When did you become interested in police systems and how has your background informed your current work?

I participated in a previous French National Research Agency (ANR) project on the history of the circulation and construction of police knowledge in Europe (CIRSAP), which led us to criticise the equivocal notion of national police ‘models’. The organisation of policing in different European countries was much more complicated than previously assumed, with connections between different regions and cities in Europe. Personally, I first became interested in police systems through studying the history of personal identification in 18th Century and revolutionary France.

The sheer variety of police forces, police agencies and other agents involved in policing during this period is fascinating. They played a much larger role in society than today’s police forces, with their various tasks including welfare provision and enforcing labour and guild regulations. The interactions between these agents – as well as their interactions with other institutions including the military, the judiciary and the Church, and with society as a whole – gradually emerged as a new subject of study in its own right. As a social historian, my expertise lies in 18th Century France and I am fascinated by the strategies of different actors and how public policies shape society and social identities.

To what extent are workshops on the history of the policing system important to your research?

Our first workshop – which focused on defining the concept of police systems – brought together sociologists, political scientists and historians of policing. The project researchers presented how they could make use of this concept in their respective fields, accordingly forging a common framework that enabled us to work together. In a second workshop that took place in November 2014 in Lille, we explored the various forms of collaboration, coexistence and conflict between the actors of police systems. The workshops were especially important in deconstructing the barriers that existed between different historical periods of policing, as well as between European and colonial history, leading us to build historical investigations that spanned the 18th and 19th Centuries. Constant dialogue with international researchers, as well as with researchers working in different European fields, has enabled us to view the French experience from a broader perspective.

What effect did the interdisciplinary nature of your work have on the success of the project?

Through a historical approach, we try to assimilate tools for the study of policing that are used by legal historians, political scientists and sociologists. Our work has greatly benefited from previous research in the social sciences that focuses on police work and police organisations, but also on the sociology of public policies and the political crisis. Similarly, analytical tools developed by geographers and spatial anthropologists have shaped our work on the territories of police systems.

Can you discuss the next steps of your research and how you expect the results of your studies to impact on future security debates?

A third workshop in Aix-en-Provence in 2015 will examine the territories of police systems and discuss how police systems have shaped territories and spatial organisations. At a final meeting, we expect to synthesise our results and propose an analytical model for the development of European police systems since the 18th Century. This would pave the way for a possible new European history of policing.

Two fields seem particularly promising for future research: policing in the colonial and imperial context, and the management of disaster, disorders and crisis. The possible impact of our results on future security debates is more than an institutional issue, given the politicisation of these questions in recent times.

Dr Vincent Denis discusses how his current project on European police systems in the 18th and 19th Centuries is creating robust international collaborations and feeding into current policy debates.
The legacy of law enforcement

A researcher from the Institute of Modern and Contemporary History at the Panthéon-Sorbonne University, France, is coordinating an innovative project exploring European police systems in the 18th and 19th Centuries that maps the wider, global impact of historical transformations to police systems.

The concept of a law-enforcing and order-preserving police force developed gradually throughout history as a tool of governance – and it has undoubtedly had a significant impact on forming the structure and fabric of modern states. Understanding the history of policing is therefore very important as it helps to forge a clearer picture of both past- and present-day societal structure and political power relations.

"As the study of change, history provides tools for analysing the evolution and transformation of police systems," points out Dr Vincent Denis, a social historian from the Institute of Modern and Contemporary History at the Panthéon-Sorbonne University in Paris. "Plus, the history of policing provides insights into historical experiences and precedents, particularly in terms of police-society relations, which could help guide future security policies and advance positive police reforms."

To this end, Denis is leading an ambitious project, funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR), entitled ‘Systèmes policiers européens, 18-19 siècles’ (SYSPOE) that is analysing European police systems in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Launched in January 2013 and drawing together multidisciplinary and international researchers, this comparative project focuses on the construction and transformation of police systems in European countries and their colonies during this timeframe. It aims to advance knowledge about the evolution of European societies by examining them through the lens of regulation methods, in turn helping to build a foundation for the study of European policing history. The hope is that this project will encourage a move from short-term collaborations to more long-term, sustainable and international partnerships.

The findings from SYSPOE’s investigations are primarily taken from case studies and a series of six workshops on the history of police systems. The case studies are being drawn from archival materials and fall into five specific work packages: police systems and circulations; police systems and colonies; plural policing; military cultures and police systems and; police systems, crises, revolutions and disasters. As for the workshops, these take place once every semester – and three are internal while three are international. The three international workshops operate as a platform for the SYSPOE researchers to present their findings to a broader audience, accordingly opening important discussions among humanities and social science researchers from around the world. Taken together, the different work packages and discussions are enabling Denis and his colleagues to design analytical tools that contribute to a better understanding of police systems by showing how configurations of police institutions are constructed and connected at local, national and transnational scales.

So far, the research findings from SYSPOE show that the transformation of police systems occurred over long cycles of rapid...
SYSPOE aims to advance knowledge about the evolution of European societies by examining them through the lens of regulation methods, in turn helping to build a foundation for the study of European policing history and dynamic changes, which alternated with periods where few changes happened. Crucially, transformations coincide with the adoption of new theories and ideas about policing, institutional reforms and budgetary issues. “One cycle ran from 1750/60 to 1815/30, coinciding with the building of new active police forces, the redefinition of police tasks and the clarification of the respective roles of police agencies, criminal justice and the army,” elucidates Denis. “Another cycle began in the 1850s and lasted until the end of the 19th Century, with the ‘nationalisation’ of police systems coinciding with the rise of nation states in Europe, the growth of financial means for the police, adaptations to social changes such as the communication and transport revolution and the shifting nature of political regimes.” Furthermore, the research has highlighted significant differences between police systems in urban and rural areas of Europe; similarly, in the colonies the European-imposed police systems contrast markedly with existing indigenous policing methods.

INFORMING MODERN DEBATE

Working towards the completion of the project in December 2015, Denis and his colleagues are uncovering fascinating insights into policing in this key period for the emergence of modern police systems. However, rather than focusing on the history of the police as an end in itself, SYSPOE is aiming to advance a global understanding of the social processes that underpin state construction and evolution. Not only will this be of use to the wider community of historians, but it will also contribute to methodological developments among social science researchers.

SYSPOE’s historical perspective is highly relevant to modern reflections and debates regarding the role of the police in many contemporary situations. These include national crises and emergencies, political and democratic transitions and even the endemic police corruption found in some countries, which could be traced back to dysfunctional colonial legacies. Moreover, ever since the confrontation of values espoused by absolutist states and the individual rights framework from the Enlightenment period, there has been an uneasy relationship between the protection of individual rights and the extension of police powers to protect the state and its citizens. “This tension has recently been revived by the simultaneous development of the internet as a space for free speech and of cyber-police agencies to monitor it,” discloses Denis. “Added to this, there is also a tension between two contrasting definitions of the ‘good’ professional policeman: one is that of a police force that has empathy with the population, while the other is that of a disciplined, military-style and distant force.”

The project also has wider implications for current debates on security policies in Europe regarding the relationships between the civilian police force and military organisations, as well as other law enforcement agencies. Indeed, in a world that is threatened by transnational terrorism, human trafficking and huge criminal organisations, there are legitimate questions about the evolving role of the police in responding to these threats. SYSPOE provides a comprehensive and historical framework to analyse these changes and inform key policy developments.