Abstract from “The Carrel Foundation’s 1942 Survey on Declining Birth Rates: A Biopolitical Snapshot of France at a Demographic Turning Point”

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This article examines the creation of a 1942 survey designed to explore the causes of the declining birth rate in France and offer solutions, and revisits the data it produced. Led by the sociologist Jean Stoetzel, a pioneer of survey-based research, it consisted of a questionnaire developed with the interviewers themselves—mainly teachers and priests. The questions took up the themes of the pronatalist movement in all their diversity, from repressive proposals (including anti-abortion policies) to social measures for supporting households. The survey concluded that the French public supported natalism but believed that the causes of the low birth rate were primarily economic, rather than moral or religious. Financial incentives were deemed useful but insufficient. While Stoetzel recommended a propaganda campaign based on patriotism and moral reform, re-examination of the survey data shows that respondents were primarily concerned by the practicalities of the living conditions associated with large families. Within the range of moral attitudes expressed, repressive leanings were mainly concentrated in rural areas. Overall, survey respondents were sensitive to the plight of vulnerable populations, including single mothers.