

 **REVIEW ESSAY**

---

**Bernard Bruneteau.** “*L’Europe nouvelle*” de Hitler: *Une illusion des intellectuels de la France de Vichy* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 2003). ISBN 2-268-04504-8. €21.00.

Reviewed by Sean M. Kennedy, Department of History, University of New Brunswick

---

**A**t a 1936 meeting of a French think-tank, the Center for the Study of Human Problems, one of the conferees outlined the following scenario:

Let us imagine the worst in the simplistic, even improbable, form of a *single* nation conquering all others. Let us imagine Europe conquered by Germany. Well, I suggest that a Germany extended thus over the whole of Europe would no longer be the Germany that we know .... *This would be Europe* under a different name: a unified Europe. Or rather, it would be neither the Europe of today, nor the Germany of today, but something else; the European confederation of *the future*.<sup>1</sup>

Given the realities of Hitler’s New Order, such a prediction seems almost willfully naive. Bernard Bruneteau’s impressive accomplishment is to explain convincingly how a variety of French intellectuals came to hold such views, believing that their country’s defeat in 1940 could serve as the catalyst for establishing European unity. Their illusion, the author contends, was rooted in the vision of a united Europe they had articulated during the interwar years; it framed their initial reactions to the German occupation and allowed them to see potential in it, though some of them did so for longer than others.

The cohort of thinkers Bruneteau examines is diverse. A number of the many individuals he discusses were associated with the French left and involved in pacifist and pro-European groups between the wars, and subsequently accommodated themselves to the German occupation to varying degrees. The best-known of them is Marcel Déat, who began his career in the French Socialist party, but went on to found the collaborationist Rassemblement National Populaire and eventually became a minister in the Vichy government. Other figures in this category include René Château, Francis Delaisi, Léon Emery, and Gaston Riou, all of whom had been supporters of centre-left politics, pacifism and the leading French civil liberties organization, the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme.<sup>2</sup> But other traditions contributed to ‘Europeanist’ discourse as well, such as

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by M.L. Smith, “Introduction: European Unity and the Second World War,” in M.L. Smith and Peter M.R. Stirk, eds., *Making the New Europe: European Unity and the Second World War* (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1990), 16.

<sup>2</sup> On this organization see now William D. Irvine, *Between Politics and Justice: The Ligue des Droits de l’Homme, 1898-1945* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007). This book also provides valuable insights into how members of a civil liberties organization could rally to the authoritarian Vichy regime, and to Hitler’s ‘New Order.’

the Catholics Emmanuel Mounier, who edited the journal *Esprit*, and Hubert Beuve-Méry, who later became the founding editor of the influential daily *Le Monde*. The fascist writer Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, a fervent supporter of collaboration, and Bertrand de Jouvenel, who was active first in left and then far-right politics during the interwar years and embraced free-market economics after 1945, are among the other figures assessed.

Bruneteau does not seek to homogenize this group, but he does identify common influences, networks and recurring themes in interwar 'Europeanist' discourse. Aristide Briand, who had sought a rapprochement with Germany during the late 1920s and early 1930s, was a crucial influence. Periodicals such as *Notre Temps*, *L'Europe nouvelle* and the *Cahiers bleus* encouraged the exchange and articulation of pro-European ideas. Greater continental unity was presented as the solution to a variety of problems. Building Europe would facilitate domestic reform, in which government by 'technicians' would ensure renovation of the state and social harmony through judicious planning. Just as critically, it would ensure peace with Germany. Bruneteau emphasizes that the Europeanists did not allow themselves to be deterred by the rise of Hitler or the rapidly deteriorating international climate. Indeed, their desire for integration and peace intensified as the 1930s drew to a close. "Members of a minority, the partisans of a united Europe thus lived their engagement with a growing intensity; it sometimes took on a religious or eschatological character"; they came to hope for "a final deliverance, whatever its form and modalities." (233)

Given this mindset, Bruneteau argues, it is possible to comprehend how these individuals could regard the collapse of 1940 as inaugurating a new European order. While some conceded the Nazi conquerors were harsh, they argued that in historical terms the Third Reich was performing a function comparable to that of empires in the past, from Rome to Napoleon – paving the way for a new era. The French had to recognize and adapt to the situation, in order to have a presence in the remaking of Europe. Some of these individuals also hoped that the Third Reich would evolve in a more moderate direction, facilitating the process.

Over the course of the occupation the Europeanists outlined their plans for the future. Their visions of economic coordination invariably rejected liberalism in favor of state direction. Africa and Eastern Europe were presented as promising sites for cooperative 'development' (exploitation) under Western European guidance. Commentators such as René Château encouraged new approaches to the study of history, in which an emphasis upon transnational trends and particular eras (such as the Carolingian Empire) would forge a common European consciousness. Cultural unity would also be forged in opposition to the negative examples of Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States. Here again, Bruneteau highlights continuities with earlier thinking, noting that interwar anti-Americanism and critiques of national history prefigured such conceptions.

As he reconstructs the evolution of Europeanist discourse, Bruneteau stresses that it should not be seen simply as a response to Nazi pressure, even though the propaganda of the Third Reich took on some pan-European tones as the war turned against Germany. Nor were these intellectuals merely opportunists, seeking advantage under changed circumstances; their convictions were genuine and must be taken seriously. This standpoint leads the author to challenge what he sees as conventional views of certain figures. For instance, he contends that

Marcel Déat's commitment to a united Europe has been underestimated; more than a simply product of his desire to wield political influence, it derived from his previous activities and the influence of earlier, French socialists like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

These thoughtful reconsiderations of key figures are one of the strengths of the book; another is Bruneteau's contextualization of his subjects, which he accomplishes by discussing other visions of international cooperation that were on offer at the time. Fiercely nationalist commentators like Thierry Maulnier, for example, cherished visions of France providing spiritual leadership to a more loosely-defined 'Western' civilization. The economist François Perroux proposed a Europe of two 'partial' federations, one dominated by France and the other by Germany. A series of conferences sponsored by the Vichy regime in the spring of 1943 evoked notions of a hierarchy of communities, reaching from the basic unit of the family to a wider European entity with a 'de-nationalized' executive.

As Bruneteau stresses, there was an air of profound unreality about all of this. The lofty ambitions and communitarian rhetoric of the Europeanists contrasted starkly with the brutal, intensifying exploitation that characterized Nazi rule. While recognizing that some of the Europeanists he studies found aspects of the latter distasteful, Bruneteau surmises that in their devotion to the fantasy of a new, united continent they too often overlooked how it would be constructed. In this respect they were comparable to those who defended Stalinism after 1945. While some aspects of their ideas echoed in postwar discussions of European unity, Bruneteau seems to imply in closing that the wartime Europeanist vision also operated as a negative example, encouraging a more cautious and incremental approach to forging common institutions.

Bruneteau's research is thorough, his style elegant, and his arguments clearly reasoned and carefully documented. The book might have benefited from providing readers with a more structured introduction to the group it discusses, to better orient the reader. However, this does not diminish the author's achievement significantly. Through his careful reconstruction of the pan-European illusions of the early 1940s Bruneteau makes a significant contribution to the intellectual history of wartime France, and to the evolution of the 'European idea.'

---

**Copyright © 2007 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved.** H-Diplo and H-Net permit the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---