"The Sherlock Holmes of Paris:"
Eugène-François Vidocq (1775-1857)
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Eugène-François Vidocq was one of the most fascinating individuals of the Napoleonic era. Largely forgotten today, this outlaw turned law enforcer was one of the founders of the French detective police, and of modern criminology. Born in July 1775 in Arras, the capital of Artois, Vidocq as a boy led a disorderly life. He first ran away from home to join a circus, later worked for an itinerant peddler and other menial jobs before eventually returning home. His family forced Vidocq, not yet sixteen, to enlist in the army, hoping he would be taught some discipline. He participated in the victorious campaign of the French revolutionary forces in the fall of 1792, serving at Valmy and Jemmapes, was wounded and sent back home to recover. In Arras, Vidocq ended up committing petty crimes for which he was jailed. He was released a few months later and went back to the army, where he served a fencing master.

Eugène-François Vidocq

In the fall of 1794 he left the army once more, probably deserting. For a time he lived like a vagabond and adventurer before enlisting in the "*armée roulante*," a roving band of soldiers and officers who, furnished with false papers and false authorizations, exploited army's quartermasters. Over the several years he repeatedly broke the law and found himself in prison, oftentimes on galleys. His memoirs are full of fascinating stories (many probably invented for color) of his adventures. He spent most of this time either in prison or on the run, disguised as a milk porter, a sailor, and even a nun. Impressed into the Dutch navy, he was, nevertheless, arrested by the French authorities and sent to the galleys in 1799, After serving several months in Toulon, he escaped to Lyon. While there, he was betrayed and was arrested once more. But Vidocq cut a deal with the police and helped it in arresting robbers in exchange for freedom.

He initially returned home to Arras but after a few brushes with the police, he fled to Rouen where he ran a mercer's shop. Yet, his mistress betrayed him and once again he landed in jail. And once again he escaped. He briefly served as a corsair on a French ship in the Atlantic and adopted the identity of a killed crew member. In 1804, using faked papers, he enlisted in the French navy while it was preparing for an invasion of England. But his criminal past was not letting him out. After Vidocq refused to join a criminal band known as the "*armée de la lune*" (army of the moon), he was denounced to the police, arrested and jailed. In late 1806, he escaped from jail by jumping from an unbarred window several stories above the river. For a time he disguised himself as a wounded captain returning from the Battle of Jena. He settled in Paris, and ran a tailor's shop. But he was

recognized and blackmailed by former prison-mates, who threatened to report him.

In 1809, tired of living in fear, Vidocq decided to surrender to police. An experienced criminal, he offered to serve as an informer in exchange for his freedom. Police accepted his offer and he was first placed in the Bicêtre prison where he started his work as a spy; he later also worked in La Force Prison. In both places, he sounded out other inmates and forwarded information about forged identities and unsolved crimes to the police chief of Paris Jean Henry. After almost two years of spying, in 1811, Vidocq was released from jail and began to work as a secret agent for the Paris police. He disguised himself as an escaped convict and used his contacts and reputation in the criminal underworld to gain trust and learn about planned and committed crimes. He even participated in some crimes in order to gain trust and then turn on his partners. Impressed with his success, the Prefecture created a new unit, the *Brigade de Sûreté,* specifically to assist Vidocq, who became its leader, in his work; in December 1813 Emperor Napoleon signed a decree, which made the brigade a state security police known as *Sûreté Nationale*.

Initially, Vidocq had only four agents but, as the return of unemployed soldiers at the end of the Napoleonic Wars produced a serious crime wave, the *Sûreté Nationale* expanded and, by 1827, it had 28 agents. The *Sûreté Nationale* proved quite successful in keeping tabs on crime; in less than seven years, Vidocq estimated, the brigade had arrested more than four thousand lawbreakers and had nearly eliminated whole categories of crime. By the mid-1820s, the brigade was keeping twelve hundred ex-convicts under surveillance and executing four hundred to five hundred warrants annually. He pioneered many new investigative methods and is often considered as one of the founders of modern criminology. He pioneered undercover work, anthropometrics, ballistics, careful crime scene investigation. A man of remarkable photographic memory, he developed an unique record-keeping-system, creating a special record card for each arrested person that listed person's name, description, aliases, previous convictions, modus operandi, and other information. His system was utilized by the Parisian police for decades before Alphonse Bertillon's new anthropometric system was introduced in 1880s. Ahead of his time, Vidocq maintained a small laboratory where he applied forensic methods to solve crimes.

In 1827, Vidocq resigned from Sûreté. He was initially involved in a small business, but lost money and returned to Sûreté in 1830. After two years of service, including involvement in the Revolution of 1830, he resigned in November 1832. The following year, Vidocq established *Le bureau des renseignements* (Office of Information), a private detective agency that employed ex-cons to solve and deter crimes. His business venture proved to be quite successful but led to repeated frictions with the official police. In 1842, Vidocq was tried for extorting money and spent almost a year in the infamous *Conciergerie* before being freed. By then his reputation was so undermined that his private agency went bankrupt.

In 1848, after witnessing the February Revolution, Vidocq ran as a deputy for the 2nd Arrondissement of Paris but lost. Instead, later that year he was charged with fraud and jailed, although charges were then dropped and he was freed. The last years of his life were full hardship and difficulties. On 11 May 1857, the 82-year old Vidocq died in his home in Paris.