

## 6 The Creation of the International Union of Students

The meeting that created the International Union of Students (IUS) took place in Prague in August 1946, less than a year after the founding of the WFDY in London. We have seen how unrepresentative the London meeting was, since most of the traditional youth organizations boycotted it. It was otherwise in Prague: the participants there really did represent the various political and religious tendencies. L'Union Nationale des Étudiants Français (UNEF) attended; as did the National Union of Students of England, Wales and Northern Ireland (NUS) and quite a strong delegation from the American National Coordinating Committee. The communists had been able to organize a world youth federation without the participation of the British SCNVYO or the French UPOJ; but they knew they could not create a credible international student organization without the NUS, the UNEF or the Americans.

However, students were not so easy to manipulate. Unlike youth movements, many national student unions (such as those of Scandinavia, Belgium, Switzerland, Britain and France) had for some decades had considerable organizational and democratic experience, also in the international field, and they were extremely jealous of their independence. The French, indeed, prided themselves on having founded the first world student union as long ago as 1907; and although UNEF had a record of passivity during the Second World War,<sup>1</sup> it was too strong for the communists to ignore.

The IUS was born in 1944, somewhere between London and Prague. In London, when the war against Hitler was almost won, it seemed important to consider the future of the student movement. The International Council of Students, which had been created in 1941 (see above, p. 52) continued to function until the end of 1944 when, according to its general secretary Margot Gale, it decided to wind itself up to make room for a better form of international cooperation.<sup>2</sup> The NUS was given the task of establishing contact with other student bodies, to build up a new student international. The need was great, the enthusiasm no less so. The idea of recreating the prewar, apolitical International Confederation of Students was swiftly rejected.<sup>3</sup> That body, set in its corporatist traditions, had been incapable of

resisting fascism; and despite the efforts of some of its former leaders during 1945 and 1946, it proved impossible to revive it. Whether they were communists or not, students at the time demanded more from an international student organization. For most of the postwar generation, political questions were now the most important ones, and in particular the problem of defending Peace and Freedom.

The NUS called a meeting of students from the allied countries for 24–25 March 1945. It was to lay down the foundations of a new international federation. Thirteen nations took part, among them the United States, the Soviet Union, France, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The 24 delegates decided to set up a new international body, though not without difficulties.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of consensus about political activities, they adopted a resolution in which they ‘agreed to disagree’ on this issue.<sup>5</sup>

The non-communist students hoped that this phrase meant that the problem about political activities would go away. It was of course a vain hope, because they thought that the communist students would agree to leave political matters aside and concentrate on questions that, in a famous formula, concerned ‘students as such’.

It was decided to set up an International Preparatory Committee to plan a constituent congress for 10–11 November 1945. It was made up of seven countries: Canada, China, the USA, France, England, the USSR and Yugoslavia.

## THE DOUBLE CONGRESS: LONDON AND PRAGUE

In May 1945 Prague was liberated by Soviet troops, and Czech democracy was restored. In July, the Union of Czechoslovak Students, which was infiltrated by communists,<sup>6</sup> told the NUS that it was willing to host a representative student congress on 17 November, commemorated since 1941 as International Student Day.<sup>7</sup> In August members of the London and Prague groups established contact and decided that a preparatory congress should be held in two parts: the first in London, where precise proposals about structure, finance, constitution and membership should be prepared; and the second in Prague, where these proposals would be studied and debated. A constituent congress should then be called in the summer of 1946. The London meeting took place at Bedford College, a few days after the World Youth Conference.

Trying to reverse earlier decisions, Belgium and France argued for a reactivation of the International Confederation of Students. The majority