

France, Le Havre and the Politics of Trafficking, 1919–39

‘La Nouvelle Activité des Trafiquants de Femmes’: France, Le Havre and the Politics of Trafficking, 1919–1939

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This article examines how the ‘moral panic’ about sex trafficking during the interwar years manifested itself in Le Havre, a French port which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had become synonymous with the illegal trade. Interrogating hitherto neglected material in departmental archives, it explores how the problem of the trafficking of women (*la traite des femmes*) changed after 1919, how the administrative consequences of directives by the League of Nations could influence behaviours in everyday life and how an episode of female migration from Eastern Europe interacted with French political agendas to magnify and, in some cases, generate a problem.

On 12 April 1927 Dame Rachel Crowdy, Chief of the Social Section of the Secretariat of the League of Nations, gave a speech at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London on the humanitarian activities of the League. Identifying the suppression of the traffic in women and children as being among the ‘most difficult [problems] with which the League deals’, she chose to focus particularly on the recently published experts’ report on the extent of this traffic, observing that:

the Press of every country has been full of it during the last three weeks, and the Report has, I am told, established a League record for sales. It was made available to the public only a few weeks ago, yet already five thousand copies have been issued and another edition is being prepared.¹

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¹ Rachel E. Crowdy, ‘The Humanitarian Activities of the League of Nations’, *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 6 (1927), 153–69, here 154, 156. The phrase ‘la nouvelle activité des trafiquants des femmes’ appears in a letter written by the prefect of Seine-Inférieure; Le Préfet de la Seine-Inférieure to Messieurs les Maires, le commandant de la Gendarmerie, les Commissaires Centraux de Police du département, 16 Sep. 1939, 4 M 608, Archives départementales, Seine-Maritime, Rouen.

The report in question was published in 1927.² It was the outcome of a three-year investigation funded by the Rockefeller Foundation's Bureau of Social Hygiene, involving field visits and interviews with procurers, madams and prostitutes, as well as the use of official sources. Its impetus had been the suggestion in 1923 by Grace Abbot, the US delegate to the League of Nations' Advisory Committee on the Traffic of Women and Children (TWC), that the Committee seek 'to obtain official and accurate information regarding the existence and nature of the traffic in women and children'.³ The report defined 'trafficking' as 'the direct or indirect procurement and transportation for gain to a foreign country of women and girls for the sexual gratification of one or more other persons' (a wide definition that included girls who became 'mistresses of wealthy men')⁴ and stressed the role played by state-regulated prostitution within it. The popular currency of the campaign against trafficking – a high-profile cause adopted by feminist groups, social reformers, internationalists and the press during the interwar years – was demonstrated not only by the rapidity with which the League of Nations report sold but also by its dissemination in other publications: in Britain, H. Wilson Harris's *Human Merchandise: A Study of the International Traffic in Women* (1928), a somewhat sentimentalised *compte-rendu* of the key findings, was a best-seller, while in France the campaign featured in Albert Londres's investigative reportage, published in English as *The Road to Buenos Ayres* in 1928.⁵

² *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children: Enquiry into the International Organisation of, and Certain Routes Followed by, the Traffic between Various Countries of Europe, North Africa, North America, South America and Central America* (Geneva: LNP, 1927).

³ League of Nations, *Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children: Minutes of the Second Session* (Geneva: LNP, 1923), 27.

⁴ *Report of the Special Body of Experts*, 8–9.

⁵ Daniel Gorman, 'Empire, Internationalism, and the Campaign against the Traffic in Women and Children in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 19, 2 (2008), 186–216, here 211; Albert Londres, *Le Chemin de Buenos-Aires (La Traite des Blanches)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1927), 245–52.

The 1927 report, which was followed in 1932 by the *Enquiry into Traffic in Women and Children in the East*, was the high point of the work of the TWC.⁶ In 1919 the newly formed League of Nations declared in article 23 (c) of its Covenant that it would take over the anti-sex-trafficking movement which had been gathering momentum before the First World War, entrusting itself ‘with the General supervision over the execution of agreements with regard to the traffic in women and children’.⁷ During the fifteen years of the TWC’s existence (1921–36), the League sought to construct an apparatus that would bring together pre-1914 conventions, laws and agreements and promote a new way of thinking about trafficking, brothels and prostitution.⁸

In recent years there has been a growing scholarly consensus that within the history of the short-lived League the work of the TWC provides a limited example of success, outlining, as Stephen Legg has argued, ‘the possibilities for international, consensual, regulation in an increasingly globalized world’.⁹ The internationalism of the League, however, clashed with imperial and national interests; attempts by the TWC to encourage the abolition of tolerated brothels generated debates about what constituted ‘international’ issues, into which the League could legitimately intervene, and domestic issues, which were viewed by individual nation states as beyond its purview.¹⁰ Nowhere was this debate more marked than in France. The persistence of regulated prostitution in France meant that during negotiations within the TWC French delegates felt the need to stress the distinction between the traffic in women across borders (an international issue) and regulated prostitution (which, they argued, was a

⁶ *Enquiry into Traffic in Women and Children in the East* (Geneva: LNP, 1932); Barbara Metzger, ‘Towards an International Human Rights Regime during the Inter-War Years: The League of Nations’ Combat of Traffic in Women and Children’, in Kevin Grant, Philippa Levine and Frank Trentmann, eds., *Beyond Sovereignty: Britain, Empire and Transnationalism, c.1880–1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 54–79, here 65.

⁷ Quoted in Metzger, ‘Towards an International’, 54.

⁸ Stephen Legg, “‘The Life of Individuals as well as of Nations’: International Law and the League of Nations’ Anti-Trafficking Governmentalities”, *The Leiden Journal of International Law*, 25 (2012), 647–64, here 654.

⁹ Legg, ‘Individuals’, 648.

¹⁰ See Stephen Legg, ‘Of scales, networks and assemblages: the League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 34, 2 (2009), 234–53.

national issue).¹¹ However, despite all the recent work on the campaign against the traffic in women and children, be it on intersections between internationalism and empire in the interwar years, transnational public movements or the influence of feminist abolitionists in the work of the TWC, research which has examined the issue from a French perspective has been somewhat specific, linking it either to French imperial and racial discourses or to the development of French feminism.¹² The relative absence of research on France is all the more surprising since it was a proposal by a French delegate to amend the age limit in the 1921 Convention – a move which would have made it illegal to take a woman over the age of twenty-one to a foreign country for immoral purposes, and which was widely seen as a *de facto* means of protecting state-regulated prostitution inside France – which split the TWC’s feminist abolitionist supporters and had such a detrimental effect on backing for the organisation after 1931.¹³

The purpose of this article is to examine how the issue of trafficking manifested itself in Le Havre, a French port in the department of Seine-Inférieure, which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had become synonymous with the illegal trade.¹⁴ The choice of a northern French port, rather than the Mediterranean port of Marseille, notorious for prostitution and

¹¹ Hennequin to Clauzel, 5 Feb. 1924, FR/MAE SDN 1755, fol. 25, Archives diplomatiques, Nantes.

¹² Legg, ‘Of scales, networks and assemblages’; Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 245–50; Metzger, ‘Towards an International’; Daniel Gorman, ‘Empire, Internationalism’, in Paul Knepper, *International Crime in the Twentieth Century: The League of Nations Era, 1919–1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Jessica Pliley, ‘Claims to Protection: The Rise and Fall of Feminist Abolitionism in the League of Nations’ Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, 1919–1936’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 22, 4 (2010), 90–113; Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 99–128; Karen Offen, ‘Madame Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix, the Josephine Butler of France’, *Women’s History Review*, 17, 2 (2008), 239–55.

¹³ The 1921 Convention stipulated that it was illegal to transport a prostitute from one country to another if the prostitute was under the age of twenty-one; LN, ‘International Conventions for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children’, 30 September 1921 (Geneva: LNP, 1921), 3; see Pliley, ‘Claims to Protection’, 101–02.

¹⁴ A claim made by, among others, Madame Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix writing under her pen name, Savioz, see Savioz, ‘La traite des blanches’, *La Grande Revue*, 7 (Aug. 1902), 281–94.

organised crime (the *milieu*) in the interwar years, is deliberate.¹⁵ Le Havre was the home of the French Line (*Compagnie Générale Transatlantique*; CGT), a leading French shipping company which ran regular Atlantic crossings (out of the ports of Le Havre, Saint-Nazaire and Bordeaux) to the United States, the Caribbean and, notably, South America, the continent which was popularly believed to be a hotbed of sexual corruption.¹⁶ Using reports written by French police officials who were tasked with carrying out surveillance of potential traffickers and their victims in the port itself, the article will show how local policies evolved in response to national and international pressures. Local reports, examined in relation to the work of the League of Nations and the campaigns, both French and international, to combat the trade led by various social and feminist movements, allow more than a simple corrective to hysterical claims about ‘a global association of traffickers, backed by an immense budget’.¹⁷ The problem of the traffic in women was used as a means of articulating anxieties about changes to the social, racial and gender order following the upheaval of the First World War in France, as in many Western countries.¹⁸ An empirical treatment of hitherto neglected material shows what was at stake in everyday lives; how the problem of the traffic in women was conceptualised differently before and after the First World War; how trafficking was understood socially, politically and in terms of gender and race and how humanitarian interventions could be used to bolster imperial interests.

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International political interest in trafficking after 1919 was a legacy of activities that had taken place pre-1914. On 21 June 1899 the first International Congress for the Suppression of

¹⁵ See Marie Paoleschi, *Marie la jolie*, récit présenté et recueilli par Jean Bazel (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1979); and Harry J. Greenwall, *The Underworld of Paris* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1921), 56.

¹⁶ Donna Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 5–7.

¹⁷ Anon., ‘A la Ligue rouennais pour le relèvement de la moralité publique: Une conférence de Mme Legrand-Falco sur “L’Esclave Blanche”’, *Le Journal de Rouen*, 31 Jan. 1931, 3.

¹⁸ Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1994), 5; Pamela Haag, *Consent: Sexual Rights and the Transformation of American Liberalism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 63–89.

White Slavery opened in London. Reporting on the event, *Le Temps*, the most influential newspaper in the French Third Republic, commented:

The white slave trade is a new development – no equivocations, please. Fifty years ago, the trafficking of these unfortunates, who are sent from one country to another to serve as instruments of pleasure, did not exist. Or at least we were unaware of it. As the Congress continues it will examine a planned agreement between all nations to reach these miserable wretches who deliver themselves to the white slave trade.¹⁹

This short report offers a condensed insight into a phenomenon that became a *cause célèbre* among social reformers and feminist groupings in Europe and the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century. Posited as a new criminal activity, ‘the white slave trade’ – or, to be more specific, the moral panic which surrounded it – was inextricably linked to the population movements which went hand-in-hand with industrialisation in western Europe and increasing urbanisation in eastern Europe, and reflected a culturally specific view of prostitution as commercialised vice.²⁰ Evidence of international trafficking began to emerge when the campaign led by Josephine Butler against the enactment of the Contagious Diseases Act in garrison and port towns (1864–69) revealed that many of the young girls whom the campaign sought to ‘rescue’ were not to be found in Britain. In 1880 the British Home Office investigated reports of trafficking to the Continent and found evidence of ‘a small international traffic in English girls’ to Belgium, France and Holland for the purpose of

¹⁹ ‘La traite des blanches, en effet, est un fait nouveau – pas d’allusion, je vous prie. – Il y a cinquante ans, le trafic des malheureuses qui sont envoyées d’un pays dans l’autre, pour servir d’instrument de plaisir, n’existait pas. Du moins, on ne le connaissait pas. [...] Le congrès aura dans la suite à examiner un projet d’entente entre toutes les nations pour atteindre les misérables qui se livrent au trafic des blanches.’ ‘Congrès International pour la répression de la traite des blanches (De notre correspondant particulier)’, *Le Temps*, 23 June 1899, 1.

²⁰ London-based physician and reformer Dr Michael Ryan is posited as being the first to coin the collocation ‘white slavery’ in 1839; see Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 35.

prostitution.²¹ The publication of W. T. Stead's highly controversial and sensationalist series of articles on child prostitution, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* (1885), exacerbated public outrage.²² This concern was not limited to Britain. As Keely Stauter-Halsted's research into the 1892 L'viv White Slavery Trial has demonstrated, in eastern Europe, and in Galicia specifically, the 'various perils of modernity' found an ideal scapegoat in the stereotypical figure of the malicious Jew entrapping Polish women into a life of vice,²³ while in the United States crusades against white slavery were linked to structural changes and a construction of white womanhood which connected racial and sexual purity.²⁴ In June 1899 the first International Congress for the Suppression of White Slavery was held in London; three years later, the French government, in response to the efforts of voluntary organisations, took the initiative and convened an international conference on the subject in Paris. Delegates from sixteen European nations attended, drawing up an 'International Agreement for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic', which in 1904 was ratified by twelve states.²⁵

The issue was also being taken up by women's groups, such as the International Abolitionist Federation in Britain and the National Council of Frenchwomen (*Le Conseil National des Femmes Françaises*; CNFF) in France, and by social hygiene activists, notably the French Association for the Repression of the White Slave Trade and the Protection of Young Women (*Association pour la répression de la Traite des Blanches et la préservation de la jeune fille*) and the American National Vigilance Association (NVA), and had gained significant public prominence by 1913. International cooperation was abruptly halted by the outbreak of the First World War, but in 1919 pressure from international women's organisations in Paris ensured that the issue was addressed by the newly formed League of Nations and included in

²¹ Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 87.

²² W. T. Stead, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* (The Report of the 'Pall Mall Gazette's' Secret Commission) (London: [Pall Mall Gazette], 1885).

²³ Keely Stauter-Halsted, "'A Generation of Monsters': Jews, Prostitution, and Racial Purity in the 1892 L'viv White Slavery Trial', *Austrian History Yearbook*, 38 (2007), 25–35.

²⁴ Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-Vice Activism, 1887–1917* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 89–95.

²⁵ Metzger, 'Towards an International', 57.

its covenant. Although at its world convention in 1910 the Women's Christian Temperance Union had declared a wish to change the name 'White Slave Traffic' to 'Women's Slave Traffic' to recognise that women of all races were implicated, and Avril de Sainte-Croix had succeeded in changing the wording from 'White Slave Trade' to the 'Traffic in Women' within the International Council of Women,²⁶ the name change had not been generally adopted and it was only with the use of the phrase by the League of Nations in 1921 that official discourses more widely acknowledged the existence of a trade in women of all races.²⁷

The absence of reliable evidence about the extent of the trade, and the ways in which it provided a malleable metaphor to express concern about other domestic issues (such as the crisis of the 'new woman', natalism, anti-Semitism, immigration and imperial anxieties in the *métropoles* of both Britain and France), have offered the ideal locus for historical research from various perspectives: transnationalism, feminism, internationalism and imperial and racial discourses.²⁸ A common feature of such research is an acknowledgement of the nebulous and approximate nature of the crime under consideration, an ambiguity compounded by the scarce archival traces of those actually involved.²⁹ The most obvious questions cannot be readily answered. What exactly was the trade in women? How far were women willing participants? As Stephanie A. Limoncelli has pointed out, 'trafficking' was

²⁶ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 51; Offen, 'Madame Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix', 240.

²⁷ Knepper, *International Crime*, 87. Resonances with the Atlantic Slave Trade were deliberate and ensured that campaigns mobilised abolitionists and other social reformers; see Guy, *Sex and Danger*, 25.

²⁸ In addition to the above cited works see, among others, Marion Kaplan, 'Prostitution, Morality Crusades, and Feminism: German-Jewish Feminists and the Campaign against White Slavery', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5, 6 (1982), 619–27; Stephanie A. Limoncelli, *The Politics of Trafficking: The First International Movement to Combat the Sexual Exploitation of Women* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); and Nancy M. Wingfield, 'Destination: Alexandria, Buenos Aires, Constantinople; "White Slavers" in Late Imperial Austria', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20, 2 (2011) 291–311. Metzger, 'Towards an International'; Watson, 'Trade'; Knepper, *International Crime*; Camiscioli, *Reproducing*; and Levine, *Prostitution*.

²⁹ Chaumont discusses at length the dearth of archival traces; see Jean-Michel Chaumont, *Le mythe de la traite des blanches: Enquête sur la fabrication d'un fléau* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), 28–33.

used to refer to a range of activities.³⁰ For opponents of the system of state-regulated prostitution in France, such as René Bérenger, the white slave trade (*la traite des blanches*) was simply prostitution itself, a definition reliant on a model of prostitutes as victims.³¹ For representatives who attended the series of international conferences convened before the First World War to combat trafficking (the first being held in 1899), the central problem was the movement of women across borders for the purposes of sex; the women might or might not be prostitutes and were frequently presumed to be victims of entrapment.³² For Alain Corbin, writing in the late twentieth century, the very concept of the traffic in women (*la traite des femmes*) was suspect, with, he argued, the trade being better understood as an inevitable feature of state-regulated prostitution within imperial nation states.³³

The complexity of definition with which the modern historian is presented is compounded by the fact that those involved in the anti-trafficking movement had a range of political agendas, not least concerning the vexed question of state-regulated prostitution.³⁴ In the absence of clear answers there is a general consensus that the white slave trade was a construct, a ‘moral panic’ which fits Stanley Cohen’s model; historians and historical sociologists may not deny that women migrated (willingly or otherwise) as part of the sex trade, but choose to focus instead on what Cohen terms the ‘fantasy, hysteria, delusion and illusion’ which was generated and how this was exploited politically and socially.³⁵ In his provocative 2009 monograph the sociologist Jean-Michel Chaumont takes this notion further, adopting a *longue durée* approach and contending that the sexual enslavement of innocent young women is a myth that persists to this day, a result of the methodology adopted by the League of

³⁰ Limoncelli, *The Politics of Trafficking*, 14.

³¹ René Bérenger, ‘La traite des Blanches et le commerce de l’obscénité: Conférences diplomatiques internationales du 15 juillet 1902 et du 18 avril 1910’, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1910, 75–111, here 77.

³² See Paul Knepper, *The Invention of International Crime: A Global Issue in the Making 1881–1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 98–127, here 119–22.

³³ Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), 275.

³⁴ Mary Ann Irwin, ‘“White Slavery” as Metaphor: Anatomy of a Moral Panic’, *The History Journal*, 5 (1996), 2.

³⁵ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 3rd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002; first publ. MacGibbon and Kee, 1972), vii. See, for example, Stauter-Halsted, ‘Generation of Monsters’, 558.

Nations in its two investigations into the traffic.³⁶ However, Chaumont's argument is reliant upon his postulation that both investigations carried out by the League adopted the same methodology – when they did not. The 1927 *Report of the Special Body of Experts* caused protests in South America, France and New York City against its findings, with the prefect of the Paris police, Alfred Morain, dismissing its claims that French women were lured to South America: 'the average Frenchwoman is too intelligent and well-educated to allow herself to be easily duped by the marvellous promises of remunerative employment which form the usual bait of the white-slave merchant'.³⁷ But it was the flawed methodology of 'undercover' investigations that provoked the most indignation, with representatives in the League of Nations from Italy, France, Poland, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay arguing that the investigators sent to their countries could speak only English and therefore any findings were inaccurate and incomplete. Paulina Luisi, the Uruguayan representative on the TWC and a member of the panel of experts, accused its chair, the American William Snow, of ethnocentrism and publically distanced herself from the findings.³⁸ Accordingly, the 1932 report, which was anxious to stress its focus on international aspects of trafficking, gathered information from local social hygiene groups and interviews with the local police.³⁹

Examining how incidents of trafficking, with or without coercion, could be transformed into the stuff of myth or hysteria has done much to elucidate how debates about slavery, gender roles and race were understood by the public, be it in France or the wider international community. However, by focusing on the constructivist and discursive nature of the phenomenon, such analyses neglect the impact on everyday life of this concern with trafficking. For travelling men and women, encounters were shaped by national and international agendas – agendas which illuminate how humanitarian actions in the interwar period were often predicated on imperial rivalry. For men and women travelling through the port of Le Havre between 1919 and 1939 these agendas manifested themselves in the monitoring carried out by the municipal police. In his exploration of the enforcement of

³⁶ Chaumont, *Le mythe*, 28–33.

³⁷ Alfred Morain, *The Underworld of Paris: Secrets of the Sûreté* (London: Jarrolds, 1928), 255; Londres also contradicted the claims of the 1927 report, *Le Chemin*, 187–8.

³⁸ Knepper, *International Crime*, 102.

³⁹ *Enquiry into traffic*, 11 and 14.

Chinese exclusion in the United States by border agents, Adam McKeown has cogently argued that ‘the discretionary opinions of individual agents were all formulated within bureaucratically constructed categories of race, nationality, and class’, with the production of this categorisation reliant upon the ‘ritualized activity’ of the border crossing.⁴⁰ A similar process is observable in the context of French ports. Investigating how the officials who monitored suspected cases of trafficking out of Le Havre, France’s principal transatlantic port, went about their task not only reveals how trafficking was interpreted and regulated locally but also challenges a teleological interpretation of the League’s activities as instituting a change in attitude towards prostitution and trafficking.⁴¹

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In the interwar period, and particularly during the 1920s, ‘the heyday of white slavery’,⁴² concern about the trafficking of women was at its height. In France the issue of trafficking was used to foster suspicion of immigrants and foreigners, with traffickers invariably portrayed as Jewish (particularly Eastern European Jewish), Mediterranean (especially Corsican) or black.⁴³ Anti-Semitism overlapped with the pan-European campaigns against trafficking, while the belief that there was an international organisation behind it fed into the idea of a global Jewish conspiracy.⁴⁴ It is axiomatic to state that, as with all ‘moral panics’,

⁴⁰ Adam McKeown, ‘Ritualization of Regulation: The Enforcement of Chinese Exclusion in the United States and China’, *American Historical Review*, 108, 2 (2003), 377–403, here 391.

⁴¹ Legg, ‘Individuals’, 648.

⁴² Haag, *Consent*, 89.

⁴³ Cassellari makes use of contemporaneous press reports to substantiate his anti-Semitic claims in his 1930 book; see René Cassellari, *Dramas of French Crime: Being the Exploits of the Celebrated Detective René Cassellari* (London: Hutchinson, 1930), 167; see also Camiscioli, *Reproducing*, 106.

⁴⁴ Knepper, *International Crime*, 34. It is worth noting that, of the twenty-three cases recorded by the police in Le Havre, there is no evidence of organised Jewish involvement in the traffic in women. As with the total of 304 arrests for trafficking reported to the League of Nations by the *Bureau de la Traite des Blanches* – the French central authority on the trade in women, established in 1913 and part of the Ministry of the Interior – the majority of the Le Havre cases involved French nationals, although it should be stressed that, while 264 of the 304 cases reported to the League of Nations were instances of internal trafficking within French borders, all the cases in Le Havre involved

the issue was malleable and could be used to explore a range of anxieties; in France the traffic in women, together with the increasingly fractious debate about regulated prostitution, was, as Elisa Camiscioli has argued, associated with debates about the health of the nation (population decline and degeneracy), racial hygiene and gendered notions of respectability during a period in which ethnic divisions had softened in the wake of the First World War and its resultant mass immigration.⁴⁵

In some respects this story of trafficking resonates with wider European anxieties. As in Britain, French opposition to the trade in women was led both by feminist groups (to whom regulated prostitution appeared to be the source of the problem) and by social hygienists; however, in France both groups articulated their opposition in a manner quite different from their counterparts in other European countries and in the Americas. France was one of the few countries to retain a system of regulated prostitution after 1919, and it did not apply the 1921 anti-trafficking convention to its colonies, protectorates or mandates.⁴⁶ As a result the French debates became muddled and divisive; the primary aim of the Temporary Union against Regulated Prostitution and the Traffic in Women (*Union Temporaire contre la Prostitution réglementée et la traite des femmes*), for example, was the ending of the French system of regulation, with condemnation of the system in the colonies being framed as a means of bolstering imperial concerns. Such condemnation was not limited to those who sought to end prostitution. In 1933 the journalist Henry Champly, author of *The Road to Shanghai: White Slave Traffic in Asia*, an investigative account of the trafficking of women to the Far East, reported that a French procurer in Indochina objected to the regulated system which saw European prostitutes having sex with ‘native’ men; according to the procurer, such a system ‘does colonisation too much harm. How can the natives respect us, afterwards?’⁴⁷

the transportation of women overseas. League of Nations, Traffic in Women and Children Committee, *Central Authorities* (Geneva: [n. p.], 1932), 6.

⁴⁵ Camiscioli, *Reproducing*, 99.

⁴⁶ Limoncelli, *Politics*, 12 and 112–6.

⁴⁷ Henry Champly, *The Road to Shanghai: White Slave Traffic in Asia*, trans. Warre B. Wells (London: John Long, [n.d.]), p. 101.

Champly's account of the Far East was written to complement that of his colleague, Londres, on South America (1927). Both emphasised the Jewish element that was believed to be behind the trade. In 1931 French newspapers contained a series of stories about the sinister machinations of the Zwy Mygdal conspiracy, which, according to *La Volonté*, operated under the front of being a mutual aid association (*Association de Secours mutuels*) but was, in reality, exploiting women in the sex trade. Claiming that the sinister influence of this international organisation reached as far as the French *métropole*, it added: 'several newspapers in Buenos Aires note as the departure points for this trade certain restaurants in Montmartre, from where women are taken to Marseille and embarked for Buenos Aires via Montevideo'.⁴⁸ Whereas Londres mentioned only in passing that the Zwy Mygdal was a Jewish organisation,⁴⁹ Champly's account was more obviously anti-Semitic, emphasising Jewish intermediaries in the trade; his reportage was, in a more general sense, explicitly racist. Positing the preference of all men for *white* women, and establishing a racial hierarchy, he peddled a hackneyed colonial discourse that exploits the fear of miscegenation and racial mixing.⁵⁰

Although his claims about the scale of white female traffic to the Far East were contradicted in 1932 by the second report of the League of Nations, *Enquiry into Traffic in Women and Children in the East*,⁵¹ Champly's sensationalist reportage served as a vehicle for wider colonial anxieties about the disruption of former racial hierarchies, including an undisguised fear of 'cross-breeding' (*métissage*) in metropolitan France:

⁴⁸ 'Plusieurs journaux de Buenos-Ayres indiquent comme point de départ de cette traite certains restaurants de Montmartre, d'où partent les femmes qui dirigées sur Marseille, y sont embarquées pour Buenos-Ayres par Montevideo.' Fonds Legrand-Falco, IV, 2: Articles de Presse de 1928 à 1940, [Anon.], 'Le Scandale de Buenos-Ayres', *La Volonté*, 29 Jan. 1931 [u.p.], CEDIAS, Paris.

⁴⁹ Londres, *Le Chemin*, 167–71. McGregor Watson and Camiscioli have both stressed what they view as the virulent anti-Semitism underpinning Londres' representation of Jewish traffickers. See Watson, 'Trade', 167; and Camiscioli, *Reproducing*, 107.

⁵⁰ Champly, *Shanghai*, 73–4.

⁵¹ For a discussion of these findings, see Katarina Leppänen, 'Movement of women: Trafficking in the interwar era', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 30, 6 (2007), 523–33, here 530.

<EXT >In France herself, the appearance of native suburbs; cross-breeding to be found even in the depths of the provinces; the astonishing vogue of Negro cabarets, copied from Harlem. . . . Everywhere, in short, racial mixture, racial conflict, perhaps racial war, *on account of the White woman, through the White woman* [italics in the original].⁵²

While McGregor Watson and Camiscioli emphasise how the racialised discourse on the trade in France revealed specifically Gallocentric concerns about the porous ethnic boundaries of the interwar period, it is clear that there was a wider, shared imperial anxiety about the integrity of ‘white’ civilisation.⁵³ For Champly, as for MacKirdy and Willis in their 1912 publication, *The White Slave Market*,⁵⁴ the fate of the white European female was a means of advancing a European imperialist agenda. But if the campaign against ‘White Slavery’ provided a site for a shared notion of ‘Europeanness’, it could be used simultaneously to privilege national imperialisms. This was the case with Champly, who could claim to ‘admire chaste England’ and ‘like her always to be in agreement in the Colonies with my own France’, while criticising British tolerance of the *Mui Tsai* system in Hong Kong⁵⁵ and the concomitant British failure (in contrast with French colonies) to ensure that ‘virtue’ be ‘triumphant’.⁵⁶

⁵² Champly, *Shanghai*, 247–8.

⁵³ A point which supports Stanard’s central contention; Matthew G. Stanard, ‘Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture: Toward a Comparative Research Agenda’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 44 (2009), 27–48, here 27.

⁵⁴ Mrs Archibald MacKirdy and W. N. Willis, *The White Slave Market* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., [n.d.]), 32.

⁵⁵ In the system of *Mui Tsai*, young women, frequently from poor families, were sold into domestic servitude, often suffering abuse and sometimes being drawn into prostitution. The practice in Hong Kong generated international attention and condemnation after Britain signed the League of Nations’ International Slavery Convention in 1926. Knepper, *International Crime*, 37.

⁵⁶ Champly, *Shanghai*, 65 and 131. As Cooper and Stoler have noted, colonial historiography has been so ‘nationally bound’ that it has ‘blinded us to those circuits of knowledge and communication that took other routes than those shaped by the metropole-colony axis alone’. International congresses provide ideal case studies for interrogating shared notions of “Europeanness” and, as in this case, heightened nationalism. See Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick

The campaign against the traffic in women shows how consciousness of social, political and economic problems transcended national borders.⁵⁷ Yet, while the moral impetus may provide evidence of an international awareness, discussion of the issue was frequently couched in the language of national prestige. This disjuncture was not confined to the diplomatic context. International cooperation between voluntary organisations frequently broke down because of national agendas; for example, the determination of the Temporary Union to end regulated prostitution led to a split with its counterpart British organisation.⁵⁸ Discourses about national identity could thus be used both to advance a French agenda (in the case of the delegates at the League of Nations) and to criticise French practices (as did the Temporary Union). In the November 1930 issue of the abolitionist journal *La Race et les Mœurs*, for example, the reality of French republicanism was critically juxtaposed with an idealised republicanism as a means of advancing the cause of abolition within France, which was unfavourably compared with other states, including ‘Eastern’ Turkey.⁵⁹

From the beginning of the dialogue between France and the League of Nations, the French government considered the issue of regulation to be a national one. As Minister of the Interior Maurice Maunory reported in a circular to all prefects in 1923:

Cooper, ‘Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda’, in idem, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 1–56, here 29.

⁵⁷ Gorman, ‘Empire, Internationalism’, 189 and 215.

⁵⁸ On 31 May 1931 Johannes Reelfs, president of the Fédération Abolitionniste Internationale, contacted Mme Legrand-Falco of the Union Temporaire reporting that Alison Neilans, General Secretary of the The Association for Moral & Social Hygiene in Britain did not understand French objections to a recent proposal by the League of Nations Special Advisory Committee. On 2 June 1933, Mme Legrand-Falco responded angrily explaining that the proposal allowed the system of regulated prostitution to continue without impunity in France. Fonds Legrand-Falco, V, 8: Correspondance (1930–36), CEDIAS, Paris.

⁵⁹ ‘Nous ne pouvons donc que déplorer davantage de ne voir ni la République Française ni la République Argentine figurer au nombre de ces nations un peu plus civilisées qui ont aboli le lupanar, ce qui eût pourtant dû être fait en tout premier lieu dans des pays qui, se baptisant des républiques, pourraient au moins se comporter en vraies démocraties! La Turquie elle-même donne une leçon à la France.’ [Anon.], ‘La Société des Nations contre les maisons de tolérance’, *La Race et les Mœurs*, 1 Nov. 1930, 52–3.

this French delegate had, in fact, considered that the Commission should concentrate its activity on the general control of international agreements and not involve itself in the question of regulating prostitution which is a matter of internal legislation for each state.⁶⁰

Given this determination to ensure that the issue of regulation was excluded from discussions of the traffic in women, why did the French government show such willingness to monitor traffic through its ports? The archives suggest that a key reason was that France, the birthplace of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the country which had abolished slavery under the Second Republic and made citizens of former slaves, and which had led the way in the pre-First World War fight against the white slave trade, had to maintain its reputation. In the 1927 report by the League of Nations, the emphasis on the number of French women involved in the sex trade in South America, an issue which resurfaced in Londres's sensationalist *exposé*, was a source of national consternation which tapped into a fear that was already widespread. A letter issued by the Minister of the Interior in 1919 expressed regret that the traffic in French women to Argentina and Uruguay discredited France's reputation abroad. In response the ministry called for effective surveillance of steamships departing for the Americas.⁶¹ The importance of maintaining national prestige through careful monitoring was impressed upon the officials in Le Havre. In a letter sent to all prefects on 2 September 1929 the Minister of the Interior made this clear, writing that 'this information, of which the importance from an international perspective will not escape you, should be sent to me before 1 February 1930'.⁶² The yearly reports produced between 1929 and 1939 by the

⁶⁰ 'Ce Délégué français, avait en effet considéré que la Commission ne devait concentrer son activité que sur le Contrôle Général des Accords Internationaux, et non pas s'immiscer dans la question de la réglementation de la prostitution qui est une question de législation intérieure regardant uniquement chaque Etat.' Le Ministre de l'Intérieur to Messieurs les Préfets, 26 May 1923, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

⁶¹ Police générale, 'Trafiquants professionnels (1912–25); circulaires (1912–40)', Le Ministre de l'Intérieur to Messieurs les Préfets, 1919, F/7/14854, Archives Nationales, Paris.

⁶² 'Ces renseignements, dont l'importance au point de vue international ne saurait vous échapper, devront m'être transmis avant le 1^{er} février 1930 sous le timbre: "Contrôle Général des Services de Recherches Judiciaires (Service

police in Le Havre were responses to requests from the Ministry of the Interior, which were in turn at the behest of the TWC. These reports reveal the interplay of local, national and international dynamics in controlling movement based on gender and race.

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In the decade before the First World War, when the trafficking of women first became headline news, Le Havre earned itself a dubious reputation as a main exit point for women shipped overseas to work as prostitutes. In an article published in the influential periodical *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1910, reporting on the work of the international conferences held in Paris in 1902 and 1910 on the ‘White Slave Trade’, Senator René Bérenger, an anti-regulationist member of the League of Public Morals (*La ligue de la moralité publique*), and a campaigner against the traffic in women, made the claim that:

the Transvaal was, during the war with Britain, the most productive field of exploitation. The needs of an entire army had to be met. For a long time, on a weekly basis, a delegation of girls or women used to leave Le Havre, the majority of them often hired as performers or waitresses in cabarets.⁶³

This charge was not new. At the international conference on the ‘White Slave Traffic’ held in Paris in October 1906, the German delegate, Major Waegner, had provoked animated debate when he reported that his personal investigation into prostitution in South America had revealed that, although the majority of imported women were of German nationality, they were not of German *origin*, and that ‘large numbers of them were shipped from Havre via

de la traite des femmes)”.? Contrôle Général des Services de Recherches Judiciaires, Circulaire n° 92, Le Ministre de l’Intérieur to Messieurs les Préfets, 2 Sept. 1929, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

⁶³ ‘Le Transvaal a été pendant la durée de la guerre avec l’Angleterre le champ le plus fructueux d’exploitation. Il fallait pourvoir aux passions de toute une armée. Pendant longtemps, un envoi de filles ou femmes, embauchées le plus souvent comme artistes ou servantes de cafés-concerts, partait du Havre chaque semaine.’ Bérenger, ‘La traite’, 86.

Southampton to South America from different places on the continent'.⁶⁴ The claim that Le Havre was a depot for the traffic of women was roundly contested by M. Hennequin, the director of the Central Office for the White Slave Trade (*Office Central de la Traite des Blanches*), but, as Bérenger's 1910 article published in *Revue des Deux Mondes* demonstrates, the charge stuck and Le Havre became synonymous with the illegal trade in women.⁶⁵ This reputation persisted after the First World War and into the period when the politics of the 'white slave trade' fell under the purview of the League of Nations. In a sensationalist and highly popular 'true crime' book of 1930, the decorated French detective, René Cassellari, once more asserted that Le Havre was the main export port for women to South America.⁶⁶ Given that the growth of Le Havre was due to its Atlantic trade, a trade which, prior to the definitive abolition by the French in 1848, had been based on slavery, it is unsurprising that the city should have functioned as an ideal focal point for the increasingly hysterical reports which emerged concerning the so-called 'white slave trade'. Over the course of the nineteenth century Le Havre developed into the most important French port for transatlantic travel, with the French, or CGT, line, which had originated in Granville in 1862, launching its first transatlantic steamboat service between Le Havre and New York in 1865.⁶⁷ The ships of the CGT line, along with those belonging to United Shippers (*Chargeurs Réunis*), and to the British, German and American companies which also operated through Le Havre, transported Europeans to a new life in the Americas and earned the city the soubriquet 'the French New York'.⁶⁸ By the turn of the century, the tonnage of goods passing through

⁶⁴ Parliamentary Papers, 1907 [Cd. 3453] Miscellaneous, No. 2 (1907), Correspondence respecting the International Conference on the White Slave Traffic, held in Paris, Oct. 1906, 5.

⁶⁵ The Office Central de la Traite des Blanches was created following the signing of the Convention (18 May 1904) establishing international arrangements for the repression of the trade and an 'arrangement administratif organisant la défense des victimes du trafic et leur renvoi dans leur pays d'origine' with parallel offices in Germany, the USA, Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, Belgium and Switzerland. See Monique Constant, 'Combats contre la traite des femmes à la Société des Nations (1920–1940)', *Relations internationales*, 131 (2007) 39–47, here 41.

⁶⁶ Cassellari, *Dramas*, 161–71, here 167.

⁶⁷ Hugh Clout, 'Popular Geographies in a French Port City: The Experience of Le Havre Society of Commercial Geography, 1884–1948', *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 124, 1 (2008), 53–77, here 54.

⁶⁸ Frédéric Carbonnel, 'Origines et développement de l'Institut Havrais de 1937 à 1980', *Annales de Normandie*, 57 (2007), 25–61, here 28.

the port was greater than that of any other French port except for Marseille.⁶⁹ With a population of 100,000, by 1881 Le Havre was already the largest city in Normandy, exceeding the prefecture of Rouen.⁷⁰ Six hours from Paris by train, thanks to the extension of the line in 1847, the cosmopolitan and rapidly expanding port provided the perfect place for sensational press stories about what Bérenger called ‘this new scourge’.⁷¹

Le Havre’s notoriety had considerable currency both in popular culture (newspapers, novels and plays) and at international conventions organised against the trade. Yet a study of the port archives suggests that the white slave trade as a systematically organised international conspiracy was largely unsubstantiated – a finding consistent with the more general conclusions of the 1927 *Report of the Special Body of Experts* which dismissed such claims as stories ‘which still linger in the popular imagination in a highly-coloured form’.⁷² The number of cases which have left an archival trace is small, and even those do not provide evidence of an established transcontinental network methodically abducting young girls and forcing them into prostitution. That said, the archival traces do more than provide a simple corrective to the sensationalist claims propagated by the Temporary Union, whose Camille Benassy (deputy for Creuse) asserted in 1933 that ‘the victims of this organisation of real-life modern slave drivers number in the thousands each year’.⁷³ While the records contain no evidence to support Benassy’s vague claim of ‘thousands’ of trafficked women, recording instead evidence of twenty-three suspected cases between 1929 and 1939, they do reveal how officers in the local police established systems to monitor international travel, imposing checks upon single women passing through the port. The discourse on trafficking in France, as in the United States and Eastern Europe, may have contained elements of a moral panic;⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Clout, ‘Popular Geographies’, 54.

⁷⁰ Alain Leménorel, *Nouvelle histoire de la Normandie* (Toulouse: Privat, 2004), 244.

⁷¹ Bérenger, ‘La traite’, 77.

⁷² *Report of the Special Body of Experts*, 18.

⁷³ ‘C’est par milliers que l’on compte chaque année les victimes de cette organisation de véritables négriers modernes.’ Fonds Legrand-Falco, IV, 7: ‘Exposé de Mr. Camille Benassy, Député de la Creuse’, 1933 [?], 3–4, CEDIAS, Paris.

⁷⁴ See, for example, on the United States, Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 129–30, and on Germany, Kaplan, ‘Prostitution, Morality Crusades’, 621–3.

the value of examining how border officials classified travelling individuals, notably the vast waves of female migrants from Eastern Europe who travelled through Le Havre, lies in revealing how such myths can and did develop. Indeed, interrogating how cases of suspected trafficking were reported, and examining what Edgar Morin has called the ‘mix between novelistic fiction and actual facts’ in urban myths, shows how the influence of the myth of white slaving, which had been established and propagated in the nineteenth century, influenced interpretations of trafficking after 1919.⁷⁵ Moreover, the administrative consequences are suggestive of how humanitarian and other ideological agendas (involving notions of freewill, victimhood, gender or race) could influence behaviours in everyday life and how an episode in female migration from Eastern Europe interacted with French political agendas to magnify and, in some cases, generate a problem.

If the reputation of Le Havre as an important node in an international trafficking system developed before the First World War, the archives contain no trace of shipments of women heading out to South America or South Africa. Systematic monitoring was not implemented in France until 1923. Following discussions by the TWC, the Minister of the Interior, Maurice Maunoury, sent a request on 23 May 1923 to all prefects for specific statistics about trafficking; since the Advisory Committee had raised the *bête noire* of the question of regulated prostitution in France, national pride appeared to be a significant motivating factor behind the request.⁷⁶ International agreements from before the First World War, however, had established the issue of women migrating to work in the sex trade as a transnational one. As a result, along with monitoring being carried out by voluntary organisations, including in France the Association for the Repression of the White Slave Trade and the Protection of Young Women, and the Working Group to Protect Female Railway Travellers (*Association pour la répression de la Traite des Blanches et la Préservation de la Jeune fille and L’œuvre des gares*),⁷⁷ police officials had investigated several cases.⁷⁸ Following the first official

⁷⁵ Edgar Morin, *La Rumeur d’Orléans* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1969), 54 and 64.

⁷⁶ Ministère de l’Intérieur, Direction de la Sûreté Générale, to Messieurs les Préfets, 23 May 1923, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

⁷⁷ Emily Machen, ‘Travelling with Faith: The Creation of Women’s Immigrant Aid Associations in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century France’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 23, 3 (2011), 89–112; Céline Leglaive-Perani, ‘Les Juifs français dans la lutte contre la traite des Blanches (1880–1930)’, *Les Belles lettres, Archives Juives*, 44 (2011/12), 59–76;

McGregor Watson, ‘Trade’, 65.

conference, convened by the French government in 1902, an international agreement had been signed by fifteen nations in May 1904 with the intention of centralising information about the trafficking of women. Article 2 envisaged a system of mutual cooperation between nations, with a general surveillance of ports and train stations.⁷⁹ This was implemented swiftly in Le Havre. Two telegrams, both from 1905, show bilateral cooperation between Britain and France in the monitoring of ports and stations. The first telegram, sent from the Police Superintendent for General Interior Security (*Commissaire spécial à intérieur Sûreté générale*) in Le Havre to the Police Superintendent at the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris (*Commissaire spécial, gare Saint-Lazare, Paris*), warned the station authorities to be on the lookout for a sixteen-year-old girl of Irish origin who both the British and French authorities feared was a victim of ‘the white slave trade’.⁸⁰ The second, dated 14 November 1905, and also sent from the Police Superintendent for General Interior Security in Le Havre to the Police Superintendent at the Gare Saint-Lazare, asked the police commission at the Gare Saint-Lazare to be on the lookout for a thirty-year-old woman who was slightly taller than average, and her accomplice, a moustached man of thirty-eight, whom the British police believed ‘to be possibly engaged in white slaving’.⁸¹ The first telegram crystallises the essential elements of what campaigners against the *traite des blanches* feared so much: a young, naive girl, travelling by herself and, as a consequence, prey to the predations of men. As such, she had raised suspicions, and the authorities in both Britain and France had intervened, even if she was not actually stopped in Paris and the purpose of her journey cannot therefore be known. As with all such reports, the women who are the focus of these concerns are silent; here the only archival traces see them officially narrativised – as victim in the case of the first telegram, and, in the case of the second, as criminal perpetrator.

⁷⁸ Bureau International de l'Association pour la Répression de la Traite des Blanches et la Préservation de la Jeune Fille, *La Traite des blanches: Bulletin du Bureau international*, 10 (1904), 1.

⁷⁹ Knepper, *The Invention*, 113.

⁸⁰ Telegram, Commissaire spécial à Intérieur Sûreté Générale préfet et de police to le Commissaire spécial gare Saint Lazare Paris, 18 Oct. 1905, AD, SM, 4 M 603.

⁸¹ ‘comme pouvant pratiquer la traite des blanches’; Telegram, Commissaire spécial à Intérieur Sûreté Générale préfet et de police to le Commissaire spécial gare Saint Lazare Paris, 14 Nov. 1905, AD, SM, 4 M 603.

Monitoring in the Normandy port of Le Havre, and to a much lesser extent Dieppe (which chiefly offered passenger sailings for Newhaven, Britain and the Canary Islands), belied the lurid narrative of virginal girls trapped into a life of prostitution, a narrative which was propagated by the Temporary Union and which was the stock ingredient of popular films such as *The Traffic in Women* (*La Traite des Femmes*, 1931) and *Dancers for Buenos Aires* (*Danseuses pour Buenos-Aires*, 1931).⁸² A key feature of these reports, and an exception given the mutability of the French administrative system, is that they are all written by one police superintendent, François-Joël Chauvineau, an officer who was commended by the Minister of the Interior, Albert Sarraut, in 1934 for the longevity and consistency of his service.⁸³ Reading all the reports together produces a clear sense of what this official viewed as trafficking, and his definition is markedly different to that established by the 1927 *Report of the Special Body of Experts*.

It almost always transpired that the women involved were travelling in the full knowledge that they were going to work as prostitutes, as in the case of two French women of twenty-nine and twenty-two who were stopped en route from Dieppe to the Canary Islands on 29 August 1929.⁸⁴ As the superintendent noted, these two women had not been forced abroad and there could consequently be no prosecution under article 334 § 4 of the penal code; they were, nevertheless, prevented from travelling and were sent back to Paris. In this respect, the port records support the conclusions of Albert Londres's investigative journalism in *The Road to Buenos Aires* (1927), which emphasised the economic push factors behind prostitution and offered a partial explanation for the traffic in women as an active decision taken by some of them to travel to South America where the brothels were perceived as more lucrative.⁸⁵ The 1927 League of Nations report similarly stressed that kidnapping was a rarity

⁸² *La Traite des Femmes* (*Der Weg nach Rio*). Dir. Manfred Noa. International Film. 1931; *Danseuses pour Buenos-Aires*.

Dir. Joap Splyer. International Film. 1931. Both of these German films were very popular in France in 1932 with the Union Temporaire contre la Prostitution réglementée et la traite des femmes using screenings of the films to advertise their campaign; Fonds Legrand-Falco, IV, 7, CEDIAS, Paris.

⁸³ *Journal officiel de la République française. Lois et décrets*, 66, 166: 17 July 1934, 7215.

⁸⁴ Le Commissaire spécial de Dieppe to Monsieur le Préfet de la Seine-Inférieure Première Division—Premier Bureau, 5 Jan. 1930, AD, SM, 4 M 603.

⁸⁵ Londres, *Le Chemin*, 249.

and that it ‘did not wish to give the impression that all or most of these were unsuspecting and defenceless women who had been decoyed to a foreign country in ignorance of the real purpose of their journey.’⁸⁶ If the assiduous reports produced by Superintendent Chauvineau for the prefect (and ultimately for transmission to the Minister of the Interior) between 1929 and 1939 disprove the fiction of innocent girls trapped into foreign prostitution, they do, however, reveal the international connections for which Le Havre acted as a nexus during the interwar years. Moreover, the reports show that while the campaigns against the traffic in women may have been motivated by racial preoccupations – specifically, as argued by the historians Donna Guy and by Elisa Camiscioli, the fear of French women engaging in interracial sex – suspected victims and traffickers identified at the port of Le Havre came from a range of destinations and only a minority were of French origin.

What also emerges from these reports is the high proportion of Eastern Europeans being identified either as criminals trafficking women, or as women suspected of being trafficked themselves. On 30 November 1929 Superintendent Chauvineau in Le Havre reported to the Director of General Security in Paris that on 5 September a Lithuanian named Abe Moussa Keselis, who claimed to be shopkeeper, had boarded the SS Krakus, destined for South America, in the company of two women who were ‘destined for brothels’. One of the women was a twenty-six-year-old Lithuanian named Noma Slapoenikaite who had arrived with Keselis on 29 August 1929 on the SS Virginie from Riga, while the other was a twenty-six-year-old Latvian named Freida Segal who had travelled to Le Havre by rail from Riga.⁸⁷ Although the movements of all three continued to be tracked, allowing the superintendent in Le Havre to report that Freida Segal had been placed in a brothel in São Paulo while Noma Slapoenikaite had been placed in a brothel in the Polish quarter in Buenos Aires, the suspected procurer was not arrested. Whether the women had actively consented to travel abroad and work as prostitutes is not recorded, although the superintendent does use a passive

⁸⁶ Quoted in Magaly Rodríguez García, ‘The League of Nations and the Moral Recruitment of Women’, *International Review of Social History*, 57 (2012), 97–128, here 107.

⁸⁷ Le Commissaire spécial to Monsieur le Directeur de la Sûreté Général (Contrôle Recherches Judiciaires), Paris, 30 Nov. 1929, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

construction in his report, noting that the women had been placed by Keselis in specific brothels.⁸⁸

In his detailed report of 9 January 1931 to the Office of General Security within the Interior Ministry (*Ministère de l'Intérieur Direction de la Sûreté Générale*), Chauvineau offers a more considered account of the role of Le Havre as a transit point for Europeans involved in the international sex trade. He notes that, while his service had not identified any clear cases as such over the course of 1930, nevertheless 'traffic by sea with foreign countries, notably the republics of South America and the United States, as well as Canada, has allowed a number of individuals of both sexes to be identified, with some quite precise suspicions regarding their trafficking, suspicions based upon what is known about their usual activities'.⁸⁹ He then goes on to detail individuals who had been repatriated via Le Havre following alleged involvement in the sex trade in South America: a Frenchman, Marcel Louis Berruyer, on 5 February 1930 following his expulsion from Brazil for trafficking; an Italian woman, Virginie Mancini, following her expulsion from Mexico for running a brothel; and a French couple who had raised suspicions on board ship and thus also found themselves expelled. Two further French nationals were returned to France on 5 July 1930 following actions by the authorities in Buenos Aires.⁹⁰ The monitoring carried out at Le Havre reveals that, although many of the women travelling out to South America were of Eastern European origin, a substantial proportion of those coming back (both women and men) who had been accused of involvement in the sex trade were French nationals. The 1927 League of Nations report discussed at length the high proportion of French women working in South American

⁸⁸ 'Keselis devait placer cette jeune fille à Saint-Paul (Sao-Paulo)'. Le Commissaire spécial to Monsieur le Directeur de la Sûreté Général (Contrôle Recherches Judiciaires), Paris, 30 Nov. 1929, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

⁸⁹ 'le trafic par mer avec les pays étrangers, notamment les Républiques Sud-Américaines et les Etats-Unis, ainsi que le Canada, a permis de relever à la charge d'un certain nombre d'individus des deux sexes, des soupçons assez précis sur leur trafics, soupçons basés sur leurs occupations habituelles connues.' Le Commissaire spécial Chauvineau to Monsieur le Sous-Préfet, Le Havre, 9 Jan. 1931, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

⁹⁰ Chauvineau to the Sous-Préfet, 9 Jan. 1931, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

brothels;⁹¹ Londres, too, emphasised the presence of what he called ‘Franchuchas’ working in Buenos Aires.⁹² A source of embarrassment to French officials in the League of Nations, and seized upon by anti-regulationists in France as further evidence for their cause, the prominence of France in the trade may be borne out to a limited extent by the monitoring done in Le Havre. What perhaps is more striking in retrospect, however, is evidence which the local documents provide about the globalised nature of the sex trade and migration routes. What also emerges is how ineffectual criminal proceedings against supposed traffickers appeared to be. For example, Chauvineau includes in his report of January 1931 information about another repatriation, that of Philippe Bartoli, who had been expelled from both Egypt and Brazil for engaging in the trade in women, having already received ‘a special mention’ on the lists of the Rouen Intelligence Service in 1917.⁹³

Article 7 of the League of Nations Convention on the Traffic of Women and Children (1921) called for the surveillance of all unaccompanied women and children travelling by sea. Signatories to the convention were encouraged to post notices in ports and train stations warning women of the potential dangers of the trade, and providing information on housing and other forms of assistance to those perceived as vulnerable.⁹⁴ The series of reports produced by Chauvineau demonstrates how this construction of gendered behaviour, reliant upon paternalistic notions of protection, affected the circulation of all women across French borders. In his report of 9 January 1931, Chauvineau states that on 25 November 1930 an eighteen-year-old Parisian girl had boarded the steamship ‘Kerguelen’, headed for Buenos

⁹¹ For a discussion of overrepresentation of French prostitutes working abroad in the findings of the League of Nations, see Chaumont, *Le mythe*, 144–7. H. Wilson Harris’s account of the report, *Human Merchandise*, emphasised at length the high numbers of French prostitutes working in South America (74–8 and 215–9).

⁹² Londres, *Le Chemin*, 93–100.

⁹³ Chauvineau to the Sous-Préfet, 9 Jan. 1931, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

⁹⁴ International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, concluded at Geneva on 30 September 1921: <http://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/Legislation+and+Case+Law/International+Legislation/United+Nations/1921+International+Convention;jsessionid=l6pJsklWdGXs8rGL6GTQHxKIXJGpPcJn2HswdHtqh4hLJ2zLYBLL!1747977758> (last visited 15 Nov. 2013).

Aires in the company of a woman who claimed to be a primary school teacher in Argentina. He notes:

Miss CHARRIAS, an eighteen-year-old minor who had not been provided with parental permission to travel, was advised that at Bordeaux, where the steamer would call, she would have to produce such authorisation or run the risk of seeing her journey disrupted by the port's superintendent, duly advised by me.⁹⁵

The TWC had talked about restricting women's travel, with women under the age of twenty-one, the age of majority, being prevented from travelling without written parental consent, but this stipulation was not officially adopted by the League. Paulina Luisi presciently warned in 1924 that any legislation to protect young women travelling alone risked limiting the freedom of movement of all women.⁹⁶ A trend of 'paternalist abolition', which opposed all forms of prostitution and envisaged achieving this through the careful management of women's movement between nations, had been one of the distinct groupings which had emerged in the international anti-sex-trafficking movement with the launch of the TWC and it came to the fore again when F. A. R. Sempkins of the British National Vigilance Association replaced Annie Baker on the TWC in 1927.⁹⁷ The reports produced by the police monitoring the port in Le Havre suggest, however, that single women were in any case viewed with suspicion and that administrative interventions were implemented accordingly. Later in his January 1931 report, Chauvineau detailed the measures put in place to monitor emigration and immigration, referring the minister back to his report on the case of Miss Charrias to demonstrate how the documentation of all children was scrupulously checked to ensure that they were not lying about their age and had parental consent to travel. He added,

⁹⁵ 'Mademoiselle CHARRIAS, mineure de 18 ans, qui n'était pas nantie de l'autorisation paternelle pour voyager, a été avisée qu'à Bordeaux, ou le navire ferait escale, elle aurait à produire cette autorisation sous peine de se voir interrompre son voyage par le Commissaire Spécial de ce Port, avisé par mes soins.' Chauvineau to the Sous-Préfet, 9 Jan. 1931, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

⁹⁶ Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 152–3.

⁹⁷ Pliley, 'Claims to Protection', 97 and 100.

however, that all female minors are subject to ‘discrete but attentive surveillance’ by the steamer’s staff during the journey.⁹⁸ In an earlier report from 30 November 1929, Chauvineau had described a regional monitoring system in operation in the fishing port of Fécamp and in the Channel port of Dieppe. He continued: ‘As soon as a woman or child travelling alone arrives in a hotel in the locality, the owner of the said hotel immediately informs the Commissariat. In addition, a surveillance team operates for people staying in the station at Fécamp.’⁹⁹

Such assiduous surveillance and intervention by the port authorities seems to have been the result of the particular attentiveness of the police in Le Havre under the leadership of Chauvineau. Similar reports from the Loire-Inférieure port of Saint-Nazaire, out of which the CGT also operated steamers, do not detail such interventions, even if they express unease at the number of Polish women travelling solo to South America. In May 1931, for example, the prefect of Loire-Inférieure contacted the Minister of the Interior, Pierre Laval, copying in the Foreign Minister and claiming to have uncovered a trafficking ring.¹⁰⁰ He reported:

On 15 May, on the steamer ‘Espagne’ headed for Mexico and Cuba, it was noticed that seven young girls had embarked, travelling alone under particularly suspect conditions: there were four Polish girls and three Greeks who, when interrogated, explained the reasons for their journey in an absolutely identical fashion (saying that they were going to South America to conclude a marriage pact which had been arranged by correspondence

⁹⁸ Chauvineau to the Sous-Préfet, 9 Jan. 1931, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

⁹⁹ ‘Dès qu’une femme ou un enfant voyageant seuls descendent dans un hôtel de la localité, le tenancier du dit hôtel en informe immédiatement le Commissariat. Un service de surveillance fonctionne en ce qui concerne les personnes séjournant dans la gare de Fécamp.’ Le Commissaire spécial à Monsieur le Directeur de la Sûreté Général (Contrôle Recherches Judiciaires), Paris, 30 Nov. 1929, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

¹⁰⁰ ‘A n’en pas douter et après une enquête très sérieuses de la part des services de police spéciale placés sous mes ordres, nous nous trouvons en présence d’une affaire de trafic des femmes’. Le Préfet de la Loire-Inférieure to Monsieur le Président du Conseil, Ministre de l’Intérieur Sûreté Général, 27 May 1931, 4 M 229, Archives Départementales, Loire-Atlantique, Nantes.

and on the viewing of a photograph), which effectively connotes that we were dealing with a particularly special traffic.¹⁰¹

The report was sent again on 8 January 1932, this time containing additional information regarding the CGT, which operated between Saint-Nazaire and Mexico; this company was identified as particularly suspect, and the report pointed out that it also operated a passenger steamship service out of Le Havre.¹⁰² A central concern underpinning both reports was that, whatever suspicions the officials harboured, the police and port officials were not in a position to prevent the women from travelling. On 27 May the prefect asked the Minister of the Interior if it would be possible to prevent boarding in such instances, or at the very least to delay embarkation. It transpired that because the women were not of French nationality, nothing could be done other than notifying the Polish government. While the prefect hypothesised that what had been identified in Saint-Nazaire was an international organisation designed to avoid national safeguards, with the French women involved being exported via some foreign port,¹⁰³ action fell short of outright intervention. Instead anxieties were expressed and the Minister of the Interior was notified of all scheduled sailings for South America operated by the CGT during 1932.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ 'Le 13 Mai courant, sur le Paquebot "Espagne" se dirigeant vers le Mexique et Cuba, il a été constaté que 7 jeunes filles voyageant seules, dans des conditions particulièrement suspects, ont été embarquées: il y avait 4 polonaises et 3 grecques qui, interrogées, ont expliqué les raisons de leur voyage d'une manière absolument identique (disant qu'elles se rendaient en Amérique du Sud pour conclure un mariage qui avait été décidé par correspondance et sur le vu d'une photographie), ce qui dénote bien qu'il s'agissait là d'un trafic tout à fait spécial.' Le Préfet de la Loire-Inférieure to Monsieur le Président du Conseil, Ministre de l'Intérieur Sûreté Général, 27 May 1931, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

¹⁰² Le Préfet de la Loire-Inférieure to Monsieur le Président du Conseil, Ministre de l'Intérieur Sûreté, 8 Jan. 1932, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

¹⁰³ Le Préfet de la Loire-Inférieure to Monsieur le Président du Conseil, Ministre de l'Intérieur Sûreté Général, 27 May 1931, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

¹⁰⁴ Le Préfet de la Loire-Inférieure to Monsieur le Président du Conseil, Ministre de l'Intérieur Sûreté, 8 Jan. 1932, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

This report of ‘shameful trafficking’ through Saint-Nazaire reveals not only the limited possibilities of intervening in suspected cases of trafficking but also the variant readings to which migrating Polish women were subjected, readings which in both cases denied female agency in migration and diverted attention from economic push factors such as poverty.¹⁰⁵ After the second warning of 8 January 1932, the incoming Minister of the Interior, Pierre Cathala, instituted enquiries with the Polish and Mexican authorities who reported back that all the single women had indeed married on their arrival in South America; this revelation provoked an outraged demand from Cathala for an explanation as to why the women had raised suspicions.¹⁰⁶ The defence offered by the superintendent in Saint-Nazaire is illuminating. Denying ever having *confirmed* that trafficking existed, he justified his suspicions in three ways: first, by reference to the country of origin of the women, adding that his enquiries among sailors had confirmed that there was a large number of Polish women working in brothels in Havana as well as in Buenos Aires;¹⁰⁷ second, by citing their intended destination, South America, which was notorious for prostitution; and third, by adumbrating the detail, or, to be more precise, the lack of detail, which they could provide for their reasons for travel.¹⁰⁸ All claimed that they were going to marry men whom they either had not seen for a long time or had never seen before; none had had any correspondence with her supposed fiancé, who, it appeared, had financed the trip.¹⁰⁹ The justification offered for his raising of the alarm, which he stressed was based on ‘observation and statements’,¹¹⁰ was predicated on the familiar trope of female passivity in entering prostitution, with innocent women tricked

¹⁰⁵ In this respect, reports are not dissimilar to those which appeared pre-1914; see Stauter-Halsted, ‘Generation of Monsters’, 25–35.

¹⁰⁶ Le Président du conseil, Ministre de l’intérieur to Monsieur le Préfet de la Loire-Inférieure, 13 Jan. 1932, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

¹⁰⁷ Le Commissaire spécial de Saint-Nazaire à Monsieur le Sous-préfet à Saint-Nazaire, 3 Feb. 1932, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

¹⁰⁸ Le Préfet de la Loire-Inférieure to Monsieur le Ministre de l’Intérieur (Direction de la Sûreté Générale – Contrôle Général des Services de Recherches Judiciaires), 5 Feb. 1932, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

¹⁰⁹ Le Préfet de la Loire-Inférieure to Monsieur le Ministre de l’Intérieur (Direction de la Sûreté Générale – Contrôle Général des Services de Recherches Judiciaires), 5 Feb. 1932, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

¹¹⁰ Le Commissaire Spécial de Saint-Nazaire à Monsieur le Sous-préfet à Saint-Nazaire, 3 Feb. 1932, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

into selling sex through false offers of marriage.¹¹¹ By contrast, the explanation offered by the Polish authorities, who denied that any such cases of entrapment or trafficking existed, relied on national sentiment and accusations of international meddling by the French. What this instance demonstrates is the way in which post-war diplomatic and international conventions offered a new way of articulating a pre-existing fear about womanhood and an explanation for prostitution. At the same time, trafficking could be interpreted as not including marriage. The 1927 *Report of the Special Body of Experts* had precisely defined trafficking as ‘the direct or indirect procurement and transportation for gain to a foreign country of women and girls for the sexual gratification of one or more other persons’, meaning that bogus or enforced marriages, a legally binding contract that involved the loss of a woman’s citizenship at this time, was included within its remit.¹¹² For Polish diplomats and their French counterparts, such a definition was not to be enforced.

On the two occasions when the authorities in Le Havre did uncover cases of entrapment and enforced prostitution between 1919 and 1939, these were articulated to the prefect and the Minister of the Interior using all the familiar devices and discursive techniques employed in the prurient and sensationalist campaigns against the traffic. This is not to suggest that these were not genuine cases of entrapment; it is worth noting that the accounts were derived from the testimonies of the women themselves. Together, however, they provide telling examples of how fiction and empirical information can combine to generate the psychologically powerful aspects of belief.¹¹³ On 9 January 1936 Chauvineau reported that one Berthe Toulotte had returned to France via Le Havre on 18 July 1934, having worked as a prostitute in Buenos Aires:

¹¹¹ See Stauter-Halsted, ‘Generation of Monsters’, 30; and James Joyce, ‘Eveline’, in *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007 [1914]), 29–34.

¹¹² *Report of the special body of experts*, 8–9; Dame Rachel Crowdy particularly emphasised the ‘contraction of bogus marriages’ as a ‘fertile source of traffic’; see Crowdy, ‘Humanitarian Activities’, 168. The issue of women’s nationality was problematic during the interwar period, frequently determined by their fathers or their husbands, and, in many countries, with women losing their birth nationality after marriage to a foreign national. Rupp, *Worlds of Women*, 146–50.

¹¹³ Morin, *La rumeur*, 54.

She announced that in 1932, regularly attending the dance hall Le Petit Jardin near the Place Clichy in Paris, she had made the acquaintance of an individual called ‘Marcel’ who, some time after, had offered her a trip to Bordeaux. In this town, they visited a steamer about to sail, the ‘Massilia’, and it was during their promenade on board that she was pushed by her friend into a cabin and locked in. During the crossing she was kept captive and watched by a ship’s surgeon called Henri JOSSE. A young girl called Suzanne was also in this cabin and she was subject to the same surveillance. On the arrival of the Massilia in Buenos Aires, the surgeon JOSSE disembarked them secretly and gave them to someone named André LEBIGOT, resident in the Pueblo de San Miguel, ‘Villa Las Acacias’, near to Buenos Aires. Miss Toulotte, then aged 16, was placed in a brothel belonging to Rosario, known as ‘Sapho’, and a year later, in another brothel, by the same Lebigot. She was forced to continue this work until she met a young Italian who became her lover, giving her the necessary money to escape and to embark for France. The young woman in question declared herself on disembarking and returned to the home of her mother, Mrs Ve Toulotte, 5, impasse Havy Pierrefitte (Seine).¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ ‘Elle a déclaré qu’en en 1932, fréquentant le bal “Le Petit Jardin”, près de la Place Clichy à Paris, elle avait fait connaissance d’un individu prénommé “Marcel” qui, quelque temps après, lui offrit un voyage à Bordeaux.

Dans cette ville ils visitèrent un paquebot en partance, le “Massilia” et c’est au cours de leur promenade à bord qu’elle fut poussée par son ami dans une cabine et enfermée à clef.

Pendant toute la traversée elle reste enfermée et fut surveillée par un matelot infirmier du nom Henri JOSSE. Une jeune femme, prénommée Suzanne, se trouvait également dans cette cabine et était l’objet de la même surveillance.

A l’arrivée du Massilia à Buenos-Aires, l’infirmier JOSSE les fit débarquer en cachette et les remit à un nommé André LEBIGOT, demeurant à Pueblo de San Miguel, “Villa Las Acacias”, près de Buenos-Aires.

Melle TOULOTTE, alors âgée de 16 ans, fut placée dans une maison de prostitution de Rosario, connue sous le nom de “Sapho” et un an plus tard “en casita” par le même Lebigot. Elle dut continuer ce métier jusqu’à un moment un jeune italien, qui était devenu son amant, lui donna l’argent nécessaire pour s’évader et s’embarquer pour la France.

L’intéressée a déclaré à son débarquement au Havre, se rendre chez sa mère, Mme Ve Toulotte, 5, impasse Havy Pierrefitte (Seine). (rapport no. 3.525 du juillet 1934).’ Commissaire Divisionnaire de Police Spéciale Chauvineau to Monsieur le Sous-Préfet, 9 Jan. 1936, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

Outside this police report, there is little archival evidence to substantiate the claims. Was she a victim of a trafficker? Did she travel out to Buenos Aires of her own volition? These questions cannot be answered, although it is worth noting that there is a second reference to André LeBigot in the files of the Central Bureau on the White Slave Trade.¹¹⁵ Perhaps what is most significant here is how Chauvineau narrated her testimony. The brief narrative has all the elements of the classic entrapment tale which had been the fare of the sensationalist press from the 1880s onwards.¹¹⁶ From the outset Berthe Toulotte appears to have no agency of her own, and is portrayed throughout as the passive object of masculine forces. She is picked up in the Place Clichy, a part of Paris notorious for prostitution and vice, and offered an implausibly generous holiday in Bordeaux, where she is kidnapped and imprisoned (*'enfermée à clef'*). She is watched during the ocean crossing, and on arrival in Buenos Aires she is smuggled ashore and 'delivered' to a brothel. Chauvineau's narrativisation of her ordeal uses the same discursive markers as the scaremongering tales propagated by campaigners against the trade; indeed, there is little difference between his narrative and the plotline of the melodrama *Dancers for Buenos Aires*.¹¹⁷

A briefer report from 20 January 1933, concerning the repatriation of one Louise Moreau on 26 February 1932, similarly gives the strong impression that the 'victim' was exploited because of her naivety. The young girl, who was returned to the care of her mother, is reported as having been accosted by a woman in Paris and introduced to an individual called 'Henri', who decided that she and the woman should go to Rotterdam. Joined by another 'young girl', and furnished with false passports, the party boarded a German ship at Antwerp before Moreau managed to escape after docking in Port-au-Prince.¹¹⁸ The report concludes by noting that although the 'Henri' in question could not be identified, the twenty-eight-year-old woman travelling under the name of Germaine Ceyrolles bore a strong resemblance to a

¹¹⁵ Police générale: Dossiers personnels et dossiers d'affaires se rapportant à la traite des femmes en Argentine (1910–34), F/7/14859, Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.

¹¹⁶ Corbin, *Women*, 291.

¹¹⁷ A succinct summary of the plot appears in the advertising flyer, *Dansuses pour Buenos-Aires* (1931); Fonds Legrand-Falco, IV, 7, CEDIAS, Paris.

¹¹⁸ Le Commissaire spécial Chauvineau to Monsieur le Préfet de la Seine-Inférieure, 20 Jan. 1933, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

Carla Piva, about whom the superintendent had previously lodged a report on 28 September 1931.¹¹⁹

The discursive consequences of the ‘moral panic’ about the traffic in women pervade the reports produced by Chauvineau. In his extensive five-page report from 9 January 1931 he references the case of a forced repatriation from Canada of a twenty-five-year-old Frenchwoman for travelling without an appropriate visa. Noting that she had originally travelled out to Canada from Cherbourg on 1 November 1930 to work as a primary school teacher, and that she had been supposed to meet up with an agency in Montreal before being transported to her post, Chauvineau adds that this young woman did not know the address of her intended place of work. He concluded his report with the observation: ‘the naivety of this beautiful-looking young girl with a nice physique makes one think that she must have been the victim of traffickers’.¹²⁰ The facts of the case are emplotted according to a readily identifiable narrative: a young, innocent and beautiful French girl entrapped into a life of vice.

While the extent of the trafficking may have been exaggerated at national and international levels, and manipulated for political ends, the ‘moral panic’ it created had the potential to influence perceptions and behaviour in a local context. At stake was not only the discursive construct of victims and perpetrators but also a requirement to be seen to act. This took the form of official constraints on the movement of people, particularly women, as the narrative of enforced prostitution was projected upon all single young females travelling alone through the port of Le Havre. A concern for the moral welfare of white European women generally, rather than French women exclusively, may be seen in the monitoring initiatives implemented by the police both in Le Havre and in Saint-Nazaire. Surveillance was not limited to French women; Chauvineau in Le Havre displayed a zealous attention to detail regarding all unmarried women travelling alone, regardless of nationality, while Mairort, the superintendent in Saint-Nazaire, was particularly exercised by fears that Polish and Greek women travelling to South America were victims of trafficking.¹²¹ Following the sharp

¹¹⁹ Le Commissaire spécial Chauvineau to Monsieur le Préfet de la Seine-Inférieure, 20 Jan. 1933, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

¹²⁰ ‘La naïveté de cette jeune femme de belle allure et de physique agréable a fait penser qu’elle avait dû être victime de trafiquants.’ Le Commissaire spécial Chauvineau to Monsieur le Sous-Préfet, 9 Jan. 1931, AD, SM, 4 M 608,

¹²¹ Le Commissaire spécial Mairort to la Sûreté générale C. R. J., 21 May 1931, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

rebuke from the Minister of the Interior over his revelations about a possible trafficking ring operating out of Saint-Nazaire in May 1931, Mairort continued to note attentively the numbers of single Polish women emigrating to South America via Saint-Nazaire.¹²² This notwithstanding, the persistence of the collocation ‘white slave trade’, used six times in Chauvineau’s official reports between 1919 and 1939, and once in those produced at Saint-Nazaire, despite the official nomenclature of ‘trafficking in women’,¹²³ suggests that, although the France of the Third Republic was officially ‘colour blind’, for the officials in Le Havre and, to a lesser extent, Saint-Nazaire, monitoring was racialised and predicated upon the need to protect white women.

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The League of Nations and the work of the TWC has been praised by historians for its legacy, establishing what Pliley terms ‘international norms on the issue [of trafficking] that were incorporated into the charter of the United Nations’,¹²⁴ but how far did these new norms permeate national discourses and what was the impact on travelling women who passed through the French port of Le Havre? The final circular about *la traite des blanches* before the end of the Third Republic, sent by the Minister of the Interior on 9 September 1939, sought to harden and nationalise the definition of who could, in social, political, gendered and racial terms, be considered a victim of trafficking.¹²⁵ Anxious that, following France’s declaration of war and the ensuing flight of civilian populations in the face of the advancing Wehrmacht, there would be an increase in trafficking, the prefect of Seine-Inférieure urged Chauvineau and his officers to exercise diligent protection of French women, ‘whose fathers, brothers or fiancés have been mobilised and who therefore find themselves, sometimes,

¹²² Le Commissaire spécial Mairort to the Préfet de Loire-Inférieure, 15 Apr. 1932; and le Commissaire Spécial Mairort to the Préfet de Loire-Inférieure, 14 May 1932, AD, LA, 4 M 229.

¹²³ AD, SM, 4 M 608: reports written by Chauvineau on 9 Jan. 1931, 8 Jan. 1932 (where the phrase is used twice), 20 Jan. 1933, 13 Jan. 1938, and 28 Oct. 1938; AD, LA, 4 M 229: Le Préfet de la Loire-Inférieure to Messieurs les: Sous-Préfets de Saint-Nazaire et Châteaubriant, Commissaire Central de Police à Nantes, Commissaire Divisionnaire spécial à Nantes, Commandant de Gendarmerie de la Loire Inférieure, 14 Sept. 1939.

¹²⁴ Pliley, ‘Claims to Protection’, 106.

¹²⁵ Circulaire n° 267, Le Ministre de l’Intérieur à Messieurs les Préfets, 9 Sept. 1939, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

deprived of all support and are thus susceptible to machinations to corrupt them'.¹²⁶ The recurrence of the old fear of 'white slaving' at a time of national crisis in 1939 is unsurprising, and France did not constitute an exception – such narratives were employed in many countries for similar reasons – but as the country which had established the system of regulated prostitution and exported this system to other parts of the world, France's somewhat vexed negotiation of the issue of trafficking after 1919 contradicts any glib claims of normalisation. Moreover, reporting on the issue of trafficking by police officials in Le Havre reveals how international and national agendas could shape encounters on border crossings. Yet it also reveals how far the tenor of local action was contingent upon the ways in which individual officials interpreted and contextualised trafficking: who was perceived as a victim, who could be saved. What is clear is that while the conceptualisation of trafficking, as it was defined by the international apparatus, differed after 1919 from its conceptualisation before the First World War, border officials who monitored travelling women employed their own interpretations of what constituted trafficking, and these interpretations were often at odds with the international definitions. The 1927 report may have declared that 'the prostitute has also her claim to protection from open and shameless exploitation',¹²⁷ but in Le Havre and Saint-Nazaire the socio-political view of trafficking taken by officials resulted in their focusing on young, white, unmarried women, who had not previously worked as prostitutes, as being in need of especial protection.

¹²⁶ 'dont le père, les frères ou le fiancé ont été mobilisés, et qui se trouvent ainsi, quelquefois, privées de tout soutien, ont en effet été l'objet de manœuvres tendant à les détourner en vue de la débauche'. The Préfet de Seine-Inférieure to Chauvineau, 16 Sept. 1939, AD, SM, 4 M 608.

¹²⁷ *Report of the Special Body of Experts*, 18–9.