

Europe as Viewed by Louis de Bonald

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ABSTRACT

Among conservative thinkers, the French theorist of the Counter-Revolution, Louis de Bonald (1754-1840), developed an original conception of the history and fate of Europe. He believed that the French Revolution was the starting point for the required regeneration of the continent, as well as for reconstruction around a common project. It would lead in particular to a territorial reconfiguration of states based on natural borders, and help recapture religious unity founded on the Church of Rome. France was called upon to act as a guiding nation: it had thrown Europe into chaos with the Revolution, and its regeneration would enable it to act as a virtuous guide.



Portrait of Louis de Bonald by Julien Léopold Boilly, lithograph series of portraits of Institut de France members. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

European conservative thought, especially among German romantics, often developed nationalist or proto-nationalist conceptions that exalted the *Volksgeist* and distinctive features of peoples. Louis de Bonald (1754-1840), the primary French counter-revolutionary theorist, had an original vision of the continent's fate: France must act as a guiding nation in order to regenerate a Europe destined for reconstruction around a common project. The French Revolution paradoxically represented fertile ground for this political and spiritual reconfiguration, which was less a matter of *ex nihilo* creation, than the realization of latent possibilities for a harmonious reunion of spirits and nations.

France and Europe: Role and Responsibility

Bonald's doctrine was based on the premise that expansionism and the desire for hegemony—and more broadly any war other than a purely defensive one—were specific to republics, which he considered to be fragile regimes that were as aggressive as they were fleeting. By contrast, a monarchical state tended toward stability both at home and abroad, and hence peace. However, for Bonald the Ancien Régime did not necessarily provide France with these conditions. In his *Du traité de Westphalie et de celui de Campo-Formio* (1801, On the Treaties of Westphalia and Campo-Formio), the former, signed under the Ancien Régime (1648), is presented as an incomplete diplomatic project, while the latter, dating from 1797, is seen as a prelude to a healthier recomposition. A nation can flourish only when it extends to its natural borders. However, it was during the revolutionary period that France achieved its definitive morphology, which had heretofore been no more than a preliminary outline, and even risked shrinking under Louis XIV. This is why Bonald requested, while the Congress of Vienna was underway, that borders be maintained (*Réflexions sur l'intérêt général de l'Europe*, Reflections on the General Interest of Europe, 1815), especially along the banks of the Rhine. In 1830, he even enthusiastically supported the notion of French sovereignty over Belgium.

As “the elder daughter of Europe,” “the prime minister of Providence in the government of the moral world,” he believed that France had the role of an *exemplum* on the continental stage. The Revolution threw France into chaos through its “false doctrines, and contaminated its neighbors with the seed of “anarchy”; in inverse fashion, the country's regeneration would give it a virtuous role as guide. Bonald was favorable toward both the Consulate and the Empire, but he opposed the “moral force” of a state—its intellectual and institutional magisterium—with its purely military “physical force.” He preferred a diplomacy of stability and dialogue to a balance of power based on the latter, and hence unsurprisingly welcomed the principle of the Holy Alliance (1815-1825) under the Bourbon Restoration, as well as the figure of Metternich. This recaptured concert would enable Bourbon France to once again have a say in matters. However, Louis-Philippe's strategy of “peace at all costs” did not find favor with him due to its wait-and-see approach, nor did the Entente Cordiale, which served British interests.

He remained indifferent and skeptical of overseas questions, for he believed that Europe's fate was determined on its own soil rather than by distant, risky, and ruinous undertakings.

Europe as a Vitalist Process

By paradoxically providing France with the geographic conditions for its political rebirth, the revolutionary upheaval had cleared the way for the continent's comprehensive reconfiguration and had enabled the realization of a collective destiny. Bonald traced the birth—if not the first expression—of this destiny back to Charlemagne, promising a thousand year fate for this alliance of monarchy and Christianity. The Crusades symbolically sealed this complicity between the spiritual and the temporal, gathering Christian princes around the same knightly ethos. Bonald saw it as a glorious reiteration of monarchical coalitions, which is how he described the allied action that brought the defeat of Napoleon and the accession of Louis XVIII in 1814-1815. The key was to reaffirm this solidarity over the ashes of the defunct Holy Roman Empire and—instead of resuscitating it—to resume the great unfinished movement of political and moral convergence.

The Bonaldian Europe that was ready to be redrawn was not so much a new Europe than one forged during centuries, and henceforth free to accede to its “virile age.” The tendency of principalities and micro-states to be absorbed within more powerful entities such as kingdoms and empires—France and Spain had long ago been built through aggregates of fiefdoms and provinces—would logically spread, he prophesied, to the Italian peninsula and the Germanic world. An intra-European axis would subsequently be established, creating a harmonious demarcation between the South, consisting of France, Spain, Italy, and Austria, and the North, consisting of Sweden, Prussia, Russia, and England. The first group, Catholic and Latin, forms the historic heart of the continent, and is the successor of the Roman Empire. As a sanctuary of genius and civilization, it counterbalances the demographic influence of the North, of which England remains a suspect element by virtue of its ancient and irreconcilable particularities with the Bonaldian notion of absolute monarchy: mercantilism, parliamentarianism, Anglicanism.

The Europe of the Future, Site of Post-Revolutionary Reconciliation

This post-revolutionary Europe would be tasked with carrying out a major reconciliation. The homogeneity of the monarchical model is no longer overlapped by that of medieval Christianity, whose unity was broken by the Reformation, which if Bonald is to be believed represented a spiritual divide that led to the intellectual divide of the Enlightenment, itself responsible for the political divide of the revolution. The Europe of the future would mark the end of the revolution and a return to religious unity, with triumphant Christianity serving as the true transcendent authority guiding nations. The Holy See would be its political expression, although the pope is more the representative and lieutenant of God than a fully-fledged monarch; Bonald distanced himself from de Maistre with regard to the supreme pontiff’s role, although he gradually changed his convictions toward a more pronounced “ultramontanism.” In short, politics and religious peace are inseparable, and their realization within states is connected to their concrete external realization.

His admiration for the Austrian model and the Europe of princes certainly made him the defender of a conservative vision of the concert of nations. However, it is important to note the ambivalence of a notion driven by an ideal of diplomatic harmony and lasting peace ensured through dialogue, and the transcendence of a religion that reconnects with its etymological meaning—as sometimes claimed—of an inclusive bond between individuals and peoples. The universalism of Bonald’s vision of Europe would ultimately, and potentially against his wishes, be closer to that of the Enlightenment thinkers that came before him, and the fathers of Europe who came after, than any royalist “white international” project.

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