

The Female Actors of European Construction

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ABSTRACT

Europe only has founding “fathers”, that is, the male European politicians who in the 1950s committed themselves to building the Community. There were no women, and for good reason: at the time they were given very little space in the national political life of the six founding states, even if a few women can be identified in the shadows of the founders behind the European project. None of these, however, had a deciding role. This initial absence of women can lead one to believe that they did not share in the construction of Europe, although what was true of the 1950s and 1960s, was no longer the case from the beginning of the 1980s.



Simone Veil presiding over a session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg on October 12, 1979. © Claude Truong-Ngoc

Although there are no “founding mothers” of Europe, historians and especially politicians and journalists like to evoke the “grandmothers of Europe”. Eleanor of Aquitaine (ca 1122-1204) or Queen Marie-Amélie de Bourbon (1782-1866), or even more so Queen Victoria (1819-1901), are often given this title in order to attract visitors to an exhibition, or to make a good title for an article. None of them built Europe, and the name of “grandmother of Europe” is due solely to their descendants, who spread across the continent.

Louise Weiss (1893-1983) is without a doubt more deserving of this title, which was given to her because of her

unwavering commitment to Europe for over sixty years. From the founding of her newspaper *L'Europe nouvelle* to the aftermath of The Great War and the 1968 publication of her *Mémoires d'une Européenne*, from the peace prize she founded in 1971 that took her name after her death to her inaugural speech as the eldest member of the European Parliament in 1979, Louise Weiss worked for a more unified and peaceful Europe. Although as a journalist, feminist, and pro-Europeanist she helped advance the notion of Europe by promoting it, she did not politically take part in its construction. The first generation of female politicians to contribute to this was born in the 1920s, with the years 1979 and 1989 signaling two major turning points.

In May 1979, just six years after her country entered the European Economic Community (EEC), Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013) became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. In a first for the European Council—which brought together the heads of state—a woman became part of the body of nine. She would be the only woman throughout the 1980s. During the European Council meeting in Strasbourg in June 1979, observers noted that “Britain is back”. In 1984, at the Fontainebleau summit, she uttered a slogan of dissent regarding the European Community: “I want my money back!” Even though Thatcher was not a major builder of Europe, she played an important political role within it. After her, Angela Merkel (born in 1954) is only the second woman, as the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, to have enough executive power to intervene in a decisive way in the European construction process

The European Parliament is an institution that has been much more favourable to the engagement of women in the European project. On July 17, 1979, during its first session, the parliament—designated by universal suffrage for the first time—elected Simone Veil (born in 1927) as president elect of the assembly, which at the time only had restricted powers. Her task was now to show that the European Parliament was an important actor in the construction of Europe. Veil particularly developed the institution’s external relations, by taking positions on major international issues, and even by engaging in what resembled diplomatic conversations with third countries, which welcomed her more as a head of government than as president of an assembly. On the international stage, the role of the Commission, which had no popular legitimacy, was poorly understood at the time, and the revolving presidency of the European Council was ill-defined. Outwardly, Veil was consequently something of the embodiment or representative of Europe. She constantly sought to show that this first Parliament elected by universal suffrage had legitimacy and an independence from the Community’s other institutions, and that it embodied democratic Europe. In December 1981, Veil was the first woman to receive the Louise Weiss prize, “for her tireless action in favour of Europe and peace”. In Parliament, other representatives imposed themselves through their presence and their work on specific issues: the Italian Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi (1922-2007), the Belgians Anne-Marie Lizin (1949-2015) and Antoinette Spaak (born in 1928), the German Magdalene Hoff (born in 1940), the French woman Nicole Péry (born in 1943), and the Dutch woman Hanja Maij-Weggen (born in 1943), among others. A number of them learned their “trade” as European representatives with Fausta Deshormes La Valle (1927-2013), who was the head of the “Women’s Information Service” of the European Commission’s Directorate General for Information, which in 1976 launched the review *Women of Europe*. In 1999, twenty years after Veil, a second woman became president of the European Parliament, Nicole Fontaine (born in 1942), who was also French.

The European Commission long remained a “for men only” club, to use the expression of the Frenchwoman Yvette Roudy (born in 1929). It took until 1989 before two women were appointed as commissioners: Christiane Scrivener (born in 1925) of France, who became Commissioner for Taxes, Revenue Harmonization and Consumer Policies, along with Vasso Papandreou (born in 1944) of Greece, who became Commissioner for Employment, Industrial Relations and Social Affairs. From 1993 to 1995, only one of the seventeen commissioners was a woman, and from 1995 to 2004 only five out of twenty; gender parity is far from being achieved, with only nine women among twenty-eight in the Juncker Commission in 2014. Although Viviane Reding (born in 1951), Emma Bonino (born in 1948), Loyola de Palacio (1950-2006), and Margot Wallström (born in 1954) among others, have left their mark on the institution, and although the position of High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and

Security Policy was successively entrusted to Catherine Ashton (born in 1956) in 2009 and Federica Mogherini (born in 1973) in 2014, the Commission had never been presided over by a woman until the election of German Ursula von der Leyen in 2019.

In May 1989, the Council of Europe celebrated its fortieth anniversary. The oldest European institution—the European construction process took place apart from of it—today counts 23 countries, including every European country with the exception of the Eastern block. The assembly of the Council of Europe elected Catherine Lalumière (born in 1935) as its new Director General. This was the first time that a woman or a French person had held this position. The context of *perestroika* and *glasnost* during the Gorbachev years was favourable to a new dimension and role for the old institution after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the face of the transitions of Eastern European countries and the end of the USSR. While the EEC at the time had twelve members and did not plan on enlarging in the short term, Catherine Lalumière conceived the Council of Europe as “a kind of decompression chamber between EEC countries and other European countries, in both the West and the East”.

Finally, within the governments of the member states of the EEC and later the EU, women play important roles in the European policy of member states. Élisabeth Guigou (born in 1946) in particular devoted herself to European affairs during François Mitterrand’s two terms, first as Secretary General of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Questions on European Economic Cooperation (1985-1990), and then as Minister in charge of these questions (1990-1993). All of the political actors of the period recognized her decisive influence, notably in the process that led to the Maastricht Treaty (1992).

The contribution of women to the notion of Europe and to the European construction process has therefore been important, and during certain episodes most likely decisive. Although it is not a question of inflating their contribution compared to that of men, it should nevertheless not be forgotten.

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