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# Rôle of the Council of Europe in promoting cultural exchanges between East and West

**Information report**
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1. The interchange of ideas across national frontiers can be greatly helped or hindered by the action of Governments. In recent years the development of international cultural bodies such as UNESCO and the Committees of the Council of Europe have much assisted the cultural relations between different countries of the West, and many Foreign Ministries now have separate cultural departments. But the fact is that at the same time, in the words of the Summary issued after the European Round Table (Rome, October 1953), " Contemporary Europe is not only politically amputated, it is also spiritually divided ". The countries of East Europe, and to a large extent Russia herself, have owed as much to our common,European culture as they have contributed to it. Yet today those links have been seriously impaired. The Western student of Baroque or Gothic architecture cannot visit Prague; the Polish art critic cannot study at first hand the pictures in the National Gallery or the Louvre; the youth of East and West Europe are being brought up in ignorance of each other's artistic wealth. Only music, and approved literary classics, can jump the frontiers unimpeded.

2. Since the first Geneva Conference the situation has slightly improved. Soviet delegates at the recent conference of historians in Rome, and at the atomic energy conference in Geneva, were freely permitted to exchange ideas with their Western colleagues, while British sporting teams have received as sincere a welcome in Moscow and Prague as did the Hungarian athletes in London. Nevertheless, the barriers to regular cultural exchanges remain, and, in the atmosphere created by Geneva, the Western Governments have a fresh opportunity to lower or remove them. Great Britain has already strengthened her cultural ties with Russia by setting up a special committee in London, and the Soviet Government has recently addressed a friendly note to the Federal Republic of Germany on the same subject. It is at this stage that the Council of Europe might consider whether it should do no more than recommend to the Committee of Ministers that such bilateral cultural arrangements between Governments of East and West should be multiplied; or whether the Council of Europe itself, through its two Cultural Committees and the Committee of Ministers, might not play a more direct part.

3. Before examinining the reasons why the first method is probably wiser, in view of the risks involved in the second, it may be useful to summarise the four main arguments which could be advanced in support of the more adventurous policy of direct action by the Council ôf Europe itself:

*a.* Although it is in practice a Council of Western European nations only, it can claim, particularly in matters of the European tradition, to speak in the name of all nations who have contributed to that tradition. It has a duty towards the peoples of the captive nations of East Europe, and their exiles in the West, to keep the European spirit alive. The Council of Europe is the only organisation with this duty, and collectively it shoulders a greater responsibility to carry it out than any single Member State. It should therefore be the main instrument for renewing cultural contacts with the East.

*b.* Secondly, the Council has not hitherto attempted to spread its activities outside the closed ring of Western Europe, but, sooner or later, as its is bound to be drawn into external relations of several types. Let it start with its own neighbours, which are part of Europe itself. On matters of political and

social policy, the aims of the Council of Europe are incompatible with the doctrines of Communism. Culturally, however, no such basic incompatibility exists. In this field the Council of Europe is in no danger of losing its virtue. By working with Communists for the common good of European culture, the Council will not be compromising its political faith. On the contrary, it will be directly contributing to the improvement of East-West relations, and will simultaneously increase its influence and scope. Cultural commitments are short-term and elastic. If the experiment fails after a period of trial, no great harm is done. If it succeeds, it will do much good, for it will have increased in the name of the Council of Europe the range of free speech and free association. prestige increases, it is bound to be drawn into external relations of several types. Let it start with its own neighbours, which are part of Europe itself. On matters of political and social policy, the aims of the Council of Europe are incompatible with the doctrines of Communism. Culturally, however, no such basic incompatibility exists. In this field the Council of Europe is in no danger of losing its virtue. By working with Communists for the common good of European culture, the Council will not be compromising its political faith. On the contrary, it will be directly contributing to the improvement of East-West relations, and will simultaneously increase its influence and scope. Cultural commitments are short-term and elastic. If the experiment fails after a period of trial, no great harm is done. If it succeeds, it will do much good, for it will have increased in the name of the Council of Europe the range of free speech and free association.

*c.* Any Communist country could sign the European Cultural Convention without surrendering its fundamental political beliefs. The Convention (Article 9 (4)), allows " any European State " to accede to it, on the invitation of the Committee of Ministers. If some or all of the East European countries were to do so, they would thereby undertake the obligation (Article 2 (b) and Article 5) to allow reasonable access to their art collections, etc., and to consult the other signatories of the Convention with a view to concerted action in promoting cultural activities of European interest " (Article 4). Within this readymade framework, there is almost no cultural activity of mutual benefit which could not be undertaken among the thirty nations of the old Europe. The signing of this document by the Communist countries of East Europe would not, of course, preclude detailed bilateral agreements between any two European States, but no accumulation of such pacts would have the moral impact, or present such opportunities for concerted action, as the signature of the Convention itself.

*d.* Apart from the measures proposed in the Cultural Convention, there are several other activities of the Council of Europe which have been suggested, or are already operating in Western Europe, which might be extended to cover Eastern European countries as well. For example :

*European Youth Conferences,*

*European art exhibitions,*

*Council of Europe Research Fellowships,*

*Students' conferences at Strasbourg University,*

*Exchange of medical information,*

*Exchange of radio and television broadcasts,*

*The Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas.*

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If they are to have real value, these activities Can but be organised on a European scale, and no other organisation outside the Council of Europe is better fitted to extend their application to Eastern Europe, once the basic agreement is reached between Governments that they are desirable and possible.

4. Strong as these arguments may appear, there are such serious objections to them that it is unlikely that the Assembly or Western European public opinion could agree to so radical a change in the policy of the Council of Europe. The objections are as follows:

*a.* The European idea has only just begun to take root in the minds of our Western peoples. They would be confused by any form of permanent association between the Council of Europe and Communism. They know that every Member State has accepted the principle of the rule of law and of the enjoyment by all persons within its jurisdiction of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Those rights are denied in Communist States. How then can they be associated with the Council of Europe, even by the most slender of links? What would happen, for instance, if the Cultural Committees discussed the interpretation of recent history in school text-books? The Western and Eastern points of view would be irreconcilable.

*b.* We should not ignore the possibility (some would say the probability) that the Communists might welcome their admission to one part of the Council of Europe in order to cause trouble in the whole organisation. The Council of Europe is still a tender plant. Its cultural work has barely begun. It is difficult enough to obtain agreement among the fifteen Western European countries, without introducing this discordant element from the East. The Communists might agree to sign the Cultural Convention only because it gives them the right (Article 6 (2)) to appoint representatives to attend meetings of the Committee of Cultural Experts. They might use this right to block every Western proposal, or put forward objectionable schemes of their own, backed by Russian funds, which we should find difficult to refuse.

*c.* Is Russia to be included in our invitation or not? She is only partly a European country in the geographical or cultural sense. Though she has drunk deeply of the cup of European culture, so, too, has the United States. If Russia were included, she would introduce Asiatic complications and dominate the smaller countries under her control. If she were excluded, she would either refuse permission to her satellites to join, or she would give orders from the background, and no serious discussion with the East Europeans would be possible. Therefore, whether Russia be included or excluded, it might be extremely difficult to arrange the type of East-West contacts which we desire, and her presence, in fact or by proxy, would weaken the capacity of the Cultural Committees to continue their work in Western Europe itself. We should have lost much, and gained nothing in return.

*d.* Bilateral agreements are preferable to multilateral. The main rôle of the Council of Europe's Committees is not to organise, but to establish principles, which are then given their practical expressions within Member States or by detailed agreements between one country and another. The right method of promoting East-West cultural contacts is to agree on a general policy at conferences, such as that at Geneva, and, later, to proceed to detailed arrangements like the Anglo-Russian or Russo-German exchanges which have recently taken place. No outside body like the Council of Europe need, or should, interfere in these delicate negotiations any more than the Council of Europe would be expected to organise exchanges of merchandise between Great Britain and the U. S. S. R. If any more all-embracing agreement is later found to be necessary, it would be better to negotiate it through UNESCO, of which Russia is already a member.

5. Here, then, we are faced by two conflicting points of view. Should the Council of Europe attempt to extend the competence of its cultural organs so as to embrace all the countries of Eastern Europe? Or should the Assembly merely urge the Western Governments to multiply their own bilateral cultural arrangements with Russia and her satellites?

6. Attractive as the first idea may seem, it is probably wiser at this stage not to risk involving the Council of Europe in the conflicts to which multilateral Communist membership of the Committee of Cultural Experts might give rise. Our main purpose is to reopen the cultural wealth oi the West to the East and vice-versa, not to boost the prestige of the Council of Europe by dramatic gestures. To admit nine or ten Eastern Communists to the Council, even in the disguise of cultural experts, might do serious harm to the work of our organisation and impair public support for it.

7. The Council of Europe has an important rôle to play in the renewal of East-West cultural links, but it can do more by influence than by direct action. We should always remember that the Europe for which we speak does not stop at the political frontiers between East and West. By striving to make our own nations more conscious of their common culture, we are also helping to keep alive the European idea in countries which we cannot reach. But to invite representatives of those countries to share in the debates and decisions of our Committees is a different matter. They would not come as Czechs or Poles or Hungarians. They would come as official delegates of closely united Communist Governments. Their motives would be suspect and their presence resented by the thousands of their fellow-countrymen who are now political refugees in the West. If our Governments, acting independently but with a common object, can be urged to multiply their cultural ties with East European nations, we shall have taken an essential first step without endangering our purpose as a community of free nations.

8. One of the main aims of such bilateral agreements should be to break down existing obstacles to free interchange of scholars and students between the two halves of Europe. Our Governments should encourage the frequent holding of East-West cultural and professional conferences and exhibitions. As far as security considerations allow, the West should set an example to the East by inviting scholars and professional men, as individuals or in groups, to visit our universities and cultural, scientific and social institutions. We should not exaggerate the danger that such Communist visitors might contaminate the West by their political ideas; and we should not be discouraged if, at first, our invitations are not always accepted or reciprocated. Moreover, we should not confine our approach to the U. S. S. R. We should invite individual Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, etc.

Since all our Governments do not recognize all the Communist Governments in those countries, it would be preferable for the initiative to be taken by universities and other non-Governmental institutions rather than by the Governments themselves, which would be asked to lend their strong moral support to such detailed arrangements within the framework of their bilateral pacts.

9. Finally, the Assembly may consider it desirable to issue invitations directly to Communist countries to send representatives to some of the cultural activities organised by the Council of Europe itself, so long as such invitations did not involve Communist membership of any part of our organisation. A Communist attending a Council of Europe Youth or Students' Conference, for example, might stimulate discussion valuable to both sides; and an exchange of radio or television broadcasts, provided that they were truly reciprocal, would undoubtedly do good, if organised under the auspices of the Council. By such methods we could break clown the Communist belief that the Council of Europe is nothing but a focus of émigré hostility to the Communist régimes, and simultaneously increase the scope and usefulness of our work in Europe as a whole.

Signed :

Nigel NICOLSON.