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Helping the Most Needy: the Role of the Secours National

Jean-Pierre Le Crom

During the Second World War in France, everyday life was largely shaped by German demands. The objective of the occupant was to exploit as many resources (whether human, agricultural, mineral or industrial) as possible, in order to sustain the German war effort against the British, and later, the Russians and the Americans. This situation led to a significant drop in the French population's financial and material means, which the Vichy regime tried to address in a number of ways. In the spirit of the National Revolution, the answer could not come from the state, which, according to Marshal Pétain, was 'overweight and defective'¹; it had to come from families, professionals, communities and organisations (whether philanthropic or charitable).

It is in relation to the question of charitable giving that Pétain would transform and develop the Secours National,² which had been founded in August 1914, was active during the First World War, and officially recognised as contributing to the public good in September 1915.³ Its purpose was to help civilians in their struggle against deprivations brought about by war, through the collection of private donations which were then allocated via various other private organisations, over which it had no control. Fifty million francs were thus reattributed to civilians in need, in the space of the four years of the Great War. It was this organisation which the Daladier government decided by decree to revive shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War on 19 October 1939. Bearing the same name, but slightly different in nature, the new Secours National also received subsidies from the State – which would increase substantially over time. It was also now responsible for all the other wartime charities which appealed to the generosity of the public. These charities were only permitted to work on condition that they adhered to the Secours National and pledged to follow its general policies.

Recognising the scope of the problems stemming from the 1940 defeat, the newly-born Vichy regime decided to resort principally to the Secours National in the implementation of its mutual aid policy. This went on to impact directly upon the everyday life of millions of French people: during the German Occupation, the Secours National considerably expanded its activities, becoming a sort of ‘State within the State’. It was eventually closed down in 1949, after having undergone post-war purges of personnel, and renamed Entraide Française in late 1944. This chapter will focus on its activities during the Second World War only. After describing and analysing its ever-growing field of activity during those years, it will go on to show how the État Français repeatedly tried to use it for its own political ends.

To the rescue of the French population

Initially created to coordinate the activities of all other charitable organisations involved in helping the civilian victims of war, the Secours National progressively extended its activity beyond emergency aid to include social care as well. This section will deal first with its supervision of other charities, and then consider the multi-faceted nature of its own activity.

Following the creation of a national system of social insurance in France, and of a benefit system intended for the most deprived, including, among other things, free healthcare and support for the elderly and disabled, by the early twentieth century, the role played by private (often religious) charities had notably diminished. Furthermore their resources, in spite of the relative stability of donations, had also been hit by growing inflation.⁴ In response to requests to increase state contributions, the Third Republic had been trying to improve coordination between charities; the Popular Front government was particularly active here, but Finance Minister Henri Sellier failed to deliver any substantial change.⁵

The advent of the Vichy regime changed this situation considerably. Three factors help explain this: first, most charities were receptive to the values put forward National Revolution, which made them more favourable to the reforms the new government proposed; second, the nature of the difficulties faced by millions of French people called for a rationalisation of emergency help; and third, the regime was, in its early days, deeply influenced by the ideas of Charles Maurras, key thinker of the Action française movement, and in particular his preference for private organisations over public institutions. This new policy was crystallised on the 11 October 1940, by the promulgation of a new law entrusting the Secours National with the supervision of all charitable organisations in France.

This supervision was first and foremost effected through a monopoly over all appeals to public generosity. Before the war, the Comité français de lutte contre la tuberculose (the French Committee for the Struggle against Tuberculosis) or the Petites sœurs des pauvres (the Little Sisters of the Poor, a Catholic charity) could collect donations in churches or launch subscriptions, via the press for example. This was forbidden under the new system: it was now the responsibility of the Secours National to initiate and manage these appeals, as well as to allocate funding to each association, which could no longer rely solely on its own members' contributions and donations.

However, the Secours National only had jurisdiction over providing aid to civilian victims of war. The other organisations which were in charge of aid related to military concerns, and in particular to prisoners of war, were the Committee for the Assistance to Prisoners of War (also known as Comité de Calan), the Service for Prisoners of War, the Légion française des combattants (French Legion of Veterans) and the French Red Cross. This complex and barely comprehensible arrangement would be numerous times throughout the war.

In return for its monopoly on all appeals to public generosity, therefore, the Secours National had to decide the allocation of funding to each of the different charitable organisations. By

1 August 1944, it had given a total of 1.6 billion francs to 12,000 such charities. This large sum is partly explained by the fact that the Secours National understood its responsibilities in a fairly generous way. Alongside charities in the strict sense of the term, it also subsidised organisations attached to movements and services whose purpose was not directly linked to charity or aid, such as the kitchens of the Légion française des combattants, working on a mutual aid basis, and even children's summer camps organised by the Légion des volontaires français contre le bolchevisme (the Legion of French Volunteers against Bolshevism, the LVF, better known for sending French soldiers to fight alongside the Nazis on the Eastern Front). In addition, the Secours National was always ready to 'assist the public services, by endeavouring to complement their work'.⁶ This it did through occasional funding initiatives, for example, the financial support of people returning from a period in a sanatorium, and even the building and development of prisons.

It should be noted that not all charities called on the Secours National for funding, whether systematically or periodically, and nor did the Secours National grant all requests: out of 7,893 requests made in 1943, 590 were turned down (7.4 per cent). But the majority of charities soon came to rely solely on its subsidies.⁷ Before the war, the Comité français de lutte contre la tuberculose, for example, mainly funded its own activities through the sale of stamps, which brought in some twenty million francs in 1938, and thirteen million in 1939. These campaigns were suppressed from 1940, and the Committee came to be funded by the Secours National – with a little over 12.5 million francs in 1940, and 20 million in 1941.⁸

The Secours National could also request that the State dissolve a charity. Indeed, the article 4 of the 4 October 1940 law stipulated that any charity which did not act upon its injunctions could be forbidden to continue by government decree. This device was used to dissolve the Salvation Army,⁹ on the official grounds that

the activities of this association were too similar to those of the Secours National, and [that] it was important, in the domain of charity and assistance, to ensure that the equitable repartition of the country's resources devoted to the people in need be supported by a unity of inspiration and direction.¹⁰

The truth was that the Salvation Army, having Protestant roots, was suspected of being opposed to the regime, and even of being Gaullist.¹¹ In the same way, there were plans to dissolve the French branch of the Quakers, who, being both Protestant and American, were doubly suspicious.¹² But while this dissolution was effectively carried out in the Occupied Zone, Pastor Boegner, president of the French Protestant Federation, successfully asked of René Bousquet and Pierre Laval that they allow Quaker activities to continue in the southern part of the country. The price to pay was a number of changes in the composition of the board of directors.¹³ Boegner's protestations may have inspired amendments to a new law of 23 August 1943, which specified that non-compliant charities would first be handed a warning, before being suspended for a maximum of three months by the prefect, and could even be dissolved by a governmental decree on the prefect's request.¹⁴

The Secours National was not only the 'charity of charities', it was a charity in and of itself. At first its own activity only concerned a few targeted sectors of the population: those who were the direct victims of the war. Yet its action on this front was multi-faceted. The first group of such victims were refugees, whose number reached 2,600,000 during the course of the war. The second were people whose homes had been wholly or partly destroyed – whether by Allied or German bombs, or by ground conflict – many of whom were also refugees. Over the period 1939-1945, around four French million people were categorized as 100 per cent bombed out, losing the entirety of their homes and property, while around one million people were considered partially bombed out. Among the ruins, there was much to be done: tending to the injured, burying the dead, feeding, clothing and accommodating the survivors, evacuating children to the countryside. These tasks

were tackled by a number of organisations, including the Défense passive (the national air raid precautions organisation), the French Red Cross, the Service interministériel de protection contre les événements de guerre (SIPEG - Inter-ministerial Service for the Protection against the Events of War), the COSI, and also but also collaborationist political parties such as Marcel Déat's Rassemblement national populaire or Jacques Doriot's Parti populaire français. The Secours National's remit was threefold: providing emergency – material, not financial – aid, through the allocation of food, clothes, furniture and temporary accommodation; taking care of refugees – particularly children – by evacuating them to the countryside; and providing food for the youth teams who were assisting bombed-out civilians. In 1943, the Secours National thus distributed to the latter and to refugees 7.92 million food rations, 1.5 million clothes and sheets, 100,000 pieces of furniture, and 600,000 pairs of shoes.¹⁵

However, the notion of a 'direct victim' quickly came to be interpreted by the Secours National in the largest possible way. Indeed, the Secours soon extended its activities to include what might be termed 'indirect' victims. Among these, some categories were more privileged than others, particularly the elderly, who, in the words of Maréchal Pétain, were 'more affected than all the others by these hard times'.¹⁶ Their situation before the war was already fairly precarious: those who benefitted from a small pension, such as railway workers, postmen or *tabac* employees, could make ends meet with 6,000 to 12,000 francs per year. But for those who had not paid any contributions to the 1910 workers' and peasants' pension system – this amounted to two thirds of the total of theoretical subscribers – and for those who were subject to social insurances – which were also limited in their application – the situation was far more problematic. These people had to resort to state-funded Aid for the Elderly: a sum of around 1,800 francs, to which they sometimes could add small annuities accumulated throughout their working life. This, along with homegrown vegetables, fishing (for men) and paid housework (for women), meant that they could just about

meet their basic needs. Yet wartime inflation made their situation considerably worse. As a social worker based in the Sarthe during the war explained:

They began by giving up the superfluous: no more wedding anniversary presents bought in secret, no more fancy dinners to celebrate important days. Then they had sell the house in return for an annuity, remove meat from their daily diet, stop buying clothes and start spending less on wood and coal. Those who could still work started looking for menial jobs, such as chopping wood, cleaning and taking in mending.¹⁷

These material difficulties were more often than not accompanied by a great deal of distress and anxiety. The newly introduced allowance for older waged workers, offered those aged over 65 years with insufficient resources the sum of 3,600 francs per year (with Parisians receiving an extra 1,600 francs). But this was not enough, especially as it excluded farmers and self-employed people, a large part of the workforce.

One of the Secours national's main initiatives in this respect was to get a young person – often a secondary school or university student – to ‘adopt’ an elderly person. This might involve the former bringing meals to the latter, staying for a chat, and accompanying them out for a stroll, among other things. Although this system, first implemented in 1941 in the Seine Department, would eventually reach 18,000 beneficiaries by September 1944.¹⁸ Yet the fact that 16 per cent of the population was aged over 60 or more in 1946 means that the success of this enterprise should be qualified.¹⁹

Children were another section of the population favoured by the Secours National. It helped them by supplying and assisting school canteens, distributing protein biscuits or vitamin tablets, organising summer holiday camps and opening specialised care establishments. In December 1943 there were 43 such institutions, which welcomed either soldiers' children and children of prisoners

of war, children of French workers based in Germany, or physically disabled children. They accommodated 4,000 children in total, but 10 per cent of the available spaces were not filled.²⁰

The families of prisoners of war were another recipient of the Secours National's aid. As in many other areas, it shared this remit with other organisations. In this particular instance, the other main actor was the Famille du prisonnier (the Family of the Prisoner), whose autonomy its president (Madame la générale Huntzinger) defended on the grounds that it employed only volunteers – which was incorrect – and that the families of prisoners of war should not be treated in the same way as the 'needy' people usually associated with the Secours National. The confusion regarding who was in charge of what would only be partly cleared by an April 1941 decision, stating that while the Famille du prisonnier was indeed autonomous when it came to intellectual and moral assistance, the material aid it provided was to be monitored nonetheless by the Secours National. Similarly, the latter also supervised the Famille du prisonnier's departmental delegates, and its managing director was accountable to a 'super-director'.

The last category benefitting from the Secours National's direct assistance is perhaps more surprising: prisoners and internment camp inmates were not exactly a favoured group, but the infrastructures meant to keep them alive were becoming increasingly inadequate. In internment camps, inmates received only 700 to 900 calories per day, which led increasing instances of gastroenteritis and hunger oedema. In the camp at Gurs in the Basse-Pyrénées, an average of 12 people died every day during December 1940 [QUI SONT LES INTERNES ICI EN 1940? CA AIDERA LES LECTEURS, PEUT ETRE?]. Overall, there were 3,000 such deaths in French camps between 1940 and 1944.²¹ Things were hardly better in prisons, where numbers increased from 19,000 in 1939 to 50,000 in 1942. In the detention centre of Riom, 120 people died during the first three months of 1942, as opposed to four people per year before the war.²²

The Secours National began intervening in internment camps from January 1942, alongside the Quakers, the charitable organisation of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul and the Red Cross. In relation to food, this brought about daily portions of thick soup, and an additional sixty grams of dried vegetables, twenty grams of pasta, two grams of fat, and either one salted sardine or twenty-five grams of jam or fresh fruit. Out of the 9,000 camp inmates identified by the Secours National in 1943, 2,400 benefitted from its assistance. These were selected by doctors, in agreement with social workers. The Secours National's kitchen worked independently from that of the camp, and was situated in a separate building, which also included a canteen and a storeroom.²³

Food and clothing aid was thus the Secours National's main and preferred way of providing assistance, whether to refugees, bombed-out people, the elderly, prisoners' families or camp inmates. But in reality this assistance did not stop at any specific category of the French population: from 1940 onwards, it would apply to more and more people, for whom the common denominator was hunger.

From 1 January 1941 to the Liberation, the Secours National served an astonishing 470 million rations in mutual aid canteens (not including those served to bombed-out people), and 405 million more in school canteens. Figures such as these were published on a regular basis, as part of the regime's ongoing propaganda. But when it came to food aid, the Secours National rarely acted alone. School canteens were actually usually managed by town or school councils,²⁴ and mutual aid canteens by town councils or charitable organisations, such as the Assistants du devoir patriotique, the Salvation Army or the Little Sisters of the Poor, who had traditionally played an active part in the organisation of soup kitchens, food banks and the supply of cheap meals.

The role of the Secours National was first to help fund these initiatives as they were set up, often by attributing coupons granting access to primary resources, initially destined for the refurbishment of soup kitchens. It was also to complement the existing food supplies and to provide

financial support up to 30 per cent of the cost for those who could not pay for their meal in its entirety or at all.²⁵ The Secours National also contributed up to a quarter or a third – depending on the case – of the cost price of school canteen rations.

From 1941 onwards it also organised mothers' tea parties, at which pregnant women, and mothers, their babies and toddlers were given food supplements adapted to their specific needs. The summer holiday camps organised by the Secours National were also motivated by food shortages: it was reported that in 1941, children who went to such camps came back 1.7 kilograms heavier and 1.2 centimetres taller on average. But one of the Secours National's most important operations in this respect was the distribution in schools of vitamin tablets containing vitamins C and B1, and of casein (protein) biscuits. These were made of flour, casein lactose, margarine and sugar, and were reminiscent of the famous 'soldiers' biscuits', although they tasted much better. Depending on how old they were, children were given two, four or six such biscuits.

Finally, the Secours National also played a role in the production of food supplies. It organised or supported family-owned canning factories (112 in 1942) and dehydration centres (6 in 1942), and helped with the cultivation of family-owned vegetable gardens (3 million in 1943, against one million in 1939) by distributing tools, seeds, plants, fertilisers, and so on. The produce of these gardens, whose average surface area was about 400 square metres, provided up to 3 per cent of their owners' caloric needs and 6 per cent of their protein needs in 1943; it also provided some financial relief, around 10 francs per square metre according to estimates.²⁶

As well as food aid, the Secours National was actively involved in supplying clothing to the French population. Thousands of refugees had lost almost all of their clothes, and the poorest families lacked the means to buy even basic items of clothing or bedding. The prices for these had risen sharply, as Germans requisitions of primary sources meant that manufacturers had to slow down production. A letter of a woman from Nantes to her prisoner husband illustrates this:

The boys have nothing to wear. Their shirts are in tatters. Their Communion robes are now four years old and ridiculously short, yet as there's no alternative they still have to wear them. They just don't fit anymore into their green overcoats, which are so shabby! Everything they have is either wearing thin or too small. I spend an awful lot of my time mending. I'm doing it so often that they're becoming a patchwork of different shades of blue. When I was unemployed, I had to sell my textile coupons for food, which means I couldn't buy them the two jackets they needed. I've got a coupon for long-johns – I'll try to get them big and dark so that they last longer, and then I can pass them on to Gustave. I'm going to write to the Secours National as they give second-hand clothes to people in need.²⁷

Working with the authorities, the Secours National came up with a system whereby clothes could be salvaged and reused. This was done in three ways: the first option was that which Gustave Pilon, the general secretary of the Secours National, called the 'grey market', as opposed to the better-known 'black market'. This grey market implied buying stock from manufacturers who had not declared it, and who were thus threatened with confiscation. The second way of getting hold of old clothes was to collect them through a public campaign called the *poignée de laine* (the 'handful of wool'). In the early days of the Occupation, these collections were organised with the Comité central d'assistance aux prisonniers de guerre (Central Committee for the Assistance of Prisoners of War – CCAPG). Donors were invited to bring clothes to designated establishments such as prefectures, town halls, schools or Secours National centres; at the same time, primary and secondary school pupils and youth groups were sent out to gather second-hand clothes directly from their owners, using handcarts. While the first collections were rather successful, they were not without incident: for example, a ton of clothes was left for several days in front of the public library in Rodez before it was spotted on the 1 January 1941, soaked in rain water. No action had been taken to store the clothes in a dry place.²⁸ Moreover, as people learnt to 'make do and mend' what

little they had, the quantity of clothes given to the Secours National was diminishing.²⁹ This is why a third mode of gathering clothes was implemented. On the 11 February 1941, a law was passed which allowed people to buy new clothes without coupons if they gave to the Secours National double the quantity purchased in old but mendable and reusable garments. Six weeks after this system was put into place, the Secours had collected sixteen tons of clothing items.

All these clothes would then be sent to the Secours National sewing workshops, to be mended and sold through its clothing outlets. These sewing workshops provided the Secours with an opportunity to develop aid through work, which was one of its leitmotifs. However, while the number of sewing workshops increased to reach about 800 in 1943, the number of employees – mostly women often working part-time and from home – decreased significantly, from around 50,000 in April 1941 to 17,500 in 1943.

To the rescue of the Vichy regime

The fast-growing development of the Secours National's activities would generate an immense bureaucracy, similar to that of a public institution; however the fact that it formally remained a private organisation meant that it was a perfect vehicle for the Vichy regime's propaganda. By providing aid through work, by founding seventy-seven social centres and by establishing housework training centres for 5,000 to 6,000 women and older girls, the Secours National went well beyond the confines of emergency aid and put in place a more lasting and ideologically charged form of social action. This development owed a lot to the ideological thought and activities of the Secours National's director, Robert Garric.

Garric was a Catholic intellectual and man of letters, whose social ideas around national duty were close to those of Marshal Lyautey, and who had created the *Équipes sociales* (social teams) which were both a philanthropic association and a further education institution. In 1939, the

Minister of Munitions Raoul Dautry, who became president of the Entraide Française after 1944, called on Garric to head the social services he had just created. There, Garric had worked with Jean Toutée, who became vice-president of the Secours National, Gustave Pilon, who became its general secretary, and Hyacinthe Dubreuil, who also took on managing responsibilities within the organisation. Within the Secours National, these men promoted a humane and non-bureaucratic conception of social action, which earned them the nickname of ‘Socials’, with a capital ‘S’. At the 1942 conference of Secours National delegates, it was declared:

Our job, within the social sector of the Secours National, is to make all forms of aid more humane, more respectful and more compassionate. At no moment should there be any association, in people’s minds, between the Secours National and a vast office, a vast anonymous counter behind which bureaucrats would dispense, on a regular basis, in a cold and mechanical and therefore inefficient and dead manner, some kind of assistance.³⁰

This group’s work and philosophy give us an insight into the development of social services during the Second World War. In each of the departmental delegations of the Secours National was posted a qualified social worker, helped by a number of social auxiliaries who held hospital or district nursing qualifications, along with various unqualified extra care workers. The same system was put in place in departmental sub-delegations, and in some rare cases at cantonal level. A few social workers were also employed as resident workers in social centres. It has been estimated that the number of social workers employed by or ‘associated with’ the Secours National was 6,023, out of a total of around 9,000 social workers active in wartime France.³¹

The proliferation of the Secours National’s activities beyond its initial realm of emergency aid for direct victims of war led to a number of questions about the nature of its attributions and responsibilities. Robert Garric himself asked: ‘Will the field of our organisation’s activities and

perspectives thus expand almost indefinitely? Is it not time we tried to enclose our domain, to define and clarify it?’³² The same day, he also wondered: ‘Why do we – the Secours National – take on the duty of teaching about housework? Why are we concerned about juvenile delinquents, or about farming apprentices? And why did we, yesterday, mention nursery schools and other social institutions?’ For Garric, the answer was evident: ‘the Secours National’s work (...) cannot be restricted to emergency aid.’

The significant expansion of the Secours National’s activities, which owed much to the wide variety of charities it supervised and to other organisational problems, was met with fierce protestations from inside the Vichy regime itself. Thus in June 1941, the Prefect of the Côte-d’Or department regretted that

little by little, [the Secours National] is becoming a state within the State, with its cantonal delegates, its regional delegates and its national delegates. This charitable organisation’s current policies, however legitimate, may well, one of these days, lead to a conflict with the government’s own representatives – or even with the government itself.³³

In his June 1942 monthly report, the Prefect of the Seine pointed out that ‘some mayors seem a little unsettled by the growing importance of these big, new charitable organisations’, and quoted the mayor of Charenton, for whom ‘the Secours National’s work, while arguably immensely beneficial to the population, tends to deprive communes of their local charities, turning them instead into its own satellites’. Bureaucratisation and the gigantic size of the institution, which were at odds with the spirit of the Vichy regime, were notable targets here: ‘people seem to deplore that local traditions and parochialism should be progressively disappearing from the commune, seen as a natural extension of the family.’³⁴ In 1943, the Prefect of Maine-et-Loire asked the Secours National’s departmental delegate to ‘stop employing more people and to update him, on a regular basis, on any vacant positions it may have’. This request, however, was deemed by the Minister of

the Interior to be incompatible with Pétain's explicit instruction that prefects show support towards the Secours National and not interfere with its operations.³⁵

Calls to order kept on coming from the highest echelons of the regime, however, as the problem became increasingly conspicuous. In December 1941, in a stern letter to the president of the Secours National, Pétain's chief of staff Du Moulin de Labarthète thus stated that 'it is not in the Secours National's remit to replace the authorities where food scarcity in cities or rising prices are concerned', and that '[the Secours National] was given to an excessive development of its institutions', which led it to take on 'the scope and the characteristics of a vast collective administration', and 'tended to turn citizens into passive recipients of social assistance'.³⁶

Du Moulin de Labarthète's assertion that the Secours National had the characteristics of a 'vast collective administration' begs the question of whether it was, in actual fact, a public or a private institution. When, in July 1941, the Secours provided the municipalities of the Nord and Pas-de-Calais departments with the means to fund the benefits allocated to people in need there, Mr Musin appealed to the government. He stated that 'the 19 October 1939 decree which re-established the Secours National and approved its new statutes confirms, in the wake of the 29 September 1915 decree, that this institution works in the public interest'. But while

the 4 October 1940 law entrusted the Secours National with the coordination and supervision of charitable organisations, and has given it a monopoly over the management of subsidies and appeals to public generosity, it was not intended to alter the private nature of this institution and its activities; from this, it should be inferred that its representatives' decisions cannot be referred to the *Conseil d'État*.³⁷

But this decision should not be taken at face value. The Secours National, in many respects, resembled and acted like a public institution. First because it operated in a bureaucratic way, in Max Weber's sense of the term; it was divided into departments, which were themselves divided into

services, just like any administration. It implemented laws and decrees, and generated its own rules, through dated and numbered circulars which were then published in an administrative Bulletin looking suspiciously like the bulletins published by government ministries. It was tightly centralised and hierarchised, and its work was checked by the Court of Audit and the Inspectorate of Finances. A substantial part of its managerial personnel came from the State's Grands Corps, such as the *Conseil d'État*.

Another important question was that of the Secours National's funding. In 1942, its budget was of 3,184 billion francs, which represented three per cent of the French State's revenue, loans excepted. Over the period between 1939 and 30 June 1946, the sum total of its financial resources was more than twenty billion francs, fifty-five per cent of which came from subsidies and revenues, while the rest came mainly from public donations, including cash, food and clothing. Its income also included earnings from sources as diverse as the sale of national lottery tickets or of abandoned property, the taxation of public auctions, real estate operations and pari-mutuel betting, the fines for gas and electricity overconsumption, or shared profits from the sale of tobacco coupons or casein biscuits. A notable mainspring was the gains made from the sale of the goods belonging to French citizens deprived from their citizenship rights. A law passed on the 23 July 1940 specifically allocated those earnings to the Secours National. Among the 450 people targeted by this measure – people who had left the national territory between the 10 May and the 30 June 1940 – were Charles de Gaulle, René Cassin, Maurice Thorez and five members of the Rothschild family. The Secours National benefitted from the latter's numerous goods, vineyards (Château-Lafitte, Mouton Rothschild), castles and Parisian buildings, especially the 19 to 25 and the 26 rue Lafitte, which became its headquarters.

The last aspect to consider is that of the Secours National's employees. These (around 12.000 workers for 40.000 volunteers) were not recruited via examinations or any other selection

process, which distinguished them from civil servants. But this needs to be qualified by the facts that a number of ministries, during that period, relied on contractual staff, that social workers held a state certificate, and, above all, that the Secours' workers' wages were aligned with those of their government counterparts.

A propaganda tool

The Secours National's growing power and influence would soon prove attractive to the authorities. As evidenced in a note issued before the October 1940 law, the government was already contemplating two scenarios: either the Secours National should be done away with and replaced by a 'more decidedly political and propagandist' institution directly attached to the state, or it should be reinforced and be made more perennial, but also bear a more visible mark of Pétain's authority. The author of the note was in favour of the latter solution, on the grounds that, 'with some publicity, it would be possible to convince the public that the Secours National was Pétain's own charity'. The main idea was to orchestrate a campaign around the theme of 'the Maréchal taking care of the people's needs'.³⁸ This plan was implemented during the 1940 Winter Campaign. One of its means of action was via the sale of portraits of Pétain. In the so-called Free Zone, a million such portraits were initially printed, in poster, postcard or vignette forms; then, responding to demand, another million were released. In the Occupied Zone, five million portraits were apparently sold. The operation was a clear success.

It must be noted that the authorities' manipulation of public opinion was tightly controlled during the Winter Campaign. Pétain's appeal to the population had to be published in every single newspaper, on the same day, in the middle of the front page. On the radio, it was to be delivered by a 'sensitive and sincere' speaker, after having been announced in earlier programmes. On each and every day during the following week, newspapers and radio programmes were to reiterate the same

message, albeit each time drafted by another ‘very talented man, talented enough to be able to channel the essence and the inspiration of the Secours National’. The message itself should be ‘ever more objective, more focused on instances of extreme poverty, and with a pressing, anxious, moving and imperious appeal to people’s conscience and generosity’. Newspaper editors were expected to ‘break down any opposition and show any objections to be irrelevant, especially when these revolved around the idea of “manipulating public opinion”.’³⁹

H. R. Kedward has pointed out that humanitarian activities were placed at the forefront of local policies from the very beginning of the Occupation, being deemed apolitical in that they were carried out by left-wing and right-wing municipal authorities alike.⁴⁰ This apolitical stance was precisely what allowed Pétain to reiterate the unity of the French nation, to which he had ‘given the gift of his person’. This observation certainly applies to the Secours National’s first Winter Campaign. Pétain, in this instance, appeared not to be acting as a politician, but to be putting his status and, more importantly, his person, at the service of an apparently neutral social agenda. Within this narrative, it was not the Secours National which worked for Pétain, but Pétain who worked for the Secours National. In reality, the Secours National was being instrumentalised by Vichy. An early 1941 note from Pétain’s cabinet made this clear:

On the other hand, the conditions are ideal for propaganda in favour of the Maréchal via the Secours National and the Entraide d’hiver [the Parisian branch of the Secours National]. With the Secours National under his authority, and his role in the choice of the Entraide d’Hiver’s president, the Head of State can justly claim the moral benefits attached to both organisations’ achievements.

In our opinion, in the current situation, the only propaganda which can be exerted freely and efficiently is that in favour of the Maréchal, through the many activities of the Secours National and the Entraide d’Hiver.⁴¹

From then on and until the Liberation, the image of the Head of State would be associated, in one way or another, with every poster, film or radio report focusing on the Secours National's action:

almost all of the profits from the sale of objects representing Pétain go to the Secours National: the generosity displayed in buying or donating for that organisation invariably involves a reference to the Maréchal (through objects, portraits and other symbols). Each and every one of us shares with the poor not only our cloak (following the example of Martin of Tours), but also the Head of State's warm, enveloping banner.⁴²

The Secours National was thus one of the most prominent organisations used by Vichy to manipulate public opinion. Pierre Laborie, in his study of these organisations, notes that 'the sacralisation of the cult of the Maréchal leaves no room for improvisation. Everywhere, specialist committees attend to it in the greatest detail, and create ever more emblematic images of the myth'.⁴³

It is however important to add, before closing the subject, that the Secours National should not be seen only as a den of Pétainists or collaborationists. Working for it were also a number of authentic resisters, such as Michel Debré, who would go on to become Prime Minister under the Fifth Republic, Léon Chevalme, former secretary general of the CGT branch of Metallurgists' Federation, Roger and Yvonne Hagnauer, pacifist teachers and revolutionary trade-unionists, and many social workers who, in some cases, paid for their engagement with their lives.⁴⁴

Conclusion

As this chapter draws to a close, it is worth reflecting on the idea that while everyday life can of course be studied for its own sake, it is crucial not to lose sight of its political implications. Everyday life in Occupied France was mostly shaped by scarcity – of food, clothes, or shelter. Vichy's way of dealing with this scarcity was to rely on 'natural' communities, such as families,

businesses or charitable organisations. The efforts of the latter, under the supervision of the Secours National, to rationalise emergency aid – offered first to civilians directly affected by the war, and then to increasingly larger portions of the population – arguably played a significant role in both alleviating the hardships of a large number of French people, and in avoiding a health crisis – although it is difficult to quantify precisely what part it played here. Its recognisable and significant contribution was undeniably why it carried on with its work as the Entraide Française until 1949.

It is quite common to oppose, both when it comes to the Second World War and more generally, everyday life to unequivocal political choices, such as choosing to collaborate with the Germans or joining the Resistance – both of which supposedly only concerned a small number of citizens. Yet this distinction has a rather heuristic dimension. In an earlier work, I have shown that, while the heavily politicised professional terms of Vichy's Charte du Travail (Labour Charter) were met with considerable hostility, its workplace-based social committees – known as 'spud committees' ('Comités patates') by some – were much more successful, on account of the significant role they played in workers' everyday lives.⁴⁵ Within the Secours National itself, a number of important figures were also in favour of substituting politics, seen as 'deleterious' since the Third Republic, with the Social, with a capital 'S'.

The study of the role played by charitable organisations or associations under Vichy, however, suggests that such a distinction between the political and the social be qualified. The improvement of everyday life was at the heart of the regime's political agenda, and the development of the Secours National was instrumental to the promotion of Pétain's image. It is uncertain just how much impact this propaganda would have had on a hungry population, but those in charge believed it had some: any reflection on everyday life must take this into account.

Translated by Benjamin Bâcle

¹ Philippe Pétain, ‘La politique sociale de l’avenir’, *Revue des deux mondes*, 15 September 1940.

² Secours National can be translated as ‘National Aid’.

³ This chapter is drawn from the author’s book on humanitarian work during the Second World War, which also covers the activities of other organisations, such as the French Red Cross or the Workers Committee for Emergency Aid (Comité ouvrier de secours immediate, COSI): J.-P. Le Crom, *Au Secours Maréchal! L’instrumentalisation de l’humanitaire (1940-1944)* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2013). See also J. Kulok, ‘Trait d’union: The History of the French Relief Organisation Secours national/Entraide française under the Third Republic, the Vichy Regime and the Early Fourth Republic (1939-1949)’ (PhD dissertation, Oxford University, 2003).

⁴ J.-L. Marais, *Histoire du don en France de 1800 à 1939. Dons et legs charitables, pieux et philanthropiques* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1999).

⁵ J. Jouan de Kervénoaël, *Les œuvres privées et l’État. Une formule nouvelle: le Secours national* (Paris : impr. de E. Desfossés, 1941).

⁶ Besoin d’une note ici ?

⁷ Centre des archives économiques et financières [CAEF], B 915: Report by the Secours National’s financial inspector, 15 March 1944.

⁸ Archives de la ville de Paris [AVP]: 24W 11: Tract from the Comité national de la tuberculose, undated.

⁹ Decree of 9 January 1943, *Journal officiel de l’État français* [JO], 28 January 1943, p. 264.

¹⁰ Archives départementales du Cantal [ADC], 419 F 48: Press release from the OFI-Havas agency. [DATE?]

¹¹ ADC, 419F 48: Letter from Marc Boegner, president of the French Protestant Federation, to Robert Garric, chief commissioner of the Secours National, undated.

¹² On American Quaker activity in France during this period, see the chapter by Shannon L. Fogg in this volume.

¹³ *Carnets du pasteur Boegner (1940-1945)*, introduced and annotated by Philippe Boegner (Paris: Fayard, 1992), pp. 233, 238; et ADC, 419F 48: Letter from the president of the Secours Quaker to Robert Garric, 6 February 1943.

¹⁴ Law no. 454 of 23 August 1943, *JO*, 11 September 1943.

¹⁵ Archives nationales [AN], 2 AG 458: End of year evaluation of Secours National's activities, 1943. **DATE?**

¹⁶ **Besoin d'une note ici ?**

¹⁷ ADC, 419F 3: Presentation given by Melle Le Bailly at the Sarthe Departmental Conference of the Entraide Française, 6 February 1947.

¹⁸ ADC, 419F 6. **Détail ici nécessaire?**

¹⁹ ADC, 419F 3: Press conference given by Justin Godard, 19 November 1946.

²⁰ ADC, 419F 7: Executive Committee of the Secours National, 7 December 1943

²¹ D. Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944. Contrôle et exclusion* (Brussels: Complexe, 1997), p. 93.

²² P. Pédrón, *La prison sous Vichy* (Paris: L'atelier, 1993), p. 52-3.

²³ ADC, 419F 55: Secours National Social Workers' Conference, 1943. Speech by Mme Discher on 'The action of the Secours National in camps and prisons', p. 36-8.

²⁴ On this subject, see Matthieu Devigne's chapter in this volume.

²⁵ ADC, 419F 49: Answers to questionnaires sent in preparation of Secours National Social Workers' Conference, 1943.

²⁶ AVP, 24W 13: Secours National Departmental Delegates' Conference, 1942.

²⁷ G. Douart, *Les civils sous l'Occupation. Nantes dans la guerre* (Maulévrier: éditions Hérault, 1993).

²⁸ AN, F/60 388: Note A/MB, President of the Council (general secretariat) Cdt Ausseur, 2 January 1941.

²⁹ AN, 2 AG 500: Letter from Clément Decomble (Toulouse) to Jean Masson, Winter Campaign of the Secours National in Vichy, 20 November 1941.

³⁰ AVP, 24W 13: Secours National Delegates' Conference, 20-22 June 1942.

³¹ R.-H. Guerrand, M.-A. Rupp, *Brève histoire du service social en France (1896-1976)* (Toulouse: Privat, 1978), p. 83.

³² AVP, 24W 13: Report from Secours National Delegates' Conference, 20-22 June 1942, p. 2

³³ AN, 2 AG 500: Extract from the Prefect of the Côte d'Or's monthly report, June 1941.

³⁴ AN, 2 AG 500: Extract from the Prefect of the Seine's monthly report, February 1942.

³⁵ AN, F/1A 3661: Letter from Ingrand, delegate of the Ministry of the Interior, to the Regional Prefect of Maine-et-Loire, 18 January 1943.

³⁶ AN, 2 AG 500: Letter dated 1 December 1941.

³⁷ *La Gazette du Palais*, 17 November 1943.

³⁸ AN, F/60 389. **Détail nécessaire ici ?**

³⁹ **Besoin d'une note ici ?**

⁴⁰ H. R. Kedward, *Naissance de la résistance dans la France de Vichy. Idées et motivations (1940 - 1942)* (Seysse: Champ vallon, 1989), p. 34.

⁴¹ AN, 2 AG 500: Unsigned note (undated, but from 1941).

⁴² D. Rossignol, *Histoire de la propagande en France de 1940 à 1944. L'utopie Pétain* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1991), p. 89.

⁴³ P. Laborie, *L'opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris: Seuil, 1990) p. 231. On this question, see also L. Gervereau and D. Peschanski, *La propagande sous Vichy* (Nanterre: BDIC, 1990).

⁴⁴ This question is treated in Chapter 8 of Le Crom, *Au secours Maréchal !*, pp. 237-78.

⁴⁵ See J.-P. Le Crom, *Syndicats nous voilà ! Vichy et le corporatisme* (Paris: Editions de l'atelier, 1995).