

Carlos DA FONSECA, “Mail Carriers in the Department of the Nord Between the Wars” (“Les facteurs dans le Nord de la France dans l’entre-deux guerres,”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Jean-Pierre Hirsch et Didier Terrier, Lille 3, 1998, 113 p + appendices.

Historical studies of mail carriers are rare; even more unusual are those that concern themselves with the early 20th century. Using the format of a triptych in logical sequence – hiring, occupation, the sociology of mail carriers – the author paints a realistic portrait of these sub-employees in a large industrial department in the north of France.

The study of how mail carriers were hired reveals the peculiarities of this occupation. First of all, it explains an original way of hiring a civil servant during the Third Republic. The use of a recommendation was still very active and efficient, although the Republicans had denounced its misfortunes (Avatars) during the empire. However, this practice seems to decrease in the thirties. In particular it was the original conditions for the hiring of mail carriers (and other employees) that put an end to this practice. By the end of the 19th century, the job of mail carrier had become practically reserved for former soldiers; after the First World War, it went to former combatants or their families. Under these circumstances, the occupation was associated almost exclusively with men, although many women assumed the position during and after wartime. After that time the hiring of mail carriers was done at the national level and was less subject to political influence and the whims of Clientelisme.

This study also presents and examines the flow of new hires into this occupation, which followed the fluctuations of economic circumstances. In general the number of mail carriers increased during the period between the wars until 1931. At that time there were more than one thousand classified mail carriers who distributed mail daily to communities in the influential department of the Nord, allowing us to trace their practices.

There were several reforms during this period. Reforms in occupational praxis came with the introduction of new techniques that contributed to a new approach to delivering the mail. There were reforms in status as well: although they remained diversified, the different categories of mail carrier slowly became more uniform in comparison to the situation before 1914, leading the way to the reforms of the Fourth Republic. The postal authorities’ recognition of the union demands that had long been denied to mail carriers led to a transformation of professional ideology.

Mail carriers were confronted with problems on a daily basis as they performed their duties. The common origin of all these problems was the budgetary restrictions that arose from the economic crisis. They prevented the efficient regulation of the mail carriers’ manpower that would guarantee quality delivery service to the public of their mail, so any sense of continuity on a day-to-day basis was lost. The same problems destroyed the advances that had been gained in the 1920s through the increase in manpower and the adjustment of salaries.

With a career as a mail carrier, the possibilities for social promotion were marginal; the carriers’ only mobility was a geographic one (there was no vertical or horizontal mobility within the corps of postal employees). The mail carrier often made use of the only mobility available to him to return closer to his family roots.

The sociological study of mail carriers shows that the popular working classes did not perceive this occupation as a means of social promotion. There was a significant and growing number of persons from higher social categories, especially craftsmen and merchants, among the candidates for the position. Thrown into the work market by the economic crisis, these candidates were convinced by the crisis that a civil servant's status was more valuable than that of an independent worker. Does this security explain the fact that mail carriers adopted an attitude toward birthrate and family size that was different from national behavior on these issues?

Nonetheless, there were certain risks, especially health-related, involved in the mail carrier's occupation. With the social scourge of tuberculosis in France in the 1920s and 30s, the mail carriers were as exposed to the disease as those employees who worked at the windows of dusty post offices.