the development of the Europeanist conviction.

To study the concrete proposals for European integration in the post-war period and to research the movements that emerged after the First World War, identifying the main intellectuals, politicians, and pacifists who advocated for European unity.

To evaluate the influence of economic and geographical interdependence and determine how the awareness of economic interdependence and geographical proximity among European countries contributed to the idea that constant rivalry was unsustainable and to the need to find mechanisms for cooperation.

To contextualise the "fragility of peace" post-First World War and highlight the fragility of peace and the imperative need for new mechanisms to prevent future catastrophes, despite the ineffectiveness of existing agreements in guaranteeing a lasting peace, which would eventually lead to the Second World War.

## **1. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE CREATION OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS**

### **1.1. The Peace Treaties and Wilson's "Fourteen Points"**

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The devastation caused by the First World War, which resulted in the deaths of more than ten million people, underscored the necessity of uniting the peoples of Europe as the only viable solution to restore peace and foster continental coexistence. Both the victors and the defeated placed their hopes in the figure of the President of the United States, Thomas Woodrow Wilson (Nicolson, 1933: 41).

With the Paris Peace Conference, in addition to the Treaty of Versailles, others were signed, such as the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye in September 1919, which established the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Austria was limited to some areas where only German was spoken. This treaty recognised the independence of Hungary and the creation of the new states of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The Treaty of Trianon, signed later between the Allies and Hungary, completed the process of separating the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine, signed in November 1919 with Bulgaria, through which it recognised the new Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the payment of 400 million dollars in reparations, as well as the cession of part of its territory.

The Treaty of Sèvres with the Ottoman Empire, signed in August 1920, achieved its expulsion from Europe, limiting it to Istanbul and part of Asia Minor. However, it never



came into force as it was not ratified by the signatory parties and was repealed by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which led to the conflicts in Anatolia under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The first chapter of each of these treaties included the text regarding the creation of the League of Nations.

The United States, having escaped material damage during the war, emerged as the leading producer in the international market and the primary creditor to the Allied nations. The U.S. provided goods valued at 10 billion dollars, a debt that, alongside loans from other sources, precipitated a significant financial crisis in most of the countries involved in the First World War. These nations hoped to address the debt through the economic reparations that Germany was obligated to pay to the victors.

The solution proposed by the United States for Europe's pacification and future prosperity was encapsulated in what became known as the "Fourteen Points." These points included measures such as the establishment of free trade and navigation, the elimination of economic barriers among European nations, and the reduction of military armaments. The latter aimed to reflect a hypothetical absence of hostility or declarations of war if Wilson's principal proposal—the creation of an international body—were realized.

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This proposed international body would bear the critical responsibility of ensuring the peaceful resolution of disputes, fostering stable and lasting coexistence among nations, and promoting cooperation and communication between them. Designed to function as a tribunal where nations could appeal to resolve their differences, this organization would eventually be known as the League of Nations.

Furthermore, smaller nations could be granted greater independence and freedom, as both major powers and smaller states would be integrated into the new institution on an equal footing, with a shared commitment to preserving peace. The choice of Geneva as the institution's headquarters underscored this neutrality, as Switzerland had remained uninvolved in the First World War.

The institutional structure of the League of Nations consisted of an Assembly, where all member states were represented and held voting rights; a permanent Council, initially comprising the five founding states (the United States, France, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom), later joined by observer states; a Secretariat composed of specialists advising

the Secretary-General, who was elected by the Council; and an international court of justice, headquartered in The Hague and established in 1922.

However, this vision faced significant challenges. The United States refused to join, Russia was excluded (having not been invited), Germany was similarly excluded, and Japan displayed early indifference. Consequently, the League of Nations ultimately came under the control of France, the United Kingdom, and Italy.

This institutional framework represented the first attempt to establish an international political entity equipped with permanent bodies (Del Vecchio, 1931: 541), tasked with inaugurating a new era in international relations. However, not only did it fail to materialize as Wilson had envisioned, but the outcome, far from meeting expectations, quickly proved to be one of the most catastrophic failures in recent history.

## **1.2. The International Context and the Failures of the Project**

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On the international stage, the United States and Japan emerged as the principal beneficiaries of the First World War, consolidating their positions as new global powers. In contrast, the Russian Empire suffered devastating defeats on the front lines, compounded by chaotic administration and widespread hunger, which fueled mass protests. The Tsar's disregard for the Duma was a critical factor in the outbreak of the 1917 revolution, which ultimately ended tsarism and led to the establishment of a socialist regime.

The end of the Great War brought about the imposition of a new geopolitical order by the Allies, triggering one of the most significant transformations of Europe's political map. This transformation included the dissolution of the German Empire, marked by the proclamation of the Republic in November 1918, and the partitioning of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into several states. This division satisfied no one and resulted in the creation of new states such as Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Martínez, 2021: 63). Additionally, Transylvania united with Romania, and the Austrian National Assembly proclaimed the Republic.

A profound sense of identity loss arose among an entire generation that had previously belonged to a centuries-old, multinational state. These individuals had lived within a



unified economic space under the Habsburg Crown in Austria-Hungary, coexisting as a collection of peoples and nationalities (Fetjő, 2016: 331).

Among the proposals promoted by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was the recognition of the right to self-determination for the peoples of the defeated powers, allowing them to decide their own futures. However, the practical implementation of this measure by the Allies revealed a selective, cynical, and deeply irresponsible approach (Möller, 2004: 140).

The peace treaties that redrew Europe's borders were negotiated without the participation of the defeated powers, leaving their state configurations and boundaries entirely to the arbitrary decisions of the victors (Nicolson, 1933: 187). The right to self-determination was applied selectively to favor the victors and was denied in cases where it did not align with their interests. For example, the Republic of German-Austria's request to unite with Germany was rejected (Musil, 2004: 431).

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At the same time, the Allies conceded to territorial demands such as the restitution of Alsace and Lorraine to France. This expansion increased France's territory, population, and production but proved insufficient to alleviate the material hardships that the belligerent nations faced in their efforts to return to pre-war levels.

The newly created states were designed to strengthen dominant minorities who had supported the Allies during the conflict. Yet, these solutions to self-determination failed to grant greater freedom or independence. Instead, they confined entire populations within smaller "prisons," imposing new forms of division and dissatisfaction (Kohn, 1944: 115).

The Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28, 1919, was deeply flawed and coercive, solidifying France's position as the sole great continental power in Europe.

While the treaty promised self-determination to the peoples of the defeated nations as a way to grant them greater freedom and independence, this principle was applied selectively. The victorious powers only recognized self-determination when it aligned with their own interests. At the same time, they failed to establish a genuine supranational entity capable of integrating these newly created states into a cohesive framework (Fetjő,

2016: 504). As a result, the problems of nationalities in Central Europe remained unresolved, and a dozen smaller states emerged. These fledgling nations, unprotected by any real association of European peoples, were left vulnerable to the expansionist ambitions of Germany, the USSR, and Italy (Churchill, 1949: 8).

The lack of unity among the newly self-determined states soon turned into hostility and persistent tension along their borders. These divisions became the breeding ground for radical nationalist movements, with the most significant threat coming from the exaggerated sense of importance and ambition displayed by some of the new small states (Zweig, 1942: 504).

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The independence granted to many nationalities did not foster peace or freedom as intended. Instead, those that gained independence often became oppressors themselves, leaving minorities unprotected. There was no assurance that majority groups would refrain from dominating others through hate speech or force. As a result, disputes over historical and natural borders multiplied, further destabilizing the region (Kohn, 1944: 114).

The peace agreements began to unravel almost immediately after 1919, with the Treaties of Versailles, Trianon, and Saint-Germain (Rogers, 1923: 93). These treaties not only redrew borders but also imposed a moral clause that assigned guilt to Germany and an economic clause obligating the country to pay enormous reparations. This unilateral imposition of a new order, which the Germans referred to as a *diktat*, created a stark dilemma for Germany: accept national humiliation or prepare for war within 20 years (Keynes, 1920: 189).

As a result, Wilson's proposal to reintegrate Germany and the defeated powers into the international community to mitigate the impact of the treaties imposed by the Allies was never implemented. Instead, the League of Nations continued its mission of fostering European integration without one of the continent's most historically significant states, or the support of its chief advocate, the United States.

This absence of U.S. participation stemmed from constitutional requirements mandating Senate approval for presidential foreign policy initiatives. In 1920, an election year, many Democratic senators, especially those from the southern states—faced reelection and



were swayed by public opinion. A surge in American nationalism and an isolationist mindset, fueled by the country's victory in the war, led to widespread disinterest in Europe's future (Nicolson, 1933: 58).

The Senate, under the leadership of Henry Cabot Lodge, blocked ratification of the initiative to join the League of Nations (Dueck, 2008: 50). Lodge and his allies even criticized the core principles of the treaty, arguing that greater international involvement in pursuing peace abroad might compromise the United States' ability to safeguard its own national interests (Bendiner, 1975: 151).

Although the League of Nations was established without the support of its principal advocate, this should not have deterred European states from continuing their efforts toward integration. The true failure lay in the choices made by both American and European politicians, who, rather than implementing Wilson's plan as it was originally conceived, opted to dismantle it entirely (Zweig, 1942: 503).

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Wilson's envisioned League of Nations aimed not only to maintain peace and security among global powers but also to advance and improve international cooperation among states. It sought to establish a new international framework capable of transcending the divergent and self-interested positions of individual states (Nicolson, 1933: 28).

The creation of this international body was not inherently incompatible with nations retaining their sovereignty (Manela, 2005: 1124), nor did it preclude their pursuit of individual national interests. However, designing an institutional framework for Europe without limiting state sovereignty resulted in a body that lacked the authority to enforce the Treaty and its resolutions (Carrillo, 1999: 55).

The League of Nations, tasked with maintaining peace and security, ultimately proved incapable of enforcing its agreements or acting decisively when these were threatened. Its inability to impose sanctions became increasingly evident in the following decade as Germany, Italy, and Japan initiated territorial aggressions. Moreover, the Allied powers demonstrated little willingness to prevent these acts (Leibholz, 1962: 12).

The League's structural weaknesses were compounded by its decision-making process, which required unanimity within the Council and Assembly, except in rare cases. This

stipulation significantly hindered the organization's ability to effectively adopt agreements on pressing issues (Keynes, 1920: 92). The victorious powers prioritized the collection of reparations and military occupations over the goals of integration and peace (Nicolson, 1933: 6), relegating the defeated nations to a subordinate and dominated status.

Furthermore, reservations and obstructions posed by some states that had initially expressed interest in joining the League undermined even basic measures such as military disarmament (Nicolson, 1933: 83). Consequently, only 32 of the 45 states ratified the agreement, which ultimately led to the dismantling of Wilson's ambitious plan (Kennedy, 1987: 364).

European society, already battered by the aftermath of the war, was engulfed in an economic crisis. Excess demand had driven down prices, unemployment had risen sharply, and production had slowed. Monetary instability was particularly severe in Germany, where the state printed currency far beyond its gold reserves, causing the currency to lose all value. Hyperinflation devastated savings, erasing the wealth of many, while benefiting those in debt (Feldman, 1997: 513). This economic chaos fueled widespread social unrest and deepened the discontent of a society already scarred by the trauma of the war.

Beyond the economic crisis, Europe faced a moral and existential crisis that engulfed the entire continent (Roth, 1923: 81). This environment provided fertile ground for authoritarian rhetoric offering simplistic solutions wrapped in radical nationalism. Such rhetoric gained traction among the middle and lower classes. Despair and disillusionment led to widespread questioning of democratic regimes, accompanied by fears of revolutionary movements spreading across Europe. Figures like Benito Mussolini capitalized on this climate, delivering superficial yet highly nationalistic speeches that resonated with the masses (Ridley, 1977: 173).

While the United States, having abandoned the European integration project, experienced a period of prosperity and progress during the "Roaring Twenties," the USSR, deliberately excluded from international institutions, began to explore totalitarian nationalist models. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom remained isolated, preoccupied with sustaining its weakened empire and colonial interests—thereby forsaking efforts toward European



integration. As a result, the continental European states were left to face expansionist ambitions on their own.

### 2. PAN-EUROPE: THE EUROPEAN MOVEMENT PROJECT OF COUDENHOVE-KALERGI

The political, social, and territorial fragility of Europe left it vulnerable to the geostrategic ambitions of the United States, Russia, and the British Empire. In response, the Versailles peace agreements were supplemented by other initiatives with a distinctly Europeanist vision, among which the proposal championed by Austro-Hungarian Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi stood out.

In 1922, Coudenhove-Kalergi published the article *PanEuropa*, critically analyzing the state of the continent. He identified the prevailing system of political and economic division as the root cause of Europe's decline and the conflicts among its peoples. Additionally, he emphasized the responsibility of the younger generation to drive the continent's renewal (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 19). In his article, he advocated for fostering unity and integration among European nations, promoting coexistence instead of conflict. This vision laid the groundwork for his Pan-Europe project, which centered on the elimination of borders and the establishment of political and economic union.

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Coudenhove-Kalergi's proposed solution was the creation of a robust political and economic alliance of European nations—an alternative to the social and national chaos engulfing the continent. He argued that this crisis could only be resolved through the establishment of a united Europe (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 20). Additionally, he suggested that a utopia remains a utopia only as long as it has few supporters; as its base of support grows, it shifts from idealism to reality (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 22).

Paradoxically, his proposal gained almost immediate traction among Europe's elites. Within a year, it became a model to follow, with Austria even offering the Imperial Palace of Vienna as its headquarters. By 1924, a "European Manifesto" had been published, serving as the foundation for advancing the Pan-European Union.

Kalergi envisioned the formation of a new political entity called *Pan-Europe*, underpinned by an economic and monetary framework. This included the establishment

of a European customs union and the adoption of a common currency by its member states (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 189). He argued that the artificial barriers dividing European territories were stifling progress and development, isolating economies, and consigning their inhabitants to a level of subsistence reminiscent of medieval times.

Moreover, he maintained that facilitating the international exchange of goods and services would strengthen relations among nations, fostering a sense of unity and mutual closeness in place of division and detachment.

The second pillar of Coudenhove-Kalergi's proposal was legal, requiring states wishing to join the entity to sign an arbitration treaty and submit to the authority of an International Court. The rulings of this court would be legally binding, with particular focus on resolving territorial disputes between member states.

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The third pillar was institutional, envisioning the creation of a bicameral assembly. This assembly would comprise a lower or popular chamber with 300 deputies, representing one deputy for every million inhabitants, and an upper chamber, or federal chamber of peoples, in which each of the 26 member states would hold one seat. Unlike the lower chamber, this upper chamber would not operate on a proportional basis but would instead function as a federal body.

Unlike Eastern Europe, federalism was present in Western Europe as a recurring political tradition in the territorial organisation of the state, linked to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mazzini. In its origins, Proudhonian federalism was simply a principle for organising society from its base in a democratic and voluntary manner, so that free communities could articulate themselves according to their will and through pacts within a state or a higher form of common organisation, which nonetheless did not disregard the weight of ethnic and historical factors when defining the federative units (Voyenne, 1973)

Coudenhove-Kalergi's vision was firmly rooted in a federal structure for European nations. In essence, Pan-Europe would take the form of a European Federation, requiring the creation of a Constitution to govern the entity. This highlights that the "Pan-European Movement" was not merely seeking an agreement to enhance collaboration and improve international relations among European nations; it was an ambitious effort to establish a genuine organic union between them (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 209).



Coudenhove-Kalergi was acutely aware of Europe's precarious position within the global context (Mann, 1986: 167). To the west lay the United States, separated by the Atlantic Ocean but with the United Kingdom serving as an American "Trojan Horse." To the east stood the Soviet bloc. Given these circumstances, the European project of continental integration could not feasibly include either of these powers as members.

Coudenhove-Kalergi argued that as long as the continental European nations remained divided or in conflict, they would inevitably witness Europe's decline, eventually being absorbed by one of the two global powers that bordered it—either the United States or the Soviet bloc (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 29).

### 2.1. The Idea of a European Nation

In 1926, the European Economic and Customs Union was founded. Although it is clear that it was created with this specific economic purpose, it is also true that there was a spirit within the Union attempting to go further. One of its founders, Gaston Riou, wrote the book *Europe, Ma Patrie*, where he explained that the new organisation tried to foster the idea of Europe through the preparation of economic studies.

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That same year, the first Congress of the Pan-European Union was held in Vienna, with representatives from most European countries in attendance—a clear indication of the movement's growing influence. The Congress called for genuine unification through a confederation of European states, envisioned as an entity that would guarantee equality and security among nations, supported by concrete institutional objectives (Muet, 1996: 61).

The foundational pillars of the Pan-European project included the creation of a European Federal Court to resolve disputes among nations, the gradual implementation of a customs union between member states, and the adoption of a common European currency. The introduction of a shared currency aimed to address the existential chaos caused by the coexistence of 27 different currencies across the continent.

Another key objective was achieving equitable disarmament among the powers—an aspiration that the League of Nations had failed to accomplish. To this end, the Pan-

European movement proposed the establishment of a European military alliance through the creation of a unified European armed force (Muet, 1996: 61).

The members of the Pan-European movement closely associated Pan-Europe with the growing pacifist movement, believing that uniting European nations would establish a stable and lasting peace (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 211) while significantly reducing the likelihood of war. By forming a continental confederation, European states would present a united front, making it far more difficult for any external power to contemplate declaring war on the continent. In this way, unification would transform Europe into a secure and peaceful region (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 212).

Moreover, the movement emphasized the importance of respecting all nationalities within Europe by fostering coexistence among the continent's diverse cultures through the newly proposed institutional framework. This approach included protecting the rights of national, cultural, and religious minorities from oppression and degradation, which might otherwise fuel radicalized sentiments of group identity among citizens.

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Kalergi also argued for the necessity of implementing legislation to prohibit the deliberate incitement of conflict among European nations. He further advocated that the dissemination of propaganda designed to foster hatred between the peoples of the continent should be classified and condemned as a crime of high treason (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 190).

A central objective of the Pan-European movement was the establishment of a customs union to foster a sense of equality and trust among the European powers. This measure was envisioned as a safeguard to prevent potential disputes between states over conflicting national interests. In doing so, the Pan-European movement anticipated the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) by three decades, culminating in its constitutive treaty in 1951.

Achieving these objectives would serve as a stepping stone toward an even more ambitious goal: the collaboration of a united Europe with other state groups to create a universal League of Nations. This was seen as a crucial step toward the eventual unification of the world (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 111). Such a visionary proposal was groundbreaking within the geopolitical context of the time.



This forward-thinking vision would take shape through the adoption of arbitration treaties, collaboration agreements, and non-aggression pacts with external powers (Faramiñán, 2014: 197). These measures aimed not only to promote peace across the European continent but also to designate English as the official language of *Pan-Europe*, while fully respecting the continent's linguistic diversity. As the most widely spoken language outside Europe, English was seen as a practical choice to facilitate effective communication with foreign nations (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 193).

In Spain, the renewed momentum for European unity found support among certain social sectors, coinciding with the establishment of the first Spanish Pan-European Committee in 1928. Chaired by the Minister of Labor, Eduardo Aunós, this committee introduced the innovative idea of drawing inspiration from the Pan-American model (Faramiñán, 2014: 195). However, its vision remained firmly centered on the future of the European continent, closely aligning with the concept of materializing a “United States of Europe” (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 20).

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The limited enthusiasm for the Pan-European movement among the broader population, often perceived as a distant and unattainable ideal, stemmed from the elitism inherent in its ideology. Conceived by a wealthy aristocrat, the movement's meetings and congresses were largely restricted to Europe's upper echelons. This perception was shared by many detractors within the military, political, and industrial spheres. The leaders of the involved states remained unconvinced about advancing the Pan-European union, as these conferences excluded grassroots activists who could have championed and disseminated the ideals of Pan-Europeanism (Brugmans, 1972: 65).

Furthermore, radical movements such as German National Socialism—fundamentally opposed to Kalergi's principles—and the loss of support from key early proponents ultimately contributed to the failure of the Pan-European project.

In Kalergi's Pan-European integration model, a central proposal was the incorporation of nationalism into the European integration project. This form of nationalism would be grounded in shared cultural elements and Christian values (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 182), drawing inspiration from nations like China and India,

where multiple languages coexist within a unified territory (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1971: 93).

The cultivation of a European national sentiment would provide citizens with a compelling reason to support an international entity responsible for governing the shared communal space. This shared sense of unity would reinforce the institutional framework of the Pan-European model, enabling it to ensure the adoption and enforcement of its policies among member states without imposing restrictions on their sovereignty.

The development of a European nationalism aimed at integrating the continent's diverse peoples was envisioned as a way to virtually eliminate the possibility of internal conflicts. However, this approach risked shifting the problem to a new scale: European nationals could begin to perceive those from non-member states as adversaries, potentially fostering an exclusionary form of nationalism.

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Kalergi firmly supported the idea of a European nation as part of its inherent destiny, arguing that this belief was one of the core justifications for unification (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1923: 205). At the same time, he viewed the state as a tool for advancing human development. Consequently, his vision placed great importance on respecting the sovereignty and independence of each state within *Pan-Europe*. He was especially committed to preventing the potential dangers of concentrating power within the newly envisioned European entity (Faramiñán, 2014: 184).

By the late 1920s, the devastating global economic crisis, exacerbated by unchecked hyperinflation, significantly disrupted the Pan-European project. The collapse of the New York Stock Exchange on October 24, 1929, ultimately marked the end of Coudenhove-Kalergi's ambitious vision (Zweig, 1936: 16).

### **3. THE POLITICAL AND PRACTICAL REALIZATION OF A CONVICTION**

#### **3.1. The Locarno Agreements**

One of Europe's greatest challenges after the First World War was resolving the instability that engulfed Germany, a nation in turmoil, waiting for a decisive historical event to occur amidst widespread disaffection and territorial fragmentation (Haffner, 2000: 59).



Germany had become an ideal breeding ground for the rise of reactionary movements, such as the ultranationalist Beer Hall Putsch in Munich in 1923, led by Adolf Hitler and inspired by Benito Mussolini's March on Rome the year before. The Franco-Belgian occupation of the Rhineland and the Ruhr—prompted by delays in reparations payments—further fueled a surge of nationalism within the country.

Additionally, the economic crisis affecting all of Europe weighed particularly heavily on Germany, exacerbated by the harsh reparations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. This situation reached a breaking point with the hyperinflation that devastated the German economy (Solmsem, 1993: 307).

Democratic Germany, emerging in the aftermath of the Great War with the establishment of the Weimar Republic, initially inspired a sense of fraternity and collective identity (Gay, 1968: 26). However, social conditions remained plagued by persistent instability and imbalance. In response to these challenges, a pivotal meeting was held in Locarno from October 5 to 16, 1925, between France and Germany—two nations historically characterized by antagonism.

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The meeting brought together the Foreign Ministers of both countries: Aristide Briand, representing France's Socialist Republican Party, and Gustav Stresemann, from Germany's German Democratic Party. Both parties were deeply nationalist in orientation.

Briand and Stresemann shared the conviction that Europe's challenges had not been resolved by the Treaty of Versailles (Stresemann, 1933: 197), which had applied undue pressure to an already open wound. Germany had refused to recognize the borders established by the Allies, while its industrial heartland in the Ruhr remained under occupation by the victorious powers until 1935. Yet peace with Germany was not solely a Franco-German issue; it was a European one, as the war had unleashed social, political, and economic upheavals that threatened the very survival of European nations.

The Europeanist sentiment became a tangible reality during the debates, so much so that French Prime Minister Édouard Herriot proposed the creation of a "United States of Europe" that same year (Bonafous, 1952: 61). Although the proposal did not succeed, it marked a significant milestone, demonstrating that the idea of European integration was gaining traction. The Franco-German meeting also coincided with Coudenhove-Kalergi's

Pan-European initiative (Faramiñán, 2014: 191) and the broader push for European integration—a movement supported by both Briand and Stresemann (Hass, 1948: 528).

The Locarno Agreements ultimately comprised eight pacts aimed at strengthening peace in Europe after the First World War. These agreements were signed in London on December 1, 1925, by Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and Poland.

Briand and Stresemann outlined objectives that included Germany's recognition of the borders established in the Treaty of Versailles—though ultimately, only the western borders were acknowledged. In return, Germany's reparations were reduced by 80%, the Ruhr was returned to German control, and Germany was allowed to join the League of Nations.

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Although the negotiations took place in Locarno, the agreements were formally signed and declared valid in London on December 1, 1925. The future of Europe became inextricably tied to Franco-German cooperation, as Stresemann emphasized two days later, on December 3 (Stresemann, 1933: 231):

*“Along with the upheavals of war, there is a fact that binds us to one another in a shared life. If we perish, we will perish together; if we wish to rise, we will not succeed by fighting each other but by uniting our efforts. Therefore, if we have faith in the future of our peoples, let us not live in discord and enmity; let us join hands and work together [...] In this cooperation lies the foundation of the future. The great majority of the German people desire peace [...] supported by the will of responsible leaders showing us the path forward, and backed by peoples who understand that only in this way can well-being be achieved.”*

The meeting between France and Germany also politically and diplomatically legitimized the conviction that Europe needed to renew its foundations for coexistence. This required abandoning despotic and arrogant positions in favor of a more reasonable framework. Stresemann (Hirsch, 1964: 68) reflected this sentiment, stating:

*“Each of us belongs first to our homeland. A good Frenchman, a good Englishman, or a good German must be part of their people, but each must also be a member of the European family [...] We have the right to speak of a*



*European idea [...] A shared destiny binds us together. If we want progress, it will not come through conflict, but through cooperation.”*

On December 10, 1926, Briand and Stresemann were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts in establishing the Locarno Agreements. In his acceptance speech, Stresemann gratefully remarked, “We are of the race that seeks light in darkness” (Ruge, 1965: 194). From that moment, they became known as the “apostles of peace” (Hirsch, 1964: 73).

### 3.2. The Institutional Model of Briand-Stresemann

By 1926, political and institutional stability in Europe began to emerge, and relations among European leaders grew increasingly positive. That year, Germany joined the League of Nations, honouring the agreements made at Locarno. In 1927, Aristide Briand reaffirmed his commitment to European integration by accepting the honorary presidency of the Pan-European Union, becoming a prominent advocate for Coudenhove-Kalergi’s vision.

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Addressing the French Senate, Briand declared that the horrors of the First World War had profoundly convinced him of the need to work tirelessly to prevent such atrocities from recurring (Bellon, 2009: 90). In collaboration with Frank Billings Kellogg, the U.S. Secretary of State (Myers, 1929: 227), Briand sought to initiate discussions in 1927 to establish a pact renouncing war as a means of resolving disputes between states (Wright, 1933: 39).

The resulting Briand-Kellogg Pact, signed on August 27, 1928, in Paris, was a landmark achievement. It was endorsed by the United States, France, and seventy other nations, representing nearly the entire international community. While the Soviet Union abstained, the pact included all Allied powers from the First World War as well as countries like Germany, Italy, and Japan—nations that would later violate its terms in the following decade.

Meanwhile, Briand, alongside Gustav Stresemann, worked to advance the development of a European integration project. On September 5, 1929, during the 10th Ordinary Session of the League of Nations Assembly, Briand personally presented his vision. In his speech, he frequently referred to the establishment of a new entity termed the

“European Union” or “European Community.” This entity, as Briand described, would be structured federally without compromising the sovereignty of individual nations. He envisioned a framework where “these peoples must always have the opportunity to come into contact, discuss their interests, adopt common resolutions, and establish a bond of solidarity among themselves, enabling them, if necessary, to face any serious circumstances that may arise.”

This vision sought to enhance cooperation and encourage the peaceful resolution of conflicts, placing a strong emphasis on the creation of a common market, including the establishment of a customs union among member states (Bellon, 2009: 98).

36

The institutional structure was envisioned to include a deliberative Assembly, an executive Commission, and a Secretariat—modeled after the League of Nations but with a more focused mission, limited to the scope of continental Europe. Briand’s proposal did not include a democratic membership clause or the adoption of a Declaration of Rights, nor did it outline a procedure for electing members of the new institutional framework. However, Briand stressed the importance of initiating the European project by first managing shared economic interests collaboratively.

The essence of the project and its Europeanist spirit came to life just four days later, on September 9, when a frail and ailing Gustav Stresemann addressed the plenary session of the League of Nations. In his speech, Stresemann called on leaders to embrace the sense of responsibility intrinsic to their roles, unite the peoples of Europe, reorganize their relations, reject the pessimistic fatalism of those who dismissed European union as a utopia, and explore concrete proposals to turn this vision into a reality (Stresemann, 1933: 453).

In doing so, Stresemann reaffirmed Germany’s support for the initiative, highlighting that harmony and coexistence on the continent were indeed achievable. His proposal and message resonated deeply with the audience. Despite his untimely death on October 3 and the financial calamity of Black Thursday on Wall Street later that month, the response from the states at the League of Nations plenary session was overwhelmingly positive. With the exception of some reservations from British and German representatives, the



proposal galvanized support and encouraged Aristide Briand to continue refining and advancing a genuine plan for European integration (Bellon, 2009: 99).

### 3.3. The Briand Memorandum

A sense of responsibility and a commitment to the common good, peace, and the prosperous coexistence of European citizens convinced Briand to accept the challenge. He pledged to present a Memorandum at the following year's Assembly that would detail the ideas he had introduced in his speech. The aspiration to overcome nationalist divisions in Europe motivated the French government, under the authorship of Alexis Léger, to complete the definitive project by the spring of 1930. This project proposed the formation of a regional entity within the framework of the League of Nations, referred to as an "Association."

Presented at the end of the summer, the project aimed to establish a "moral union" among the powers and achieve "institutional solidarity," providing an institutional framework for "the community of European peoples" in the service of "the peaceful organization of Europe" (Zorgbibe, 1993: 8).

37

In terms of political integration, the project proposed the creation of a federation of states based on the principle of *union et non d'unité* ("union, not unity"), respecting the national independence and sovereignty of each member (Bellon, 2009: 100). This approach aligned with the principles of contemporary integration plans of the time. The ultimate aim of this federation was to progressively establish Europe as a system of arbitration and security.

The organizational structure of this European Association would include a representative body called the European Conference, composed of representatives from all European governments that were members of the League of Nations. Its presidency would rotate annually among the member countries, with the president elected each year.

A second representative body, called the Permanent Political Committee, would hold an executive role. The details of its composition and competencies, along with the process for selecting its members, organizing its presidency, and determining the frequency of its sessions, were to be decided at the next meeting of European states.

Finally, the project proposed the creation of a Secretariat to handle the administrative coordination required to implement the decisions and instructions issued by the European Conference and the Permanent Political Committee.

In the economic sphere, the proposal underscored the belief that all prospects for progress were dependent on securing stability across the continent. This security, in turn, hinged on the effective political union of Europe's peoples (Bellon, 2009: 100).

Notably, the proposal stipulated that signatories, upon joining, would commit to a coordinated approach to various public policies. These included labor, hygiene, transportation, communications, university cooperation, and inter-parliamentary exchanges (Zorgbibe, 1993: 11).

The Memorandum was sent to European governments in May 1930 for analysis and consideration, with responses directed to Paris. Most replies were received between late June and early August, with Spain being the first to respond. In September 1930, the Memorandum became the central focus of discussions during the 11th Ordinary Session of the League of Nations Assembly.

The project encountered near-unanimous rejection from the European community. Of the 26 powers, 21 dismissed it outright, while the remaining five expressed reservations about participating. Critics highlighted its association with the discredited League of Nations, an institution widely regarded as ineffective in addressing international tensions and incapable of fulfilling its mandate. As a result, many sought to distance themselves from the League. The proposed "Association" was seen as an attempt to redirect the political and economic integration effort toward this new entity, which failed to inspire confidence.

Great Britain's national interests, led by Secretary-General of the League of Nations Sir Eric Drummond, further impeded the project. British isolationism prevailed, effectively blocking the establishment of a framework that could facilitate the creation of a stable European bloc, regardless of whether Britain chose to participate (Bonnesfous, 1952: 64).

After hearing from all parties, it was decided to establish a Commission of Inquiry for the European Union, which would include representatives from all European states. Delegates from non-member European states and nations outside of Europe were also



invited to participate in jointly analyzing the proposal. However, the project made a critical misstep by preserving the artificial borders created by the Treaty of Versailles. This decision reinforced the central aim of Briand's proposal: to uphold the political map established by the 1919 peace treaties by securing borders and maintaining the existing order, aligned with the steadfast logic of French policy (Philip, 1950: 164).

Achieving the peace and stability envisioned by Briand for the European continent proved impossible within a fragmented and conflict-ridden framework, one widely perceived as unjust and arbitrary. The proposed "Association" perpetuated the subjugation of the defeated nations, depriving them of access to essential raw materials and intensifying rivalries, particularly in the competition to monopolize economic gains from their territories.

This climate of distrust toward the project was further exacerbated by suspicions that its professed conciliatory and fraternal spirit might conceal France's hegemonic ambitions on the continent (Philip, 1950: 165).

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Additionally, the proposal's attempt to preserve the sovereignty of individual states while simultaneously fostering a federal union was seen as inherently contradictory (Philip, 1950: 164). Many leaders doubted whether the new entity would have the authority or mechanisms to enforce its founding treaty, especially in cases of non-compliance by member states.

Unlike Coudenhove-Kalergi's unification proposal, which emphasized fostering a sense of European national identity among its citizens, Briand's plan was more focused on a political union framed as a legal commitment to collective action. Its primary objective was economic progress through the adoption of shared values across the continent. However, the political unity Briand envisioned as a means to achieve economic development failed to materialize, leaving the security and stability essential for the continent unrealized.

Coudenhove-Kalergi's proposal was considerably more ambitious and visionary than the French government's plan. As a result, Briand's initiative found itself caught between two opposing camps: the utopians, who hoped for a more daring and comprehensive project, and the defeatists, who viewed European unification as a betrayal of national loyalty.

Ultimately, Stresemann's successors abandoned the meetings, reverting to the national rivalries of Europe, which were increasingly dominated by aggressive nationalism and protectionist trade policies.

### **3.4. The European Political Crisis and the First Steps Toward Conflict**

The 1929 economic crisis shaped every initiative in Europe that did not directly address its devastating effects on society. Initially, the crisis impacted the U.S. economy, leading to widespread business bankruptcies, rising unemployment, and the collapse of banks. However, it quickly spread to Europe when the U.S. government curtailed capital outflows, preventing promised financial aid from reaching the nations involved in the First World War. This led to a dramatic halt in industrial production and a steep decline in agricultural prices, prompting European governments to adopt protectionist and interventionist policies. Currency devaluations were implemented in an effort to boost exports and curtail imports.

40

The First World War initially brought about an extension of democracies in Europe, due to the fall of the great empires. However, these democratic regimes proved unable to solve political, economic, and social problems. The tensions inherited from the First World War, with countries subjected to extremely harsh conditions and others whose territorial aspirations were not met, caused a great surge of nationalist fervour, fuelled by war propaganda and the socioeconomic deterioration associated with the post-war crisis, which led to significant social unrest, also encouraged by the Bolshevik triumph in Russia.

For this reason, conservative and nationalist dictatorships gradually became established in the countries of Central, Eastern, and Mediterranean Europe. The discontent, anxiety, and despair caused by the crisis provided fertile ground for the spread of totalitarian movements across Europe, following the victories of fascism in Italy and National Socialism in Germany, totalitarian regimes began to expand further. In Italy, throughout the 1920s, its democratic-liberal structures were transformed into an authoritarian organisation with the rise of Benito Mussolini to power in 1922. He pursued a policy of violence and established a personal dictatorship, in addition to promoting autarky and reinforcing state interventionism.



In France, the effects of the crisis were observed from 1932 onwards, and from 1934, a very active political coalition began to form, comprising radical republicans, socialists, and communists, through organisations such as the Croix de Feu or parties like Action Française (Maurras), which would evolve into the Popular Front in 1936.

In Spain, between 1923 and 1930, the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera had followed a unique path, and in 1931 the Second Republic was proclaimed, entering a period of instability that led in 1936 to the formation of the Popular Front (in the French style), which would win the elections in February of that year. However, public discontent triggered the uprising of 18 July, which started the Spanish Civil War.

Dictatorships multiplied across Europe, such as Gomes da Costa in Portugal, Piłsudski in Poland, Venizelos in Greece, Alexander I in Yugoslavia, Dollfuss in Austria, Carol II in Romania, and Boris III in Bulgaria. These regimes commonly identified communism, democracy, and liberal systems as their ideological adversaries.

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Meanwhile, Germany accelerated its rearmament efforts and, in 1933, formally withdrew from the League of Nations. This act signaled its clear intent to reassert itself as a dominant military power.

In January 1933 Hitler was appointed Chancellor with society's firm support, based on the serious consequences of the Treaty of Versailles for Germany, which declared it null and void on 7 September 1937. The state of affairs in Germany forged Pan-Germanism and an expansionary desire, which would continue with the crossing of the Rhine and subsequent occupation of Austria on 11 March 1938, leading to the violation of the provisions and limitations of the Treaty itself.

The international weakness caused by the differences of each state acting in defence of their interests and the fragility of the League of Nations showed a divided and incapable Europe that could not prevent the military occupation of Austria and the subsequent annexation of an increasingly stronger Germany yearning for revenge. On 9 March 1938, the Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg held a referendum to promote a free and independent Austria in an attempt to stop Hitler from fulfilling his threat of invasion, an event that would take place two days later; and on 13 March, its annexation to the Reich was declared, as well as another referendum that would confirm the *Anschluss*. It was the

first stone for the Great Germany promised by Hitler. European countries refrained from criticising what had happened and on 2 April, Austria's annexation to Germany was recognised diplomatically, except by Winston Churchill, who was the only person to publicly voice his disagreement as he had a presentiment of the future armed conflict.

This situation caused Central Europe to constitute Hitler's next goal, and in May he decided to invade the Sudetenland due to the significant strategic concentration of industries, essential for rearmament. The level of tension increased, which resulted in signing the Munich Agreement, a settlement reached on 29 September 1938 with Great Britain, France and Italy to obtain their consent to this new annexation. It must not be forgotten that Italy was a German ally as a consequence of the ideological relations that joined them and, on 15 July 1934, the first meeting between Mussolini and Hitler took place to establish the first terms and conditions of the Rome-Berlin Axis, which were consolidated on 22 May 1939 with the Pact of Steel.

42

Due to the States' incapacity to cope with Hitler's expansionary ideals, between the second half of 1938 and September 1939, he started annexing other territories. The occupation of Prague on 15 May 1938 brought the invasion of Czechoslovakia to an end, and he proclaimed the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. His next target were the Balkans, besides allowing Hungary to annex the region of Ruthenia.

On 21 March 1939, Hitler demanded Poland to return the city of Danzig to Germany and to create a corridor with an extraterritoriality statute. Stalin harshly criticised this action as he was worried that Germany would come dangerously close to his borders, in spite of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact signed on 23 August, which included a secret additional protocol by virtue of which Eastern Europe would be divided between the Soviet Union and Germany, with the Narew, Vistula and San rivers forming one line of demarcation and the Baltic states in Lithuania forming the other.

The Soviets were afraid of a highly probable attack by Germany and they asked for a common front and assistance, placing their troops at France and England's disposal while demanding reciprocity that was not returned from either London or Paris, as Nazi Germany and its Anti-Comintern Pact were considered less dangerous than the Soviet



Union. As a result, this incipient tripartite agreement ended up in failure, as they alleged that they did not have enough troops to ensure this assistance.

In an attempt to prevent an invasion by Hitler, Great Britain signed an Agreement of Mutual Assistance with Poland that, despite having outdated troops, its army was the sixth largest in Europe in terms of the number of soldiers. However, on 1 September the war with Poland began and three weeks later, Warsaw surrendered to a German siege. War was inevitable and World War II started on 3 September 1939 with the joint declaration of Great Britain and France.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The nationalist divisions in Europe were entrenched by the 1919 Peace Treaties. Despite U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's intention to foster peaceful coexistence among European nations, the self-serving application of his proposed right to self-determination, combined with the League of Nations' ineffectiveness in uniting European nations due to the restrictive reservations imposed by its member states, ultimately created a scenario of instability and perpetual confrontation. These factors paved the way for the Second World War.

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The failure of the project stemmed from the conditional nature of the right to self-determination, which was contingent upon the establishment of the League of Nations. In the absence of a genuine supranational entity, however, the result was a fragmented continent, hampered by economic barriers that stifled development and left its citizens in a state of existential discontent.

Moreover, the absence of an effective supranational organization to safeguard the newly established small nations left them vulnerable to the ambitions of the larger powers surrounding them. These larger powers, operating beyond the reach of such an organization's authority, were unable to provide protection when invasions and annexations commenced in the following decade.

The dominance imposed by the Allied powers over the defeated nations within the League of Nations played a significant role in fueling the emergence of reactionary movements. This dominance, coupled with the severe economic crisis that devastated Europe,

exacerbated an already precarious situation. In this grim context, proposals were introduced to revise and amend the peace agreements in a bid to find lasting solutions. However, the defeated nations, devoid of the resources necessary to challenge the laws they viewed as unjust, soon resorted to reactionary responses, perceiving the treaties as lacking legitimacy. These developments set in motion decisions with far-reaching and incalculable consequences.

The first of these initiatives represented the most significant response to emerge from Europe, closely aligned with Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi's Pan-Europe vision. The Pan-European movement proposed the creation of a genuine union of European peoples through a federal framework, drawing inspiration from the United States of America as a model for unity.

44

The Pan-European project called for the creation of a customs union and the adoption of a common currency among member states to address the economic chaos of the time. It also proposed the establishment of a federal court to facilitate the peaceful resolution of international disputes and a bicameral parliament to provide institutional support. With a firmly pacifist outlook, the movement aimed to protect minorities, prevent radicalization, and ultimately achieve the disarmament of member states in favor of a unified European military force.

Meanwhile, in 1925, a landmark congress took place between the two most influential powers on the continent: France and Germany. This initiative was led by French Prime Minister Aristide Briand and German Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann. The primary objective was to amend the clauses of the peace treaties, fostering reconciliation to reduce the prevailing hostility in Europe and alleviate the economic crisis affecting Germany.

This meeting solidified the conviction that the unification of Europe was indispensable for the future of its peoples. By 1926, a continental integration project was developed, rooted in federal principles while respecting the sovereignty of individual states. Central to this vision was the creation of a customs union as an initial step toward the eventual realization of a common market. The project's modest institutional framework was modeled after the organizational structure of the League of Nations.



Stresemann's death left the French government to pursue the initiative alone, firmly convinced that political unification in Europe was essential for driving its economic development. This vision included advocating for the coordinated management of certain public policies. However, the decision to uphold the political map established by the Treaty of Versailles and maintain the discredited League of Nations resulted in widespread rejection from the European community.

Ultimately, both the Pan-European project and Briand's initiative collapsed amidst a broader societal breakdown—a vacuum of values that totalitarian movements exploited to their advantage, leading inexorably to the outbreak of the Second World War.

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