CHAPTER TWELVE

A HISTORY OF THE FRENCH CONSULAR SERVICES

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Introduction

‘It is quite certain that the institution of consuls was created to forward trade, which is and probably always will be its main purpose’, wrote an expert on the function of the French consul in 1889 under the pseudonym of Z. Marcas.¹ Despite the author’s thorough review of the first four centuries of the institution in France, his predictions did not hold true.

Reinvented in the Middle Ages by merchant guilds in the Mediterranean region, and then claimed by the central power, consuls became the engine and guarantors of French commercial expansion. They were the ones to protect merchant navigation and colonies abroad. However, at the end of the First World War, French consuls lost the essential part of their commercial attributions and ended up as nothing more than foreign-based civil servants. It is this evolution—from the institution’s birth through its climax to its relative decline—that this chapter will briefly follow, going through the central administration’s construction and functioning, describing the development of consul attributions, as well as recruitment and pay.

Early Days

Since ancient times, the offices designated by the term ‘consul’ have changed through the ages. Initially, and for over a millennium (from 509 B.C. to 542 A.D.), the term ‘consul’ designated the supreme office of the Roman cursus honorum. During the Middle Ages, the word

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¹ ‘Il est parfaitement certain que l’institution des consuls a été créée pour favoriser le commerce, que tel est et sera probablement toujours son principal objet’, Z. Marcas, ‘La diplomatie, les consulats et le commerce français’, extract from the Nouvelle Revue of 1 and 15 December 1889, Paris, 1890, p. 14 (author’s translation).
simultaneously applied to five different offices: the leader of a town’s local authority was known as a consul; there were merchants’ consuls; sea consuls (consul maris); consuls on the sea; and the overseas consuls (consul ultra maris).\textsuperscript{2} The overseas consuls were the distant heirs of the Greek ‘proxenes’ (πρόξενοι) and the forerunners of the modern consuls who, in France, were delegated by the cities, particularly Marseilles, to manage their fellow citizens who were living and trading in foreign ports. In disputes, they also acted as judges for their compatriots.

It was not until the end of the fifteenth century that the French consulates shed their municipal—and, more particularly, Marseilles-based—guardianship and became a royal institution. The first Royal Consulate was created ‘in the land and parts of Egypt and Alexandria’,\textsuperscript{3} probably under the reign of the French King Charles VIII (1483–1498).\textsuperscript{4}

Central Administration for the Consulates

Under the French monarchy, administration of the consulates was frequently restructured. Having come under the French King’s authority, the consulates were originally attached to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but when Jean-Baptiste Colbert became Secretary of State for Naval Affairs in February 1669, his request that the consulates be overseen by his ministry was granted by Louis XIV. Except for a brief five-year spell (from 1761–1766), when they passed once more under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the consulates remained under this affiliation until the French Revolution in 1789.

Within the Naval Ministry, the management of consular affairs was at first divided between two different departments: the ‘Levant Bureau’ for all lands to the east, managed the consulates of the


\textsuperscript{4} The first nomination on record is that of Raphaël Labia in Alexandria in 1532, but a section of his letters of office suggests that the position already existed in Charles VIII’s reign; see Poumarède, ‘Naissance d’une institution royale’, p. 68. On the conflict between the Crown and the Marseilles municipality for control over consular nominations, see Poumarède, ‘Naissance d’une institution royale’, pp. 68–72.