

# The Christian Democrat International

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## ABSTRACT

The New International Teams (NEI), formed in Liège in 1947, along with the gatherings held between 1947 and 1955 which brought together the primary Christian Democratic leaders of Western Europe in Geneva in the greatest secrecy, were important places for exchange and dialogue. In the context of the dawning Cold War, they played the role of a Christian Democratic International *avant la lettre*, which “facilitated” the advancement of the European integration process.



The first attempt to organize the forces of Christian Democracy on the transnational stage go back to the mid-1920s, with the creation in Paris in December 1925 of an International Secretariat of Democratic Parties of Christian Inspiration (SIPDIC) by Luigi Sturzo and his friends from the Popular Democratic Party (PDP). Swept aside by the rising tide of totalitarianism, it was replaced at the beginning of the war by an International Christian Democratic Union, organized around the London group *People and Freedom*. In 1945, a Christian Democrat Information Service was apparently established in view of preparing for the postwar period. A first international conference of leaders from European democratic parties of Christian inspiration was convened in Lucerne in late February 1947 at the initiative of the Swiss conservative party. While the Swiss, with the support of the Austrians and Italians, wanted to create an “organic agreement between parties of the same inspiration,” the Belgians, with the support of the Dutch and especially the French, absolutely excluded this possibility, preferring instead a kind of more flexible association bringing together personalities more than parties. The founding Congress in

Chaufontaine near Liège (May 31-June 2, 1947) marked the triumph of the Belgian approach. The New International Teams (NEI) created at the time aimed at “establishing regular contacts between social personalities of popular Democratic inspiration.” Unlike other European groups, the Popular Republican Movement (MRP) refused to join as a party. The second congress held at Luxembourg in late January 1948 represents an important date in the brief history of the NEIs. A German delegation, led by the former burgomaster of Cologne (and future Chancellor of the Federal Republic) Konrad Adenauer, was welcomed there for the first time. “The solution to the German problem depends on the general restoration of Europe, and vice versa. To achieve these two solidary goals, we must first and foremost recapture or preserve fidelity to the heritage of Christian civilization,” stated the final motion of the Congress. After joining the Coordination Committee of European Unity Movements, the NEIs took part with full rights in the major Congress of Europe, held in The Hague in May 1948. They did not play a prominent role there, as their spokesperson, the Dutchman Emmanuel Sassen, was content at the final session with proposing the implementation of limited institutions in specific domains, but all the same endowed with a “real authority.” Held once again in the Dutch capital three months later, the third congress, which was on the subject of “the political and economic unification of Europe,” revealed the profound differences between a federalist (minority) and unionist (majority) branch. The congress decided on “the convening of a European Assembly” that was of a “purely advisory [nature], with no decision-making or legislative power,” in line with governmental projects being prepared. In October 1948, the NEIs took part in the founding of the European Movement with the goal of counteracting the influence of socialists, which was deemed as being dominant. The election to the presidency of the Belgian August van Schryver, a moderate who succeeded the Frenchman Robert Bichet, confirmed this conservative shift the following year. Carried by the social hopes of the Liberation, the movement had until then sought to be a force for proposition and progress, above and beyond traditional divides. During the 1950s, the NEIs resolutely supported the policy of European integration implemented by Schuman, De Gasperi and Adenauer, without for all that becoming a kind of Christian “Cominform” that some had dreamed of following the promulgation by the Vatican of a decree prohibiting any collaboration with communism. The efforts made by the new Secretary General of Italian Christian Democracy, Aminfore Fanfani, to revive this possibility after the failure before the French parliament of the EDC did not change anything. It took until the mid-1960s, after the transfer of its secretariat from Paris to Rome, for the movement to complete its transformation into a true European Union of Christian Democrats (EUDC), at the Congress of Taormina in December 1965.

The qualms that the MRP and other groups such as the Belgian Christian Social Party had over their autonomy, along with doctrinal and strategic differences between conservatives and Christian socialists, prevented the establishment of a genuine organic cooperation on the level of party apparatus during the postwar period. A real form of transnational solidarity nevertheless existed among the leaders of these groups during the early years of the Cold War. The NEIs and even more so the gatherings that brought the primary Western European Christian Democratic leaders—held in Geneva in the greatest secrecy at a rate of three or four sessions per year between 1947 and 1955—were important places for exchange and dialogue. Beginning in 1951, this solidarity took hold at the highest level with the Adenauer-Schuman-De Gasperi triumvirate. Without seeking to mythologize the relations between the three statesmen, who were well aware of the interests of their respective nations, it should be noted that their relations took on a personal turn that facilitated the resolution of problems and the advancement of negotiations on a European scale. With regard to the Vatican’s attitude, the Pope’s great prudence in his public encouragement should be noted. The only message by Pius XII to the NEI dates from April 1957, and it was simply a brief passage in an address pronounced during a general audience. The Church’s interest was not to insist on the constitution of an interparty force that was committed from a confessional point of view, but rather to promote the collaboration of all political forces for the defence of Western Christian civilization. The role of this transnational cooperation of Christian Democratic parties in the process of European integration was far from negligible, although it should not be unduly overstated. The NEI congresses and the Geneva meetings—without having a “direct” impact on negotiations on the governmental level—“facilitated” and “encouraged” this process. In this sense, they played the role of a Christian Democratic International *avant la lettre*.

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