



Louise Weiss

A committed European



European Parliament

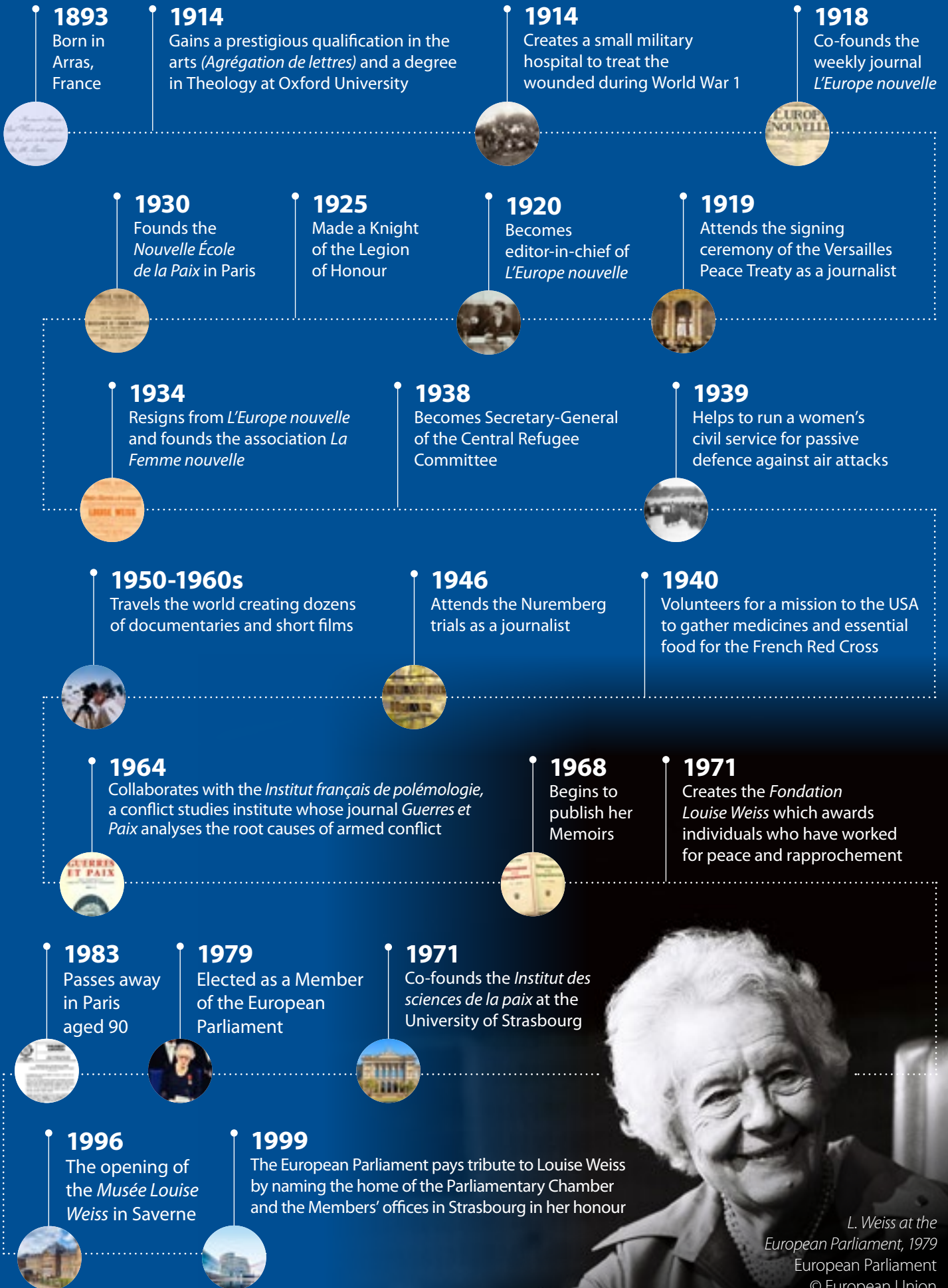


Louise Weiss, a committed European
European Parliament
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Timeline of a life dedicated to Europe



L. Weiss at the European Parliament, 1979
European Parliament
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Louise Weiss, 1980
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Introduction

A lifelong progressive and a steadfast witness to many of the 20th century's great upheavals, Louise Weiss (1893-1983) has left an indelible mark on the Europe we know today. As both a determined intellectual and a tireless activist, she was a pioneer of the European ideal. She was born on 25 January 1893 into a liberal, upper middle-class family from Alsace. After obtaining a prestigious qualification (*agrégation*) in 1914, she became a journalist, and from the 1920s was involved in efforts to build peace and unity throughout the continent.

A passionate campaigner for women's rights, she organised suffragette demonstrations in the 1930s to demand the right to vote and equal civil and political rights for women.

After the war she travelled the world making ethnographic documentaries and became a well-known conference speaker, writer and memorialist, working alongside some of the greatest politicians and thinkers of her age.

In 1979, she was elected to the European Parliament at the first European elections held by direct universal suffrage. As the oldest Member of the European Parliament she chaired the constituent session of Parliament and delivered its first inaugural address. Louise Weiss died in 1983.

In 1999, the building containing the Chamber of the European Parliament in Strasbourg was named in her honour.

Monsieur et Madame
Paul Weiss ont le plaisir de
vous faire part de la naissance
de leur fille Louise

Arzas, le 25 Janvier 1893.

Birth announcement card of L. Weiss, 1893
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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CHAPTER 1

The early years: war and peace

Louise Weiss was born on 25 January 1893 in Arras (in the Pas-de-Calais region of France) as the oldest of six children in an upper middle-class family of Alsatian origin with patriotic, secular republican values. Her father was a prominent mining engineer. Also from Alsace, her mother was from a Jewish family with roots in central Europe, a family history which made Weiss aware from an early age of the dangers of history and the difficult relations between France and Germany.

She spent her youth in Paris where she received a strict education in the country's best schools. Despite opposition from her father, Weiss pursued a successful academic path, gaining a degree in Theology from the University of Oxford and a prestigious qualification in the arts (*agrégation de lettres*)

by the age of 21. Louise was now qualified to be a teacher, but her future lay outside the schoolroom. On her graduation in 1914, life changed forever – both for Louise Weiss, and for all of Europe.

The slaughter which took place on the battlefields of the First World War and the suffering of a sacrificed generation would mark Weiss for life. She turned down a lucrative career opportunity in education and instead set up a small military hospital to treat soldiers wounded in battle and, later, a centre for victims in northern France.

However, Weiss was soon looking further afield for other ways to use her talents. Attracted by debate and the exchange of ideas she became a journalist, publishing her first articles in Parisian newspapers.



Portrait of L. Weiss as a young woman, 1909
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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With her sister wearing Alsatian costumes, 1913
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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War hospital created by L. Weiss, 1914
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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Weiss family portrait, 1932
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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L. Weiss, editor-in-chief of L'Europe nouvelle, 1928
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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CHAPTER 2

Journalist for Europe

Louise Weiss' desire to bring Europe closer together and to achieve a better understanding between its nations was rooted in the horrors of the Great War and her subsequent aim to build a better future for her fellow citizens. In 1918 she co-founded the weekly journal *L'Europe nouvelle*, which sought to provide high-quality information on international politics and major economic issues to aid the continent's peacemakers.

In 1919 she attended the signing ceremony of the Versailles Peace Treaty as a journalist, and frequently reported from central and eastern Europe on the national aspirations of countries emerging from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. She also travelled to Russia, where she wrote a report for the Red Cross on the regions affected by famine after witnessing first-hand the impact of the Soviet revolution. Ever the social activist, on her return to France, she organised campaigns to provide help to malnourished Russian and Ukrainian children.

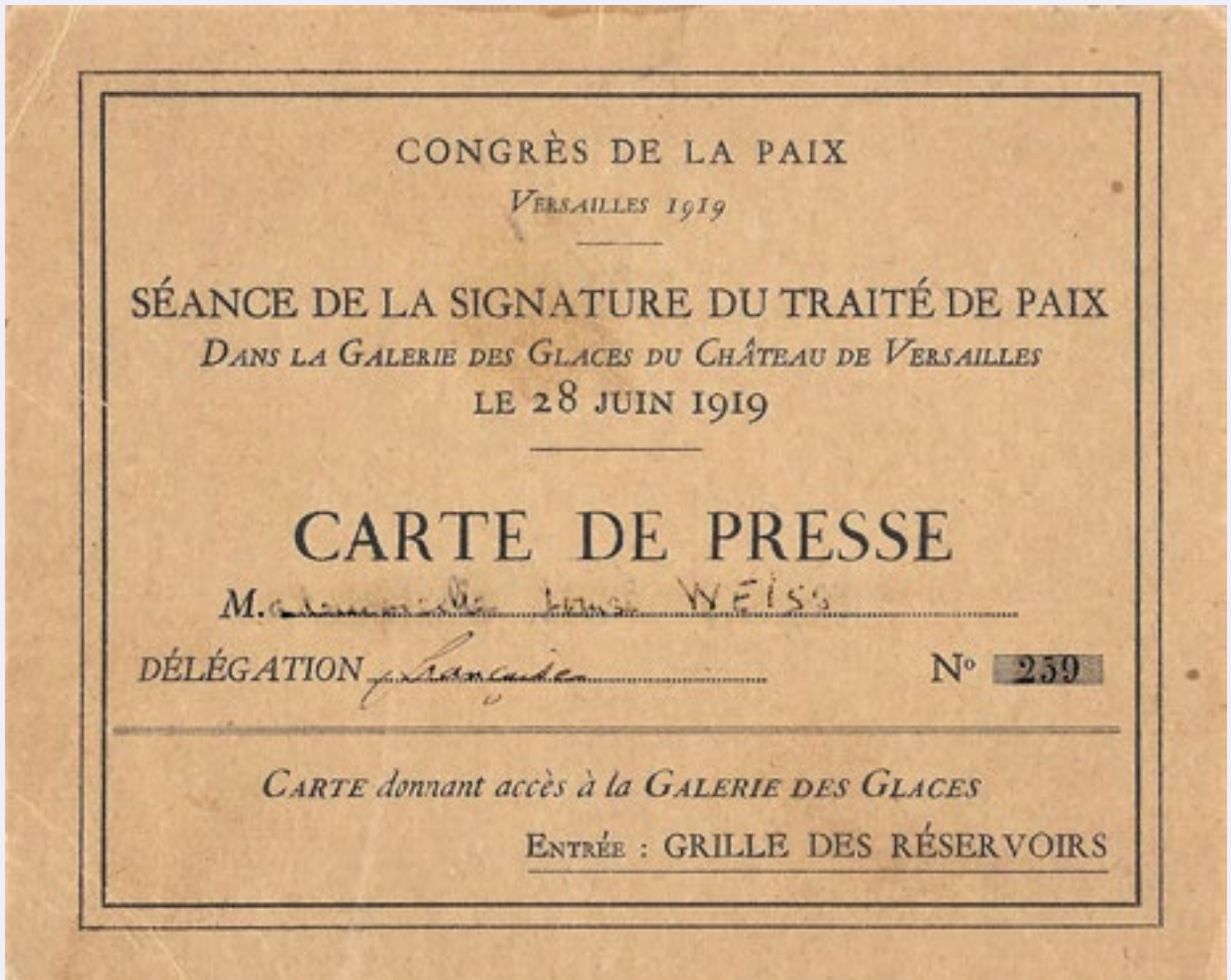
Weiss' work as editor-in-chief of *L'Europe nouvelle* from 1920 to 1934 would put her at the epicentre of many key moments of Europe's development across the 20th century. She worked with many the greatest writers of

her time, from Paul Valéry to Léon Blum, often asking them to contribute to her newspaper on foreign policy issues.

She made frequent trips to Geneva where she covered developments concerning the League of Nations and met Jean Monnet, later known as a 'Founding Father of Europe'.

As an advocate of a just peace with Germany, she helped to popularise the idea of European integration. She supported the Locarno Treaties that established a collective security system in Europe, and defended the ambitious European federal union project of French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand.

Louise Weiss was gradually becoming a significant force in the male-dominated world of diplomatic journalism. In Paris, she met with leading intellectuals, diplomats and politicians. Her reputation was such that she was made a Knight of the Legion of Honour in 1925. However, less than a decade later and with Hitler's ascendancy in Germany convincing her that any European rapprochement was becoming impossible, she abandoned journalism to pursue peace in Europe by different means.



Press pass for the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, 1919
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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Promotional leaflet for L'Europe nouvelle
Fondation Jean Monnet pour l'Europe, Lausanne
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L. Weiss and the *L'Europe nouvelle* editorial team
 Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
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Cartoon showing L. Weiss dreaming of European unity
 Alajos Dezsö (alias Derso)
 Fondation Jean Monnet pour l'Europe, Lausanne
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A. Briand calls for a Federal Europe, 1929
 VU, 1929
 Private Collection
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L. Weiss at the headquarters of L'Europe nouvelle, 1928
Fondation Jean Monnet pour l'Europe, Lausanne
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CHAPTER 3

Campaigner for peace

In 1930, Louise Weiss founded the *Nouvelle École de la Paix* in Paris. This 'School of Peace' was a private higher-education institution which organised conferences and debates at renowned French university the Sorbonne on international current affairs and the major political, economic, social and cultural issues of the day. Weiss sought to develop the teaching of peace and foster new expertise in conflict prevention.

While *L'Europe nouvelle* was primarily addressed at the ruling elites, she was also seeking to reach the general public with her message of peace: students, business leaders, teachers, civil servants.

Conferences would be held every week, with politicians, diplomats, journalists, university professors, economists and writers presenting lectures on subjects such as the global economic crisis, the borders in Europe, the rise of totalitarian regimes and European unity. Weiss ensured that the facility maintained a strong connection with the League of Nations,

notably through traineeships, research grants and study trips to Geneva.

However, rising tensions in the 1930s made it increasingly difficult for the *Nouvelle École de la Paix* to continue its work. Weiss was quick to gauge the dangers of Nazism. Her hopes and efforts were effectively sabotaged by a speech given at the League of Nations by Joseph Goebbels, the Third Reich's Minister of Propaganda, who described Hitlerism as the foundation of order in Europe. He argued that a national-socialist Germany wanted to promote peace among nations.

For Weiss, this dangerous fanaticism was too much to bear, and she would soon feel compelled to abandon her educational efforts and move on to tackle other issues. The death of the French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand in 1932 signaled the final blow to *L'Europe nouvelle's* last hopes for peace and Franco-German reconciliation. The unity of Europe would have to wait.

TOUS LES SAMEDIS.
LE NUMERO : 4 FRANCS.
ETRANGER : 6 FRANCS

15^e ANNEE. — N° 735.
12 MARS 1932.
EDITEUR : L. WEISS.

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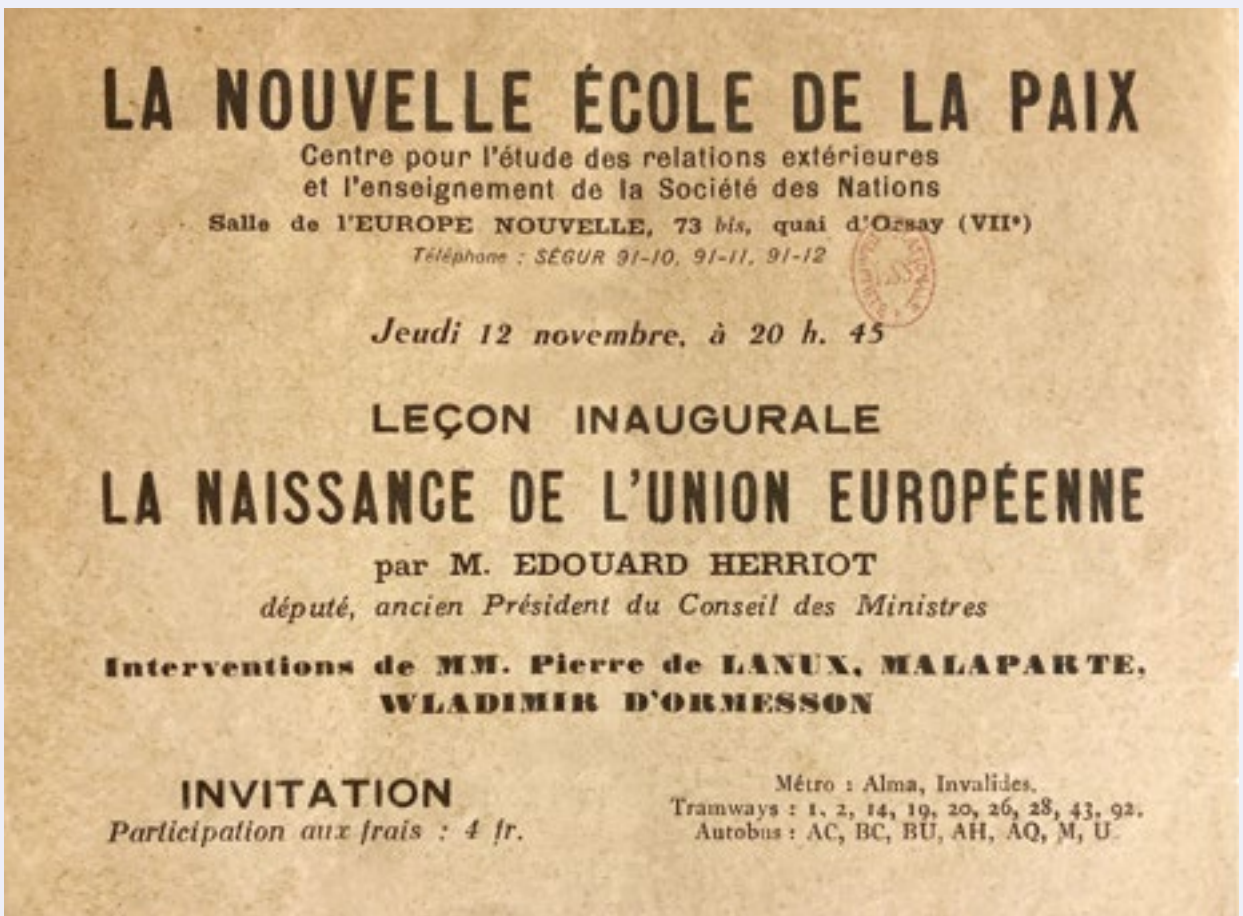
Les dossiers et les documents de " L'Europe Nouvelle " sont les archives de la paix.

France, Belgique, Luxembourg et Colonies : Un an : 80 francs. — Six mois : 45 francs.
Etranger : Abonnements : Un an : 125 francs. — Six mois : 75 francs.
Collections : Deux volumes reliés toile. L'année : 350 francs.

Téléph. : SEGUR 91-10, 91-11, 91-12. — Chèque Postal : PARIS 7029. — Adr. Télégr. : EUROPNOUVE 27 PARIS.
PARIS, 73¹⁴, QUAI D'ORSAY (VII^e arrondissement).



Cartoon by Derso et Kelen on Briand and the United States of Europe
Le Rire, 1931
Private Collection
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Invitation for a conference on Europe at the Nouvelle École de la Paix
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
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L. Weiss campaigning for women's voting rights
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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CHAPTER 4

Feminist

In 1934, Louise Weiss launched herself into a new struggle: the campaign for women's emancipation. Inspired by the activities of the British and American suffragettes, she founded the association *La Femme nouvelle* to fight for women's voting rights and created an information centre to campaign for equal civil and political rights for French men and women.

Although ineligible to stand, Louise Weiss made a powerful statement by putting herself forward as a candidate at several elections.

After an initial abortive run in local elections, she chose to join other suffragettes in Paris in 1936 to symbolically campaign for election to the French National Assembly. A special postcard showing Louise Weiss with a detailed curriculum vitae was produced and distributed across the city.

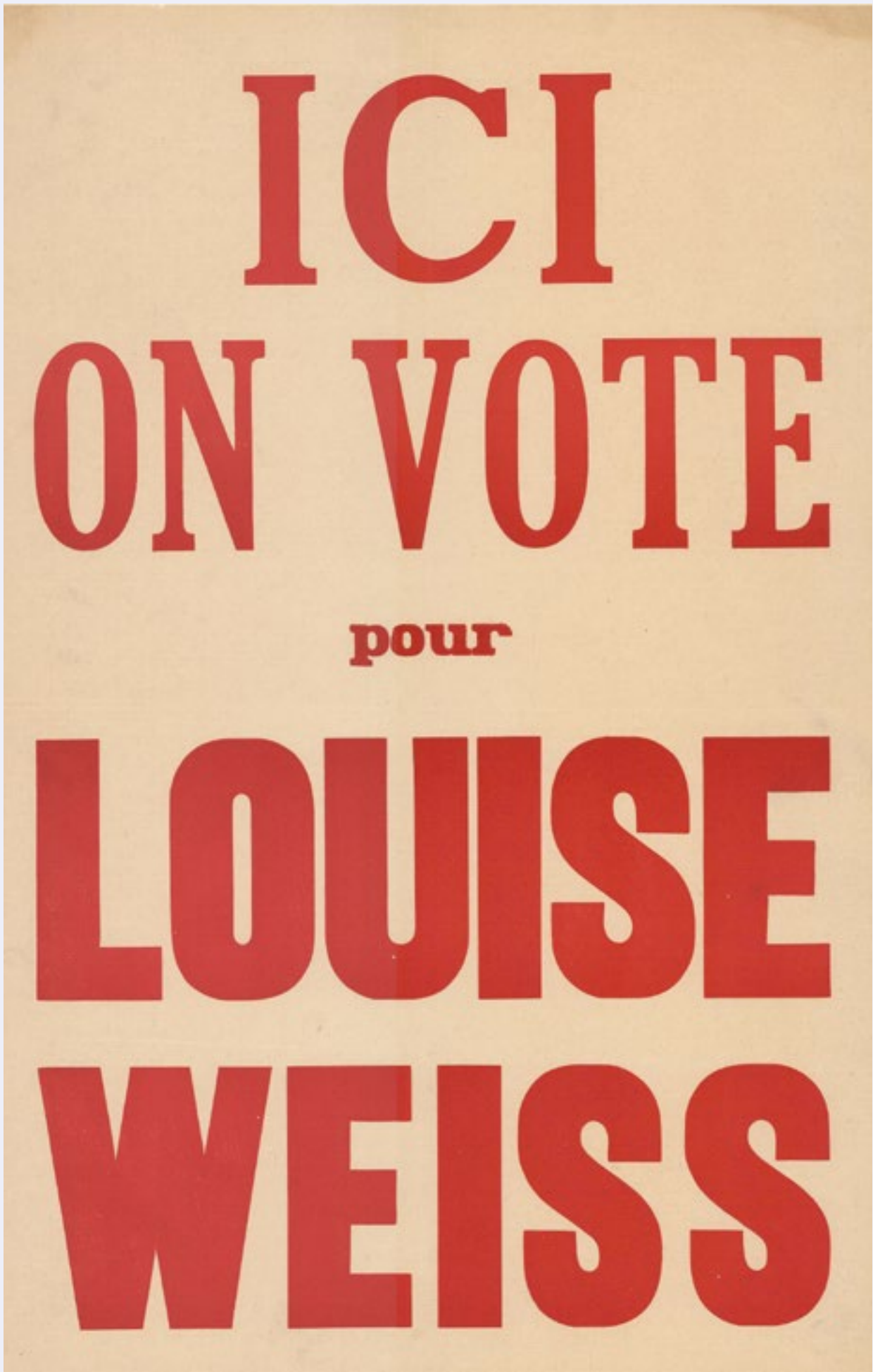
She also organised a nationwide tour of France, stepping up action and protests to demand the right for female emancipation.

But she would again be disappointed by the progress in Europe: the women of France would

have to wait until the end of the Second World War to win the right to vote and be eligible to stand in elections under the same conditions as men.

Weiss soon realised that her efforts were needed elsewhere in Europe. In 1938, recognising that a new conflict was inevitable, Weiss became involved with the work of a Central Refugee Committee set up by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to manage the influx of Jewish families fleeing Nazism. She later worked with the Union of French Women Decorated with the Legion of Honour, where she helped to run a women's civil service 'for passive defence against air attacks'.

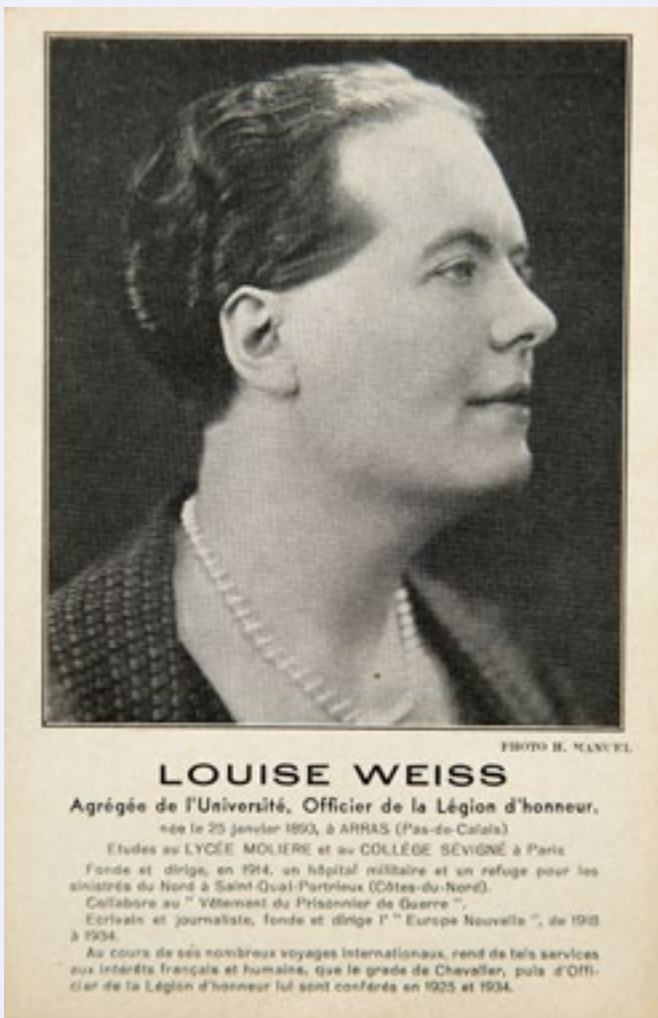
The arrival of war once again saw Weiss continue her tireless efforts to help others. She volunteered for a mission to the United States to gather medicines and essential food for the French Red Cross. On her return to occupied France, although she could not prevent the Gestapo from seizing her library and personal archives, she successfully evaded anti-Jewish persecution and managed to protect several of her friends from capture.



Election Poster
Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris
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L. Weiss showing the situation of women's voting rights in Europe
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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L. Weiss as an electoral candidate
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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LA FEMME NOUVELLE

CENTRE DE PROPAGANDE POUR L'ÉGALITÉ DES DROITS
CIVILS ET POLITIQUES DES FRANÇAIS ET DES FRANÇAISES

Permanence centrale : PLACE JULES-JOFFRIN (Café du Nord-Sud)

SECRETAIRES GÉNÉRALES : M^{me} JULIETTE AKAR

Citoyens et Citoyennes du 18^e Arrondissement!

Sans distinction d'opinions politiques, des citoyens et citoyennes de grand cœur ont décidé de provoquer, à l'occasion des élections municipales, une grande manifestation féministe et de soutenir, à cet effet, **dans les sept circonscriptions de votre arrondissement**, la candidature de

LOUISE WEISS

OFFICIER DE LA LÉGION D'HONNEUR, AGRÉGÉE DE L'UNIVERSITÉ, Fondatrice de LA FEMME NOUVELLE

Le Congrès des Maires de France, plusieurs Municipalités importantes, le Conseil municipal de Paris ont reconnu que la participation des femmes à l'administration des cités était désormais indispensable. Le XVIII^e arrondissement, aux traditions politiques de générosité, a toujours soutenu toutes les revendications de liberté humaine. Il veut être le premier à manifester son adhésion enthousiaste à la cause féministe. Cette adhésion qui, pour le moment, ne peut avoir aucune conséquence légale, aura cependant, si elle se manifeste avec ferveur, une immense valeur symbolique.

En votant pour **LOUISE WEISS**, le 5 Mai, **Montmartre** aura signifié à Paris, à la France, au monde entier sa volonté d'accorder aux épouses, aux mères, aux femmes seules de ce pays les libertés et les responsabilités dont elles sont dignes.

**Françaises ! Vous payez des impôts
Votre argent est utile à la France
Votre opinion ne l'est-elle pas ?**

Par un vote massif, vous soutiendrez la candidature de LOUISE WEISS, pour l'amélioration du statut de la femme et de l'enfant, pour la défense des intérêts des ménagères et des travailleuses.

Le 5 mai, LA FEMME NOUVELLE procédera aux opérations électorales en organisant des sections de vote officieuses dans le voisinage de toutes les sections de vote officielles. Les citoyens et les citoyennes du XVIII^e, favorables à la participation des femmes à l'administration municipale, seront priés de déposer dans les urnes un bulletin portant le nom de LOUISE WEISS, candidate féministe, et son programme ainsi résumé, d'accord avec un grand nombre d'associations féministes :

**LA FRANÇAISE DÉSIRE ADMINISTRER LES INTÉRÊTS DE LA CITÉ
COMME ELLE ADMINISTRE LES INTÉRÊTS DE SON FOYER !**

Il est bien entendu que les bulletins ainsi déposés en dehors et en plus des bulletins officiels ne peuvent en rien les opérations électorales régulières. Si des milliers d'électeurs et de femmes électorales répondent à l'appel de LOUISE WEISS, la participation des femmes aux affaires municipales et aux futures élections législatives ne pourra plus être différée.

LOUISE WEISS au cours de ses réunions et interventions ne fera pas de politique de parti. Elle défendra simplement les droits de la femme et de l'enfant.

Les candidats de tous les partis sont cordialement invités aux réunions de **LOUISE WEISS** et notamment à une **GRANDE RÉUNION PUBLIQUE**, qui aura lieu **le Vendredi 3 Mai**, au Moulin de la Galette, 77, rue Lepic, Paris-18^e, au bénéfice des œuvres de la **Mairie du 18^e** et de la **Commune Libre du Vieux Montmartre**.

Cette manifestation revêtira un grand caractère féministe. Les citoyennes candidates dans tous les autres arrondissements de Paris y prendront la parole.

**CITOYENS et CITOYENNES du 18^e arrondissement,
le 5 Mai vous voterez en masse pour**

LOUISE WEISS

Candidate féministe dans les sept circonscriptions du 18^e arrondissement

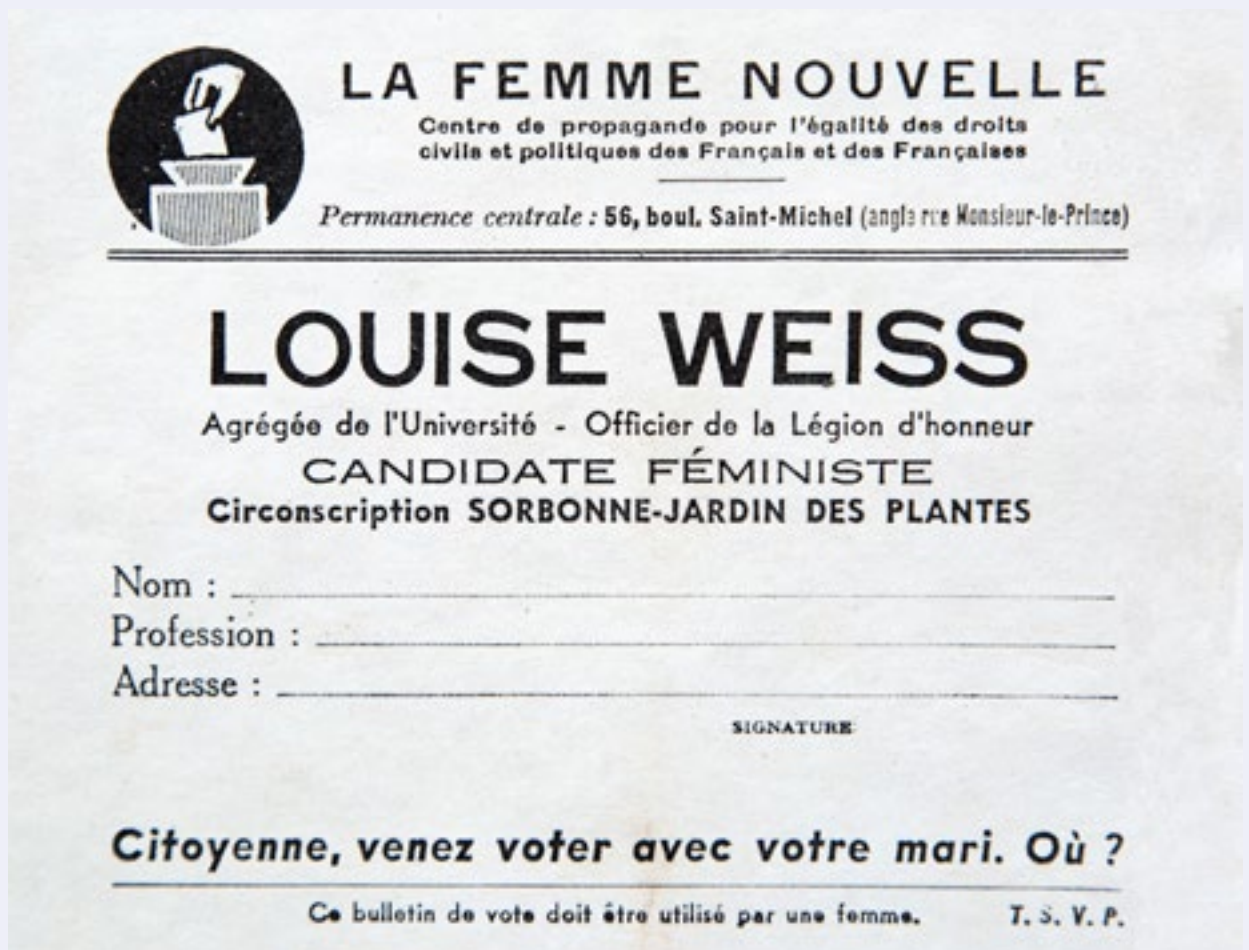
AIDEZ-NOUS! Apposez nos affiches! Distribuez nos tracts!

Imprimé par Le PENSÉ-FEMINISTE

Maison Socialiste, 10, rue d'Alger, Paris



Rally for a women's civil service for passive defence against air attacks, Paris, 1938
 Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris
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Leaflet of L. Weiss as an electoral candidate, 1936
 Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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L. Weiss behind a camera in Palmyra, Syria, 1952
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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CHAPTER 5

Writer and film-maker

After the devastation of the war, Louise Weiss began to look beyond Europe for new ways to use her considerable efforts. Her ambition to use images as a way of expressing her ideas led her to travel the world and raise awareness of countries and civilisations far from Europe.

She spent several years as an ethnographer in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent, bearing witness to the geopolitical, religious, social and cultural upheavals that, against the backdrop of the Cold War, were transforming the Third World.

She made dozens of documentaries and short films, which she presented on conference tours around Europe.

It was at this time that Weiss developed an interest in the work of the *Institut français de polémologie*, a conflict studies institute which examined the root causes of armed conflict. Throughout this period she continued to pursue her own writing in the form of novels, biographies, plays, essays and travelogues, publishing six volumes of *Mémoires d'une Européenne* which won the 1978 Robert Schuman Prize for European unity.

She went on to establish the *Fondation Louise Weiss* in Strasbourg, which awards individuals who have worked for peace and rapprochement between peoples. Since 2005, the Association of European Journalists has awarded an annual Louise Weiss Prize to journalists focusing on European affairs.



L. Weiss navigating on a canal in Shrinagar, Kashmir, 1954
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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L. Weiss visiting Turtle Island, Zanzibar, 1961
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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L. Weiss with a snake charmer in New Delhi, 1954
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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L. Weiss on a trip in China, 1958
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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CONNAISSANCE DU MONDE
252, FAUB,
ST-HONORÉ **SALLE PLEYEL** MÉTRO:
TERNES

Mardi 13, Jeudi 15 Janvier 1959, à 21 heures
Dimanche 18 Janvier, à 14 h. 30

★

CHINE - JAPON

FOURMILLANTE ASIE

Récit de
LOUISE WEISS

★

HONG-KONG : Le Rocher tragique
PÉKIN : Le Barrage des 13 Tombeaux
KYOTO : Le Dieu du Riz

★

FILMS INÉDITS EN COULEURS

de LOUISE WEISS

Cinéastes : P. GUEGUEN et L. MIAILLE

Transports assurés par AIR-FRANCE et les MESSAGERIES MARITIMES

★

Places : de 200 à 600 francs. Location : Salle Pleyel, chez Durand, 4, Place de la Madeleine et aux Agences. Billets à prix réduit et location pour les Membres de « Connaissance du Monde », Salle Pleyel (Carnot 06-30) et 12, Faubourg St-Honoré (Anj. 82-03). Bureau International de Concerts et Conférences Charles et Camille XIËSGEN, 252, Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris - 8^e (Wag. 21-25).

T. S. V. P.



L. Weiss's Mémoires d'une Européenne
European Parliament Library, Luxembourg
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L. Weiss at the European Parliament, 1979

© AFP



CHAPTER 6

Member of the European Parliament

Her long career as a European activist and feminist made Louise Weiss an ideal candidate at the first elections to the European Parliament to be held by direct universal suffrage in 1979. Described by former Prime Minister Jacques Chirac as “our first Lady”, Weiss was a top candidate for the ‘Defence of France’s interest in Europe’ list. During the political campaign she refused to oppose Simone Veil, who headed the ‘Union for French Democracy’ list of President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing.

On 17 July 1979, Louise Weiss, as the oldest Member of the European Parliament, presided over the inaugural sitting of the new European Parliament in Strasbourg. Weiss would savour this historic moment, using her address to speak directly to Europe’s newly elected politicians. Ever the activist, she took this opportunity to warn of the danger of allowing a ‘cult of the ancients’ to paralyse political action and highlighted the continent’s future challenges of identity, birth rate and human rights.

It was vital, she argued, that Europeans unite not only around their shared economic interests but also around their common culture.

The following day she handed over to Simone Veil, who had been elected President of the European Parliament.

Her speeches in the European Parliament’s plenary meetings continued to cover a wide range of other concerns, addressing amongst other topics the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, world hunger, human rights abuses, the law of the sea and Strasbourg’s place at the heart of Europe.

Her position on the Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sport even enabled her to start a new project: the creation of a museum dedicated to the history of European unification.

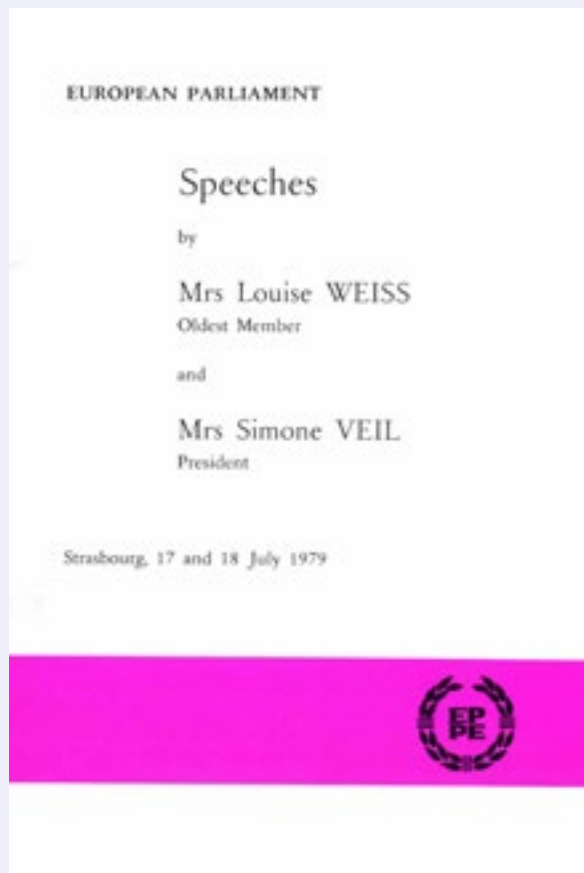
An active politician well into her old age, Louise Weiss died in 1983 at the age of 90, before completing her term of office.



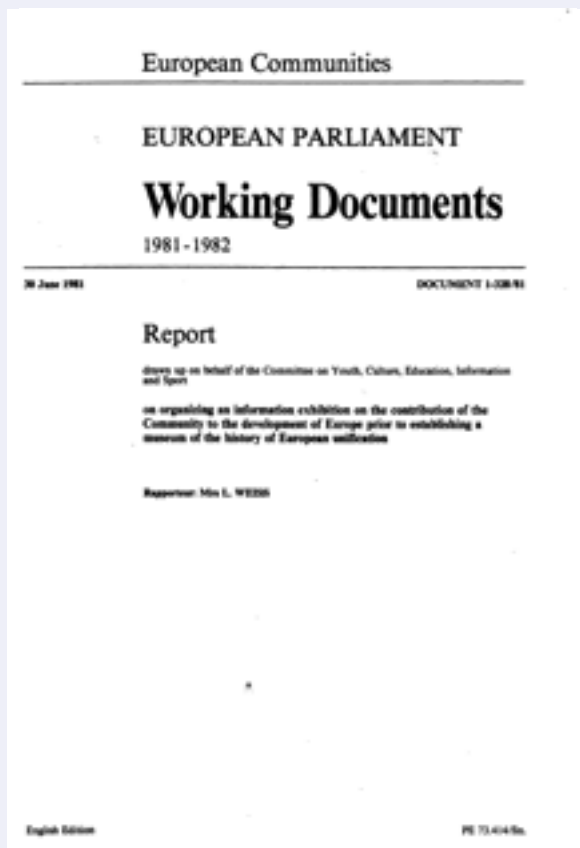
L. Weiss and French candidates for the European elections, 1979
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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L. Weiss greeting Simone Veil elected as EP President, 1979
European Parliament
© European Union



Program of the opening session
European Parliament Library, Luxembourg
© European Union



EP report on a museum for Europe
EP Archives
© European Union



Press release after the death of L. Weiss
EP Archives
© European Union



Exterior view of the WEISS building
European Parliament
© European Union

CHAPTER 7

Louise Weiss in Strasbourg

In 1999, the European Parliament paid homage to Louise Weiss by naming the home of the Parliamentary Chamber and the Members' offices in Strasbourg in her honour. Today, a bronze bust of Louise Weiss welcomes visitors to the entrance of the building.

This new building was inaugurated by the President of the European Parliament, Nicole Fontaine, in the presence of French President Jacques Chirac.

Almost fifty years after it was established in the Alsatian capital, the European Parliament finally had its own Chamber – the largest of its kind in Europe.

The WEISS building is completely plated in glass to symbolise an open and transparent democracy, while the roof's unfinished

appearance references the ongoing nature of the European project.

The city of Strasbourg recognised Louise Weiss with the inauguration of the 'Square Louise Weiss' in 1989, one of many public spaces across France named in her honour.

An annual Louise Weiss writing competition is held by the University of Strasbourg for its students, and the city's National and University Library houses a collection of personal books donated by Louise Weiss.

Not far away, in the town of Saverne, the museum holds a permanent exhibition tracing Weiss' life, and her statue, enhanced with multimedia content, stands in the main square.



Inauguration of the WEISS building in Strasbourg, 1999
European Parliament
© European Union



Night view of the WEISS building
European Parliament
© European Union



Bust of L. Weiss in the WEISS building, Strasbourg
European Parliament
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Plaque indicating the 'Square Louise Weiss' in Strasbourg
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Statue of L. Weiss in Saverne's main square
Musée Louise Weiss, Saverne
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Credits

Exhibition 'Louise Weiss: a committed European' organised jointly by the Archives Unit and the Directorate of Libraries and Knowledge Instruments of the European Parliament with the support of the Louise Weiss Museum in Saverne.

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[Online exhibition](#)



[Multimedia package](#)

Further reading

- J. BARIÉTY, 'D'une guerre à l'autre : Louise Weiss à la recherche de la paix (1918-1939)', in A.-R. Michel & R. Vandenbussche (ed.), *L'idée de paix en France et ses représentations au XXe siècle*, Lille, Publications de l'Institut de recherches historiques du Septentrion, 2001, pp. 95-106.
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- Y. DENÉCHÈRE, 'La contribution des Françaises à l'idée d'Europe et à la construction européenne au XXe siècle', in *Parlement[s]*, 2007, n°3, pp. 73-85.
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