

**Jean-Pierre Le Crom, *Au secours, Maréchal! L'instrumentalisation de l'humanitaire (1940-1944)*, Paris, PUF, 2013, p. 344.**

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Jean-Pierre Le Crom's most recent monograph tracks the rise and fall of the Secours national (SN), a parastatal relief organization decreed into existence by the Daladier administration in November 1939 and not disbanded until ten years later. As Le Crom's subtitle indicates, however, it is the years 1940-1944 that are of greatest interest to him.

This is not the first time Le Crom has written on Vichy social policy. In *Syndicats, nous voilà* (1995), he looked at the regime's decision to mandate creation of firm-level social service committees. Vichy also extended social insurance and family allocation coverage to wider swaths of the population, a subject treated in *La Protection sociale sous le régime de Vichy* (2001), a collective volume Le Crom helped to edit. Neither scheme, as it happens, was dismantled after the war, and continuity turns out to be one of the key themes in Le Crom's present volume as well.

As an organization to be sure, the Secours national did not long outlive the war, but Le Crom makes the argument that it left a lasting legacy nonetheless. During the Vichy years, the SN enjoyed a legal monopoly on fund-raising for civilian relief. Rival relief agencies, like the French Red Cross, were forbidden to raise money without SN authorization, and in point of fact, the SN opted to carry out most of its own fund-raising without working through subsidiaries. Generous state subsidies further filled its coffers. The organization boasted a huge budget, four billion Francs in 1944, which it deployed to finance a vast apparatus of SN-run relief bodies or parceled out on application to a host of secondary *oeuvres* like the French Red Cross. The SN used its financial leverage to centralize and rationalize relief. So, while the SN itself may have closed down in 1949, its centralizing and rationalizing practices lived on, serving as a model for the relief efforts of the Secours catholique and the Communist-associated Secours populaire français, both national-level bodies born of the postwar years. The SN left its mark, though, not just as an organization model. It employed a large staff, an estimated twelve thousand at its peak. Le Crom is at pains to show how many of these were trained social workers. The SN created a network of departmental delegations and made certain that each included a social worker. It did not hand out money without investigating to ascertain whether the cause was a worthy one, and social workers were involved in the evaluation process. And to insure it had the qualified personnel it needed, the SN subsidized the education of social workers, provided they pledged to go to work for the SN after graduation. In these various ways, the Secours national contributed to the professionalization of relief.

Centralization, rationalization, professionalization: this is Weberian language. Le Crom's book is in part a story of bureaucratization, and so it's not surprising to

encounter a figure like Raoul Dautry haunting its pages. Dautry in so many ways helped to define what a modernizing technocrat looked like: as architect of the national rail service in the 1930s and from November 1944 as Minister of Reconstruction and Urbanism in de Gaulle's provisional government. It was Dautry who got a protégé, Robert Garric, named as the SN's commissioner-general in August 1940, and it was he who in August 1944 took over the SN himself to help shepherd sit through the first weeks of the Liberation, a tricky moment of transition for an organization with such close ties to the discredited Vichy regime.

The invocation of Garric's name, however, points to a second way of looking at the Secours national focused less on Weberian themes and more on confessional ones. Garric was a product of the interwar Catholic associational mobilization. A veteran of the Great War, he had committed himself in its aftermath to finding ways to preserve in peacetime the above-class fraternity of the trenches. It was in this spirit that he founded the Equipes sociales in 1920, which brought together laborers and young Catholic bourgeois in a spirit of common moral and educational endeavor.

A similar moralizing spirit, Catholic in tonality, shaped the thinking and *modus operandi* of the Secours national itself. The organization styled itself as an above-party social service organization. It did not dole out assistance with reckless abandon but made inquiries first into the worthiness of would-be recipients. That task often fell to social workers. In the 1920s and 1930s, Protestant women had dominated the social-work profession, but that ceased to be the case during the war years when women of Catholic background moved center-stage thanks in part to the patronage of the SN. It will not come as a surprise then that the SN looked with greater favor on relief applications from families who sent their children to Catholic schools and maintained high moral standards at home than on pleas for help from divorcees and unwed mothers. And once relief was granted, it was not paid out in cash, which might be diverted to undesirable purposes, but in kind in the form of clothing, food, or fuel. The SN, moreover, had the authority to call for dissolution of subsidiary agencies that it judged uncooperative, an authority it took advantage of to target the Salvation Army and Quaker groups in the northern zone. As noted already, the SN amassed most of its income from fund-raising and state subsidies, but it benefited from a third source as well: revenue from the sale of property confiscated from citizens, most often Jews, who had fled abroad. The SN was a huge, bureaucratic body, a state within a state in Le Crom's words, but it was also Catholic in orientation: committed to moral improvement, cool to Protestant competitors, and not averse to benefitting from the regime's anti-Semitic policies.

The Secours national's Catholic orientation helps explain the position it staked out for itself in the constellation of charitable organizations that proliferated during the Vichy years. It got along fine with the Assistants du devoir patriotique, a relief network associated with Colonel François de La Rocque's Parti social français. The SN's dealings with the French Red Cross were more complicated. The Red Cross had venerable antecedents and enjoyed a certain social cachet, none of which predisposed it to take a back seat to the upstart SN. A *modus vivendi* was worked out in the end, however. It was harder to maintain the peace between the SN and organizations that outflanked it on the Right like the Entraide d'hiver and the Comité ouvrier de secours immédiat (COSI). The former was an Occupation-era creation, most active on the Parisian scene. It was supposed to be subordinate to the SN, but its leadership, connected to the fascist ligueurs Marcel Déat and Jacques Doriot, had other ideas.

They imagined a relief regime more *populaire* in its operations, willing to hand out, not just materiel, but cash to all the needy without moralizing strings attached. Tensions between the SN and Entraide d'hiver never got resolved. With the COSI, however, relations were not just prickly but hostile and rivalrous. The COSI was created in 1942, Déat and Doriot acolytes once again taking the lead. The organization's stated objective was the provision of assistance to victims of allied bombing raids. It got backing from the Germans, financial as well as political, and as a result, Vichy legislation notwithstanding, did not have to answer to the SN. It conceived of itself, moreover, as an agent of popular revolution, a stance reflected in the personnel it recruited, many of them trade-unionists (of the sort loyal to René Belin, Vichy's Minister of Labor). The Secours national had no sympathy for fascists and collaborators; it got on with La Rocque and his ilk, fellow paladins of Christian civilization; and it maintained polite, if strained, relations with upper-class establishment organizations like the Red Cross.

In a word, the SN situated itself on the Christian, non-fascist authoritarian Right, and it was in that spirit that it cleaved to Pétain. The SN embraced the Maréchal as the embodiment of a paternal Catholicism and as an above-class guarantor of national sovereignty. Pétain served as the SN's honorary president. The SN in turn undertook to popularize Pétain's image. In 1940, it retailed an estimated five million post-cards and portraits of the Maréchal in the unoccupied zone alone.

Le Crom evinces some puzzlement when sorting out how the SN and other Vichy-era relief agencies related to the Resistance. The SN, though ever loyal to the Maréchal himself, began over the course of the Occupation to tilt to the Resistance side, helping out Jewish children and other victims of the regime's persecutory policies. Lower echelon figures in the COSI did the same. But there is no real need for puzzlement. The SN's conduct was similar to that of other organizations situated on the Catholic Right, Jeune France, for example, or the Compagnons de France. They, like the SN, distanced themselves from a regime they had once supported as it slid deeper into collaborationism in the last years of the war. The persecution of Jews was one thing, their deportation another. As for the Nazi occupation of the southern zone and the imposition of the labor draft, these were measures that Catholic patriots just could not stomach. Such measures awakened as well the conscience of COSI trade-unionists who, pacifist and anti-communist though they might have been, still retained some memory of the ethical commitments that had led them to the Left in the first place.

Le Crom's intelligent and deeply-researched book is in the end a book about power, about the construction of a grand bureaucratic apparatus and the politically-marked purposes to which that apparatus was put. Humanitarians today might like to think that they are leaving partisanship behind to fight the good fight, but the case of the Secours national stands as a reminder of how deeply humanitarian work is implicated in structures of domination. Hezbollah, as Le Crom himself takes note, built its power in part on providing the kinds of welfare services that the Lebanese state itself proved unable to supply. In the US, welfare provision stands at the center of political debate, every penny spent now a matter of bitter partisan contention. The politics in these two instances are not hard to parse. But what are the politics of humanitarian interventions undertaken by western states backed by well-meaning publics? They might not be so easy to discern, but they are there, and Le Crom's book invites us to try to sort them out.



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