

## OTHER NATIONS

## How to Talk European

**THE SOURCE:** “Manifesto” by Thierry Chervel, at *signandsight.com*, March 1, 2005.

WHEN THE FRENCH CELEBRITY-intellectual Pierre Bourdieu died in 2002, he left behind a slim, partly autobiographical volume, with strict instructions designed to thwart the celebrity-mad French press: The book must be published in Germany first. The scheme worked far better than Bourdieu could have imagined. When his *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* [Outline for a Self-Analysis] appeared in Germany in 2004, the French seemed utterly unaware of its existence. Only when it was published in France did the expected brouhaha erupt.

For all the talk of a new, united Europe, writes Thierry Chervel, the Bourdieu tale is typical of a much less exalted European intellectual reality. Each nation is increasingly absorbed in its own affairs, living in ignorance of significant political and cultural developments beyond its national borders. “The ignorance is greatest in large Western European countries where public debate is little more than self-contented thumb-twiddling. Talk is of national issues—political leaders, late-night comedy stars, and football scandals.”

European intellectuals do share one thing, according to Chervel: a “morbid fixation with America.” In their obsession with the United States as the source of all problems, they spare themselves the need for self-examination. “Is it really the fault of

dard, concluded in 1963 that the Special Organization played no role in the Armenian deportations. Lewy believes that the killings of the minority Christians were “more likely” the work of “Kurdish tribesmen and corrupt policemen out for booty.”

“The most damning evidence put forward to support the claim of genocide,” says Lewy, is the documents reproduced in Aram Andonian’s *Memoirs of Naim Bey* (1920). Andonian, an Armenian who had been deported from Constantinople, claimed to have obtained the memoirs of a Turkish official that contained many official documents. “Particularly incriminating,” says Lewy, are telegrams from the wartime interior minister, Talât Pasha, showing that he “gave explicit orders to kill all Turkish Armenians—men, women, and children.” But the documents—for which Naim Bey, an alcoholic and gambler, was paid, Andonian later revealed—may well be fake. Most historians and scholars regard them “at best as unverifiable and problematic,” Lewy says.

All in all, the charge of genocide has not been proven, he concludes. The Armenian partisans—like the Turkish nationalists who with equal fervor and certitude assert the Young Turk regime’s innocence—“have staked claims and made their case by simplifying a complex historical reality and by ignoring crucial evidence.” It would be better, as some Armenian and Turkish historians have suggested, for both sides to back off from the high-volume debate about genocide and instead join in seeking to establish and enlarge “a common pool of firm knowledge” about the tragedy.

Bill Gates or Steven Spielberg that the French are learning less German, and the Germans less French?” asks Chervel, who is cofounder of the German magazine *Perlentaucher* and the Web site *www.signandsight.com*, which features English-language summaries of articles by German public intellectuals.

To intellectuals such as Bernard Cassen, director-general of the antiglobalist French monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique*, the English language itself is an instrument of American imperialism, and its spread is part of a program to establish “domination of the mind, of cultural signs, frames of reference.” Cassen has proposed to stop the rise of English by promoting language groups within Europe: The “Romanophones” in the Romance-language countries, for example, would learn one another’s languages, while the Germans, Dutch, and Danes would form another group.

That’s just a recipe for more provincialism, in Chervel’s view. And “Cassen is wrong to maintain that the English language conveys only one ideology or the exclusive interests of a single country.” In criticizing America, for example, few can outdo the English-language al-Jazeera network or the Indian magazine *Outlook India*. After 9/11, the best news and background on Islamic terrorism and Afghanistan was in English, notably in *The New York Times*. “There was very little information in German or French.”

If Europeans are to talk to one another—and help save the English-speaking world from its own provincialism—they will have to have their conversation in English.