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The Nazi Social Order Implemented? The Case of France

in


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In mid June 1940 the German Wehrmacht invaded Paris. After a surprisingly quick defeat of the French army, the occupiers found the capital in rather good condition, without much trace of destruction. In particular, the road and railway infrastructure was ready for use. However, the streets of the French capital were deserted. Of France’s 42 million citizens, 8 million had fled from their homes in fear of enemy aggression. The French government had moved to Bordeaux as its temporary seat, before later installing itself at Vichy.¹ For French politicians, the top priorities were to regain national sovereignty and freedom of action.

The unprepared French people had to adapt to a completely new situation. Economic issues were among the most urgent: agrarian and industrial production needed to resume, and order needed to be re-established on the labour market, particularly in terms of re-integrating thousands of refugees into the workforce. In that context, social policy was not among the main concerns, but nevertheless played an important role in the process of reorganization.

At the same time, the German occupation provided new opportunities for France’s right-wing authoritarian groups and parties, letting them implement ideas that had not been practicable under the parliamentary democracy of the Third Republic. After Germany’s Military Commander in France (Militärbefehlshaber in Frankreich or MBF) was installed in Paris, both sides wanted to establish contact and start collaboration immediately. Although the existing literature argues that the German side was not interested in co-operating with French ministries and organizations,² the situation on the ground was quite different. It was only by working with...

² Ibid. 41–2.
the French authorities that Germany could achieve a supervisory administration with close control of local administrations. According to Nazi legal scholar Werner Best, that aim could be realized only when representatives of the dominant power (that is, Germany) were installed to supervise the local (French) administrations, with experts delegated to all administrative sectors. Of course, this raises the question of how far the German ‘supervisors’ were truly able to control the remaining French administrations. Here, the French administrators’ room for manoeuvre can also be considered with reference to social and labour market policies.

However, longer lines of continuity still resonated in occupied France. The Vichy regime’s social policy decisions were founded upon the traditions of the late French Third Republic, but were also shaped by German thinking on social policy as developed by the occupation bureaucracy. It will be necessary to explore the attitudes of both sides, and to what extent they were (or were not) interested in fundamentally changing social policy.

The following essay will first examine the French reception of German thinking on social policy in the 1930s. Explorations will focus on the writings of key protagonists in French society in order to document how far they were interested in the ‘German model’ of social policy that originated during the German Empire period. The enquiry will then turn to German propaganda on social issues, which intensified during the world war. German actors were operating in France during the 1940–4 occupation period, and we will try to discover whether they really did intend to transfer German concepts to occupied France. Even if such a transfer was not explicitly planned, the occupiers’ administration developed practices that led to changes in the French social security system, and these also affected the assessment of social benefit entitlements.

I A German Model? French Interest in Nazi Social Policy during the 1930s

When Hitler came to power in 1933, French politicians on the other side of the Rhine were naturally concerned. The Nazi Party’s

rise was especially worrying because of its aggressive nationalism, leading to great uncertainty concerning the future of German–French relations. The monitoring of social policy was not actually a main concern, but there was nonetheless a long tradition of French interest in the German welfare state. The focus was on a ‘German model’ that had originated under Bismarck during the German Empire period, had developed further in the Weimar Republic, and was reshaped by the Nazi regime. Such scholarly debates, however, had little impact on everyday political discussions and could not be found in the daily newspapers. Therefore, the focus of this investigation will be on the concrete policies imposed by the relevant practitioners as well as the expert opinions and debates recorded in specialized reviews and intellectual journals.

1. French ministries and international organizations

The French Ministry of Labour, which had primary responsibility for social policy, published a quarterly bulletin with a regular column on foreign countries. Each edition contained at least a few lines about the situation in Germany, especially its evolving unemployment statistics. There were occasionally longer articles, too, mostly dealing with labour policy, such as a 1938 analysis of German working hours based on information provided by France’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These articles were published anonymously and presented the current legal situation without any critical comments. Only one article, published in late 1939, dealt with the adaptation of social policy to wartime conditions. Drawing on German sources, it described changes to working hours, wages, and annual holidays. However, there was no mention of a ‘German model’ or any explicit critique of these regulatory changes.

French-language publications from the International Labour Organization (ILO) were a valuable source of information in this area. Even though Germany left the ILO in 1933, the monthly Revue internationale du travail (International Labour Review) continued...
to carry articles about its developments. They were mostly written by Germans exiled to Switzerland, particularly Jews and Social Democrats, including specialists such as Judith Grünfeld, who wrote for Social Democratic and trade union journals until 1933, and Leo Grebler, an economics journalist who fled to Switzerland in 1935 and worked for the ILO before emigrating to the USA in 1937. In keeping with the ILO publication’s general tone, their articles were rather neutral in style, only presenting the policy according to official reports without describing its real-world implementation. But in 1937 there were two articles signed by German authors with insider knowledge, one of them as a high official in Beauty of Work (Schönheit der Arbeit), a suborganization of the Nazi regime’s German Labour Front (Deutsche Arbeitsfront or DAF). No editorial note was given to justify the printing of this propaganda piece; nonetheless, such articles were an important source of information for policy specialists in France.

2. Debates in academic publications and specialized journals

The academic interest in German social affairs is even more interesting. If the number of French university dissertations is any indicator, it was law students who were most interested in Germany’s social affairs and social policy. From 1933 to 1936 a number of law theses focused on the social and labour policies of the Nazi regime (at the time, the discipline of law in France still included political sciences and economics). The young authors were born in the first two decades of the century; some of them were of Alsatian origin or had studied law at German universities.

The main field of interest was the Nazi reorganization of labour relations through the Law on the Organization of National

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7 See e.g. L’Année sociale (the French-language version of The ILO Year-Book), particularly the years from 1933 to 1939/40, with sections devoted to ‘Social Insurance: National Schemes’, ‘Right of Combination in Trade Unions’, etc.
10 For the special situation of Alsace, with its close links to Germany’s social policy frameworks, see the essay by Alexander Klimo in this volume.
Labour (Gesetz zur Ordnung der nationalen Arbeit, shortened to Arbeitsordnungsgesetz or AOG) of 20 January 1934. This law abolished collective bargaining and legitimized the role of the DAF, a corporatist institution that included employers and replaced independent trade unions. In his critical study of 1935, the young scholar Alexandre Tillmann (born 1911 in Strasbourg) stated that the AOG had resulted in strong state interventionism while purporting to respect the corporatist principle. His analysis highlighted changes in working conditions, showing how the law had transformed unemployment benefit claimants into cheap labour and forced the younger unemployed (aged under 25) into ‘volunteer’ assignments. Thus, the author concluded, workers’ civil liberties had been abolished. Another Alsatian author, René Bollecker (born 1913), wrote his thesis on the implementation of the AOG after an extended stay in Germany. Although he had studied under Nazi jurists, he doubted that the class struggle had finally been resolved, as claimed by the law’s supporters. Instead, he ended his study with the warning that although the German authoritarian state should be able to provide enough resources to ensure the ultimate success of this programme, the slightest failure along the way could lead to a catastrophe.

Meanwhile, the thesis by Jacques Doublet (born 1907) concluded that the DAF intended to control the working population while imposing constraints on everyone, all in the name of serving the public interest. Moreover, he was critical of the Strength through Joy (Kraft durch Freude or KdF) programme, whose achievements were counterbalanced by systematic efforts to diminish the general level of knowledge while getting rid of humanism, critical thinking, and personal decision-making. In 1938 the same author wrote an article on labour conflicts in the Third Reich. Although he was convinced that the shift from private labour law to public law was a general trend that could also be observed in France, he expected that Germany’s ‘New Order’ would lead to comprehensive state control

12 Ibid. 270.
13 Ibid. 271.
15 Jacques Doublet, Le Front du travail allemand (Paris, 1937), 139.
16 For more on the KdF programme see Daniela Liebscher’s essay in this volume.
17 Doublet, Le Front du travail allemand, 140.
of production, companies, and workers. Yet another thesis on the KdF was presented by François-Xavier Babeur at the Paris law faculty in 1939. He denied that this Nazi mass organization could ever serve as a model for a democratic society. Certainly, he stated, the organization strengthened workers through physical training, but the Nazi regime undertook such measures only to increase labour productivity, and not for humanitarian reasons. The crucial difference was at the moral level: according to the German concept of Volksgeist (Volk spirit, with Volk meaning folk, people, or nation, but also ethno-nation), personal freedom had to be subordinated to the Volk. The KdF programme thus disdained individualistic values, and was just one wheel in the huge war machine established by the so-called 'Greater German Reich' (Großdeutsches Reich). On the whole, these specialized studies by French jurists revealed little appreciation for German social policy, focusing more on the labour market and the newly created organizations in this area.

Further monographs were written by Germanists such as Henri Lichtenberger (1864–1941), a renowned specialist in German literature and retired professor from the Sorbonne. In 1936 he published a successful book entitled L'Allemagne nouvelle (The New Germany, later published in English as The Third Reich), which included chapters on foreign, racial, and economic policy, but only a few pages on social issues. The paragraphs on the DAF and the AOG concluded with the remark that the influence of Hitler’s revolution on social policy could hardly be measured. Le Relèvement de l'Allemagne, 1918–1938 (The German Recovery, 1918–1938) was written in the same spirit by Albert Rivaud (1876–1956), a philosopher and Sorbonne professor specializing in German issues. As a conservative nationalist obsessed by the German threat and also hostile to the 1938 Munich Agreement, he maintained a critical distance from German developments. In June 1940 he became Minister for National Education (Ministre de l'Éducation Nationale) in Pétain’s first government, but was dismissed one month later as a result of German pressure.

Among the writings by French Germanists, the most positive

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article on social policy was published in 1938 by Xavier Heydet, a German teacher at a lycée in Mulhouse, Alsace, in the Revue de l’enseignement des langues vivantes (Review of Modern Language Teaching). Hardly an outstanding scholar in the field, he claimed that of all revolutions, both past and present, National Socialism was one of the most peaceful, and had succeeded in solving a great many social problems.\textsuperscript{22} While presenting favourable descriptions of the various institutions founded by the Nazi regime, he also added that it would be impossible to impose such a centralized and hierarchical organizational model in France, where its severe discipline would be perceived as oppressive.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, even admirers of the Nazi regime did not see the Nazi social system as a potential model for the governance of France.

In-depth articles on these issues were also rare in more general magazines. One such periodical was L’Europe nouvelle (The New Europe), a weekly review founded in 1918, whose main purpose was to promote Franco-German reconciliation after the Great War. A number of articles dealing with German social policy provide an interesting case study of how one French publication presented Nazi efforts to transform German society. They reveal a noteworthy shift from an initial enthusiasm for Hitler’s regime to a more critical distance regarding later developments.

In 1933 the journalist Maurice Pernot took part in Berlin’s May Day parade, which he described as an ingenious metamorphosis of a socialist ritual into a German nationalist labour celebration honouring the new regime. Observers had been expecting Hitler to define his social policy, but were disappointed for the time being. Pernot continued with his own analysis of Nazi social policy, reminding readers that Germany’s independent trade unions had been destroyed on the following day. The more Hitler mercilessly persecuted Marxism, he argued, the more he had to respond to the public’s expectations of National Socialism. Despite the anti-unionist repression of 2 May 1933, Pernot did not see Hitler’s actions as reflecting a reactionary policy, or even an anti-socialist one.\textsuperscript{24}

Other articles in the same journal, published in 1934, dealt with the

\textsuperscript{22} Xavier Heydet, ‘L’œuvre sociale du Troisième Reich’, Revue de l’enseignement des langues vivantes, 6 (June 1938), 241–9, continued in issue 7 (July 1938), 297–306, at 241.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. 306.

\textsuperscript{24} Maurice Pernot, ‘La politique sociale du Troisième Reich’, L’Europe Nouvelle, 13 May 1933, 442–3.
AOG. As the most important piece of legislation passed by the Nazi regime so far, it aimed to make considerable changes in the field of labour relations, thus helping to resolve class struggles. According to one article dating from 1934, the change in social relations driven by new Nazi institutions was taking place at breathtaking speed. Whereas Mussolini’s actions had been rather cautious, the first year of Nazi rule showed that the government was working towards a total transformation of social reality. Thus, Mussolini’s realism was contrasted with a German idealism inspired by a sense of utopian salvation that might overcome any obstacle.\(^\text{25}\)

Such enthusiastic statements provoked strong reactions among the journal’s editorial staff. In 1934 its feminist founding editor, Louise Weiss (1893–1983), resigned because of disagreements with her colleagues about trying to co-operate with Germany. After Pierre Brossolette (1903–44, later known as a resistance hero) became chief editor in 1936, the journal became more critical of Hitler’s regime. It started featuring exiled German authors such as Fritz Sternberg, a Jewish sociologist from Frankfurt.

In a 1937 article Henry Laufenburger concluded his analysis of the Third Reich’s autarchic economy with a warning that warmongering, in the long run, could not be compatible with a peacetime economy.\(^\text{26}\) Meanwhile, the exiled Austrian journalist Ernest Landau highlighted the differences between Robert Ley’s speeches and the real situation of German workers. Even Georges Lefranc, who would work for the Vichy regime a few months later as a staff member under Minister of Labour René Belin, wrote in May 1940 that the alleged support of Germany’s working classes for its authoritarian regime was no more than a Nazi myth. Like most of France’s newspapers and journals, \emph{L’Europe nouvelle} came to be dominated by critical views of Germany.

Because Germany had a generally negative image in France, there were very few publications presenting a more favourable view. The most important organization created to counterbalance Germany’s negative public image was the France–Germany Committee (Comité France-Allemagne), founded in 1935.\(^\text{27}\) Its leading figures


\(^{27}\) See Barbara Unteutsch, \emph{Vom Sohlbergkreis zur Gruppe Collaboration: Ein Beitrag}
were later among the most dedicated of Vichy collaborationists: at the top was President Georges Scapini, a lawyer and reactionary deputy in the National Assembly who later became head of the Berlin-based war prisoner diplomatic service; his second was Vice President Fernand de Brinon, a journalist with Nazi sympathies who later became the Vichy regime’s representative in Paris. In association with its German partner the German–French Society (Deutsch-französische Gesellschaft), the France–Germany Committee launched the bilingual monthly review *Cahiers franco-allemands* (*French–German Notebooks*) in 1936. Most of the articles on France were written by French experts and translated into German or vice versa.

As far as German social policy was concerned, most of the relevant articles were written by German authors from the Reich’s higher state administration. Their main aim was to create a positive image of the German welfare state abroad. In June 1936 Abraham Frowein, President of the German Group at the International Chamber of Commerce, wrote an article on Germany’s new economic and social policies, while in November 1936 Friedrich Syrup, President of the Reich Institution for Job Placement and Unemployment Insurance (Reichsanstalt für Arbeitsvermittlung und Arbeitslosenversicherung), presented Germany’s fight against unemployment.28 There was also an article on the idea behind the Beauty of Work programme as well as its current tasks, written by its deputy head.29 These texts were mostly pure propaganda.

3. Extra-parliamentary French right

During the 1920s existing extra-parliamentary right-wing opposition groups such as the Action Française (French Action) were joined by newly emerging associations such as Le Faisceau (The Fasces) and Croix-de-Feu (Cross of Fire). There is an ongoing debate between French historians, beginning with René Rémond in the 1950s,30 and revisionist historians, mainly non-French, about the

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fascist character of these groups. Although they were clearly anti-parliamentary and corporatist, they are generally not recognized as fascist by French historians. Within these groups, there were even more radical movements and suborganizations, such as the Volontaires Nationaux (National Volunteers), a group of young rightists inside the Croix-de-Feu. For them, the crucial elements of a new economic order were economic planning and technocracy, which they regarded as more important than corporatism. These ideas were clearly inspired by fascist thinking, without referring directly to National Socialism.

During the mid-1930s the technocratic model became increasingly popular in right-wing circles. On 9 July 1934, a plan to reform the French state was prepared by a group of individuals from across the political spectrum, including syndicalists, socialists of the French Section of the Workers’ International, neo-socialists, young radicals, Agrarian Party members, Croix-de-Feu activists, and young patriots. Among its sympathizers were a number of civil servants, belonging in particular to the Inspectorate of Finances, the Council of State, and the Court of Audit ( Inspection des Finances, Conseil d’État, and Cour des Comptes), who collaborated in writing the paper but refrained from signing it for reasons of administrative discipline.

The technocrats’ proposal emerged from the experience of crisis. Their paper stated that the scientific developments of recent decades had increased the power of man over nature and society, while simultaneously decreasing the individual’s personal sense of control. That is why civilization seemed unsteady—and the balance needed to be restored by the social sciences. Furthermore, the forces of morality had to be strengthened, as emphasized in the first paragraph of their manifesto. The sense of malaise threatened to precipitate a civil war; therefore, a comprehensive political and social reorganization was necessary in order to resolve the economic crisis.


32 For the debate around corporatism and technocracy see the introduction by Sandrine Kott and Kiran Patel in this volume.

Political and economic recovery was to be achieved by promoting the idea of service, thereby guaranteeing liberty through order, true equality, and the restoration of hierarchies. To reform the state, it was crucial to put France’s political institutions in order. Through structural reforms, government programmes would gradually replace individual profit motives by highlighting the joy of creativity and social service. Producers would be organized into corporate entities to resolve conflicts between labour and capital, thus saving energy otherwise wasted on class struggle.

From 1935 on the technocrats gained increasing influence within France’s ministerial bureaucracy, especially in the transitional cabinet under Prime Minister Pierre Laval. Supported by Raoul Dautry, Taylorist technocrats aimed to reform public finances; meanwhile, technocrats from the X-Crise group (such as Jean Coutrot and Alfred Sauvy) joined the staff of the Ministry of National Economy (Ministère de l’Économie Nationale), headed by the socialist Charles Spinasse, during the 1936–7 Popular Front government. After the installation of the Vichy regime, some of these technocrats were among the first to offer their collaboration to the German occupiers.

Meanwhile, neo-corporatist thinking also remained important. This was promoted by the French Social Party (Parti Social Français or PSF), which emerged from the Croix-de-Feu movement and existed from 1936 to 1940. Social questions were of major interest for the PSF, which rejected class struggle in favour of a corporatist organization of labour, one inspired by Austrian and Portuguese models, and not National Socialism. The PSF defended trade union pluralism, in which workers could form unions as desired and join the organization of their choice. Regarding the organization of the economy, they opposed statism and excessive interventions by the state bureaucracy. Because of their affinity with political Catholicism, they kept their distance from both the Fascist Italian and the Nazi German economic models.

Most of France’s right-wing groups wanted to transcend...
Marxism—see, for example, Henri De Man’s 1929 book *Au-delà du marxisme* (*Beyond Marxism*)—in order to establish a new authoritarian regime. They combined nationalist with socialist elements drawn from revolutionary syndicalism, and revolted against historical materialism. Most but not all of them were inspired by a neo-socialist revision of Marxism based on *planisme* (‘plan-ism’), which had become an influential theory of economic planning since the late 1920s. The right remained fragmented during much of the interwar period, but began to gain importance towards the mid 1930s. Two prominent figures were Hubert Lagardelle and Marcel Déat, who each in turn became Minister of Labour under the Vichy regime.

These right-wing groups were convinced that social tensions and social inequality could be overcome by a corporatist reorganization of society, and some even acquired political influence during the late 1930s and the subsequent German occupation. Other right-wing political leaders, however, such as François de la Roque (Croix-de-Feu) and Georges Valois (Le Faisceau), remained aloof from collaboration.

II German Occupiers as Benevolent Observers of the Vichy Social and Labour Measures

This was the political situation on the ground when Germany occupied France. As described, the occupier’s attempts to contact French government organizations were quite successful. The Germans began their propaganda, which showed an awareness of social issues. The *Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau* (*Social Policy World Review*), a German monthly published by the RAM during the war, was mainly intended to provide German specialists with factual information on international matters. It offers some clues as to how the RAM perceived French social policy between 1940 and 1944.

Most issues featured an introductory propaganda article praising Germany’s social achievements, contrasting them with the enemy’s policies, in particular, the faults of the British social welfare system. There was often positive commentary on Italy’s social policies, including a series on Italian social security reforms. By comparison,

37 Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left*, 16.
38 See Hubert Lagardelle’s various writings; Marcel Déat, *Perspectives socialistes* (Paris, 1930).
39 On the *SPWR* see Sandrine Kott’s essay in this volume.
there were few references to French issues and little interest was shown in French social policy, its history, and its perspectives; the only long article was devoted to the corporatist organization of the trades under the Vichy regime.  

Generally, the major focus was on Britain and its social issues, especially the conceptualization and realization of its social policies. France was of minor importance, the subject of just eighty-one published articles in four and a half years. As Table 1 shows, interest peaked during the second year of German occupation (that is, between April 1941 and March 1942), when around 37 per cent of these articles were published. The following two years showed moderate interest, representing 21 and 22 per cent respectively, while the first and last volumes (1 and 5) of the *Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau* devoted even fewer articles to French topics. Overall, ‘work and wages’ was by far the dominant focus.

| Table 1. France-Related Articles in the *Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau*, 1940/1–1944/5 |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------|--------|
|                                 | Work and wages  | Social insurance and administration | Work conditions and safety | Misc. | Totals |
| Vol. 1 (1940/1)                 | 5               | 1               | 0      | 3      | 9      |
| Vol. 2 (1941/2)                 | 15              | 9               | 3      | 3      | 30     |
| Vol. 3 (1942/3)                 | 8               | 3               | 5      | 1      | 17     |
| Vol. 4 (1943/4)                 | 15              | 3               | 0      | 0      | 18     |
| Vol. 5 (1944/5)                 | 3               | 1               | 0      | 3      | 7      |
| Totals                          | 46              | 17              | 8      | 10     | 81     |

*Source: Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau*, vols. 1–5 (1940/1–1944/5).

In 1943–4, when the transfer of French workers to Germany was intensified by the introduction of Compulsory Work Service (Service du Travail Obligatoire or STO) and the Sauckel actions (the measures imposed by Fritz Sauckel, the Nazi regime’s General Plenipotentiary for Labour Deployment, or Generalbevollmächtigter für den Arbeitseinsatz), more than 80 per cent of these articles dealt with labour market questions. Within this category, subjects such as

unemployment, job creation, and labour deployment had became dominant in the first two volumes. The *Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau* also cited the unemployment statistics of various other industrialized countries, contrasting Germany’s superior performance with the high unemployment seen elsewhere.

Another social policy topic was the drafting of France’s Charter of Labour (Charte du Travail), with articles commenting first on its conceptualization and then its implementation.\(^{41}\) Other articles dealt with particular segments of the labour market, such as colonial labour, women’s labour, and domestic labour. Articles on wage issues highlighted the situation in several branches of industry, as well as the evolution of salaries and wages since the beginning of the war. For example, one report focused on the abolition of excessively low wages, describing a directive from France’s Ministry of Finance to increase pay in the lowest wage brackets by 5 to 10 per cent.\(^{42}\)

A more detailed analysis of two randomly chosen articles will give further insights into how the RAM’s information department viewed social and labour issues in occupied France. In the first volume of the *Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau*, two articles dealt with the situation in France before the German occupation: one on labour deployment via emergency decrees, the other on the employment of colonial workers. The first article explained the directives published on 29 February 1940 in the *Journal officiel* (the French Republic’s official gazette), citing the radio speech given by French Minister of Finance Paul Reynaud in which he summed up the harsh constraints imposed on liberal France by the poor economic situation.\(^{43}\) The second article referred to a French government report on an inspection tour conducted by France’s Minister of Labour Charles Pomaret at a reception camp in Marseille.\(^{44}\) While criticizing the lack of adequate clothing for France’s incoming colonial workers, the German commentator also tried to describe the circumstances of the relevant social welfare measures taken in this area.

The general tone did not change after the German occupation began. A short report on France’s job creation programme referred to a speech given by the French Minister of Labour on 19 September

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\(^{42}\) ‘Ausmerzung von Elendslöhnen’, *SPWR*, 2/4 (July 1941), 10.

\(^{43}\) ‘Arbeitseinsatz durch Not-Verordnungen in Frankreich’, *SPWR*, 1/1 (Apr. 1940), 4–5.

\(^{44}\) ‘Einsatz kolonialer Arbeitskräfte in Frankreich’, *SPWR*, 1/2 (May 1940), 12–13.
1940 and a newspaper article published in Le Temps on 22 September 1940, both of which explained the decisions taken by the French Council of Ministers. The introduction praised General Pétain’s policy actions, stating that his government had created jobs for the French people by establishing a New Economic Order.

A sample of Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau articles from 1941 illustrates the general strategy of evaluating the French government’s policies positively. For example, an article on a ten-year national infrastructure development plan began by praising the efforts at reducing unemployment of its creator, François Lehideux, head of the General Delegation for National Infrastructure (Délégation Générale à l’Équipement National). The RAM commentator welcomed decisions taken by the French government on the enlargement of agricultural areas, the production of synthetic fuel, and the construction of public works. The article was one of several positive reports on French laws that supposedly brought significant social progress, such as the introduction of the wage book (Lohnbuch) on 20 June 1941.

The core idea of the underlying act—a comprehensive monitoring of wage payments—is presented as an allegedly beneficial reform for French workers.

Meanwhile, Britain’s social policy measures were presented in a consistently negative light, thereby framing Germany’s occupation of France as a positive catalyst for reforming the French state. There were no critical reports on French social policy at all. The RAM was eager to support the Vichy regime in its efforts to build public confidence. Such favourable statements on Vichy figures were conceived as propaganda and clearly contrasted with internal documents in which German officials expressed critical reservations about their French collaborators.

On the occasion of the Fête du Travail (Labour Day), newly instituted as an official holiday on 1 May under the Vichy regime, the Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau welcomed the introduction of a Medal of Labour (Médaille du Travail) in France for ‘workers of the forehead’ and ‘workers of the fist’ (Arbeiter der Stirn and Arbeiter der Faust), a pair of Nazi expressions that equated intellectual workers with

45 ‘Frankreich: Arbeitsbeschaffungsprogramm’, SPWR, 1/7 (Oct. 1940), 7–9.
48 See e.g. AN Paris, AJ 40/413, MBF report on hostile ideological opponents in France, 10 Nov. 1941.
manual labourers), stressing that the French government was following the examples of Germany and Italy. According to the article, this was in stark contrast to the trade unionism of the past, which had been oriented towards class struggle. In another case, a short article dating from September 1942 on the reorganization of labour supervision argued that the relevant legislation had French roots going back to the nineteenth century. Because of the increasing number of new responsibilities, an amending law had been passed in October 1941, leading to the establishment of new supervising offices, whose subsequent evolution was regarded with approval, with reference to an article in *Les Nouveaux Temps*, a collaborationist newspaper founded under the Vichy regime. The tone of the RAM reports remained unchanged: while they emphasized France’s own social policy traditions, its New Order was presented as an appropriate way to include France in the circle of Europe’s fascist powers.

In 1943–4 reports on labour matters became even more dominant, constituting over 80 per cent of the France-related articles in the *Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau*. Featured subjects included the introduction of the work ID document (*Arbeitsausweis*) pursuant to new French legislation, the establishment of an inter-ministerial General Commissariat in charge of labour deployment (the Commissariat Général au STO), and the setting up of regional committees for labour deployment. It is only mentioned in passing that this General Commissariat was headed by the German officer Robert Weinmann. Another article summarized the French Ministry of Labour’s responsibilities regarding labour deployment, thereby reflecting the RAM’s own strategy of emphasizing French responsibility in these matters. According to the German commentator, the most important tasks for the French ministry were to supervise the transfer of French workers to Germany, and to shift workers in France from peacetime industries to armaments production.

In terms of social insurance topics, the tone of the articles was

49 ‘Stiftung eines “Ordens der Arbeit”’, *SPWR*, 3/3 (June 1942), 19.
quite similar: whether dealing with minor reforms to health insurance or modifications to accident insurance, the emphasis was always on the French origins of the new measures. Such reports explained in great detail the relevant insurance regulations and benefit improvements, with typical subjects ranging from assistance for particular subgroups, such as retired mariners, to supplementary allowances for single-income families. None of these articles investigated fundamental questions regarding the reorganization of French social insurance; nor was there any mention of studying the potential transferability of German concepts to France’s social security system.

As the Sozialpolitische Weltrundschau was not widely distributed in the occupied territories, the German occupiers had to seek other ways of disseminating propaganda. In fact, they showed little interest in directly influencing Vichy social policy, but tried instead to improve the image of German social policy by translating German books and brochures into French. In 1940–1 the pro-German Maison Internationale d’Édition (International Publishing House) in Brussels printed dozens of these brochures, including several related to social policy, mostly written by little-known German authors. They were published in the two series L’Allemagne d’aujourd’hui (Today’s Germany) and La force économique du Reich (The Economic Strength of the Reich). Little is known about their reception in France, other than that they were held by certain French public libraries.

In Paris the far-right publisher Fernand Sorlot and his company, Nouvelles éditions latines, played an important role. In 1934 Sorlot had released an unauthorized French translation of Hitler’s Mein Kampf, and in 1939 he published books by Hermann Göring and Walther Darré. During the German occupation he launched a
III German Practices of Administering Social Policy in Occupied France

Having occupied the French capital, the German Wehrmacht installed the MBF headquarters at the city’s Hotel Majestic. Although attached to the armed forces, the MBF was a civil administration with staff members recruited from the Reich ministries in Berlin and other parts of Germany’s bureaucracy. In his final report after Germany’s withdrawal from France in 1944, Elmar Michel (head of the MBF civil and economic administration) wrote that the MBF staff consisted of skilled civil servants with administrative experience placed under military discipline.59

In western and northern European countries, the German occupiers used a system of supervisory administration in which the local administrations continued to operate under the close control of the occupiers.60 In France, this meant that the government was retained and the military administration relied on a small group of experts to take care of social policy issues. They belonged to the economic division, which was responsible for supervising the French economy, and formed Dept. VII: Labour Deployment and Social Issues (Arbeitseinsatz und Sozialfragen). Its head was surnamed Eckelmann,

59 BArch-MA, RW 35/244, Elmar Michel’s final report, 1944.
a senior civil servant whose peacetime title of Senior Governmental Counsellor (Oberregierungsrat) had been supplemented with the wartime title of Senior War Administration Counsellor (Oberkriegsverwaltungsrat). He had already headed the Department for Labour Issues in the staff of Walther Funk, the General Plenipotentiary for the Economy (Generalbevollmächtigter für die Wirtschaft), before the latter was downgraded in November 1939 and replaced by Hermann Göring. Several members of Funk’s disbanded staff were delegated to a special task force (Sonderstab) in the town of Giessen, where they were to prepare administrative plans for use in western European territories that might be conquered in the future. Of the resulting seventeen economic decrees, only one dealt with the labour market, and none with social policy.

With the occupation of France, the special task force was almost entirely transferred to Paris, where it would form the core of the MBF’s economic administration in Dept. VII. In May 1941 it consisted of the following seven subsections: (i) labour deployment of French workers, unemployment benefits, labour deployment of war prisoners; (2) working conditions, labour law, personnel matters; (3) social insurance, supervision of German health insurance in France; (4) recruitment of workers for the Reich; (5) propaganda for worker recruitment, worker transports, labour statistics; (6) care of workers sent to the Reich; and (7) worker recruitment medical issues. These seven subsections were headed by either a War Administration Counsellor (Kriegsverwaltungsrat) or an Administrator (Sachverwalter). The overall staff included thirteen of these Counsellors and Administrators, along with six secretarial assistants. In examining Dept. VII’s administrative structure, it is clear that two main goals took priority: supporting the recruitment of workers for the Reich, and fulfilling the occupiers’ aims in the French labour market through social policy. Although the occupiers might be expected to influence French social policy through subsections 2 and 3, these each consisted of a single civil servant with no support staff.

When the Germans withdrew from France in 1944, Dept. VII prepared its own final report on its activities within the MBF administration. It stated that the implementation of social policy

61 Hans Umbreit, Der Militärbefehlshaber in Frankreich 1940–1944 (Boppard, 1968), 5.
62 BArch, RW 33/264, final report of social insurance subsection, MBF labour division, 1944.
reforms had been of little importance in managing the three branches of social security, namely, health, accident, and pensions insurance. According to this report, the MBF neither intended to reform France’s social insurance framework in line with the German model, nor was it instructed to do so. Its functions were limited to creating basic structures in the main fields of German interest, especially in terms of safeguarding the benefits of French workers employed by the Wehrmacht or by German firms operating in France.\(^\text{63}\)

Consequently, Dept. VII refrained from introducing elements of German social legislation in occupied France. According to its final report of 1944, this was primarily because of a lack of staff. Moreover, the MBF’s administrative officials had a particular view of France’s social insurance system: in their eyes, the relevant French procedures were overly complicated, and thus in need of simplification. For example, the existing French practice of paying monthly contributions to small insurance funds by post was judged impractical by German paymaster officials, such as those at the Wehrmacht and at German-controlled construction sites. At the same time, the German authorities wanted to avoid disadvantaging French workers employed by the Wehrmacht or by German companies. The MBF officials therefore negotiated with the French Ministry of Labour, and they ultimately agreed that German employers’ contributions would be paid into a central body known as the Regional Service (Service Régional), as suggested by the Ministry’s Directorate-General of Social Insurance (Direction Générale des Assurances Sociales). Moreover, the MBF was also successful in extending social security coverage to workers over the age of 60.\(^\text{64}\) These new practices for workers employed by the occupiers corresponded to Germany’s war aims, and were not originally meant to be introduced into France’s regular social security system. German employers, especially the Wehrmacht, could easily finance such improvements because they possessed abundant liquid assets as a result of the


Nonetheless, these special regulations for German employers did have some impact on French social insurance reforms. According to the 1944 report, the French Ministry of Labour wanted to extend such practices to France’s entire workforce. For example, the collective payment of employers’ contributions to the Regional Service was extended to other groups of workers by a law passed on 6 January 1942. In French companies with more than fifty employees, the employer now transferred the entire payable sum every three months. Meanwhile, the extension of social insurance coverage to all French workers over the age of 60 was decreed on 14 March 1941.\footnote{See ‘Allocations aux vieux travailleurs salariés’, \textit{Journal officiel}, 14 Mar. 1941.} However, further attempts to introduce wide-ranging social insurance reforms ultimately failed. The Ministry of Labour in Paris developed plans to centralize the small, scattered health insurance funds by uniting local health, maternity, and burial funds in a single regional body, one for each of France’s administrative departments (départements). The corresponding draft decree was approved by the German administration in February 1942, but the Vichy government ultimately rejected the reform project. As emphasized in the German report of 1944, the MBF administration did not wish to interfere in France’s internal social policy affairs. It concluded that—beyond the collaborationists at the Ministry of Labour in Paris—there was no support for adopting the traditional German concepts of \textit{Gemeinschaft} and \textit{Lastenausgleich} (communality and burden-sharing).\footnote{BArch, RW 35/264, final report of the social insurance subsection, MBF labour division, 1944, 39–7.}

The interwar period had seen efforts towards a bilateral German–French social insurance accord, but negotiations were ultimately cancelled in 1932. An accord of this sort was needed because of gaps in coverage for people who had moved to work abroad. When talks on the matter resumed in 1941, the context was naturally very different: the German occupiers were now recruiting French nationals to work in the Reich. On 14 October 1941 the RAM and the French Minister of Labour negotiated an arrangement whereby
French workers and their families would receive benefits from the German health insurance system after returning to France, even to the non-occupied zone. French workers willing to move to Germany thus had a double incentive: not only higher wages, but also more complete social security coverage, including for their families. The corresponding agreement was finally signed in 1943, as noted and welcomed by the French press. French workers integrated into the German social insurance system were consequently suspended from their domestic insurance schemes. After 1 July 1943 their benefits were paid out by the local Departmental Funds (caisses départementales), a practice that strengthened their active role as centralized bodies. The awarding of benefits followed French legislation, but the payout was assessed according to German conditions—for example, by including free medication and medical treatment. The resulting costs had to be reimbursed by Germany’s Reich Insurance (Reichsversicherung).

There is little evidence of the German administration influencing French legislation on labour market regulation. The Charter of Labour mentioned above was developed at the French Ministry of Labour (under Minister René Belin) by a Committee for Professional Organization (Comité de l’Organisation Professionnelle). The MBF administration wanted the Committee to work rapidly, but refrained from exercising direct influence on its discussions. When the Charter was complete, it put an end to unionist political activities and the right to strike, while creating obligatory local workers’ syndicates. Elmar Michel, as head of the MBF economic administration, approved the French draft, but reserved the right of the Germans to supervise the appointment of senior staff. The German side requested only a few modifications to the Charter, such as further clarification through additional implementation rules. Even after its enactment on 4 October 1941, the Charter of Labour was still monitored by the German authorities, including the RAM in Berlin.

69 BArch-MA, RW 35/1407, article from Paris-Soir, 28 July 1943, ‘Le travail français en Allemagne: des assurances protègent les ouvriers et leurs familles’.
71 AN Paris, AJ 40/443, MBF report for Apr./May 1941, dated 31 May 1941.
74 ‘Die soziale Neuordnung und die Charte du Travail’, SPWR, 4/5 (June 1943), 18–19.
When the STO was established in early 1943, its coercive character was somewhat tempered by the accompanying benefits. For the German side, the benefits paid to forced workers by the mandatory insurance system were only a minor burden on Germany’s financing strategy, since it had already turned to aggressive deficit spending to boost the war effort. On the French side, the effects were more noteworthy because of the gap between local wages and those earned in Germany. Moreover, the higher social benefits received in Germany led to dissatisfaction among the workforce in France. The French social insurance system reacted by adjusting its domestic benefit levels to the standards set by the Germans.

Although such competition in social policy matters did lead to some improvements in the French health insurance system, a larger legislative reform effort remained out of reach during the war years. However, it was more about partial revisions than the wholesale adoption of a ‘German model’. German practices may have led to limited improvements, but there was neither an active nor an intentional transfer of reforms from the German mandatory insurance system to the French one.

It is clear that no plan for the reorganization of French social policy had been developed, and the German occupiers preferred not to interfere in French legislation. Limited social policy amendments were pursued only when it came to issues closely tied to German interests, such as the transfer of French workers to the Reich. An inspection of files from the German embassy in Paris shows a similar neglect of social policy matters: its local propaganda efforts concentrated on anti-Bolshevik and anti-Jewish pamphlets, prepared in collaboration with the French publisher Hachette.  

IV Conclusion

When the Italian Fascists came to power in 1922, most European countries saw a sea change in the political debate. The idea of an authoritarian system had become a reality for the first time, and Mussolini’s political practices served as an inspiration for a potential corporatist transformation of society. Right-wing groups and movements gained in strength and developed programmes that were often modelled on the Fascist state. When the Nazi Party came

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See various files in PAAA, Paris, 1173.
to power in Germany, this effect was further strengthened, although in a more ambiguous way. The radical and brutal character of the Nazi transformation often provoked scepticism, even among admirers of corporatism. As shown above, French commentators were quite aware of developments in Germany, and doubted that German measures could be adapted to France.

Social and labour policy did not play an important role in this context, because the emphasis lay on the development of society as a whole. However, some of the relevant measures taken by the Nazi regime in this area did attract particular attention, such as the introduction of new welfare organizations and the radical change in labour relations. Although the Bismarckian 'German model' dating from the 1880s was well known, it did not play an important part in French debates of the 1930s. International discussions, especially in France, focused much more on Nazi Germany’s labour market regulations than its social policy issues.

In countries occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War there were certainly opportunities to introduce more radical reforms, such as France’s Charter of Labour, and, more generally, the Vichy regime also took steps towards a corporatist reshaping of French society. Such measures, although not a reaction to any clear German pressure, were in tune with the general trends of the time, and were viewed positively by RAM commentators. Nevertheless, the MBF administration was not interested in implementing German social legislation on French soil. The MBF’s Dept. VII did not act as an adviser, forerunner, or executor of such measures: instead, it focused on its main policy aims, which involved the recruitment of French workers and the implementation of racially motivated deportations. There is no evidence that the German occupiers had any plans or desire to promote or influence the development of French society during the Second World War.