The New Slave Trade

Nowhere was the unreliability of the French Police shown as acutely as in the application of the Forced Labour Draft which was central to Germany’s attempts to exploit France. From 1942 Germany became increasingly desperate for resources as its war in the east took a mounting toll. It needed ever-greater manpower for its factories to replace those mobilised at the front. Pressure was applied by Vichy to supply workers to supplement those conscripted in other occupied countries. Between October 1942 and July 1944, around 640,000 individuals in France were drafted for forced labour schemes, in particular the Service du Travail Obligatoire (STO), and sent to work in Germany.\(^1\) The continual widening of age and social categories to which these schemes were applied testify to their relative failure since they constantly fell short of the numbers the Germans hoped for. In spite of their disappointing yields, however, forced labour schemes ended up affecting huge numbers of French people: those actually drafted, those threatened with conscription, those who found any means possible to escape the draft, those left worrying about the loved ones sent to Germany, the myriad of people who sheltered draft-dodgers and the institutions responsible for ensuring that the schemes were put into effect.

The number of people affected and the public reaction to forced labour schemes ensure that they occupy a central position in French wartime experiences. The historian Yves Durand wrote: ‘The problem of STO affected the whole population and assumed an important place in the existence and the representations of the war and Occupation of the French.’\(^2\) Richard Vinen has referred to it as ‘the most important single Vichy policy’, not only because it caused widespread distress but also because it made a mockery of Vichy’s claim to be protecting the French population.\(^3\)

The imposition of the law creating the STO further undermined the control the Vichy government had over its own administrations and thereby raised questions about how far Vichy could still be useful to the Germans. It highlighted how even in services such as the Police, where a cult of obedience to

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the State was a professional reference point, divergences between professional and patriotic duties engendered a spirit of disobedience. Through their position as a central instrument in the application of the forced labour draft the Police were expected to be at the forefront of Franco-German collaboration on this issue. Through their widespread defiance in its application they became a spearhead of opposition.

There were 4 ways in which the law affected the Police. Firstly, in their role as French citizens, Police officers formed an opinion of the scheme. The damaging effects of this unpopular law on French society were visible to everyone and it seems most French citizens, including most Policemen, viewed it negatively. Secondly, through their professional obligations, the Police were given the task of delivering call-up papers for the STO and thereafter of arresting any draft dodgers. Defiance in performing this mission was widespread and undermined the degree to which the government could rely on the institution. Thirdly, the social make-up of the Police was changed by the law as large numbers of Frenchmen to whom it would not have occurred in other circumstances to become Policemen suddenly discovered this vocation believing the Police was protected from the STO. Individuals who had entered the force simply to avoid labour conscription accounted for roughly one third of all Marseille Policemen by the spring of 1943. Finally, contrary to received wisdom, the Police did not entirely escape the law’s application as a number of Police officers were compelled to go to work in Germany.

The Service du Travail Obligatoire came into being as a result of the failure of previous labour schemes. Germany had initially focused on recruiting volunteer labour from France. They promised such workers generous wages and good working conditions and accommodation. But these attempts to attract volunteers were never very successful. Up until the summer of 1942 they had managed to recruit a total of around 150,000 French volunteer workers, although there were never more than around 75,000 in Germany at any one time and it was only in June of that year that Vichy allowed the Germans to recruit volunteers in the unoccupied zone when recruitment bureaux were set up in Lyon, Marseille and Toulouse.4 Such figures were insufficient when the demands of the war, particularly the bloody campaign in the east were draining