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“La Bretagne aux Bretons?” : Cultural Revival and Redefinition of Brittany in Post-1945 France

Abstract

A sense of national identity in France is something that has been defined and redefined throughout the twentieth century. With a history that includes two world wars, the creation of the European Union, in addition the the notable action of decolonization on the part of France, particularly in Indo-China and Algeria, there have been evident increases in immigration into France in recent history. These actions have forced France, as a nation, to question what its identity really is, particularly in terms of its cultural identity. In addition to these immigrants who may arrive from former French colonies, however, there are those individual cultures that have existed within France’s own borders for centuries. They have been a part of the ever-changing definition of French nationalism and French culture. One such area of France is known as Brittany or Bretagne in French. With the Breton National Party’s alliance with Nazi Germany during World War II, there was a decline in Breton nationalism in politics immediately following the war, which was exacerbated by the exclusion of the Breton language in schools, and led to the division between nationalist politics and culture. With the creation of “Regions” in France during the 1970s and 1980s, the borders of what had once been Bretagne changed as well. This did not eliminate the nationalism and identity, particularly through culture, that existed within what had formerly been the Brittany “province.” A revival of Breton folk music and other cultural elements, as well as the Breton Democratic Union party in France reflect both the cultural and political aspects of an area of France that serves as an example of the larger French question of national identity and cultural identity that still exists today.

Keywords

France, Cultural History, World War II, Brittany

"La Bretagne aux Bretons?": Cultural Revival and Redefinition of Brittany in Post-1945
France
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A sense of national identity in France has been defined and redefined throughout the twentieth century. With a history encompassing two world wars, the creation of the European Union, and decolonization of former French colonies, particularly in Indochina and Algeria, there have been notable increases in immigration to France.¹ These actions have forced France to question the nature of its national and cultural identity. In addition to recent immigrant culture, there are also individual cultures that have existed within France's borders for centuries. One such area of France is known as Brittany or Bretagne in French. The Bretons, a Celtic people, were forced out of Great Britain by the Anglo-Saxons during the fifth century. Establishing themselves in the northwestern part of France, they remained largely separated from the rest of the country during the Middle Ages, perpetuating Celtic cultural traditions and developing their own language.² Contemporary Breton society interprets many of these traditions, illustrating the struggle to define cultural identity which many regions in France continue to grapple with. The liberation of German occupied France in 1944, as well as the regional reorganization of France during the 1970s and the 1980s, both serve as periods of great change in modern French history, which are paralleled by periods of cultural redefinition in Brittany. These two significant periods of cultural revival in post-1945 Brittany illustrate the continued struggle with the French question of national and cultural identity.

¹ Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Modern France: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 88-90.

² William F. Edmiston and Annie Duménil, *La France contemporaine*, 4th ed. (Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning, 2010), 40.

The occupation in Brittany began with the arrival of German soldiers in Rennes on June 18, 1940.³ As German soldiers, along with the Wehrmacht, began to control France, Brittany was relegated to the northern occupied zone which was separated from the southern Vichy “free” zone, although it was still subject to laws imposed by said Vichy government.⁴ Brittany serves as a microcosm of pertinent events during the French experience in World War II. Just as with the whole of France during this period, no blanket statement can be made that all citizens were either collaborationists or members of the resistance. During the occupation, there was “confusion about who was really Brittany’s enemy.”⁵ While some Bretons became prisoners of war and were sent to Germany, some seventy-seven other Bretons were killed in 1943 RAF (Royal Air Force) air-raids.⁶ Although the number of pro-fascist Breton nationalists was likely marginal, an “intolerant [and] aggressive sense of bretonnitude” was ingrained in the culture as a whole.⁷ Those active pro-fascist individuals, largely drawn from the Breton National Party (Le Parti nationale breton, PNB), expected a potential equality in partnership with the Nazis, but ultimately became simply “tolerated.”⁸ This tolerance was manifested in a number of ways, such as the influence of compelling speeches on German approval of nationalist recruitment of Breton POWs, and the establishment of Luckenwalde, a Breton POW camp which taught Breton-language courses.⁹ Additionally, under the occupation, there was a greater investigation of Breton culture through “Celtic Studies,”

³ Sharif Gemie, *Brittany, 1750-1950: The Invisible Nation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 217.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sharif Gemie, *Brittany, 1750-1950: The Invisible Nation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 218.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 212-218.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 221; PNB stands for Parti nationale de Bretagne in French.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

as well as “a study [of] Brittany’s pre historic past.”¹⁰ PNB member Roparz Hemon even defined a unified Breton language in 1941, a key aspect of ensuing and continuing Breton cultural nationalism.¹¹

While some PNB members were hoping to find an ally for an autonomous Brittany in the Nazis, members of the French Resistance became a part of “a unique process of ‘mutual discovery.’”¹² The approximately 1.5 percent of the Breton population who were involved with the Resistance were crossing cultural and religious divides in their contact with other areas of France.¹³ Therefore, the end of German occupation presented a nuanced and paradoxical political and cultural aftermath in Brittany. The Resistance had bred a “sense of common suffering,” creating an opportunity for integration into France.¹⁴ At the same time, the PNB became a “source of shame,” and created a negative association with nationalist politics and, to an extent, the “ancestral language.”¹⁵ A few years following the war a mixed perception of purely Breton cultural practices developed, indicating and fostering a division between cultural and political nationalism. While a 1948 festival in Quimper saw protestors shouting “collaborators!,” a Breton priest in 1949 approved a “festival of Breton-language poetry and dance,” indicating a developing sentiment in favor of Breton cultural nationalism.¹⁶ The cultural revival following World War II was ironic in that it propagated the same Celtic traditions which the “shame[ful]” PNB had supported, but singular in that it led to an, at

¹⁰ Ibid., 225.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 226-228

¹³ Sharif Gemie, *Brittany, 1750-1950: The Invisible Nation*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 228.

¹⁴ Ibid., 229.

¹⁵ Ibid., 230.

¹⁶ Ibid., 232.

least temporary, division between Breton nationalist politics and Breton cultural heritage.¹⁷

The war and the occupation impacted not only the interpretation of the political and cultural landscape of Brittany, but also its geographical divisions. The German occupation of France demonstrated the 1941 Vichy governmental decision to develop a regional system; Brittany officially became the “Region of Brittany.”¹⁸ The general idea of a regional system, which created new dividing lines throughout France, would later be revived during the Fifth Republic, providing an impetus for the second major cultural revival in Brittany’s post-1945 history.¹⁹ Beginning with President Georges Pompidou in 1973, and culminating in the “Defferre laws” under President François Mitterand in 1982, the resulting administrative decentralization became a major reform during the latter half of the twentieth century.²⁰ This policy represented a broader concept of decentralization of the economy and culture throughout France.²¹ This regional system was intended to provide more autonomy in addition to “a better balance of powers” between the national and local government.²² Additionally, this system reorganized France into “Regions,” 22 of which are a part of continental France, and the other five of which are overseas.²³ This resulted in the largely disregarded “cultural and historic identity” of Brittany, as well as other former provinces that had existed since the Middle

¹⁷ Ibid., 232.; Jack E. Reece, *The Bretons against France* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 177.

¹⁸ Mikael Bodlore-Penlaez and Divi Kervella, *Atlas de Bretagne* (Éditions Coop Breozh, 2011), 132. - Translation “région Bretagne”

¹⁹ William F. Edmiston and Annie Duménil, *La France contemporaine*, 4th ed. (Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning, 2010), 34.

²⁰ William F. Edmiston and Annie Duménil, *La France contemporaine*, 4th ed. (Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning, 2010), 120.; The “loi Defferre” was so named after Gaston Defferre, the Minister of the Interior during this time period.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “La France à la loupe: Decentralization in France” (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006).

²³ Edmiston and Duménil, *La France contemporaine*, 24.

Ages.²⁴ Most places still associated with their former provincial borders, more so than either their departmental or regional divides.²⁵ Brittany is an excellent example of this, as its redefined borders excluded Nantes, the historic capital of the province.²⁶ There have been further developments vis-à-vis the decentralization of France since the 1980s, however, in Brittany, there remains a strong sect in favor of further cultural, as well as political, autonomy.²⁷

While the revival of cultural heritage in immediate post-war Brittany led to the creation of a division between political and cultural identity, the period of decentralization led to the simultaneous resurgence of these two facets of Breton identity. The actions of militant Bretons, in addition to the rise of the Breton Democratic Union (UDB - L'Union démocratique bretonne), have defined a clear political path for political revival. While political Breton nationalism has increased, cultural identity had been dynamic in its own right.²⁸ One dimension of this Breton cultural revival is evident through sports. Of a number of athletics practiced in Brittany, two notables are gouren, similar to “Cornish wrestling,” as well as horell or “hurling.”²⁹ Gouren serves as an important example of a cultural revival through sports, as it has strong Celtic roots which saw growth in Brittany during the 1930s.³⁰ It is even on an international stage today with the creation of the International Federation of Celtic Wrestling (FILC) in

²⁴ Edmiston and Duménil, *La France contemporaine*, 34.; In French: “largely disregard ‘cultural and historic identity’” is “...ne correspondent à aucune identité historique ou culturelle.” All translations are my own.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁶ Mikael Bodlore-Penlaez and Divi Kervella, *Atlas de Bretagne* (Éditions Coop Breozh, 2011), 19.

²⁷ Edmiston and Duménil, *La France contemporaine*, 58.

²⁸ Erwan Chartier, *La question bretonne: Enquête sur les mouvements politiques bretons* (Plougastel-Daoulaz: Editions An Here, 2002), 24.; The Breton Democratic Union is the “Union démocratique de Bretagne” in French. All translations are my own.

²⁹ Francis Favereau, *Bretagne contemporaine : culture, langue et identité* (Morlaix: Skol Vreizh, 2005), 82, 85.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

1985.³¹ Other dimensions of Breton culture include religion, festivals, dance, and music, all of which are interwoven to create a larger Breton cultural identity. The dominant religion in Brittany is Catholicism, as is the case with most of France. However, Brittany has a number of “Breton religious festivals” that interweave Celtic culture with traditional Catholic practices.³² One such example is that of a pardon, an ancient tradition that honors a patron-saint through a penitential ceremony and serves as a pilgrimage, while also representing a “Breton syncretism which melds old pagan traditions ... with a Christian veneer.”³³ Although largely practiced in the westernmost parts of Brittany, the pardon serves as an example of an important Breton cultural tradition which endures today, if not an example of Brittany on a world stage. Both the cultural revival through sports and through religion illustrate a continuing movement to combine Breton tradition with contemporary society on a national and international level.

Among elements that define Breton cultural identity, those of festivals, dance, and music overlap significantly. One of the well-known celebrations in Brittany is that of festoù-noz or festoù-diez, a dancing festival which includes live musicians and dates back to the Middle Ages.³⁴ The music at these festivals is divided into a cappella songs in the Breton language called kan-ha-diskan, or music performed on various instruments.³⁵ Although the origins of certain instruments to Brittany were spread across different periods as well as different parts of Brittany, those which appear most frequently are the clarinet, the violin, the hurdy gurdy, variations of bagpipes, and a

³¹ Ibid., 87-88.

³² Ibid., 88.

³³ Ibid.; In French: “Breton syncretism which melds old pagan traditions ... with a Christian veneer” is “de ce syncrétisme breton entre le vieux fond païen ... et un vernis chrétien.” All translations are my own.

³⁴ Mikael Bodlore-Penlaez and Divi Kervella, *Atlas de Bretagne* (Éditions Coop Breozh, 2011), 64.

³⁵ Ibid.

double-reed instrument called the biniou-bombarde.³⁶ Despite the centuries long history of this traditional music, the 1970s experienced the introduction of a completely new variation of Breton musical heritage into “a completely new style, often called ‘celtic music,’ which, from folk to rock, transcends musical genres.”³⁷ The revival of Breton music serves the dual purpose of representing the way in which this era has led to a full cultural revival, but also how it has been redefined within the context of contemporary international society. Current Breton music is able to combine elements of political and cultural nationalist sentiments through its use of language and instruments. As Professor Favereau of the University of Rennes describes:

The twentieth century will have seen, just as in other areas, a double paradoxical movement, at least in appearance: on the one hand, the demise of popular songs and traditional music as Breton society saw a decline during the middle of the century, but, on the other hand, a remarkable revival ... The contemporary revival of music during the 1970s ... led to an remarkable abundance [of new music]: the success of a world music version of Breton music.³⁸

Breton music represents a larger scope of Breton national identity, particularly in relation to cultural identity, but also within the bounds of France’s own struggle for identity.

³⁶ Mikael Bodlore-Penlaez and Divi Kervella, *Atlas de Bretagne* (Éditions Coop Breozh, 2011), 64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Francis Favereau, *Bretagne contemporaine : culture, langue et identité* (Morlaix: Skol Vreizh, 2005), 97.; In French: “Le XXe siècle aura donc vu, là comme dans d’autres domaines, un double mouvement paradoxal, du moins en apparence : d’une côté, la disparation annoncée du chant populaire et de la musique traditionnelle, à mesure que la société bretonnante se dissolvait vers le milieu du siècle, voire plus tôt, mais de l’autre, un revival remarquable. ...contemporaine du revival musical des années 70 ... c’est depuis lors un égal fisonnement, tout à fait remarquable : succès de la world music version bretonnante...” All translations are my own.

In the post-1945 world, France has faced many, sometimes troubling, realities regarding their world power status as well as a continuous search for national identity. For Brittany, this has been illustrated through two significant periods of cultural revival in the post-1945 period. The liberation of German occupied France in 1944, as well as the regional reorganization of France during the 1970s and the 1980s, both represent changes for the search for national identity in France and the revival of cultural identity in Brittany. Revivals and redefinitions of Breton culture represent both larger nationalist movements in Brittany, but are also a part of France's struggle with national and cultural identity. The transcendence of contemporary Breton music is representative of this, moving beyond the simple cultural heritage it represented in immediate post-World War II France to the international stage of world music. Brittany still clearly expresses its own cultural identity and national identity and some citizens even convey a militant desire for autonomy with the idea that "...our culture should never die."³⁹

³⁹ Francis Favereau, *Bretagne contemporaine : culture, langue et identité* (Morlaix: Skol Vreizh, 2005), 121.; In French: "...our culture should never die," is "...notre culture ne doit jamais mourir." All translations are my own.

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