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Safeguarding a «Civilization in Crisis»: 
La Revue Universelle’s Conceptualization of Western Civilization and its Renewal, 1920–1935

In a short review of Roger Woods’s The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic, Klemens von Klemperer expressed his frustration with the concept of «conservative revolution» that had become so pervasive in the work of German historians in the 1990s.«The question is», he wrote, «whether the «conservative revolution», about which so much, too much, printer’s ink has been spilled, has in fact ever really taken place». And yet, he went on to concede, «a broader perspective on the subject» that included an international array of interwar writers would add a «salutary, indeed necessary, dimension to an understanding of neoconservatism in our times». «What is needed», he continued, «is a comparative approach to the topic of the German «conservative revolution» which indeed would amount to a real contribution to the field of intellectual history». The collection of articles in this issue each approach the idea of conservative revolution from different national and theoretical points of view in order to provide this more complex understanding of neoconservatism in the 1920s.

When considering the possibility of a «conservative revolution» beyond Weimar, it seems necessary to turn our gaze across the Rhine to the interwar French right. Here, a few historians have already begun to identify a new breed of radical-right intellectuals in the «nonconformist» movements such as the Jeune Droite (Young Right) that corre-

1 R. Woods, The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic, London 1996 was but one of many texts that explored the idea of a conservative revolution in response to Weimar. More recent texts such as M. Travers, Critics of Modernity: The Literature of the Conservative Revolution in Germany, 1890–1933, New York 2001 explore the intellectuals and the ideology of the revolution more fully.

2 In this sentiment, Klemperer echoes the work of S. Breuer, Anatomie der konservativen Revolution, Darmstadt 1993 which finds no common ground for the revolutionaries and therefore rejects the concept.


4 This effort, by its very nature, diverges from the work of R. P. Sieferle, Die konservative Revolution: Fünf biographische Skizzen (Paul Lensch, Werner Sombart, Oswald Spengler, Ernst Jünger, Hans Freyer), Frankfort/M. 1995, which argues that the conservative revolutionaries in Weimar sought specifically «German» paths to modernity unique to them. However, it is very much in keeping with the new trend to approach such European intellectual movements as transnational phenomena seen, for example, in A. Mammone / E. Godin / B. Jenkins, Mapping the Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe: from Local to Transnational, New York 2012.
spond to the neoconservative revolutionaries of Weimar. The Jeune Droite fascinates historians for a variety of reasons, not least of which is that this group, like the German conservative revolutionaries, is at the «intersection of several lines of division which structure the political landscape of the time», one of which seems to lead inexorably to fascism and collaboration. However, the Jeune Droite did not find its voice or its audience until the 1930s, a decade after the conservative revolutionaries in Germany. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to consider more closely the groups and ideas that would have nurtured the Jeune Droite intellectuals during their formation in the 1920s if we are to explore the concept of a transnational conservative revolution in the immediate post-war years. Nicolas Kessler, whose work, *Histoire politique de la Jeune Droite 1929–1942: Une révolution conservatrice à la française*, seeks more than any other to link the Jeune Droite and the radical right of the 1930s to the European conservative revolution, acknowledges this from the beginning. «Too many», he says of the works on the non-conformist intellectuals of the 1930s, «insist on the novelty of the spirit of the 1930s, too many put the emphasis on the will of rupture demonstrated by its representatives, one loses the historicity of their path. They did not produce a doctrine ex nihilo, from a blank page and only the resources of their reason.» Kessler and other historians of the neoconservative, nonconformists of the 1930s, are therefore careful to show the long history of the diverse strains of thought that led to the Jeune Droite, particularly the strains of thought crafted by their neoconservative predecessors in the 1920s.

Shifting attention to the 1920s instead of the mid-1930s allows a discussion of the values, ideals and language already in use in the 1920s that would undermine parliamentary democracy in France, as it did in the Weimar Republic, and prepare the intellectuals to be more receptive to fascism. However, this examination of neoconservative intellectuals of the 1920s is not intended to become unnecessarily embroiled in the ongoing debates over their paths to Vichy or the «Nazi pedigree-hunting» that have been more thoroughly explored in numerous works on the 1930s French intellectual right. In particular, while recognizing the influence of their anti-democratic language...
in making the French public more susceptible to later fascist rhetoric, it will not suggest, as some scholars have, a straight line from the anti-Enlightenment and anti-democratic thought of neconservatives of the 1920s French Right to the support for collaboration and Vichy.\(^{10}\) Instead, it emphasizes the complexity of choices and currents of thought facing the intellectuals of the conservative right during the 1920s and the early 1930s, and the ambiguity of political affiliations and trajectories in a time when it seemed, more so than ever before, that «engagements and classifications are constantly changing», and positions could reverse on issues such as pacifism and fascism within a few short years or even months.\(^{11}\)

In the complex and ever-changing socio-political environment of the post-war decade, any categorization of intellectuals must necessarily be a fluid one and must be tempered by recognition of internal division. While recognizing these internal inconsistencies and the evolving and often ambiguous positions of its writers, it is still possible as early as 1920 to identify the coterie of La Revue Universelle as a distinct community of radical conservatives whose shared values and compatible worldviews linked them in a neoconservative network. La Revue Universelle, created as an incarnation of the parti de l'intelligence first proposed in 1919 in a manifesto in Le Figaro,\(^{12}\) became one of the leading voices of the intellectual radical right of the 1920s and a training ground for the young intellectuals of the 1930s. It was initially suggested as a new journal by Charles Maurras, who envisioned it as a space for continued discussion of the royalist, conservative, nationalist ideas of the Action française.\(^{13}\) However, once placed under the direction of conservative historian Jacques Bainville, along with the famed spokesman for the generation of 1912 Henri Massis as the editor-in-chief, and Jacques Maritain, an ardent Thomist in charge of the philosophy segment, the journal quickly became a beacon for a unique blend of neoconservative thought that was indebted to, but clearly distinct from the Action française. While it maintained some AF writers, including occasional contributions from Maurras himself, and the general Maurrassian Germanophobia, it also attracted a trans-generational array of revolutionary right-wing writers in France: from Maurice Barrès to Robert Brasillach, who had pulled away from the Action française in search of right-wing alternatives during the 1920s and the early 1930s. Their focus would be social and cultural concerns rather than the «politics first» model of the Action française. Perhaps equally significant, the Revue Universelle by its title and its stated mission, saw itself not as a voice of French nationalism narrowly


\(^{12}\) The manifest, which will be examined in more detail in the pages to follow, was designed to oppose the demobilization of intellectual engagement demanded by Romain Rolland at the end of the war and sparked an outpouring of support from nationalist and conservative intellectuals. «Pour un parti de l’intelligence», in: Le Figaro, 19.7.1919, 5.

defined, but rather as the defender of European or Western civilization as a whole. As a result, while keeping its ties to the Action française and to the Catholic faith, the coterie of the RU branched out from these two powerful influences to develop its own unique cultural politics.

Revue Universelle authors envisioned their network as one stretching beyond French borders to include radical conservative intellectuals throughout Europe and designed a cultural politics to reach this broader audience. They solicited news and critique on European-wide events and contributions from like-minded neoconservative writers across the continent. But an essential component of their attempted pan-European cultural politics, and the main focus of this study, was the language of decadence and decline in Western civilization, and the need to defend and revive this source of European unity and vitality. There was a strong belief among the RU authors that this language of decline and renewal of the West, and all the neoconservative political, religious, social and cultural ideals that language could be used to express, was a pan-European language for a European-wide crisis and that its invocation would promote a transnational conservative revolution. However, I would argue that despite their vision of pan-Europeanism, their attempted network with European contributors, and the many values they shared with their European neoconservative colleagues, the distinctive way in which the intellectuals of La Revue Universelle conceptualized Western civilization, the sources of its decline, and the method of its safeguarding and renewal were not conducive to any true pan-Europeanism and particularly any confederation with the conservative revolutionaries across the Rhine.

How, then, did the intellectuals of the RU conceptualize Western civilization, and how did they envision safeguarding it against decline and the forces of modernity? Although the language of civilization and decadence was not unique to the intellectual right, the source of this decadence, as portrayed by the RU authors, and their proposed solutions to it were distinctly right-wing visions. It is through a lens of history that saw civilization in decline, and through the language of apocalypse and palingenesis all of the themes of the French right-wing, neoconservative revolution would flow: support for an authoritative leader, hierarchy of elites and traditional sources of authority, revival of the spiritual health of the nation, and a return to the classical, Western traditions and heritage. And, in keeping with this, their language of safeguarding Western civilization was one that opposed liberalism, parliamentary democracy, and Marxist socialism, and one that rejected modernity’s materialism, dependency on technological progress and a short-sighted focus on economic health. The RU’s understanding of Western civilization as a structure for the expression of these neoconservative values meant that their trope of civilization could have been the foundation for an imagined community of neoconservatives across Europe. However, the RU also understood civilization and its revival as compatible with, and even a manifestation of, French nation-
alism. Civilization might be a Greco-Latin creation, but in their minds it was dependent on French leadership and values. Their francocentric concept of civilization intentionally excluded Germany from civilization, the West, or even a pan-European neocorporative alliance. Therefore, while the language of decadence and the decline of the West was intended to spark European-wide intellectual revolt against the forces of modernity believed to be destroying the cultural heritage of their shared civilization, the narrow understanding of Western civilization and of its sources of regeneration undermined the resonance of their call to arms beyond France.15

1. Neoconservative Revolution in France and the Tropes of Civilization in Decline

Historians whose work has focused specifically on identifying a conservative revolution in Germany have approached it as «an intellectual current or rather a cluster of individual writers»16 who experienced the First World War as the formative experience of their generation and reacted against the forces of modernity that they believed led to this war.17 However, French historians locate the origin of this neoconservative intellectual movement less in the disillusionment after war, and more in the long-running tradition of anti-democratic thought of the conservative and the far right. Zeev Sternhell, who traces the anti-Enlightenment tradition from the eighteenth century through to the modern day in all of Europe, sees the conservative revolution as simply one in a long line of reactions to the Enlightenment concept of modernity. The fragmentation of medieval continental harmony by the modern, divisive forces of nationalism, industrialization, materialism and expansionism resulted in the modern-day decadence and decline that inspired the counter-Enlightenment, conservative revolutions across Europe.18 «Nothing would be more mistaken», he writes, «than to make the world conflagration [of the First World War] responsible for the pessimism, the relativism, the anti-humanism and the revolt against reason, the autonomy of the individual, and the idea

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15 This is, at least in part, supported by the research of Tamir Bar-On and Andrea Mammone who consider the extreme right’s goals of pan-European empire in the post-war era. A. Mammone, «Revisiting and De-territorializing Fascism in the 1950s: The Extreme Right in France and Italy, and the Pan-national («European») Imaginary», in: Patterns of Prejudice 45 (2011) 4; T. Bar-On, «Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite», in: Patterns of Prejudice 45 (2011) 3, 207. I have argued elsewhere that the origins of this turn toward a European conceptualization of nationalism can be found as early as the late 1930s and the early 1940s when opportunities for collaboration with fascist movements prompted a new language of Europeanism, as a substitute for narrow nationalism, on the far right: S. Shurts, «Continental Collaboration: The Transition from Ultranationalism to Pan-Europeanism by the Interwar French Fascist Right», in: French Politics, Culture & Society 32 (2014) 3. However, the level of exchange, institutionalization and cooperation that Bar-On and Mammone identify in the post-war is not evident in the effort of the Revue Universelle, and neither is there a clear transition in language from a French-led Europe to the Europe as the new nation that was emerging in the late 1930s and early 1940s.


17 Woods, Conservative Revolution, 1, 12–15.

18 Sternhell, Anti-Enlightenment Tradition, 8–9.
of progress to be found in Spengler’s work».\(^{19}\) He highlights instead the long tradition of European anti-Enlightenment thought by writers such as Barrès and Maurras, and before them, Herder, Carlyle, de Maistre and Burke as the key to the «multidimensional popular revolt against liberal democracy» in favour of a more distant socio-political heritage.\(^{20}\) For the French revolutionary right, according to Sternhell, it was the failures of democracy long before the war that inspired neoconservatism and its corresponding language of civilization’s decline in the modern era.

Christopher Forth narrows Sternhell’s theory to pinpoint the emergence of these ideas of decadence and renewal in the work of the generation of 1890. He argues that, between the generations of 1890 and 1912, «there was a gradual intellectual transformation from decadence and individualism to vitalism and collective regeneration, a shift hastened by political scandals, socialist and anarchist agitation, the Dreyfus affair, and the rise of French nationalism»\(^{21}\). It was, Forth says, at the turn of the century that «the philosophy of Nietzsche inspired and legitimated a vitalistic desire for a radical change in the status quo» and promoted «new vitality to end European decadence».\(^{22}\) Even if there was no transformation of intellectual values in reality, Robert Wohl has convincingly argued that certain young neoconservative writers like Henri Massis promoted the perception that such a transformation had occurred.\(^{23}\) Nowhere is the desire to create this change, while presenting it as a fait accompli, more apparent than in eventual Revue Universelle founder and editor Henri Massis’s 1913 faux enquête, Les Jeunes gens d’aujourd’hui that proclaimed the arrival of a new generation of youths who preferred collectivism, nationalism and classical humanism over the decadent modernity, sterile science and individualism of their predecessors. Although the enquête was revealed to be a fabrication, Massis’s message of civilization’s revival resonated with the youth years before the experience of the Great War.

Nicolas Kessler, whose work focuses more narrowly on the French neoconservative revolutionaries of the Jeune Droite during the 1930s, explains that they were indebted to their predecessors of the 1920s, and particularly to the Maurrassian worldview for a «particular form of ultraintellectualized nationalism enclosed in an armor of Greco-Latin references, a visceral aversion for political romanticism in all its forms, a Realism and a pre-war germanophobia».\(^{24}\) But to this was added the historic French Catholic perspective that more strongly influenced the young Jeune Droite intellectuals Jean de Fabrègues, Jean-Pierre Maxence and Robert Francis.\(^{25}\) This Catholicism, including the

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 369.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 315.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 98, 108.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 24.
\(^{25}\) The role of the Catholic faithful and particularly the conservative Catholic intellectuals in the political engagement of the 1920s and the early 1930s has been recognized by several historians including B. E. Doering, Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals, Notre Dame 1983; F. Gugelot, La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France, 1885–1935, Paris 2010; and J. Grondeux, Georges Goyau (1869–1939): Un intellectuel catholique sous la 11e République, Rome 2007. Of particular significance for understanding the influence of a Catholic journal team is M. Winock’s masterful Histoire politique de la revue Esprit, 1930–1950, Paris
Thomist strand promoted by *Revue Universelle* author Jacques Maritain, encouraged a return to traditional sources of spiritual health and «a complete refusal of the society issued from the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Revolution and dominated by individualism, rationalism, secularization of thought, of sciences, and of the state». Linking the Maurrassian and the catholic strands, and transmitting ideas of the generation of 1890 to that of 1930, according to Kessler, was Henri Massis and, by extension, his team at *Revue Universelle*.

Paul Mazgaj, more so than any other historian of the Jeune Droite, recognizes the invaluable role that Massis played, not only as a mediator between Catholicism and Maurrassian integral nationalism and as a link between generations, but also in articulating from the merger of these themes «what was to become a pan-European and remarkably potent language of cultural politics [...] that converged on a simple set of dialectically-related oppositions: age and decadence versus youth and renewal. On the one side», he writes, «stood the symptoms of decline, which taken together constituted a veritable «crisis of civilization»», indicated by materialism, democracy, and positivism; on the other were those who would pursue cultural renewal, spiritual and philosophical projects, and reassert the need for elite leadership. While the concepts of decadence and civilization’s decline had been evolving in France and the rest of Europe for decades, it is Massis’s work starting from 1919 that Mazgaj rightly credits for «fashioning a distinctive and highly influential version of the pan-European language of decline and renewal» for the neoconservatives of the 1920s that, while distinct from the Action français version, still existed comfortably within the «Maurrassian worldview». Mazgaj draws attention to the «retooling of French nationalism for the purposes of civilizational defense» and the types of conservative nationalism that were crafted during this time on the far right, including Maurras’s own anti-Semitic- and xenophobic-tinged version, in response to this «meditation» on decadence.

But I would add that there was also a simultaneous «retooling» of the concept of civilization to better correspond with existing themes of right-wing French nationalism. Each group that utilized the language of civilization and its defence against decadence understood the concept in their own unique ways. For the coterie of *Revue Universelle*, while the language was pan-European, «existing within the Maurrassian worldview» required an understanding of civilization which, while not as exclusionary as Maurras’s anti-Semitic concept, was also not fully inclusive. This resulted in internal contradictions between the *Revue Universelle’s* stated mission of universalism – or...
at least Europeanism – and the reality of a very particularist francocentrism and a strong Germanophobia that unintentionally undermined the transnational appeal.

In this effort to distinguish the generic tropes of pan-Europeanism and Western civilization from the unique way in which the RU authors understood these concepts, the work of several recent scholars provides a useful model. Because these frameworks of Europe, the West, civilization and decadence were not academic categorizations but rather actors’ categories, self-fashioned by the intellectuals of RU to reflect their own historical contexts and experiences, they were necessarily imbued with a unique meaning that made more sense to the French conservative revolutionaries than others outside their circle. The work of both Michel Dobry and Bruno Goyet are powerful reminders that the categorizations and meanings that we apply to certain concepts as historians are not necessarily the meaning that such concepts had for the individuals of the time. Goyet’s masterful study of Charles Maurras shows that even the image of a man (Maurras) is fluid over time, shifting in response to successive interpretations by supporters and detractors. This idea of fluid, constructed categories with meanings that evolve over time in response to relationships and historical contexts, rather than generic concepts and categorizations, is also essential to Michael Dobry’s «relational» analysis of fascism that stresses «the role played by political allies and rivals in shaping a phenomenon that develops rather than simply exists». This approach to the RU’s language of Western civilization as a self-constructed, fluid, and relational concept imbued with unique meaning by the authors means that their perspective is more significant than any «reality». This helps to explain why the RU authors did not see, or did not permit themselves to see, what appear to historians today to be common themes and ideals between the RU vision and that of the German conservative revolutionaries.

Federico Finchelstein’s work on transatlantic fascism reinforces the significance of these constructed meanings for the effort by the RU to connect across national boundaries. Finchelstein argues that despite the concept of a generic fascism that could be spread from Italy to Argentina, and the efforts by Italy to create a transatlantic fascist network, the reality was that fascism in Argentina meant something very different from what it meant in Italy. He suggests that this inability of Italy to create a true Latin-American fascist connection was due in part to the «paternalistic Italocentric» approach that they took to the concept of fascism. Such an appreciation for the limitations of a generic concept in the hands of those who interpret it according to their own national interests seems particularly fruitful for this study of the RU. Arnd Bauerkmper has made similar arguments that generic concepts such as civilization and Europe have «repeatedly been a referential framework used to legitimize the pre-eminence of specific states» and that this has amounted to a form of «exploitation» for the dominant

32 Goyet, Charles Maurras, 15.  
nation’s self-interest. This does not mean, he insists, that the language of Europeanism used by Fascists and Nazis can be dismissed as purely propaganda, since they truly believe that their vision was one for all of Europe. Nor does it mean that their much-touted transnational collaborations and ties produced no fruitful exchanges. However, Bauerkämper argues, their unique understanding of what Europe meant, based on their own “hyper-nationalism”, would create barriers to any substantive “cross-border exchange” and result in a failure to “institutionalize cooperation” with other fascist sympathizing groups. Here again are striking parallels to the well-intentioned goals of the RU authors, the attempt to solicit transnational collaboration, and yet the compromise of this expansive vision by a narrow, overly nationalized conceptualization of the meaning of Western civilization.

2. The Cultural Politics of Western Civilization: The *Revue Universelle*’s Francocentric Conceptualization

The generic trope of a declining civilization on which Massis, Bainville and the RU writers built their neoconservative cultural politics has been seen to extend back before the war to the turn of the century. However, the story of the RU itself began in the war’s immediate aftermath in 1919. The intellectuals of the extreme left and right had ostensibly buried their antagonisms during the union sacrée in order to unite as one against the enemies of France during the war. Even left-wing intellectuals had “engaged” or “mobilized their intellect” in the service of their embattled nation with only the rare intellectuals like Romain Rolland refraining from nationalist propaganda by declaring themselves “au-dessus de la mêlée” [above the fray]. However, at the war’s conclusion, Rolland’s position was seen in a more favourable light, and the intellectuals of the left sheepishly retreated from nationalist propaganda. Rolland’s manifesto, “Déclaration de l’indépendance de l’Esprit”, published in *L’Humanité* on June 26, 1919 called for all intellectuals to cease putting “their intellect in the service of their governments” and to return to universalist, disinterested art which was within their proper purview, a position later reiterated in Julien Benda’s *La trahison des clercs*. In response, Henri Massis crafted a manifesto entitled “Pour un parti de l’intelligence” to call for intellectuals to continue to “engage” in political affairs as they had during the war in the name of Western civilization and its continued defence. This manifesto was signed by a majority of the right-wing writers who would soon make their home at the *Revue Universelle*. Published in *Le Figaro* 19 July 1919, the manifesto laid the foundation for the creation of the *Revue Universelle* and propagated not only the ideal of the intellectual engagé but also the language of civilization decline and renewal that would become hallmarks of its effort to create a pan-European conservative revolution.

“Certain intellectuals have recently published a manifesto where they reproach their peers for having abased and degraded thought by putting it in service of the


36 Ibid., 44-45.
nation», the manifesto informed its readers about those signers of the «Déclaration de l’indépendance de l’Esprit». However, it continued, the signers of Massis’s new manifesto, «Pour un parti de l’intelligence», believed such a demobilization of the intellectuals «menaces intelligence and society». Victory, it explained, had brought great opportunities to France, but these would be lost if the intellectual elite did not immediately begin the «immense work of reconstruction» necessary for a «disrupted universe». This was a task, the manifesto continued, that was not for the French alone but for the elite of every nation. «It is to an intellectual apostolate that we want to consecrate ourselves, first as Frenchmen, but also as men, as guardians of civilization», the manifest proclaimed. «Public health and the safeguarding of truth are the points that guide us – they are broadly human enough to interest all peoples.» The manifesto’s intent was not only to promote French revival but revitalization of all of Western Europe, which the signers believed to be suffering from the same spiritual malaise as France. From its first appeal, therefore, the neoconservative mission of civilizational renewal was a generic trope intended for a pan-European audience, but was approached through the particular lens of French nationalism.

Because the framers understood civilization as a French concept, the manifesto was quick to reassure the ardent French nationalists that any transnational defence of the West would not mean the kind of internationalism proposed by the communists. Instead, this would involve a neoconservative concept of universal values: French nationalism writ large as a defence of Western civilization through the defence of French values. «If we put first the preoccupation of the needs of France and national reconstitution, if we want before all to serve and accept our civic obligations, if we claim to organize the defence of French intelligence», the manifesto explained, «it is because we have in mind the spiritual future of the entire civilization». The signers claimed that it was in national geniuses that the true «international of thought» would be established, not in the disinterested and abstract universals of the left. Nations were to remain distinct and autonomous pieces in a pan-European, organic mosaic united by its shared classical heritage, the Christian tradition and history of hierarchical, authoritarian leadership. «In posing the principle of national interest, in working first for the restoration of the spirit of the French nation», the manifesto explained, «it is to Europe and all humanity in the world that our solicitude goes». French nationalism was understood by the authors to be the first step toward the revival of Europe and Western civilization as a whole. The manifesto did not hesitate, therefore, to reserve for France the role of guide and hegemon over this revived Western civilization saying, «intellectual federation of Europe and the world under the guidance of victorious France, guardian of all civilization» – that is the French elite’s responsibility. When France was revived, they believed: «Human kind will benefit from it with us.»

Even a few of those intellectuals affiliated with the Nouvelle Revue Française, the nemesis in the 1920s of the

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
Revue Universelle, could not help but be swayed by this vision of a francocentric Western civilization. NRF author Henri Ghéon wrote to those critical of the manifesto: «The entire world has an interest in restoring the French spirit; ferment, motor, and animator of the only civilization that concerns us – that is, Western civilization.»

On 1 April 1920, Massis, Bainville and their neoconservative peers capitalized on the popularity of their manifesto with the creation of a new journal, La Revue Universelle, which was to embody the mission of the original manifesto. «A new journal is indispensable to assemble the forces of intelligence against the forces of dissolution, of ignorance, and of money which menace the reason and order of the universe», the initial article proclaimed. From the very first lines, the Revue Universelle also made the pan-European intent of its project clear, saying: «[T]his organ will federate the intellectual elements which, on all the points of the globe, are devoted to safeguarding civilization.» This continental organization was necessary, they explained, because the «International of the Revolution» on the left had such an international organization of journals, alliances and networks of authors to spread its doctrines. «The attack was international», the RU insisted about the liberal and Marxist assault on civilization, «the defence ought to also spread to other nations». Lest the continental scope of the project still not be clear, the authors closed by proclaiming, «To assemble all that which, in the world, takes part against destruction, to fortify and spread the relations between groups devoted to the cause of the esprit, groups who too often ignore one another, such is the destiny of this revue.» It was, they continued, «in homage to this universality of intelligence [under classical principles] that our revue calls itself Revue Universelle».

Yet, once again it was made clear to the conservatives of a more ultranationalist bent, that this language of pan-Europeanism and Western civilization was not in conflict with French national values and, in fact, would bring France new glory as the guide of the European recovery. This unification and defence of all of Europe under the guidance of France was possible, the authors insisted, because French values were those of «the classical spirit» of Western civilization, inherited from the Greco-Latin tradition, which is a «natural line between the men of all nations». The language of universalism was therefore intended not to Europeanize the French, but rather to present to the peoples of Europe «authentic French ideas» that they believed had an «eternal force» necessary for the task of reconstruction. «We do not separate service to France from service to humanity», the programme stated, since the task of revitalizing Western civilization was one that would «re-establish the prestige of French thought and propagate it beyond France». Thus, safeguarding Western civilization was not really understood as a pan-European mission by the RU authors (despite their universalist language), but rather a French mission. «The world awaits much from France», the journal authors concluded, «at this hour of inexpressible confusion, it turns itself toward her so that she will put herself at the head of a civilizing movement».

40 Mazgaj, Defending the West, 110. 41 «Notre programme», in: Revue Universelle, 1.4. 42 Ibid. 43 Ibid.
The articles that followed into the new decade would reiterate these claims that Western civilization was best understood as a French-led, French-dominated or French interpreted concept. Maurice Barrès contributed an article invoking French nationalism as the great medium for defence of universal, Western, and classical intelligence. The revival of France, he explained, worked to the development of all of men for «the genius of France, each time that it is spread, aspires to the universal».

Lucien Corpechot later echoed and expanded this sentiment, reminding both his French and European readers that France had set the standard for civilized society and had, he claimed, furnished the Europeans with their concept of the term. «For centuries, Parisian society was the envy and admiration of all», he wrote. «Our institutions and our moeurs combined to assure our fame and make France the paragon. Europe owes to it, in part, its civilization.»

Jacques Bainville's meditation on the sources of civilizational decline emphasized that one of the civilizing and unifying threads of traditional European society was the ubiquity of French culture throughout the continent. «It is not only the European system that has been disrupted by revolutions,» Bainville muses. «It is the European spirit. In every part of Europe, the monarchies, the courts, the aristocracy conserve a certain community of ideas, of language, of manners, a memory of the time when the French language was that of Frederick II.»

The nationalisms of the modern era, he warns, have fragmented this sense of unity by replacing the universalizing French culture with their own or with German or Russian inspired versions that are not capable of transmitting the values and ideas of the West.

3. Safeguarding Western Civilization as a Product of Neoconservative Values

For the RU authors, a revitalized Western civilization was understood to be not only dependent on French guidance, but also on the neoconservative right’s concept of French values, particularly those of anti-materialism, anti-Marxism, aristocratic elitism and Catholicism. Many of these themes were not presented as exclusively French and were intended to appeal to a broad European audience of neoconservatives. However, as will be seen later, even these common neoconservative themes would be ignored or infused with new meanings by the RU authors in order to exclude German conservative revolutionaries. As early as the original 1919 manifesto, it was made clear that if they were to remake France as a reinvigorated nation that could guide the peoples of Europe in the ways of Western civilization, the signers had to «agree to rally our reason and our hearts to the doctrines which protect and maintain the existence of France, to the conservative ideas of its immortal substance».

It was to be through the ideals of a revitalized conservatism: aristocratic tradition, national heritage, Christian values and authoritarian leadership that France (and through it, Western civilization) would be
saved and protected. These, the manifesto says, are the «political doctrines whose development is in accord with the lessons of life».  

In contrast, the neoconservatives deplored the «infirmity of these democratic doctrines that nature itself judges and condemns each day by the failure that it inflicts on them». They agreed to «oppose liberal and anarchic disorder» in favour of organization, order, hierarchy and firm leadership that were the only paths to safeguarding civilization. The liberals, democrats and Marxists might have felt the same decline of civilization after the war, the RU authors agreed, and they might use the same language of a decadent West, but they had severely misjudged the cause and the solution to this crisis. The left believed the depression after the war was economic in nature and their «materialist tendencies» led them to only «see the industrial or commercial renovation of France» as the solution to the crisis. In this way, the RU authors intentionally conflated the democratic, socialist, anarchist and Marxist understandings of civilization into one homogeneous concept and linked it in the public imagination to the destructive forces of modernity, and an overdependence on scientific progress and materialism.

The signers of the manifesto warned that the liberal and Marxist fascination with materialism and modern industrial progress, far from reversing the decadence of society, had contributed to the decline. «Industrial modernism», they explained, «menaces culture [...] it makes man’s happiness depend on the rebuilding of material life alone and has no concern for his person.» Georges Duhamel’s *Scènes de la vie future*, reviewed in *Revue Universelle*, warned readers of the «excesses of material civilization» that Duhamel found in his visit to Chicago. Liberal American society was Alighieri’s inferno, a «voracious and soulless civilization» whose «very prosperity evokes the images of the death toward which it hastens». The world of progress and material prosperity of this «false civilization» in America was «more dangerous than political despotism for men submit to it with a sort of somber intoxication as if unconscious of their own decline».

Paralleling, and often conflated with this anti-liberal strain in a general condemnation of materialism was a pointed critique of Marxism. The closing line of the 1919 manifesto proclaimed, «The Party of Intelligence is that which we claim to serve in order to oppose this Bolshevism which first attacked the spirit and culture in order to better destroy society, nation, family, and individual. We await nothing less than the national reconstitution and the renewal of human kind.» Condemnation of Marxist concepts of civilization for overemphasizing material well-being became a running theme throughout the interwar years. Pieces in the early 1920s included topics such as the theory of class struggle as a «false interpretation of history»,

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<td>H. Massis, «Georges Duhamel; Scènes de la vie future», in: <em>Revue Universelle</em>, June 1930.</td>
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and the economic collapse in Russia after the Revolution.\(^{55}\) By the 1930s, they included Marxism’s misunderstanding of nationalism as determinism.\(^{56}\) In general, the pieces all played into the overarching cultural politics of Western civilization as a European concept and Russia, and therefore Bolshevism, as a product of Asiatic, Eastern civilization incapable of providing lessons for the West.

In the face of materialism and scientific progress, the French neoconservatives proposed salvation for civilization through what they proclaimed to be the universal values of the West: strong leadership, classical sources of intellectual inspiration and Christian morality. Nowhere were these combined more clearly than in the Catholic Church tradition. If the authors of the \textit{RU} only focused on the intellectual and cultural recovery of man, rather than the economic recovery emphasized by the liberal and Marxist left, it was, Massis said, because they we are «going to the foundation of the evil of which we suffer; it is not a material peril [...] the peril is the invisible menace which agitates the crowds, ruins the banks and empties the workplaces. The peril is of the spiritual order and here is the reason it is tragic, the material forces and human-made machines are able to recover before man, but the spirit does not recover».\(^{57}\) And, spiritual regeneration for Western civilization, as it was understood by Massis and other \textit{RU} founders like ardent Thomist Jacques Maritain, could only be found in the principles of civilization’s ancient institution, the Catholic Church.

Maritain, who took the helm of the philosophy section of the \textit{RU}, used its pages to promote traditional Catholicism and the superiority of religious faith over human progress.\(^{58}\) Massis contributed to the understanding of the church an essential feature of Western civilization in his popular \textit{Défense de l’Occident} where he argued: «The problem before us is fundamentally spiritual. The important thing is to recreate the human person, to re-establish the hierarchy of being, and to defend it against all the errors that weaken it and tend only to destroy it.» He concluded, «Nothing less is needed than a complete restoration of the principles of Greco-Latin civilization and Catholicism. This great tradition of ancient and Christian wisdom may yet save what remains viable in the world.»\(^{59}\) Bainville agreed by arguing that in the past, France had been able to rage against the forces of disorder, «the Church, the greatest power of order in the world», but that modern secularism was limiting the power of this ancient Western institution.\(^{60}\) Contributions from other strong Catholic voices, such as an excerpt from \textit{Brière} by Alphonse de Châteaubriant and also pieces by G. K. Chesterton, made it clear to readers that the defence of Western civilization and the unification of Europe for that cause, was to be achieved in part through revitalization of the universal Catholic Church.\(^{61}\)

\begin{itemize}
\item \(^{55}\) D. Merejkowski, «Choses vues pendant la révolution russe», in: \textit{Revue Universelle}, 15.10.1921.
\item \(^{56}\) T. Maulnier, «Fatalités nationales», in: \textit{Revue Universelle}, July 1933.
\item \(^{57}\) H. Massis, «La crise est dans l’homme», in: \textit{Revue Universelle}, 15.7.1932.
\item \(^{59}\) H. Massis, \textit{Defense of the West}, Harcourt 1928, 220.
\item \(^{60}\) Bainville, «L’avenir».
\end{itemize}
For the RU authors, a return to the traditional Catholic Church might provide the spiritual unity, structure, and hierarchical order of the medieval world, but this pillar of Western civilization required the corresponding order of the traditional medieval monarchies. The running theme of anti-liberalism that saw democracy and republicanism as the epitome of societal decline and decadence was therefore added to the understanding of civilization as Catholic. The current liberal, democratic, parliamentarian and republican political culture has failed across Europe, Massis declared. «Democracy is no longer able to be seen as a peaceful ideology; the pride of progress has flown, liberty appears as an unbelievable phantom. Our era will not be an era of liberalism, but of order, of authority, of truth, at least if we do not agree to disappear.»

«We know the regime is bad», Theirry Maulnier would later write of the Third Republic; «we know that it is capable of neither energy nor continuity in its efforts [...] we know that it is not able to assure France security and prestige, nor resuscitate or maintain the national energy for the French, nor protect arts and letters. When a regime carried within itself so many inevitable causes of death», he concluded, it was pointless to argue against change. According to the authors of the RU, this necessary change to revive civilization, after its decline at the hands of liberalism and Marxism, would be initiated by the neoconservatives. The nature of this change, however, was a matter of internal debate among the RU authors.

Initially, there was some general agreement among the authors that traditional Maurrassian monarchism and aristocratic elitism were the natural source of renewal for Western civilization. Bainville argued that even in a world where traditional elites were lost to democratization, civilization could count on the «traditional solidity of the French peasant stock» to create the future middle classes and eventually, out of that, the aristocracies who could «remake Western civilization». Lucien Corpechot agreed that «if nations do not want to die, they work to recreate for themselves a leadership» and that this leadership must necessarily come from the traditional elites. Not even, he wrote, «the most brilliant culture, when allied to solid bourgeois values, is able to replace in civilization the specific qualities of an aristocracy». But, he concluded hopefully, the aristocratic elite had reawakened «to the call of the patrie in danger» and soon France would «rediscover its eternal servants, the aristocracy its traditions, and the aristocrats their qualities of leadership». They would «know how to conserve of the ancient civilization all that which will be necessary for humanity to fulfil its [...] mysterious destinies».

In their clear claims that modernism, industrialism, commercialism, materialism, liberal democracy and Bolshevism had contributed to the decline of French and therefore Western civilization, and in their adamant defence of conservative principles of leadership, hierarchy, tradition, authority, order and Christian tradition as the sources of spiritual renewal for this civilization in crisis, the coterie of the RU believed that they

64 Bainville, «L’avenir».
65 Corpechot, 1.8.1920.
had crafted a cultural politics for neoconservatives across Europe despite the francocentric nature of their vision. However, while the Revue Universelle authors celebrated their supposed leadership of this transnational conservative phenomenon, their nationalist conceptualization of civilization and the West resulted in an almost humorous struggle to distance the French experience from the remarkably similar German conservative revolution.

4. Revue Universelle’s Rejection of German Conservative Revolution
The intellectuals at Revue Universelle had developed a unique cultural politics around the concept of Western civilization that they employed to oppose the forces of modernism, liberalism, and secularism in France. They would use this concept of civilization as justification for their leadership of a new generation of conservatives throughout Europe. Yet, while they formed professional and intellectual alliances in the RU with many of these neoconservative voices across Europe (from England to Albania), they made a concerted effort to distance themselves from the work of the Germans, including Oswald Spengler’s Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Today, historians identify this rejection of the German conservative revolutionaries as a product of the inherent anti-Germanism of these groups fostered since the Franco-Prussian war and the Dreyfus affair in the conservative, and particularly Barrèsian and Maurrassian, worldview and exacerbated by neoconservative ultranationalism after the First World War. In the work of these RU authors, however, the rejection of German neoconservatism was woven into the cultural politics of Western civilization and justified as the rejection of both a non-Western cultural influence and an unhealthy pessimism about the fate of civilization.

The anti-Western influences of Eastern thought, according to Massis, found their natural allies in Russia and Germany who «have not kept in step with the others in the march of human civilization and who belong in only an artificial and incomplete manner to the body of the West». The RU authors argued that German thought was never fully a part of classical Greco-Latin culture and therefore was alien to France and Europe. Its Kultur could provide what Barrès termed as «scientific benefits and technological lessons» but it was incapable of providing spiritual guidance for the West. Jacques Maritain’s article «La Liberté de l’intelligence» complained that the German Kultur was responsible for the decline of intellectual life in the modern world, saying: «Free? In reality, intelligence, distorted by the religion of facts, subordinated to sensation, industrially put to work by this utilitarian and material science which one calls ‹German science›, was in the service of powers inferior to the human being. From there, the withering of this faculty, exasperated in its activity [...] no longer produces its fruit.»

Much of this antagonism toward the German Kultur and science was influenced by the Nouvelle Sorbonne debates of the pre-war years when Massis, writing as Agathon, railed the nationalists and conservatives in favour of classical, traditional curricula against

66 Massis, Defense, 30.
German-inspired, spiritually sterile, scientific education introduced by republican reformers like Gabriel Monod. «If there is a culture opposed to ours and that we are not able to imitate without forcing and falsifying our natural qualities it is without doubt the Germanic culture», Massis wrote as Agathon for _L’Esprit de la Nouvelle Sorbonne_ in 1911. «This spirit that the Nouvelle Sorbonne has imported from the Germanic universities [...] is incompatible with French culture and perhaps with all true culture.»

Barrès too had long argued that the French genius was distinct and incompatible with the German one. In the pages of the _RU_, Barrès would claim that even Germany admitted that from Faust to Marx, Wagner to Nietzsche, it had taken up arms against the minds of other peoples. «German thought, at the same time so beautiful and so guilty, we have loved it, we love it and it has wanted to destroy us.» He warns readers that they must «decide if [they][would] accept German culture as part of human civilization or if [they][would] learn to denounce and put aside that which it contain[ed] of the Boche». It falls, he concluded, to the French guides of civilization to «revise the values that Germany poses to universal intelligence [...] to put in the minds of all nations a new order [...] [W]e know the problems of the hour, they are problems of civilization and of ideas [...] It is necessary to revise the values that Germany proposes to universal intelligence [...] to put in the minds of all nations a new order. For us, the French intellectuals [...] what a task». Bainville too marvelled after the war that the German science, so beloved by the French republicans of the fin de siècle, could now be seen as barbarism and the antithesis of the new French understanding of civilization. «Under the force of the war», he wrote, «the word civilization took on new meaning and new acceptance. It represented the antithesis of barbarism. This was the moment when England no longer spoke of Germans but only of Huns». After the war, he claimed, the French neoconservative right, if not the democratic left, understood that «German organization, _la kultur_ [industrial civilization], was without doubt a monstrosity of civilization.»

Massis claimed that this distortion of civilization was because German philosophy, ruined first by protestant and then by democratic ideas, no longer held the seeds of Western, Catholic, Greco-Latin thought, but rather found its inspiration in Eastern and pagan barbarism. There was some basis in reality for this perception of German links to Eastern and pagan sources since a new generation of historians in Germany and Austria had begun to dismantle the long-held beliefs in Roman antiquity as the source of Western civilization, and to identify instead with pagan, Eastern, and Middle Eastern influences. For this reason, the _RU_ authors argued, German culture and thought was more akin to the Orthodox, barbarous Russians and the Bolsheviks than to the spirit of Western civilization which they continued to conceptualize as a product of a Greco-Latin heritage despite these new findings.

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69 M. Barrès, «Quelles limites poser au Germanisme intellectuel?», in: _Revue Universelle_, 1,1.1922.
70 Ibid.
71 Bainville, «L’avenir».
72 Ibid.
Playing on pre-existing fears of Bolshevism, Massis warned readers that a divided and decadent Europe faced, without any defence, the «formidable problems raised by the awakening of the nations of Asia and Africa, united by Bolshevism against Western Europe».74 «It is the soul of the West that the East wishes to attack», he continued, «that soul, divided, uncertain of its principles [...] and all the more ready to destroy itself because it has departed from its civilizing order and its traditions».75 «For the purpose of the spiritual war it has declared on the human race», he wrote, «the Russo-Bolshevist idea could not but find in the Germanic idea a sort of pre-established complicity, a secret connivance, an identical fund of permanent hostility toward the principles of Romano-Christian culture; and it is for this reason that they constitute an identical danger for the future of civilization».76

Linking Russian Bolshevism to German concepts of civilization proved an effective tool for the RU authors to justify and intensify their exclusion of German neoconservatism from the supposedly pan-European project of Western revitalization. With hostility toward Germany for the destruction of the First World War still fresh in the readers’ minds, Georges Valois linked Germany to the spread of Bolshevism in Poland by claiming, «Even the least informed minds understand that Western civilization is menaced in its entirety [...] That which is directly menaced is the immense treasure that the human spirit, taking up the lessons of Athens and Rome, has created in the West. These are the highest acquisitions of human intelligence which risk being annihilated by new barbarian invasions, called into Europe by Germanism drunk with vengeance.» He concluded that the victory of Warsaw over the spread of Bolshevism was a defeat of the «Germano-Asiatic» civilization and a victory for our civilization acting in Poland through French intelligence».77 Over a decade later, with the rising threat of a newly powerful German Nazi party, the RU authors revived the language of German culture as a product of Eastern, Bolshevik influences. Roger Labonne wrote of the «danger of the Germanic mystique» being «superimposed» on the Bolshevik mystique and together causing the «discouraged old world to abandon itself to the enterprises of the barbarians, as during the time of the Roman decadence, without having the energy to resist them»78. And Louis-Dominique Girard and Pierre Lafue warned readers that a reconstructed Germany under Hitler would not revive Europe and the West but only its own «race and nationality», and that by its nature, German civilization «menaces us directly with our Christian, Greco-Latin civilization».79

Spengler and the German conservative revolutionaries were not only painted as prophets of an anti-Western brand of conservative culture by their fellow neoconservatives at the RU, they were also portrayed as pessimists and fatalists in comparison to

74 Massis, Defense, 17.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 107.
the Western neoconservatives. After the war, Massis wrote, Germany had suffered such a vast defeat that they turned from a tradition of order, hierarchy and organization to renounce the only elements of culture they had inherited from the West. In its demoralization, its deep and «almost fatal anxiety», it decided that the collapse of Germany was the collapse of «all Western science, method, reason, and the bankruptcy of civilization» and turned instead to new ideas from the east. Germany, he said, «in a dream of dragging the rest of the world with her in her fall began to prophesy in dark apocalyptic tones the final bankruptcy of a world, the mastery of which had escaped her».  

It is in this attitude of despair and pessimism for the West, Massis claimed, that Oswald Spengler wrote *Decline of the West*.

In his «catastrophic theory of history», Massis writes, Spengler claims civilization is a meaningless word with no transcendent purpose and claims each civilization rises and falls independently of others without any common heritage or values. This, Massis says, is «historico-scientific rubbish» designed to take the responsibility for decline and collapse off the shoulders of the German people. Germany, he says, wanted to hear that it needed to create new values for itself and eagerly imbibed the distorted interpretations of Nietzsche’s philosophy of will and recreation, and made Dostoyevsky their new hero. They then cut themselves off from Western values and culture in order to construct a «New Man» built upon Eastern concepts. This was why, Massis wrote in the pages of *RU*, Spengler had expressed his support for the Nazis in 1933 – a support that Massis says «should not surprise anyone» since «the historicism of Spengler, in claiming ruin for the metaphysical values of the West; personality, unity, stability, continuity and even the idea of man, was conceived to justify the enterprises of Germany, to permit it to impose its imperium on the world, founded on its ‹dynamic› values which it intended to oppose to the ‹Apollonian› values of the West in decline». Spengler’s pessimism about Western civilization, Massis writes with contempt, represented German concepts of civilization and epitomized the ideals of the Nazis.

Pessimism and fatalism, according to the writers of the *RU*, are not solutions to the European crisis and instead only compound it. «We know now that we are mortal,» Bainville wrote, «we see now that the abyss of history is large enough for everyone. We sense that a civilization has the same fragility as a life». But this is not to say that civilization must fall. «Is this to say that one ought to despair for the future of Europe and civilization?», he asks. «One ought never despair. History shows us a series of decadences and renaissances.» Instead, a true conservative revolution is palingenetic in nature and works «with a special urgency to restore the true principles and traditions of our civilization, those indeed that may save it and the human race with it». It was with this mission to «defend» Western civilization rather than simply mourn its «decline», that the *RU* writers sought to distinguish the French neoconservative movement from that across the Rhine.

80 Ibid., 30.  
81 Ibid., 39.  
83 Bainville, «L’avenir».  
84 Massis, *Defense*, 161–162.
It was with this disdain for the German concepts of civilization and the belief that French values descended from a Greco-Latin tradition, common to the rest of Europe, that the French neoconservatives of the RU approached the rise of fascist movements. In their rejection of the existing world and their search for a more vital alternative, in their emphasis on the palingenetic tropes of revival after decadence, and in their idealization of leadership, the elite and tradition, the neoconservatives of the RU found common ground with fascist or fascist-sympathizing movements throughout Europe. However, while the work of the RU authors toward these groups indicated some fascination in the 1920s and the early 1930s, there was a great deal of ambiguity even in the treatment of fascist Italy and a particular resistance to German Nazism informed by the authors’ long-held francocentrism and anti-Germanism. The choices that these authors made by the mid-1930s to support certain foreign fascist movements, develop «native» French fascist organizations, or the choices reject fascist ideology, and then again in the 1940s, to collaborate, stay silent or resist are as diverse as the individuals themselves and quickly dissolved the temporary unity that the RU team had enjoyed in the 1920s and the early 1930s.

5. Fascism and the Revue Universelle’s Cultural Politics of Western Civilization

The Revue Universelle’s conceptualization of Western civilization, its sources of decadence and sources of renewal also informed their reception of international fascist movements in the 1920s and the early 1930s. Although not every contributor or even the RU lead author perceived international fascist movements the same way, the approach of the journal as a whole was intrigued by, and relatively supportive of, Italian fascism, but between the period of 1920 and 1935, it was critical of German Nazism. Once again, the support or rejection of these fascist programmes was presented within the framework of the cultural politics of Western civilization, and the language of the RU authors was pregnant with these ascribed meanings. The fascist parties, like Mussolini’s, that gained support were described as defenders of an imperilled civilization while those that the RU authors rejected were damned with accusations of anti-Western cultural influences.

Articles supporting Mussolini began to appear in the RU as early as 1922 with short pieces on the fascist state by René Johannet and the Catholics’ choice between fascism and democracy by Maurice Vaussand. These were followed soon after by a brief biographical essay called «M. Benito Mussolini» that described Mussolini’s «vindication of the heritage of an ancient empire» and presented him after the factory strikes as a «leader of the resistance to anarchy». His version of fascism was described as «an aristocratic movement» that would «create order and re-establish national discipline» to benefit not only the Italian recovery but European recovery as a whole. By 1930, these pieces were followed by excerpts from Abel Bonnard’s Rome praising the new
regime’s transformative effect. Not every piece was congratulatory of Italy’s transformation. For example, Saint-Brice’s «L’erreur de l’Italie» criticized its decisions in international political affairs, and Jules Toulouze reported the economic crisis of inflation, the loss of political liberties and the resignation of ministers. But the general attitude toward Italy was supportive of their new venture and usually ameliorated the critique with praise for the attempted renewal of civilization by a «generation of [Italian] youth who learned the virtues which made the grandeur of ancient Rome». This support was invariably linked in the language of the RU articles to the trope of the Latin and Catholic heritage of Western civilization.

Massis’s most prominent statement of support for the Italian fascist movement was the 1935 Manifeste d’intellectuels français pour la défense de l’Occident. This manifesto, crafted by Massis and once again displaying his neoconservative brand of cultural politics, was published in Le Temps. However, it was signed by 64 right-wing intellectuals who, more often than not were also contributors to the RU and who then wrote articles there in support of the manifesto. On the question of sanctions against Italy after the invasion of Ethiopia, the manifesto claimed «the just interests of the Western community would be wounded, all civilization would be put in the position of the vanquished» if the cradle of Western civilization, Rome, was so unfairly prevented from imperial expansion. Just proposing it, the manifesto fretted, «indicated a veritable resignation of the civilizing spirit». Those who signed agreed that it was «their duty to rise against such causes of death, set to ruin definitively the most precious part of our universe, that menace not only life, the material and spiritual well-being of millions of individuals, but the very notion of man». Sanctions against fascist Italy, they concluded, would mean «civilization choosing against itself [...] a suicide».

The fall 1935 issues of Revue Universelle reiterated this argument that support for Western civilization required support for Fascist Italy and the end to economic sanctions. Maulnier critiqued the antifascist intellectual opposition to Massis’s petition as those «who are not able to accept seeing proclaimed the superiority of civilization over barbarism and the necessity of letting one prevail over the other». Those who supported sanctions, Maulnier concludes, «do not consider whether it is good or just that the most ordered and most precious part of the world be devastated for the defence of one of the most savage [...] whether conservation of Ethiopia is more important than that of Italy for the good of the world». Once again, the authors were utilizing the trope of a civilization in peril that they knew would resonate with their neoconservative audience across Europe. By supporting Italian fascism, and later efforts by Salazar and Franco, they portrayed themselves as supporting a series of Greco-Latin-based European conservative revolutions destined to restore Western traditional values, political order, and both material and spiritual well-being.

However, by 1930, essays on fascism also had to somehow address the rise of Hitler and National Socialism. Maulnier expressed the general ambiguity toward fascism and a particular resistance toward National Socialism in a series of articles in 1933 where he observed that everyone felt compelled to take a stand on National Socialism and fascism, but that no one understood the meaning of the label. For Maulnier, National Socialism was appealing for its fascist ideals of anti-materialism, in both liberal and Marxist incarnations, and for its conservation of the race through heroic values. But, it was also dangerous, he wrote, because «National Socialism is a collectivist myth that demands individuals sacrifice precious human qualities to it – the same danger we find in communism» and because it promoted the «vitality of its primitive popular masses» over the elites. He saw a danger, particularly in Germany, in the misunderstanding of human heroism as service to the collective nation and nationalism as determinism, and linked these concepts to the Marxists.

In the early 1930s, RU authors amplified this suspicious fascination with Germany through essays on Hitler himself, the German elections and democratic pan-Germanism. However, as the Nazis gained success, the condemnation of Hitler’s Germany became more evident in the RU with articles including reports from travellers and student visitors to «New Germany,» a critique by Massis of Spengler’s fascination with Nazism, and an essay on the Jews of Germany by the Tharaud brothers. Articles on Hitler claimed that the Nazis blamed the Jews and also the French for their suffering and made the French their enemy, while others warned that German «ultranationalists» in any guise were always enemies of France. Still, others revived the theme of a link between German and Bolshevik thought with the worry: «[T]he moderate socialism of Hitler, will it not lead to integral communism?»

Massis sought to influence those who were indecisive or confused by the alternatives of Italy and Germany by emphasizing a distinction between the Latin and German versions of fascism based, as always, on the cultural politics of civilization decline and defence of culture. In a collection of his interviews with fascist dictators, Massis would claim that fascism in Spain, Portugal, and Italy could be described as «a doctrine of defence against the new barbarians who threaten the West». According to Massis, those regimes called fascist throughout Europe were all variations of conservative revolutions whose common goal was «a defensive action, a manifestation of a desire to live, to not die». However, Massis argued that Nazism did not belong among these conservative, fascist movements, but instead was a different ideology. «Hitlerism could in no way be seen as a defence of Western civilization», he wrote. «Even if it imitates civilization's concepts of order, hierarchy, and authority, it rejects its main ideas, its fundamental doctrines, and it rejects them as fatal to the German genius.»

This anti-Nazi attitude of the RU as a whole was due in great part to the long-running Germanophobia of a journal team that had been heavily influenced by its earliest origins by the Maurrassian and Barrèssian hostility to Germany, and by Massis’s and Bainville’s own long-held antagonism towards German intellectual values. However, attitudes toward the fascist movements of Europe, and to National Socialism in particular, were constantly shifting and were extraordinarily diverse during the 1930s within in the conservative and neoconservative milieux. The authors of the RU would follow a variety of different paths, with some like those of Brasillach, Bonnard, Châteaubriant and Lucien Rebatet notoriously ending in collaboration. However, what can be said of all the RU authors of the 1930s, as it has been said of those conservative revolutionaries in Weimar, is that they not only «failed to provide a fundamental critique of National Socialism» or Italian fascism that «might have impeded its ascent to power», they in fact worked during the 1920s and the early 1930s to alienate the public from democratic institutions in a way that made it more receptive to fascism and thus prepared the way for the rise of these fascist states. More specifically, in its antagonistic assault on all the forces of modernity through the language of Western civilization’s decadence, decline and renewal, the cultural politics crafted by the RU intellectuals provided fertile ground for later fascist and Nazi party cultivation.

6. Conclusion

Bainville opened his 1922 RU article, «L’Avenir de la civilisation», with a musing on the abstract nature of the concept of civilization. «Civilization is one of the abstract terms that has been used since the war», he wrote. «But we don’t have a good understanding of it. What is civilization?» Bainville’s recognition that the trope of civilization, and through it the language of decadence and the West, which had been in vogue since the fin de siècle, were ill-defined and therefore were malleable concepts, is essential to understanding the RU’s language of French conservative revolution in the 1920s and the early 1930s. The neoconservative intellectuals that formed the writing staff of the Revue Universelle utilized the framework of Western civilization and its decline in order to appeal to a broad pan-European audience and mobilize a transnational neoconservative movement against the forces of modernity. The RU used the generic trope of civilization as a universal standard for its assault on materialism, Marxism and liberalism, the secularization of society and technological progress. Safeguarding this civilization from apocalypse, as understood by the neoconservatives, required a return to traditional sources of spirituality in the Catholic Church, and a return to

96 All of these authors contributed at least one piece to the RU and have been identified as collaborationists by the French government and historians. A plethora of texts deal with the slide of right-wing intellectuals like Brasillach toward collaboration including A. Kaplan, The Collaborator: The Trial & Execution of Robert Brasillach, Chicago 2000 and S. Sanos, The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France, Stanford 2013 among many others.


99 Bainville, «L’avenir».

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structure and order under authoritative leaders – whether they be aristocracy and monarchs, or a new form of social hierarchy.

However, infused into these generic frameworks of civilization and the West, and laced through the language of palingenesis, was a francocentrism that belied this universalist trope. Neither the USSR nor the US were considered representatives of Western civilization under this limited conceptualization, and France was the only permissible leader and model for the civilized West. But it was the exclusion of Germany from the meaning assigned to civilization by the RU authors that was most remarkable. The neoconservatives of the RU worked diligently to distinguish their own ideas of civilization, decline and renewal from those presented by the conservative revolutionaries of Weimar. Because the meaning of Western civilization in the pages of the Revue Universelle was a construction of its intellectuals, these authors studiously excluded the Germans from civilization and the West, and petulantly assigned to it the responsibility for the decline instead. This understanding of Western civilization even played a role in the way they approached and wrote about international fascist movements. This re-interpretation of Western civilization as French nationalism by the intellectuals of the RU may have appealed to the French audience, but it hindered their cooperation with the conservative revolutionaries of Weimar, and therefore undermined the original mission of the journal as a pan-European network and an imagined community for the neoconservative European right.

Safeguarding a «Civilization in Crisis»: La Revue Universelle’s Conceptualization of Western Civilization and its Renewal, 1920–1935

This article contributes to a comparative study of the «Conservative Revolution» in Europe by exploring the French journal Revue Universelle in the 1920s and the early 1930s. Led by Henri Massis, Jacques Bainville and Jacques Maritain, the intellectuals contributing to the journal developed a unique cultural politics that evoked the decadence and decline of Western civilization under the forces of modernity, and called for the defence and renewal of this civilization through revitalised conservative values of Catholicism, authoritative leadership, elitism, and a return to the spiritual sources of Western culture. However, while the Revue Universelle team intentionally cultivated a pan-European scope for their journal and promoted its cultural politics as a common language for all European conservatives, their aim was compromised by their francocentric and germanophobic conceptualisation of the West and civilization.

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