Anti-Semitic Policing

Between 11 August and 11 September 1942, 2089 foreign Jews were crammed into 5 convoys in a railway station near Les Milles, a former brickworks transformed into a transit and internment camp which had provided primitive and dusty accommodation to many foreign refugees since 1939. The railway carriages were cattle wagons strewn with straw, containing a jug of water and a bucket to serve as a toilet. Jews were packed in like sardines. As the convoys prepared to make for an ‘unknown destination’, many parents decided to leave young children behind in the care of aid agencies like the Quakers or the YMCA believing that few youngsters could survive the conditions they were likely to endure. The decision was heart-rending. Parents were effectively assigning their offspring to total strangers, unsure if or when they would ever set eyes upon them again. The convoys went first to Drancy, a French controlled camp on the outskirts of Paris. From here internees were transferred to the Nazi extermination camp of Auschwitz in Poland. Few survived the ordeal. Many died during the journey. Cramped conditions, poor sanitation, excessive heat and lack of food took their toll. Most of those who eventually arrived at Auschwitz were immediately gassed to death. Others succumbed to the rigours of forced labour. Very few of the children left with aid agencies would ever see their parents again.1

These deportations were the culmination of a process of persecution and exclusion co-sponsored by the Nazis and Vichy. Nazi anti-Semitic persecution continued throughout Hitler’s 12 year reign. Mistreatment of Jews in the Reich and the occupied territories caused many to emigrate to unoccupied France. The Nazis also engaged in a policy of expulsion from territory they controlled. In October 1940, 7000 Baden and Saarland Jews were crammed into sealed trains and transported into the Southern unoccupied zone where Vichy placed them in internment camps. It was at the beginning of 1942, at the Wannsee conference, that the Nazis decided on a systematic industrialised extermination of the Jews by gas.

Historians have established that anti-Semitic leanings were not forced on the French government by their Nazi allies but rather were indigenous. Vichy is generally attributed with the desire to exclude the Jews from its national

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community. The use of the word ‘exclusion’ over-simplifies Vichy intentions and fails to highlight one of the essential differences between Nazi and French government policy toward the Jews. Unlike the French, the Nazis made no philosophical distinction between Jews who were their compatriots and those that were not. The difference between Vichy’s policy towards French and foreign Jews needs to be underlined by a difference of vocabulary. The word ‘exclusion’ should be reserved for the treatment of foreign Jews, whilst the word ‘relegation’ seems more appropriate to describe the policy towards French Jews. Vichy sought to relegate French Jews to the status of second-class citizens by limiting their influence within the national community. It introduced Jewish Statutes (Statuts des Juifs) which defined Jewishness, obliged Jews to register for a census and limited the access of French Jews to certain professions. These measures isolated Jewish communities making them more vulnerable to subsequent persecutions. But for the government most French Jews remained citizens and it showed initial reticence to organise or encourage their expulsion. It was not until the beginning of 1943 that French Police arrested Jewish compatriots other than those who were children of immigrants or who had been naturalised French. Unlike their French counterparts, foreign Jews could be interned from as early as October 1940 for the simple fact of being Jewish. Extermination was never the avowed intent of the Vichy regime even for foreign Jews. Nevertheless, Laval’s government allowed itself to become an active accomplice in the Holocaust by handing over Jews for deportation to an ‘unknown destination’.

This was an area where considerable hierarchical pressure was exerted. From 1940, Pétain’s government sent clear signals to local subordinates about what it expected regarding the Jews. Vichy ministers were delighted when Police operations arrested what they considered a satisfactory number of Jews. The Director of Pétain’s cabinet could not contain his satisfaction in the spring of 1941 with the results of round-ups in the Bouches-du-Rhône, the administrative ‘département’ of which Marseille is the capital. As 147 Jews from the département were assigned to residence between 25 May and 5 July he gloated ‘the figures are becoming impressive and correspond to the wishes expressed by the government’. Then in the context of the deportations a year later, the anti-Semitic zeal of central government placed huge pressure on subordinates.

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3 AN 2AG 520 C, Le Directeur du Cabinet Civil à M le Secrétaire Général pour la Police, 28 May 1941.