

Federalism, Self-Determination, and the Reshaping of French Regionalist Debate in the Aftermath of World War I

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Abstract

During World War I, national pride in France fostered solidarity and increased patriotism. However, after the war, the principles of self-determination and nationality reignited debates among young regionalists about federal reorganization in France and Europe. Federalism was seen as a way to promote peace in Europe and to protect national minorities within the state. This movement crystallized in 1927 when representatives from Alsace, Corsica, and Brittany established the Central Committee of National Minorities in France (CCMNF). The CCMNF advocated for self-determination and international federalism, suggesting that a federation of peoples could replace the modern state system. This structure would let each nationality decide its political status and cultural development. While the CCMNF marked a milestone in uniting minorities around federalist ideas, its efforts were slowed by the 1929 economic crisis and a resurgence of political tensions. This article examines the rise of regionalist federalism in 1920s France and its connection to the broader post-war discussions on self-determination. By placing this movement within the larger national debates on reorganizing the French state, it highlights federalism's potential as a transformative framework for addressing political and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Federalism; regionalism; national self-determination; World War I; France

Introduction

The doctrine advocated by the CCMNF [Comité Central des Minorités Nationales de France] is based on the right of Peoples to self-determination and on international Federalism (Duhamel 1928).

In the aftermath of World War I, France experienced a resurgence of regionalist sentiment that challenged its long-standing tradition of centralization. While nations across Europe grappled with self-determination and the redrawing of borders, regionalist movements in France increasingly turned to federalism as a potential solution to both national tensions and local demands. This article examines how regionalist movements in 1920s France conceptualized federalism as a response to the challenges posed by state centralization and as a contribution to the emerging international discourse on (national) self-determination, minority rights, and European peacebuilding after World War I.

Although the war had initially fostered unity and patriotic fervor, the postwar diffusion of Wilsonian ideas reignited regionalist debates. For many young activists, federalism appeared not only as a blueprint for a peaceful reorganization of Europe but also as a response to internal calls for autonomy. It thus emerged as a dual solution: a path to peace and a means to safeguard minority

and regional rights within centralized nation-states. These ideas crystallized in 1927 with the creation of the Central Committee of National Minorities in France (CCMNF), established by representatives from Brittany, Alsace, and Corsica. Article 2 of its bylaws, partially quoted at the outset of this article, affirmed the right to self-determination and endorsed an international federalist vision.

To understand these interwar developments, it is useful to consider how scholars have interpreted the longer history of French regionalism. Anne-Marie Thiesse inaugurated a fundamentally new approach to this field of study. In *Écrire la France. Le mouvement littéraire régionaliste de langue française entre la Belle Époque et la Libération* (1991), she moved beyond seeing regionalism as a folkloric curiosity or peripheral cultural current, instead demonstrating that it provided a key arena for negotiating national identity in modern France. By foregrounding literature as both a source and a catalyst of regionalist activity, Thiesse traced how writers and activists created transregional networks and transformed regionalism into an influential political and ideological force. While Thiesse highlights the cultural and literary dimensions of French regionalism, Julian Wright (2003) analyzes it as both a product of and a reaction to the state's long-standing tradition of centralization. Rejecting simplistic portrayals of regionalism as merely separatist or nostalgic, he underlines the tensions between national integration and the persistence of regional particularisms. Among the key figures shaping this movement was Jean Charles-Brun, founder of the French Regionalist Federation, who conceived regionalism as a republican project of modernization that sought to unify administrative reform with the revival of regional cultures, ultimately aiming to renew France through its regions (Wright 2003). On his part, Thomas Schippers (2009) explores the "region" as a fluid intermediary category negotiated between national and local identities, highlighting how regional consciousness simultaneously embodies nostalgia for lost traditions and an active adaptation to modernization under persistent pressures of state centralization.

Cultural and comparative scholarship has further broadened the lens on French regionalism by situating it within wider European currents. Eric Storm (2012a) places the revival of regionalism in the context of the fin-de-siècle "crisis of reason," highlighting its transnational character as a reaction to mass society and the cultural, political, and social upheavals destabilizing national narratives. Rather than directly opposing nation-building, regional identities often reinforced it by supplying authenticity and cultural depth (Augusteijn and Storm 2012; Storm 2012b). Francesca Zantedeschi (2019) likewise demonstrates how local traditions and languages were selectively preserved and valorized within the national framework, strengthening cohesion through diversity rather than undermining it. Broadening the geographical and comparative perspective, Núñez Seixas and Molina (2019) examine the complex interplay of culture, language, and politics in southwestern Europe, showing how regional movements could assert distinctiveness while simultaneously contributing to national integration.

In the French case, the aftermath of World War I marked a shift from largely cultural claims to more politicized agendas. Particularly in Brittany, Alsace, and Corsica, movements articulated demands for cultural recognition and autonomy by mobilizing international discourses of minority protection. As Romain Pasquier (2014) observes, this marked a departure from earlier, more conservative currents: new parties and organizations reframed their agendas around cultural, linguistic, and political rights, drawing inspiration from the postwar diffusion of Wilsonian ideals and the emerging discourse on minority protection. While some movements embraced federalism as a framework for reconciling regional identities with national unity, others adopted more radical or separatist stances. In different ways, they aligned with contemporary international debates on minority rights and self-determination. Although elements of federalist thought had been articulated before 1914, it was primarily in the interwar period that regionalist movements in France became more assertive, politicized, and internationally engaged – linking their aspirations to broader discussions about Europe's postwar reorganization.

During the interwar years, French regionalist movements increasingly engaged with federalist ideas as tools to address the enduring tensions between a highly centralized state and persistent

regional particularisms. Sébastien Carney's (2021a) study of Breton nationalism illustrates how activists adopted a pragmatic federalist strategy, simultaneously leveraging emerging European institutions and minority rights discourses to claim cultural and political autonomy, while navigating the constraints imposed by the French Republic's centralizing frameworks. The journal *Bulletin des minorités nationales en France* (1936), soon renamed *Peuples et Frontières* (1937-1939), exemplified Breton efforts to connect local aspirations with a broader network of European minority movements advocating for a federal restructuring of Europe aimed at diminishing the dominance of nation-states (Carney 2021b). Such initiatives resonate with Carrier and Barillé's (2021) interpretation of federalism as both a symbolic and practical framework through which the French Republic sought to reconcile its universalist republicanism with increasing demands for regional and cultural recognition. In this sense, federalism functioned as a means to balance unity and plurality amid sociopolitical crises.

Placed within a wider historical and conceptual frame, Éva Bóka's survey on European federalism (2006) traces the emergence of federalist thought as a sustained response to the centralizing, nationalist, and often authoritarian state models prevalent across Europe since the 19th century. Bóka highlights how federalist theorists – grounded in principles like subsidiarity and decentralization – advanced political models aimed at protecting minority rights and cultural diversity within democratic constitutional states. This broader intellectual backdrop helps to situate French regionalist federalism within a transnational tradition that sought to mediate between national unity and plural identities.

This article explores how international debates following World War I – particularly on the principle of national self-determination and minority rights – were received and interpreted within the evolving landscape of French regionalism and federalism during the 1920s. Special attention is given to the political thought of Breton activist Maurice Duhamel, whose writings illuminate the convergence of autonomism and federalism in this period. The creation of the League of Nations and the rise of global discourse on minority rights served as catalysts, pushing French regionalist movements to articulate their claims within a broader international framework. To contextualize these postwar debates, a brief overview of the 19th-century origins of federalist and regionalist thought in France is provided. By situating these interwar developments within this longer trajectory, the article sheds light on the persistent limits of national self-determination in the French context after 1918.

Debating Federalism and Regionalism in France in the 19th century

In 19th-century France, the need to reorganize the state arose from two main factors: the tension between universalism and particularism in national identity (Thiesse 1999, 173), and the desire to address regional issues more effectively. The reorganization of the French administrative system had a twofold purpose: to balance the centralized power inherited from the Napoleonic era with greater local autonomy and to revitalize provincial life as a means of national renewal. Since Bonaparte's establishment of the system in Year VIII, decentralization has been a recurring demand, aiming to grant local authorities – initially communes and departments, and later regions – independent administrative powers exercised by representative bodies freely elected by citizens. This liberal and democratic aspiration has been a constant theme for anti-centralist forces, articulated through press articles, pamphlets, legislative proposals, parliamentary debates, electoral campaigns, and motions from municipal and departmental councils (Riemenschneider 1982).

Beyond these institutional demands, decentralization also sparked broader debates about alternative political structures. While it aimed to redistribute power within the unitary state, it also paved the way for more ambitious proposals, including federalist ideas seeking to redefine the relationship between central government and regions – or local communities – and regionalism, stemming from the social, political, and economic integration of localities into the nation and the ongoing tension between the universal and the particular (Pasquier 2012). These currents evolved

in complex ways, often interacting with decentralization efforts rather than merely following them. While challenging aspects of the centralized state, they did not represent a complete rejection of it, but instead contributed to the ongoing negotiation of France's political and cultural organization.

As decentralization gained momentum in 19th-century France, it paved the way for broader discussions about governance and national identity, ultimately leading to the exploration of federalism. Federalism experienced varying degrees of success throughout the century. In a context marked by significant political instability, the concept of federalism remained a prominent topic in revolutionary discourse, serving as a counterbalance to the highly centralized state. A variety of ideological currents nourished the federalist idea. Notably, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon articulated a socialist vision of federalism in *Du principe fédératif* (1863), envisioning a society composed of autonomous communities voluntarily federated. His federalism was both a political and economic alternative to centralized state power and laissez-faire capitalism. Ferretti and Castleton (2016) highlight that Proudhon opposed the idea of national unity as natural or inevitable. Writing on Italy, he argued that geography made the peninsula more suited to federalism than to unification under a centralized nation-state. Legitimate borders, in his view, were those that allowed for maximum freedom and self-governance. Proudhon's model thus accepted internal diversity – including linguistic and cultural differences – and promoted a “United States of Europe” as a network of federations. Drawing from examples like Switzerland and Belgium, he theorized that federated structures could reduce war, ensure cooperation, and foster both stability and liberty (Prichard 2007).

Though not a direct implementation of Proudhonian thought, the 1871 Paris Commune embodied several federalist principles. It proposed decentralized governance and aspired to a broader federation of communes. Carrier and Barillé (2021) argue that federalism here was not employed for efficiency or local identity but as a means to realize the ideals of the Republic (336). Outside Paris, federalist themes also featured prominently in the Occitan revival, especially through the *Félibrige*, a literary movement led by Frédéric Mistral that aimed to preserve and promote the Provençal language and culture. For Mistral, federalism was central to political and cultural regeneration. By 1870, he lamented the French public's limited understanding of federalism and attributed France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War to excessive centralization (Charles-Brun 1930). He proposed a Latin Confederation – an alliance between France, Italy, and Spain – as a counterweight to German and Russian power. The “Latin idea” adopted by the *Félibrige* linked federalism to anti-centralism and national revival. Decentralization, in this view, was not merely administrative but vital to restoring France's moral and political strength.

Federalism and identity pluralism were also central to Louis-Xavier de Ricard's political vision. A key figure of the *Félibrige* and a strong republican, liberal, and anticlerical, Ricard promoted a multi-level model of federalism. He believed people could simultaneously identify as “Montpelliérains, Languedociens, Français, and Latins” (Ricard 1879), seeing these identities as complementary ways of expressing political and cultural life. Drawing on the ideas of Francisco Pi y Margall, whom he translated, Ricard embraced a form of federalism based on mutual respect rather than assimilation. In his view, federalism reflected the historical resistance of Latin peoples to centralization and provided a framework for unity in diversity. His vision extended from local and regional levels to the broader Latin scale, advocating for a Latin Confederation as a step toward a peaceful and cooperative Europe (Zantedeschi 2015, 2025)¹.

Such visions culminated in moments of strong political expression. One notable example is the “Déclaration des félibres fédéralistes” of February 22, 1892, drafted by Frédéric Amouretti and Charles Maurras. Presented at Café Voltaire in Paris, the declaration marked a political shift in the *Félibrige*, asserting that cultural rights alone could not guarantee autonomy – political reform through federalism was necessary (Abrate 2001, 84). This event caused a split among the *félibres* and sparked a debate that connected language, regional identity, and national governance. Later, Maurras reflected on this period and explained that “federalism” had been chosen over vaguer terms like “decentralization” or less radical ones like “regionalism,” mainly because of its clarity and

historical significance. He argued that France's ancien régime was itself a kind of federal system, with autonomous provincial bodies and a decentralized judiciary (Charles-Brun 1911, 226–227). For many southern intellectuals and activists, federalism thus provided a historically based model for modern reform.

Despite this momentum, federalism faced growing resistance from mainstream Republicans and secularists, who began to associate it with monarchist or reactionary ideologies. As a result, “regionalism” emerged as a more politically acceptable alternative, avoiding the contentiousness of the federalist label while maintaining its core goal of resisting over-centralization.

By the end of the 19th century, regionalism became closely linked with France's debates over decentralization. Under the Third Republic, formed in 1870, decentralization progressed slowly but steadily. Major legislative milestones included the 1871 law establishing the direct election of departmental councils and the 1884 municipal reform, both of which expanded local administrative powers. In this evolving context, regionalists advocated for a political and cultural reassessment of the provinces. They viewed Parisian centralism as harmful to the richness of local life and identity, and they aimed for a more balanced national structure.

The Cultural Politics of Regionalism During the Belle Époque

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, France experienced a significant regionalist movement, part of a broader transnational phenomenon observed across Europe and beyond (Storm 2012b). This movement emerged in response to major socio-economic changes that were disrupting rural life and challenging long-established customs. Regionalism called for the cultural, social, economic, and political development of regions,² seeking to address the perceived imbalances created by centralization and to promote local identities and traditions. As Anne-Marie Thiesse (1991) notes, rapid modernization and industrialization prompted efforts to protect and promote traditional cultural values. By the 1890s, a fresh wave of intellectuals aimed to reconnect with regional traditions and challenge the Paris-dominated intellectual scene. Confronted with the expectation to move to Paris and the societal bias against provincial authors, many began to embrace their rural origins as a mark of authenticity. The widespread impact of this regionalist movement was shown by the proliferation of regional journals and cross-regional collaborations. However, as emphasized by Julian Wright (2003), this broader movement embracing “sentimental literary regionalism” encompassed the “core of the movement,” whose regionalism “offered new political insights on the nature of the state” (31)³.

Regionalists advocated for a redistribution of power from the central state to local communities, often proposing projects for regional re-division to create more cohesive and autonomous regional units. Like decentralization, regionalism displayed ambiguity about its preferred political regime (Bouchard 2012), reflecting the diverse ideological backgrounds of its proponents and the complex political landscape of the Third Republic. Some regionalists aligned with conservative or monarchist traditions, while others drew inspiration from republican or even socialist ideas.

The popularization of regionalism as a concept was largely due to the efforts of Jean Charles-Brun, a professor of literature, *félibre*, Catholic republican, and advocate of federalism inspired by Proudhon and Mistral⁴. In March 1900, he founded the *Fédération régionaliste française* (French Regionalist Federation, FRF), which aimed to unite various decentralizers, regionalists, and federalists, regardless of their political or religious affiliations. This organization played a crucial role in solidifying regionalism as a significant movement in French political and cultural discourse at the turn of the century. In response to a centralist regime that, in their opinion, stifled local initiative and prioritized the center, the FRF sought to coordinate efforts to address the centralist “ill.” It aimed to support, rather than replace, local or regional associations, fostering a collaborative approach without imposing a specific direction or discipline. Charles-Brun (1937) justified the use of the term “regionalism” by highlighting its openness and neutrality. Unlike “decentralization,” which he found dull and uninspiring, or “federalism” and “provincialism,” both tied to potentially

divisive political connotations, “regionalism” provided a newer, more adaptable option. Its inherent vagueness allowed it to unify different perspectives and goals, acting as a form of “common ground” (6). Building on this conceptual openness, Charles-Brun (1911) argued that regionalism was not a rigid system but a “method” grounded in respect for regional diversity. It aimed to tailor political solutions to local conditions, reconciling tradition with progress and unity with variety. Rather than outlining a fixed framework, regionalists emphasized adaptability and knowledge of provincial differences. This approach sought to reduce state overreach, enabling organic growth and national prosperity through balanced economic forces and decentralized governance focused on essential state functions.

Another prominent figure in early 20th-century French regionalism was Jean Hennessy (1874–1944). Influenced by both liberalism and Catholic social thought, Hennessy developed ideas on the political, economic, and administrative organization of the state (Dubasque 2008, 79 ff.). In 1911, he publicly proposed the modernization of the democratic state, advocating for reforms based on professional and regional representation. To address the evolving industrial society, he argued for a reform that would ensure the Parliament was composed of competent regional representatives from key professional categories rather than being dominated by politicians with limited local knowledge (79). Hennessy also proposed creating larger electoral districts, extending beyond the traditional departmental boundaries, to better reflect the growing economic and social concentration. His reform campaign gained media attention and became a key moment in the regionalist cause (83). As a member of the FRF from 1912, Hennessy collaborated with Charles-Brun, which broadened his political perspectives. In 1913, he founded the *Ligue de représentation professionnelle et d’action régionaliste* within the FRF also known as the *Ligue d’action régionaliste* – to continue promoting regionalist actions on a national scale. The league published its official bulletin, *La Région*, beginning in June 1914. Between 1913 and 1916, Hennessy presented several reform projects before the National Assembly, advocating for a restructuring of France’s administrative divisions and greater regional autonomy.

Julian Wright (2003) identifies several key weaknesses in the regionalist movement between 1900 and World War I that limited its effectiveness. A primary issue was its failure to present a clear, unified agenda, leaving its goals ambiguous and difficult for the public to grasp. Charles-Brun’s focus on “sentimental regionalism,” emphasizing cultural and emotional ties, further compounded this problem. Critics like Jean Hennessy noted the inaction of the FRF, which prioritized congresses and journals over concrete initiatives, even as regionalist ideas gained traction in republican politics after 1910. Wright also highlights the FRF’s reliance on “spontaneous regionalism,” which favored unstructured development and led to growing divisions after World War I among economic, administrative, and artistic regionalists, the latter emphasizing cultural expressions – such as literature and painting – as a means to assert regional identity. Additionally, the movement’s inherent eclecticism diluted its message, preventing it from uniting its supporters or driving meaningful reforms (167–172).

Nonetheless, during World War I, regionalists worked tirelessly to disseminate their ideas, arguing that federalism could guarantee world peace. Hennessy’s vision, for example, extended beyond national borders. In the context of the Great War and its aftermath, he became involved in promoting the idea of a federal League of Nations. In 1917, he founded the *Société Proudhon* – later renamed the *Ligue pour l’organisation de la Société des Nations* –, which sought to unite wartime allies into a federation of democracies to counter imperialist conspiracies (Bouchard 2006), reflecting his belief in the potential of federalism on an international scale.

Regionalism, Federalism, and the Path to Peace in Wartime Europe

During World War I, French war aims were shaped by a complex interplay of military, economic, and political objectives. Initially, France prioritized reclaiming Alsace-Lorraine – territories lost to Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 – both for national pride and strategic necessity.

As the war progressed, French aims expanded to include weakening Germany's military and economic power to prevent future aggression (Heffernan 2001). These goals encompassed plans for the economic integration of Western Europe under French influence through a customs union with Belgium and Italy, and control over key industrial regions like the Saarland. French leaders, particularly President Raymond Poincaré, sought to secure France's safety through alliances and territorial adjustments. By 1917, the French government also considered the possibility of occupying or even separating the Rhineland from Germany to serve as a buffer zone. However, outright annexation was eventually set aside due to changing international dynamics, including the entry of the United States into the war and the Russian Revolution. French war aims extended beyond territorial ambitions, envisioning a new European balance of power that would secure peace and solidify French influence. This broader vision was reflected in their participation in discussions leading to the Treaty of Versailles and their support for the League of Nations as a mechanism for maintaining international order.

At first, France was slower than countries like Great Britain to embrace the League of Nations. The idea only began to gain traction in France towards the end of 1916 and especially in 1917. Early support came primarily from a few civic associations and political groups, with government censorship stifling any material resembling peace propaganda (Guieu 2006). Nevertheless, the *Ligue des droits de l'homme* played a critical role in advocating for the League's ideals, particularly during its 1916 Congress, which addressed the conditions for a lasting peace. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's 1916 endorsement of the League of Nations further galvanized French supporters, spurring the formation of new organizations dedicated to the cause (92), such as the *Ligue du droit des peuples pour la constituante mondiale* (December 1916) and other committees that emerged in 1917.

Among these initiatives, Hennessy, influenced by Proudhonian federalism and Jean Charles-Brun's ideas, proposed the establishment of a League of Nations as a "federation of democratic peoples" (Dubasque 2008, 111). As Dubasque (2008) outlines, he envisioned federalism as a process in which states voluntarily cede portions of their sovereignty to a federal organization through a contract-based system. This model aimed to ensure international peace by replacing traditional alliances with a pact of mutual guarantees. Hennessy's federalist framework addressed four critical issues: limiting national sovereignty, granting representation to emerging national groups, resolving disputes through international law, and establishing a strong authority to enforce laws (114). Drawing inspiration from the American and Swiss federal systems, he proposed a League of Nations constitution with legislative, executive, and judicial powers.

In collaboration with the League for a League of Nations, Hennessy worked to unite federalist and pacifist movements, culminating in a 1917 congress that advocated for a global constitution. His ideas resonated within the broader regionalist debate, which, as Carl Bouchard (2012) emphasizes, persisted throughout the war despite challenges posed by the focus on military victory. Proponents of regionalism, inspired by the hope for lasting peace, turned their attention to international issues, advocating federalism as both a national "principle of social organization" and an international "system for transcending sovereignties" (202). Their efforts, which included speeches, conferences, and publications, gained momentum from 1917 onward. Notable milestones included a July 1917 conference on the League of Nations, Charles-Brun's December 1917 address on the "Principles of Federalism," and – as already mentioned – the establishment of the *Société Proudhon*.

The *Société Proudhon*, in particular, embodied the tight linkage between regionalism and internationalism (Bouchard 2006, 2012). Its members argued that the principles applicable to France's internal organization could also serve as a framework for global solutions. At its landmark meeting in July 1917, discussions centered on creating an international organization after the war, explicitly tying regionalist efforts within France to broader global challenges. While there was general agreement on the need for a League of Nations, disagreements over its timing revealed internal divisions, with Hennessy advocating immediate action and others urging caution.

This hesitation was echoed more broadly within the Regionalist movement. As the writer and journalist François Jean-Desthieux noted in his book, *L'évolution régionaliste* (1918), the Comité de la Ligue d'Action Régionaliste's call in July 1917 to debate the formation of a "League of Nations" prompted the Regionalist movement to take a stance on the issue. Its creation faced significant skepticism, as illustrated by a report from Victor Cambon, a French engineer and journalist, who criticized the vagueness of its name: "An excellent denomination because, being vague enough to mean nothing specific, it provokes no principled opposition; within this group, I say, an infinity of questions were raised, whose solutions, whatever they may be, are entirely beyond the reach of these deliberators: notably those of free trade and protection" (222–223).

Jean-Desthieux also referenced the observations of Charles-Brun, who highlighted the ambiguity and complexity in defining the term "nation" in the context of the League of Nations and its implications for political organization. For Charles-Brun, clarifying this concept was crucial, since "nation" could denote political states, ethnic groups, or cultural communities, many of which – such as the Catalans – , were divided by existing borders. This, in turn, raised intricate issues about unification, secession, and the viability of multi-national states, like the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Jean-Desthieux 1918, 223–224).

Dubasque (2017) notes that wartime conditions disrupted the activities of the FRF: membership dues ceased, annual congresses and its monthly journal were suspended, and its media networks became disorganized (20). The movement shifted from public outreach to functioning as a parliamentary pressure group, with figures like Jean Hennessy and the Marquis Régis de L'Estourbeillon – a Breton publicist, historian, and politician, founding member of the Union régionaliste bretonne, and member of Parliament for Morbihan – advocating legislative proposals for administrative decentralization (21).

In 1918, two examples among others reflected ongoing debates about the economic and administrative reorganization of France and redefining the balance between central and regional powers: *Les régions économiques* by the French historian, geographer, and economist, Henri Hauser, and *Le régionalisme et la France de demain* by Régis de L'Estourbeillon. In *Les régions économiques*, Hauser examines how France's economic development could benefit from grouping territories into "economic regions" defined by functional economic linkages rather than purely administrative boundaries. He highlights the importance of regional networks of commerce, transport infrastructure, banking, and intellectual centers, arguing that post-war modernization and national renewal depended on empowering such regions and coordinating local institutions to create a more balanced and integrated economic order. In his preface to the book, Étienne Clémentel, Minister of Commerce and Industry, endorsed Hauser's vision, framing it as essential to France's post-war reconstruction and as a means of aligning economic organization with the realities of production and exchange. He explained that the *région économique*, which he had conceived under the law of 9 April 1898 on Chambers of Commerce, was "the voluntary government, sanctioned by the State, of companies whose interests are interdependent and convergent." He further described these groupings as both "organs of information" – tasked with submitting to the ministry opinions already studied and "freed from purely local contingencies" – and "organs of action," with the regional office charged with devising ways to increase the productivity of the region (1918, 7–8).

This economic and institutional approach to regionalism found a cultural and political counterpart in *Le régionalisme et la France de demain*, where Régis de L'Estourbeillon argued for greater autonomy and recognition of historic regions – especially Brittany – as essential to France's political and social revitalization after the war. He called for administrative, cultural, and economic decentralization, defending the value of regional languages, traditions, and identities against excessive centralization, and maintained that national strength rests on respecting and empowering local diversity, which he saw as the necessary foundation for building "tomorrow's France." This vision aimed not only to preserve regional uniqueness but also to integrate it into a renewed national framework where local identities contribute to the country's unity and future vitality.⁵

According to Dubasque, wartime regionalist activity demonstrates both the ambitions and limitations of French regionalism during this period: while parliamentary debate was lively and the FRF gained new members – including groups from Corsica (Action Corse), Alsace-Lorraine (Renaissance française de l'Alsace-Lorraine), and southern France (Groupement d'action régionaliste from Marseille, L'oeuvre méridionale from Toulouse) – post-war political realities and fears of separatism hindered structural reform (2017, 23–24). Therefore, despite its cultural vitality and economic vision, the movement remained restricted by the centralized framework of the Third Republic, embodying the ongoing tension between regional aspirations and the unitary state.

Navigating National Self-Determination and Federalism in the Post-War Years

The Double-Edged Sword: Wilson's National Self-Determination Principle

The Great War and its aftermath were crucial for the development of self-determination and federalism, as the collapse of empires and the redrawing of borders reshaped Europe and beyond. Woodrow Wilson clearly expressed this idea in his 1918 Fourteen Points and his 1916 support for the League of Nations, affirming that every people had the right “to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live” while emphasizing the importance of small states and the need for a world free from aggression and violations of national rights (Ambrosius 2002, 21).

Historians like Eric Weitz (2015) have highlighted the confusing and paradoxical shift of self-determination from an Enlightenment ideal of individual autonomy to a nationalist doctrine focused on collective liberation and the political sovereignty of peoples. He points out how the rise of the nation-state model, linking territory with ethnic or national political membership, both allowed for minority rights and limited them, creating conflicting legacies such as forced deportations and ethnic cleansing within the discourse on minorities after the war. Woodrow Wilson's postwar program invoked self-determination rooted in liberal and religious beliefs in the “consent of the governed,”⁶ but, as Núñez Seixas (2021) explains, Wilson himself was neither fully committed to the nationality principle nor thoroughly familiar with Europe's ethnographic complexities. His Fourteen Points focused more on pragmatic territorial adjustments than on broad national self-determination. Importantly, however, the European acceptance of Wilsonian self-determination included a crucial new element: the nationality principle.⁷ This was largely shaped by the German notion of *Selbstbestimmung*, which “contributed to transform individual self-determination into collective self-determination: this entitled a territorial community, a nationality, to become its subject” (Núñez Seixas 2021, 50). European Wilsonianism developed through a liberal and leftist reinterpretation that included this collective dimension (49–50). Although German nationalists had used *Selbstbestimmungsrecht* since the 19th century, James Summers (2007) notes that its post-war adaptation expanded “to encompass both the nationality principle and the existing theories of liberal government” (125).⁸

The principle of self-determination, therefore, faced considerable challenges in its implementation due to its intrinsic ambiguity, as illustrated by the Austro-Hungarian Empire's situation. While self-determination resulted in the establishment of new nation-states, it simultaneously created new minorities and territorial disputes. This tension is closely tied to the emergence of “minority” as an international legal concept around 1918, particularly in the Habsburg context (Adorjáni and Bari 2019). The term, shaped by European peace treaties and the “nationality question” in multinational empires, reflected not only numerical but also qualitative inferiority, aligning with the rise of nation-states.⁹ However, the unique pluralistic structure of the Habsburg Monarchy further complicated this legal framing. According to Pieter Judson (2023), the empire's multinational character did not conform to modern nation-state categories: instead of clearly delineated minorities, the Habsburg political system recognized collective “nationalities” connected to territorial communities, where ethnic identities were often fluid and overlapping, and “national indifference” (a lack of fixed national allegiance) was widespread. Consequently, the minority

treaties crafted in the postwar settlement struggled to adequately address these complexities. Moreover, these treaties were imperfect instruments – largely excluded from main peace accords, weakly enforced, and limited in scope – underscoring the fragility and contested nature of minority protections in the interwar period.

To address ethnic tensions in Central and Eastern European states and prevent the spread of national disputes into Western Europe, a minority protection system was established under the League of Nations. It had the task of “watching over the integrity of the frontiers and the egalitarian treatment of minorities within the new States” (Núñez Seixas 1993, 6). The Covenant of the League of Nations, its founding document, was incorporated into the Treaty of Versailles, as well as into all other peace agreements signed in Paris following World War I. Comprising a preamble and 26 articles, the Covenant outlined the League’s primary purpose: to foster international cooperation and ensure global peace and security. It also outlined various aspects of the organization, including membership requirements, the functions of its principal organs, the procedures for peacefully resolving international disputes, and the responsibilities of Member States. The Covenant also established the core principles that underpinned the League’s structure and operations.

As Bartsch (1993) notes, the rights granted to minorities under the League of Nations system were a mix of “negative rights,” aimed at preventing discrimination, and more expansive “positive rights.” Negative rights included legal and civil equality, equal access to public positions and professions regardless of religion or belief, and the freedom to establish and manage institutions or use minority languages in private, public, and cultural domains. Positive rights required states to allow the use of minority languages in courts, provide education in minority languages at the primary level, and ensure minorities received a fair share of public funds for education, religion, and charity. Additionally, minority treatment was deemed an international concern, limiting state sovereignty while paradoxically upholding it as a fundamental principle, a contradiction that undermined the effectiveness of the League’s minority protection system from the outset.

The League’s minorities system, Fink (1995) explains, was fundamentally conciliatory and aimed “to provide minimal enforcement of treaties” without provoking tensions with the states involved (200). This approach sought to avoid alienating governments while ensuring cooperation; however, it did not succeed in establishing a consistent and effective system for protecting minorities. Although the minority treaties represented a “path-breaking attempt to internationalize the minorities problem,” the 1919 Wilsonian peace failed to provide a clear framework for balancing self-determination with minority claims. Furthermore, the League’s inability to create an effective system reflected wider interwar challenges, including the decline of democracy and the rule of law in new states, the Great Powers’ failure to maintain peace, and the ideological and human divisions that reemerged after 1933. These factors made it challenging to realize the ambitious vision of peace and security outlined in 1919 (203–204).

Wilson’s advocacy for national self-determination and collective security fueled the growth of nationalist and regionalist movements not only in Central and Eastern Europe but also in Western Europe (Dalle Mulle, Prott and Ambrosino 2024; Zantedeschi 2021). Dalle Mulle, Prott, and Ambrosino (2024) argue that in Western European borderlands such as Alsace-Lorraine, South Tyrol, and Eupen-Malmedy, nationalist and regionalist mobilizations were heavily influenced by the Paris Peace Conference’s redefinition of borders and minority protections. These movements often aimed for internal self-determination, seeking regional autonomy within existing states rather than full independence. The authors demonstrate how local political contexts, the strength of state institutions, and the commitment to liberal principles influence whether minority groups experience repression or moderate accommodation, challenging simplified East-West frameworks in minority studies. Núñez Seixas (1998) points out the propagandistic use of self-determination, its legitimization, and the spreading of the Wilsonian myth significantly influenced groups that had previously focused on cultural or regionalist activities to shift toward nationalism. This shift prompted nationalist movements to engage in political and propagandist efforts to influence peace negotiations (154). Moreover, while pre-war discussions often centered on the nationality principle,

the post-war era saw the rise of “minority rights” as a key concept in international relations. This turn had profound implications for how Western European ethnonationalist movements framed their claims and positioned themselves within the broader European context (Núñez Seixas 2022).¹⁰

In this context, federalism started being increasingly viewed as a potential solution to reconcile the demands for self-determination with the need for larger, viable political entities. It offered a framework for diverse groups to maintain some autonomy while remaining part of a larger state structure, addressing both national and international challenges. As Daniela Preda (2012) notes, a significant contribution to redefining approaches to peace and conflict, rethinking international relations, and reconsidering the fundamental notions of the state and nation in the context of Europe’s disrupted equilibrium was made by “interwar pacifist federalists” (32). Thinkers like the Italian economist Luigi Einaudi and British intellectuals such as Lionel Curtis argued that true peace could only be achieved through a system that limited the sovereignty of individual states and promoted a federal structure. This “pacifist federalism” aimed to replace the anarchy of sovereign states with a higher political order, where power was shared across a federal system. By reducing the absolute authority of nation-states, it was believed that such a structure could prevent conflicts, encourage cooperation, and stabilize international relations, all while still preserving local autonomy within the broader federal framework.

In France, the concepts of self-determination and federalism intersected with longstanding debates about centralization and regional autonomy. The war experience intensified discussions about the relationship between Paris and the provinces. While the shared sacrifices of the war years reinforced national unity to some extent, they also highlighted regional disparities and reignited debates about decentralization that had been ongoing since the 19th century. The principle of self-determination influenced discussions surrounding France’s state reorganization on a federal basis, particularly in areas like Brittany, Corsica, and the Basque region.

Federalism and the Struggle for Autonomy: the Challenge of Self-Determination in France’s Regionalist Movements

After the war, the broader debate on regionalism persisted (Guiomar 1970). Between November 1918 and September 1920, provisional regional governments were set up in the recently regained territories of Alsace and parts of Lorraine. Many parliamentarians pushed for a governance model that recognized local differences and their historical experiences under German control from 1871 to 1918 (Guiomar 1970, 90). However, as Guiomar explains, international tensions, strained Franco-German relations until 1924, and strong opposition from most parliamentarians (particularly on the left) to regionalism – especially in areas with linguistic issues – led to the abandonment of these initiatives. In 1924, Édouard Herriot’s government abolished the nascent regional representation in Alsace-Lorraine, effectively ending broader regionalist ambitions in France. The modest administrative reforms introduced by the Poincaré government in 1926, focused on economic coordination through measures like interdepartmental unions, reflected a centralized approach to regional management. Ultimately, these efforts were curtailed due to political opposition, driven by concerns about the erosion of the centralized legacy of the French Revolution and fears of foreign influence (90–91).

Despite resistance to regionalization due to fears of undermining national unity and associations with reactionary politics, the interwar period saw regionalism in France undergo significant transformation, evolving into a more nationalistic form (Pasquier 2014). This shift was particularly evident in regions such as Alsace, Brittany, and Corsica, where movements emerged seeking recognition of cultural, linguistic, and political rights, either within or outside the French state. This new iteration of regionalism, influenced by the Wilsonian principle of self-determination, departed from traditional conservative regionalism and embraced autonomism and nationalism, drawing inspiration from examples like Irish independence (26). The focus shifted from regional uniformity to national identity and the right to self-determination.

The impact of the principle of self-determination, however, varied among French regionalist movements, highlighting not only the tension between regional aspirations and French patriotism but also differing degrees of politicization. While some regionalist movements, such as the Occitan and Flemish movements, remained primarily focused on cultural demands, others, like the Alsatian and Breton movements, experienced a more politicized momentum. The development of autonomist and federalist ideas was sometimes influenced by transnational or pan-national factors, as exemplified by the Breton movement, highlighting how regionalist movements in France were shaped by both local dynamics and wider European context trends (Zantedeschi 2021; Núñez Seixas 2022).

The principle of self-determination, for example, had limited influence on the Occitan movement, which remained focused on cultural preservation rather than political activism. Rooted in the late 19th-century efforts of organizations like the Felibrige, the movement in the 1920s sought to promote the Occitan language through initiatives such as the Comité d'Action des Revendications Nationales du Midi (1922) and the Ligue de la Patrie Méridionale (1923). These efforts, influenced by Catalanism and culminating in the creation of the Societat d'Estudis Occitans (SEO) in 1930, aimed to modernize the movement. However, the lack of political ambition, weak organization, and an unsupportive national environment hindered its ability to align with the self-determination ideals gaining momentum across Europe.

At the same time, the postwar reorganization of Europe and the re-annexation of Alsace-Lorraine raised broader concerns about France's centralized governance and the treatment of minorities. While the restoration of peace reignited discussions among young regionalists about restructuring France into a federal system, the Alsace-Lorraine case underscored the challenges of such aspirations. As Volker Prott (2016) observes, French authorities celebrated the region's return as a national triumph, prioritizing rapid integration through administrative measures that relied heavily on the resources and personnel of the former German regime, often without adherence to national laws or international oversight. Despite recommendations from the Conférence d'Alsace-Lorraine for a gradual transition, Jules Jeanneney – who was appointed by PM Georges Clemenceau to address the problems posed by the return of the region to France – led swift efforts to introduce French legal, linguistic, and administrative systems, reflecting the government's urgency in consolidating control over the region (151). Alison Carrol (2021, 2023) highlights that these measures were part of a broader strategy to reinforce French identity and eliminate German influence in the reclaimed *départements*. Policies included replacing the German mark with the French franc, enforcing the use of the French language, seizing German businesses, and expelling German citizens. The government also implemented citizenship policies based on classification, loyalty assessments, and targeted expulsions, aiming to reinforce distinctions between Germans and the indigenous Alsace-Lorraine population (2021, 76; Prott 2016, 151 ff.; Boswell 2000). This approach involved expelling undesirable Germans while imposing alternative punitive measures on disloyal locals, deepening ethnic divisions in the region (Prott 2016, 160).

Meanwhile, discussions on national self-determination and a plebiscite for Alsace-Lorraine faded after the 1918 victory (Prott 2016, Carrol 2023). Wilsonian ideals were exploited by local extremists, some covertly supported by the German government (Prott 2016, 170). Efforts by German groups and local advocates for a plebiscite – including petitions to President Wilson and the League of Nations – were discredited due to suspicions of Berlin's involvement and failed to gain meaningful support. The *Mitteilungen des Ausschusses vertriebener Elsaß-Lothringer* journal critiqued French policies and advocated for a plebiscite, but its limited circulation and lack of international support diminished its influence (Prott 2016, 171–172).

In 1926, the autonomist movement in Alsace-Lorraine gained significant momentum with the formation of the Heimatbund (Homeland Union), led by Eugen Ricklin. The Heimatbund issued a manifesto denouncing French cultural assimilation policies and advocating for autonomy within France, which would later serve as a precursor to broader European federation ideals. The following year, in 1927, the Unabhängige Landespartei für Elsaß-Lothringen (Independent Party for Alsace-

Lorraine) – known as the *Landespartei* – was established, furthering calls for autonomy. Around 300 people attended the founding meeting, which was chaired by Paul Schall, René Hauss and Karl Roos, and a program of German language requirements was formulated largely along the lines of the *Heimatbund*. Alongside this, autonomist newspapers such as *Wahrheit*, *Zukunft*, and *Volksstimme* emerged, promoting these goals. The *Wahrheit* even supported independence for Alsace and Lorraine. Political parties like the *Elsässische Fortschrittspartei* (Alsatian Progressive Party) and the *Elsass-Lothringischer Heimatbund* (Alsace-Lorraine Autonomist Party) were also established in the same period. In the April 1928 parliamentary elections, three Autonomist candidates were named to sit in the Chamber of Deputies, including Eugen Ricklin, former President of the Alsatian Parliament established in 1911 under German dominion and later a member of the German Reichstag, and Joseph Victor Rossé.

However, by November 1927, the French government began cracking down on these autonomist movements. The government banned newspapers it deemed a threat to the “integrity of the Republic,” such as *Wahrheit*, *Zukunft*, and *Volksstimme*, accusing them of foreign funding, particularly from Germany. The repression against Alsatian autonomists culminated in the Colmar Trial of 1928, which lasted from 1 to 24 May 1928.¹¹ In late 1927, fifteen prominent autonomists were arrested on charges of espionage and conspiracy, including Dr. Eugène Ricklin. During the trial against these alleged co-conspirators to establish an independent Alsace, Ricklin denied the charges of Germanophilism, stating that he had always been an “autonomist pure and simple” (quoted in *The New York Times*, May 2, 1928, 4). On the second day of the trial, he also stated that “We had no wish in any way to sacrifice our regional personality. We preferred France; but on the other hand, we had no hatred for Germany, to which we were united by ties of blood and customs. We furthermore were pacifists and desired conciliation between the two countries, which, if they would work together, would march at the head of the civilized world. But after our return to France we suffered interference in customs and education and misunderstanding in administration. You cannot expect us to become French again within a few years. It is only after generations have passed that we can hope to be thoroughly attached to France” (quoted in *The New York Times*, May 3, 1928, 4).

Despite insufficient evidence, four out of fifteen were found guilty of conspiracy against the French government and sentenced to one year each in prison, to be followed by five years’ exile. These were: Georges Eugene Ricklin, the director of the autonomist movement since the annexation of Alsace to France; Paul Joseph Schall, former editor of the autonomist newspaper *Zukunft*; Joseph Victor Rossé, a former professor and pamphleteer; and Joseph Fashauer, a journalist and proprietor of an Alsatian publishing concern (*The New York Times*, May 25, 1928, 7). The remaining defendants were acquitted. This trial underscored the tense political climate and the French government’s firm opposition to regional autonomy, highlighting the extent to which the movement for Alsatian self-determination was perceived as a threat to national unity.

The Alsatian autonomist movement had found a passionate ally in *Breiz Atao*, a bilingual French-Breton periodical launched in 1919 by the Groupe Régionaliste Breton (GRB), a political organization founded in 1918 by Joseph de Roince, Henri Prado, and Morvan Marchal.¹² In June 1926, *Breiz Atao* published the manifesto of the *Heimatbund*, amplifying its critique of French centralism and its call for regional autonomy.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Breton nationalism was still in what Kernalegenn and Fournis (2013) define as its “first phase” (1830–1918), which was primarily marked by cultural revival, historiographical debates, and the gradual formation of a distinct Breton identity, with limited explicit political claims for autonomy. This initial phase gradually gave way at the turn of the century with the founding of the first Breton regionalist and nationalist political organizations. The creation of groups such as the Union Régionaliste Bretonne (1898), the Fédération Régionaliste Bretonne (1911), and the nationalist Parti National Breton (1911) marked an important shift toward more organized political activism. While their demands for Breton self-government remained largely conservative and moderate, these groups laid the foundation for a more politically

assertive and ideologically diverse nationalist movement that would characterize the subsequent phase (Kernalegenn and Fournis 2013, 83). The “second phase” of Breton nationalism, roughly spanning from 1918 to 1964, was marked by increased political activism and a broadening of ideological diversity. During this period, the movement experienced intense internal debates concerning its identity, objectives, and strategies, with different currents – federalist, separatist, conservative, and left-wing – contesting the direction and meaning of Breton nationalism. This phase also saw Breton nationalists engage more actively with broader European political frameworks, including Pan-Celticism and federalist ideas, while navigating the challenges posed by the centralized French state (Kernalegenn and Fournis 2013, 83–84)¹³. In particular, the pan-national rhetoric of Celticism gained momentum after the Easter Rising (1916) and the Irish War of Independence, invigorating nationalist activity in Brittany, Wales, and Scotland, and inspiring *Breiz Atao* members to seek solidarity with other Celtic nations to revive Breton identity and pride (Carney 2015, 70 ff.; Berresford Ellis 2002).

The GRB became the first political group to officially embrace Pan-Celticism. In 1923, it sent a delegation to Wales to strengthen ties with other Celtic movements. That same year, Olier Mordrel published an article in *Breiz Atao* – now subtitled “Monthly Magazine of Breton Nationalism and Inter-Celtic Relations” – declaring that Pan-Celticism could renew Brittany’s cultural and political aspirations. Mordrel envisioned Pan-Celticism as a force to “awaken a sleeping genius” in Brittany, reinvigorating its spirit and breaking free from centuries of oppression. Between 1923 and 1925, *Breiz Atao* even published a supplement, *Panceltia*, featuring articles in Welsh and English. However, due to limited interest from other Celtic movements, Breton Pan-Celticism quickly gave way to a focus on European federalism, as Breton activists sought new alliances with “small, oppressed nationalities” beyond the Celtic world, notably engaging with Flemish nationalists and criticizing the postwar Treaty order (Carney 2021b, 2). Federalism, driven by the broader international context, became the cornerstone of Morvan Marchal’s vision for the Breton nationalist movement (Guiomar 1970, 95). A committed federalist, Marchal articulated his ideas in *Breiz Atao*, declaring in 1925 that “Breton nationalism is federalist.” The periodical’s subtitle evolved in 1926 to reflect this shift, changing to “Monthly Magazine of Breton Nationalism and International Federalism.”

Inspired by the political and electoral success of autonomist Alsatians from 1925 onward, the Breton nationalist movement gained momentum in the late 1920s. In September 1927, the Strollad Emrenerien Vreiz (Parti Autonomiste Breton, PAB) was founded in Rosporden. It was through its initiative that the Comité Central des Minorités Nationales de France (CCMNF) would be founded. The PAB sought a Breton parliament to manage education, justice, taxation, and other regional matters. While rejecting separatism, the party embraced a federalist vision, emphasizing a world order based on collaboration among distinct nationalities rather than centralized states: “the reorganization of the world will be accompanied by secessions and regroupings, and [...] will take place, not between large States, whose historic role will be finished, but between the nationalities they are made up of, which will come together according to their ethnic, linguistic and cultural affinities” (*Déclaration et statuts du Parti Autonomiste Breton* 1929, 17). By 1928, this federalist ethos was enshrined in the party’s statutes, marking a clear ideological departure from traditional French republicanism.

In 1929, the PAB brought together what Maurice Duhamel (real name Maurice Bourgeaux, 1884–1940), a musician and Breton activist, described as “the elite of Breton intellectuals.”¹⁴ This group was guided by a coherent doctrine based on federalist principles, deliberately distancing itself from both simplistic regionalism and a counterproductive, divisive form of separatism (1929, 40). He explained that Breton autonomism, akin to other nationalist movements such as Alsace-Lorraine autonomism, embodied the application of a universal doctrine to a specific region. This doctrine, informed by the experiences of the most advanced and successful states – such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the United States of America, and the Soviet Union – , was grounded in the federalist principles outlined by Proudhon (47, 84). Moreover, he regarded internal

federalism as a first step toward “the international federalism that paves the way for a balanced and peaceful Europe.” (47) He emphasized that the foundation of a federal state lies in the principle of mutual respect for differing viewpoints and the autonomy of each national community to structure its organization according to its own preferences: “It is the practical implementation of the right of peoples to self-determination, a principle that Woodrow Wilson’s proclamations established as the foundation of a new international ethic. However, it is important to remember that this right was first championed by one of Brittany’s most distinguished sons [Ernest Renan]. Nothing is more opposed to the spirit of conquest” (107). Furthermore, Duhamel believed that “combative fervor and war psychosis can only emerge in a people under the influence of intensive propaganda by the established authorities,” characterized by the spread of distorted information, false news, and concealed facts. This is more easily achieved in a state with a centralized government, where the authorities control a centralized press. Contrary to the claims of federalism’s opponents, he argued that it is the suppression of particularisms, the oppression of ethnic minorities, and the excessive extension of the principle of national sovereignty that lead to “catastrophic explosions” (108–109).

Duhamel also explained that Breton autonomists claimed administrative and political autonomy within France. France, after all, was not “a nation, but a state encompassing ethnically distinct nationalities. The French, far from being a single race, are not even a ‘linguistic fact’ like the Germans. [...] French unity is a governmental myth” (1929, 115).

From Advocacy to Betrayal: the League of Nations and the Plight of Minorities in Maurice Duhamel’s Thought

The League of Nations was intended to ensure equality among all peoples, regardless of their numerical size; instead, it has become a vehicle for the dominance of an oligarchy of great powers. It was meant to embody the aspirations of the people, yet it serves the interests of imperialist governments. Rather than acting as a supreme tribunal resolving international disputes in the name of universal ethics, it has become a forum for sordid bargaining, where concessions are traded for self-interest, where significant issues are evaded, and where outcomes are reduced to compromises, half-measures, or outright failures (Duhamel 1929, 193–194).

With these words, Maurice Duhamel summed up ten years of the League of Nations’ existence, capturing the profound disillusionment felt by national “minorities” who had hoped the organization would champion their rights and aspirations but instead witnessed its subordination to the interests of major powers. He argued that the situation in 1929 was likely worse than in 1914 for several reasons. Firstly, the Treaty of Versailles and its supplementary agreements, despite proclaiming the principle of nationality, consistently violated it. As a result, “more than 40 million Europeans out of 240 [...] are deprived of the independence to which they are entitled or arbitrarily separated from their true homeland” (184). Additionally, the intensification of imperialist rivalries on a global scale and the exponential growth of military budgets suggested that governments harbored no real illusions about the permanence of the peace they had signed.

Duhamel attributed the failure of the League of Nations primarily to the refusal of states to relinquish even a minimal portion of their sovereignty and to the inability of major powers to address the aspirations of certain peoples or to unite in establishing the “new international order” that was urgently needed. He described these states as “artificial entities, composed of human groups that share nothing in common except the conflicts they have waged against each other in the past” (200–201).

He recognized that, despite being one of the cornerstone ideals championed by Western powers during the war, it was invoked by the Allies to justify the redrawing of Central Europe’s territorial map along ethnic lines, and they had no intention of applying it to their own territories. As a result,

while Finland, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Czechoslovakia “had achieved or regained” independence through the application of the principle of self-determination, regions such as Alsace-Lorraine, Brittany, Corsica, Flanders, South Tyrol, Egypt, and India faced resistance from states like France, Belgium, Italy, and Great Britain, which, much like Spain with Catalonia, sought to sideline such claims (206). They attempted to sidestep the issue by asserting that such matters were “internal questions” falling exclusively within their “sovereignty.” During the hostilities, they failed to anticipate that this principle could act as a double-edged sword, with one side potentially turning against them (206).

Examining the relationship between two seemingly contradictory ideological trends – on one hand, an “immense desire for international understanding,” and on the other, a “prodigious resurgence of nationalities” – Duhamel argued that the only viable path to reconciliation was an “international federal organization.” He envisioned this as an economic union of politically free nations rather than states: “The European Federation, a precursor to the World Federation, will only be sustainably realized among true nations, many of which are currently torn between different states or absorbed by them” (216–217).

Accordingly, the role of federalists, according to Duhamel, was not to advocate for the “premature separation from large states” but rather to transform their internal structures. This transformation involved securing the political and administrative autonomy of the nationalities encompassed within these states, all within their existing frameworks (218).

On September 12, 1927, representatives from the Alsatian, Corsican, and Breton movements gathered in Quimper to establish the CCMN. One of the main promoters was Olier Mordrel (from the Parti Autonomiste Breton), who convinced Duhamel to join the congress with the intention of presenting him as “a candidate to represent Brittany” (Carney 2015, 137–138). Other founding members were Paul Schall (from the Heimatbund and Elsass-Lothringisch-Autonomistische Partei, ELAP), Morvan Marchal (PAB), and Petru Rocca (from Partitu Corsu Autonomista). The CCMNF aimed to “harmonize the efforts of all member groups” and declared that only those advocating for the rights of national minorities would be eligible for membership (*Breiz Atao*, October 1, 1927, 3), and maintained connections with groups such as the Flemish, Catalans, and Basques. The bye-laws of the CCMNF claim, in Article 2, “the right of people to self-determination and international federalism”:

To modern states, based on force, rendered obsolete by the growing economic interdependence of the world, and whose antagonisms can only lead to increasingly devastating wars, it [the CCMNF] wishes to substitute a Federation of Peoples, where each Nationality can determine its own political status and pursue its cultural development according to its traditions and tendencies. However, the economic unity of this federation would be ensured through the abolition of customs barriers and the practice of free trade, as this conception appears to him to be the only one capable of providing Peoples with the two essential goods: freedom and peace Duhamel (1928, 16).

Article 3 outlines that the founders of the Committee express no hostility toward the French people; instead, they oppose an outdated, oppressive, and peace-threatening state model, a framework that is, moreover, shared by several other states. Article 4 specifies that any organization representing national minorities oppressed by the French state – whether in terms of “language, racial traditions, or interests” – may be admitted to the CCMNF. Such organizations must formally endorse the doctrine articulated in Article 2 and demonstrate, to the Committee’s satisfaction, that their prior activities have been guided by this doctrine (Ibid).

Building on these principles, the member organizations convened to “compare their information and methods, support one another, and, in particular, enhance their influence on public opinion through joint initiatives” such as manifestos, leaflets, and public meetings (Article 8; *ibid.*). This gathering marked the first instance in which various minorities came together to seek a common

solution to their challenges and to begin laying the groundwork for transforming France into a federal state.¹⁵ Yet, as Carney (2021b) has observed, the opportunism of the Bretons – motivated by financial dependence on Alsatian allies – and their racism toward Mediterranean partners, coupled with the promotion of Nordicist ideas, undermined the cohesion of the movement. These internal divisions were worsened by the economic downturn of 1929 and the rise in international political tensions, which greatly slowed the progress of federalist ideas.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how the international debates on minority rights and the principle of self-determination that emerged after World War I significantly influenced the landscape of regionalism and federalism in 1920s France. These movements sought to translate a global discourse into local terms by articulating demands for cultural and political autonomy within a highly centralized state.

The creation of the CCMNF in 1927, albeit short-lived, was a symbolic and concrete expression of these efforts. By bringing together various minorities, including Breton, Alsatian, and Corsican groups, the CCMNF advocated a federal model of coexistence based on the free determination of nationalities, reflecting broader European attempts to forge new forms of international cooperation. It embodied aspirations to transform a perceived oppressive state system into a federation of peoples that balanced regional autonomy with economic unity. However, these aspirations collided with the realities of the postwar period. The League of Nations' failure to effectively guarantee minority rights and the persistence of rigid state sovereignty in Western Europe limited meaningful reforms. The selective application of self-determination, embraced in Central and Eastern Europe but resisted at home by Western powers, exposed contradictions between international ideals and political realities. Furthermore, despite the growing politicization of regionalist movements in Alsace, Brittany, and Corsica – which moved away from the conservative, cultural regionalism of earlier generations and invoked Wilsonian self-determination to seek autonomy – their efforts were limited by internal divisions and a lack of widespread social support. As Perri (2023) notes, beginning in the 1920s, the merging of various social and political divides, worsened by the 1929 economic crisis and rising political polarization, sped up ideological fragmentation within nationalist movements across Western Europe's stateless nations (100 ff.). This fragmentation was further fueled in the 1930s by the rise of fascist regimes across Europe, leading some radical factions within these movements (including in France) to adopt collaborationist strategies, which deepened internal conflicts. Overall, these factors greatly hindered the success of postwar federalist and autonomist efforts in France.

The French experience of the 1920s thus illustrates the persistent tensions between state centralization and regionalist aspirations, as well as the gap between ideals of self-determination and political realities that characterized interwar Europe. This case underscores the complex interplay between domestic reform efforts and international ideals, shedding light on the challenges of navigating cultural and political diversity within modern nation-states.

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Notes

- 1 It is important to note that Pan-Latinist visions of the late 19th century – including the proposed Latin Confederation – intersected with broader ideas of European federation and peace. This confederation, conceived as a peaceful alternative to European alliances, highlights the connection between federalist structures and stability. The related concept of a customs union among

- Latin nations, competing with the German *Zollverein*, emphasizes the role of economic integration in federalist peace initiatives. While focused on a specific cultural group, these proposals still reflect the broader intellectual movement of the era, which aimed to reduce interstate rivalries and promote European peace and stability through supranational cooperation and a federalist structure (Zantedeschi 2015).
- 2 In the context of French regionalism during the Third Republic, “regions” typically referred to historical provinces and cultural areas that predated the departmental system established during the French Revolution. These regions often had distinct linguistic, cultural, and historical identities that didn’t necessarily align with the administrative divisions of the time.
 - 3 This core movement emerged from the efforts of Jean Charles-Brun, who established a *group d’études* that later evolved into the *secrétariat* of the Fédération régionaliste française and would become the “engine of the movement” (Wright 2003, 29–31).
 - 4 The term “regionalism” in France emerged gradually from the late 19th century, gaining traction in the early 1900s. First used by Léon de Berluc-Perussis in 1874, it became more widely adopted with the 1894 launch of *La France d’Oc*, the first journal to feature “regionalism” in its title. The term was chosen over “federalism” to avoid political misunderstanding, as advised by figures like Frédéric Mistral and Charles de Tourtoulon (Charles-Brun 1911, 226–226).
 - 5 The Marquis de L’Estourbeillon was also the author of a declaration, addressed to the Peace Conference in January 1919, in which he affirmed “the right of every People to *remain itself*, whatever its situation within the *internal* or *external* organization of States,” as well as “*the inalienable right of Peoples to speak and freely teach their language, and to see their traditions and beliefs respected forever without hindrance*” (*La libre parole*, January 31, 1919; original italics).
 - 6 As Erez Manela (2007) explains, Wilson adopted the term “self-determination” from Bolshevik rhetoric to neutralize their criticism of Allied war aims, integrating it into his ideological framework while maintaining a liberal understanding of the concept as government based on the consent of the governed.
 - 7 Zantedeschi (2020) outlines how Italian jurist Pasquale Stanislao Mancini’s 1851 “dogma of the independence of nations” defined nationality as a “natural society of individuals”. This principle became foundational in international law and shaped the 1919 Peace Treaties, where nationality was linked to Wilson’s promise of self-determination and used to redefine Europe’s borders and minority rights.
 - 8 In the late nineteenth century, Swiss jurist and politician Johann Caspar Bluntschli emphasized the profound influence of nationality on states and politics. He argued that a nation’s identity and spirit stem from the people inhabiting it, creating a natural connection between the two. Bluntschli contended that a community conscious of its shared culture and values naturally aspires to political expression through statehood. This principle of nationality asserts that the state should not only safeguard cultural elements like language and customs but should also embody the nation itself, advocating for a global order where each distinct people has the right to form its own state (Bluntschli 1885, 92–95). *The Theory of the State* was first published in German in 1875 as *Lehre vom modernen Stat*.
 - 9 Adorjáni and Bari (2019) explain: “While it is clear that ‘minority’ was predominantly a quantitative notion in both the Austrian and the Hungarian political and legal spheres, it nevertheless had some connotations to the national question in these highly diverse political entities. Austria lacked nationally defined territorial structures, and the Hungarian legal-political tradition rather used the terms ‘nation’ and ‘nationality.’ Thus, a qualitative understanding of a ‘minority’ as a legal entity, i.e. a (national) group to be invested with rights, did not appear before the First World War” (33).
 - 10 A central focus of the article is the tension between territorial and non-territorial approaches to autonomy. The author contrasts the preferences of many Western European movements for territorial home-rule solutions with the advocacy for non-territorial autonomy by East-Central European minorities. This divergence in approaches reflects deeper differences in how these

groups conceptualized national identity and its relationship to state structures (Núñez Seixas 2022).

- 11 The trial of the leaders of the Alsatian autonomist movement was sparked by the discontent in Alsace, particularly in response to statements made by Edouard Herriot, the Prime Minister at the time, on June 17, 1924. Herriot's push to expedite the implementation of the entire French legal code in Alsace led to significant unrest in the region, as there were growing fears about the potential impact on its confessional status.
- 12 For an exhaustive account of *Breiz Atao!* and the Breton nationalist movement, see Carney 2015. Without attempting to retrace the full trajectory of Breton nationalism, this article takes as its focus two writings by the Breton activist Maurice Duhamel from the late 1920s, using them as an entry point to examine how debates on autonomism, national minorities, and federalism converged in interwar France.
- 13 Alban Bargain (2010) highlights the ideological heterogeneity of Breton nationalism during the interwar years, focusing particularly on far-right factions. He characterizes the movement as an “ideological goulash,” combining traditional Catholicism, fascist tendencies, regionalist activism, and opposition to the secular French Republic. This mixture complicated the internal coherence and unity of Breton nationalism, helping to explain the diversity of its political positions at the time. Paolo Perri (2019) emphasizes the socio-economic roots and the rise of ethnic nationalism within the movement, noting that some factions evolved toward radical conservatism and collaborationism in the context of broader European authoritarian trends. He highlights how the fragmentation and radicalization of Breton nationalism during the interwar period reflected both internal tensions and wider historical forces. See also Perri 2023, 95–97.
- 14 As Carney (2015) notes, Duhamel was already relatively old when he became involved with the younger members of *Breiz Atao*. For a detailed account of his trajectory and entry into the group, see 137–138.
- 15 According to Carney (2021b), “the CCMNF had a meteoric trajectory.” Its brief existence (1927–1928) saw protests in Paris against press bans and the arrest of Alsatian autonomist leaders, police judicial searches and raids in Corsica, Flanders, and Brittany, and the publication of an open letter to jurors in Colmar in a special issue of *Breiz Atao*. Its activities ended shortly thereafter following arrests in Alsace and weakening interregional connections (4–5). On the CCMNF, see also Carney 2015, 137–142.

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