SUMMARY
Throughout her career in the public eye, Louise Weiss was both a writer and an activist. She was among those who promoted the European ideal on the basis of their experiences during the First World War. Like many other people who were similarly influenced, Louise Weiss was a product of the borderlands, her family having come from the part of eastern France that had been annexed by Germany in 1871.

Louise Weiss devoted her life to various campaigns, which can be seen as having been mutually reinforcing: the battle for women's rights, the battles for Europe and for freedom for the nations of central Europe, and the intellectual struggle to analyse and eradicate the roots of war.

At different times in her life, she was a journalist, a politician, a committed intellectual and a maker of documentary films in many parts of the world. Her commitment to Europe remained the underlying theme of everything she did, and in 1979 she successfully stood as a candidate in the first elections to the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. As the oldest member of the assembly, she gave the inaugural speech, before handing over the presidency to another woman who had campaigned for Europe, Simone Veil.

Today, the building in which the European Parliament has its plenary chamber in Strasbourg is named after Louise Weiss.
Origins of Louise Weiss's commitment

Louise Weiss was born in 1893 in Arras in northern France. On her father's side, she came from an affluent family from Alsace who had left that region at the time of the German annexation in 1871. The oldest of six children, Louise grew up in a family replete with women of strong character. Her mother encouraged her young daughter's desire for independence and a formal education, although her father could not imagine that a woman from her background might be capable of advanced study. Without entering the École Normale Supérieure, Louise prepared for, and passed, the teachers' training examination in arts subjects, thus securing a prestigious qualification, at the age of 21. She studied at Oxford, but turned down a school-teaching post of the kind for which she was now qualified, and instead turned her attention to journalism.

In a century when it was difficult for women to find jobs commensurate with their ambitions, she saw working in journalism primarily as a commitment to a role in society at large. Accordingly, during the Great War, she organised an operation in Brittany to provide care and assistance to soldiers who had been wounded at the front. Her feelings about this experience were ambiguous, mingling a desire to support the defence of her homeland with pacifist convictions.

The peace campaigner

Freedom for Central Europe

During the First World War, Louise Weiss moved in the circles of central European intellectuals in exile in Paris, particularly Czechs and Slovaks, who were campaigning for autonomy or independence for their country. As a result, she met Tomáš Masaryk, Edvard Beneš and Milan Štefánik. She fell in love with the latter and espoused his cause, during and after the war.

After a first experience of journalism under the pseudonym Louis Lefranc, she co-founded an important newspaper – L'Europe Nouvelle – of which she was the linchpin and which she ran from 1922 to 1934. This weekly was notable for the interest that it took in economic and political issues, but also because of its openness to the leading lights of French literature, such as Maurice Genevoix, Georges Duhamel, Guillaume Apollinaire and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle. She met the major political and diplomatic writers of the time, such as Léon Blum, Arístide Briand, Paul Valéry and Alexis Léger (alias Saint-John Perse), and engaged in debate with them, sometimes very heatedly.

From the very first issue of the newspaper in January 1918, she ensured that it spearheaded the campaign for freedom for the nations of central Europe. Her passion for that particular region of Europe took her to Prague as a correspondent for the 'Petit Parisien' in order to witness the earliest days of the freshly created state of Czechoslovakia. She continued as far afield as Moscow, which was still embroiled in the turmoil of the Revolution.
In addition to her longstanding family ties (it had been in Prague that her great-grandfather had met his future wife), Louise Weiss's political passion for central Europe was backed up by her private life.\footnote{1}

The League of Nations

After the war, Louise Weiss used her articles to campaign for Franco-German reconciliation and to criticise the revengeful attitude inherent in the Treaty of Versailles. She expressed enthusiasm for the League of Nations, which was being established in Geneva: 'I was optimistically convinced that it was within the newly emergent League of Nations that it would be possible to conduct negotiations without any of the Great Powers having to lose face, while at the same time involving the small nations in the decisions taken to build peace'.\footnote{2}

She then associated herself with Aristide Briand, whose work to promote peace and Franco-German reconciliation she supported (he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with his German counterpart, Gustav Stresemann, in 1926). She supported the Locarno Agreement concluded between Germany, Belgium, France, Britain, Italy, Poland and Czechoslovakia on 16 October 1925, the first stage in Germany's return to the embrace of the community of European nations. She also supported Briand's other projects, such as the 1928 'General Treaty for Renunciation of War' and the project of a European Union which he presented to the League of Nations in 1929.

In 1930, after the first electoral victories of the Nazis in Germany, Louise Weiss became more pessimistic. She accompanied Briand to Berlin, where he was going to install André François-Poncet, the new French ambassador, in 1931. She returned with an awareness of imminent danger. Visiting Prague, she warned Edvard Beneš about it, but he did not believe her: ‘In the end I begged him to imagine that Germany had cut itself adrift from the world in which he and I were still living, and that it was making off in a new and sinister direction that was all its own’.\footnote{3}

The campaigner for women's rights

Having seen her role in the foundation and running of L'Europe Nouvelle played down, Louise Weiss left the paper for a time. After her series of articles written from central Europe and Russia, the owner, Hyacinthe Philouze, suggested that she should return. Louise Weiss's response was a typical expression of her ambition to secure recognition of her role and indeed that of women more generally after four years of warfare during which they had been responsible for much of the war effort on the economic side: '[I want] the 750 francs per month that you promised me [...] and that you have never paid me. A vote on the Management Board. The title of Editor in Chief. Control over subscriptions. A right to scrutinise the accounts'.\footnote{4} Hyacinthe Philouze had no choice but to concede to every demand.

Louise Weiss - Campaigner for liberty

Source: Musée de Saverne – Collections Louise Weiss.
As regards her political activity, in 1934 Louise Weiss set up the association 'La femme nouvelle', with the aim of promoting the status of women and their participation in politics. For this reason, although it would be another ten years before women were granted the right to vote, she stood symbolically as a candidate in municipal elections in Montmartre, and tens of thousands of votes were cast for her, the ballot papers being placed in hat boxes, symbolising women's relegation to the background of politics. Louise Weiss was very much in favour of actions that would make an impression: on the Champs-Elysées she opened a 'Femme nouvelle' shop to serve as a showcase for her actions. She had some withering things to say about the most died-in-the-wool conservative senators, organising public meetings at which, 'armed only with the Official Journal', she read out their most reactionary speeches in order to provoke a public reaction. She organised releases of red balloons with feminist tracts attached to them during the French football cup final. After her bold stunt at Montmartre, she similarly stood as a 'candidate' – even before women were allowed to vote or stand for election – in the parliamentary elections in 1936, and more than 14 000 votes were cast for her. In her view, the appointment of three women in Léon Blum's Popular Front Government in 1936 was just one step in the long journey towards women's liberation, as she considered that 'three swallows do not make a summer'.

The Second World War

Between 1930 and 1938, Louise Weiss continued her campaigns for peace. She set up the 'Nouvelle École de la Paix' (New School of Peace), a free educational institute which, throughout the year, invited politicians, statesmen and renowned intellectuals to come to the Sorbonne to dispense their wisdom and to speak about their hopes for peace. She conceived this school as a continuation of her support for the League of Nations.

From 1938, while she remained faithful to her long-term convictions, her campaign for peace took a more practical turn. She campaigned for France to admit the waves of German refugees fleeing the Third Reich and its racist, anti-Semitic policies and political persecution. They included such leading European intellectuals as Walter Benjamin, Günther Anders and Hannah Arendt.

Like the rest of the country at the time, Louise Weiss was aghast at the collapse of the French army in the face of the Nazi onslaught. She joined the provisional government in Bordeaux, then in 1940 threw in her lot with the Vichy government. Louise Weiss did not appreciate the importance of General de Gaulle's call for resistance, and she refused Jean Monnet's offer to leave the country with him. Monnet was at that point on a mission to persuade Philippe Pétain, the new head of government, to leave the south of France for Algeria.

That same year, she finally departed for the United States, with the intention of building a movement of philanthropic solidarity with France in its time of trial. She had under-estimated the hostility that she would encounter: many of her interlocutors condemned the armistice signed by France. However, she found people willing to help her, and returned to France with a large consignment of food. She travelled via Vichy France before then obtaining permission to return to Paris, in the occupied zone. At a later stage, she joined a resistance movement for whose newspaper she was to write articles under a pseudonym.

Fresh campaigns after the war

After the war, Louise Weiss had difficulty in finding a job as a journalist on any of the major newspapers that had emerged from the Resistance. After a trip to Prague, where her friend Edvard Beneš was elected President of Czechoslovakia, she went to Germany. She travelled to the United States many times during this period, and busied herself with making documentaries. After America, Louise Weiss visited Egypt and then Asia, including Japan and Korea.

She continued her peace campaigns, in particular by supporting the new academic discipline of polemology – the academic study of conflicts. In 1945, she joined forces with the sociologist Gaston Bouthoul. Together with him, she ran the review Guerres et Paix. It was in the course of her
polemological research that she undertook her major trips around the world to study at first hand the causes of conflicts in the context of decolonisation and the Cold War.

**Louise Weiss and the European Parliament**

In 1979, Louise Weiss was elected to the European Parliament in the first European elections held by direct universal suffrage.⁹

The 'Rally for the Republic' (RPR) list, for which Louise Weiss stood as a candidate, had asked her to do so because it was looking for someone to represent it whose commitment to European unity was well known, despite a number of substantive disagreements, particularly regarding the role of women in politics.

However, Jacques Chirac had promised her that she would be 'our First Lady', and she was the woman highest on the party list, ranked in such a way that she could expect to be elected. Thanks to her age, Louise Weiss quickly realised that, as the oldest Member, she would have the honour of delivering the first address and presiding over the election of the first President of the European Parliament elected by direct universal suffrage, who in the event was another woman, Simone Veil. Louise Weiss began her address by evoking the commitment that had inspired her all her life: 'The stars of destiny and the paths of the written word have led me to this rostrum, and given me, as President for a day, an honour of which I would never have dared to dream, and the greatest joy a human being can experience in the evening of life: the joy of a youthful vocation miraculously come to fruition'. She died in Paris before completing her term of office, on 26 May 1983.

In 1998, the Bureau of the European Parliament adopted a decision laying down rules on the names to be given to Parliament's buildings: it sought proposals to honour prominent individuals who were no longer alive and who had contributed greatly either to European integration or to the promotion of human rights or the dissemination of European culture.¹⁰ In the same decision, Parliament decided that the main European Parliament building in Strasbourg, previously known as IPE4, should become the Louise Weiss Building. By means of this gesture, Parliament acknowledged the fundamental contribution that Louise Weiss had made to the cause of Europe.
FURTHER READING


NOTES

3 Ibid., p. 316.
4 Ibid., p. 56.
6 Ibid., p.123.
7 C. Bertin, op.cit., p.276.

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