

Youth Movements in Recent European History

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This topic represents a very challenging matter, as it underlies a series of important implications for our present history. Indeed, if it is true that grand history is driven by the deeds of politicians and prominent people –such as entrepreneurs, bankers, artists, writers, philosophers–, everyday history is the direct result of an everlasting process that directly involves each of us. It does not matter our age, gender, social and economic conditions: we all have the chance, and the responsibility, to play a vital role.

One of the most recognisable examples of our times has undoubtedly been the Conference on the future of Europe. It was a “democratic exercise”, the first of this kind, that ran from April 2021 to May 2022 allowing people, from across Europe, to share their ideas, projects and suggestions in order to shape our common present and future.

Like any “democratic exercise”, this initiative was not flawless. Weaknesses and strengths were both part of such a unique experiment. Nevertheless, it was a clear indication that involving European citizens was not an impossible objective. In other words, the reason behind this reasoning is that we can all make some small changes, even if they seem unimportant. Regardless of age, power, and influence, a major effort can indeed be achieved by combining many small efforts.

In such a contest, I believe, we can better understand how important is the role played by young people in the European integration process, especially regarding the contribution they can still offer. To reflect on this aspect, from a historical point of view, I suggest two case studies: the story of the Weisse Rose and the story of the European Youth Campaign.

The Weisse Rose represents the commitment and the determination of a group of young people who, encouraged by their professor, in the middle of the Second World War, had the bravery to dissent from a deranged ideology that had taken



control of the world they were living in. Among them: Hans, Sophie, Christoph, Alexander, Willi and Professor Huber.

Their action started in Germany, more precisely in Munich, the city where they were attending the University. However, the small group soon developed a solid organisation that widespread their cultural activity. As a matter of fact, they did something quite simple. By showing the lies told by Hitler, they rose people awareness about the horrendous crimes committed by the Nazi. Their acceptance to risk their lives showed how young and adult people can collaborate by putting together their forces with the sole aim of demonstrating the truth. In total they printed and distributed only six leaflets, but their impact was sufficient to alert the Nazi Regime that put them to death.

On February 18th 1943, the members of the Weisse Rose were caught red-handed while distributing the sixth (and last) leaflet. On that day, Sophie and Hans had planned to go early in the morning to the University of Munich, carrying a baggage full of flyers to be distributed. The building was still silent and empty and they did not realize that someone was looking at them. As soon as they reached the University, they hurried upstairs and launched the papers that began to rain from the sky and fell down in the courtyard. They thought to be safe, but they were wrong. The guardian of the building promptly closed the doors and called the Gestapo. For Hans and Sophie, and later for the rest of the group, there

was no way out. Despite their youth, the Regime was frightened by their actions. The reason was their success in challenging the grasp of the Nazi ideology by opening the eyes of many students, stimulating their democratic engagement, and reinvigorating their thoughts of freedom.

To give an idea of their ethical values, in the fifth leaflet they affirmed: “At this juncture only a sound federal system can imbue a weakened Europe with a new life. The illusory structure of an autonomous national industry must disappear. Every nation and each man have a right to the goods of the whole world! Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the protection of individual citizens from the arbitrary will of criminal regimes of violence - these will be the bases of the New Europe”.

For the Regime, there was only a solution. Even if they were still so young, they had to die. On February 22nd, in a shining day, the final verdict was pronounced: Sophie and Hans Scholl (brother and sister) and Christoph Probst had to be executed for high treason.

Now, let me go straight to the second case in point: the European Youth Campaign (EYC).

The second case study from the past is about a group of young people that soon after the Second World War, in the middle of the Cold War, was recruited to provide a strong contribution to the European integration process. The context, compared to the previous case, was indeed very different. The *Weisse Rose* was born, following a bottom-up approach, as an informal group. Only later, the group increased its field of action. The European Youth Campaign, on the contrary, was based on a top-down approach. This was an initiative promoted by high-level American and European leaders, and the younger members had to struggle to gain more autonomy.

Specifically, the European Youth Campaign was initiated by the American Committee on United Europe and European leaders in 1951 pursuing the objective of opposing a youth organization to communist influence. Indeed, the European Youth Campaign was originally thought of as a sort of “young section” of the European Movement –a sui generis network founded after the famous Aja Congress of May 1948–. The European Movement was imagined and structured as a sort of umbrella organization with the aim of connecting all the different associations/organizations active at that time on European/Federalist Affairs. Their vision and mission were very simple: unite forces in order to increase the power of action of pro-Europe movements.

From 1951 to 1958/1959, the European Youth Campaign obtained substantial funding from the American Committee on United Europe, through the intermediation of the European Movement. Its structure was well-organized and impressive: a General Secretariat in Paris (headed by a General Secretary) and

single national Secretariats (headed by national Secretaries). The activities promoted by the European Youth Campaign were mainly aimed at informing and educating young people about European matters and, in particular, at promoting a widespread network of youth involvement in the common goal to create a more peaceful Europe. In addition, some of the national Secretariats published a bulletin called “Young Europe”. The Italian version was titled (it was the simple translation from English) “Giovane Europa”, a rich and unparalleled source of information for those times.

Regrettably, the European Youth Campaign came to an end in 1959. European and American Leaders thought that maintaining an initiative like this one, after the official signing of the Treaties of Rome, was no longer useful. They believed that Europe, after the milestone reached in 1957, was already established without considering the fact that the path had just started and it was necessary to increase awareness among citizens, both young and old. The positive aspect was that the European Youth Campaign created something that could not be easily dismantled: a group of competent young people that remained interested in European affairs in the following years. Some of them even started working –as “militant” civil servants– for the European institutions.

Bearing in mind these two examples, we can now take a moment to reflect on the present. How to raise youth involvement in political and social affairs? This is a recurring issue that involves national, European, and international institutions. On this path, the European Commission designated 2022 as the European Year of Youth. Young people were given the opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills through a wide range of activities at all levels. Above all, it was a chance to strengthen their civic engagement in shaping Europe’s future. The European Year of Youth was welcomed in 2021 by Mariya Gabriel, who was the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth with these words: “We want to make their voice heard and to inform the decisions we will take for their future. We want this Year to lead into concrete actions that will last well beyond 2022. Together, we will make this Year a success.”

It is premature to evaluate the outcomes of this initiative, as there are pages of history that still need to be written. However, this demonstrates that the best approaches are the simplest ones and that Europe needs people, both young and old, to advance, not heroes.

To conclude I would like to include a reflection on the main subject of this essay, into Robert Schuman’s famous declaration –pronounced by the French politician on May 9th 1950– also known as the strategy of “small steps”: “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity. Regardless of age, a large effort could be achieved by combining many small efforts”. ■