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Paper summary - Walking the city beat: The day-to-day tasks and rigours of urban policing, Antwerp 1890-1914

This paper is concerned with patterns and strategies of urban policing as they developed in Belgium, between 1890 and 1914. In this period the major Belgian urban centres, like their European counterparts, experienced strong demographical and economical growth as well as many problems such as poverty, dirt, disease, pollution, speculative development and slum housing. Such problems had, of course, existed previously yet were now of a scale never before witnessed. As a consequence, popular and official anxieties about crime and disorder reached new heights: more than ever, the insalubrity and rootlessness of city life and the demoralising effects of urban poverty were believed to produce the environmental conditions for political unrest, immorality and crime to flourish. Prompted by a desire to control the chaotic urban environment and elevate, socially and morally, the new town dwellers, city authorities increasingly charged their police forces with the monitoring and suppression of popular activities and reactions considered conducive to immorality, disorder or crime, utilising local acts to suppress or control animal fighting, indecency, brothels, dancing, gambling, etc. New in this period was a shift in the general policing of working-class activities to a concerted assault on clearly identified ‘deviant’ groups: the urban casual poor - beggars, vagrants, habitual offenders, casual workers in general. This group was widely assumed to be distinct from the law abiding majority of the population, and because of its apparent intractability, to pose a special problem for law enforcement agencies.

Although the policing priorities of the propertied classes lay particularly in the maintenance of public order on the city streets and crime control, daily police work – which meant: foot patrol - encompassed a much broader range of police actions and duties. City police forces were assigned new tasks at a high rate as local authorities increasingly sought to ensure urban order and public safety through a proliferation of local acts or statutes pertaining to control housing and sanitation, to improve public cleanliness, to protect urban infrastructure from damage, and so on. As a result, the police were expected to carry out a large variety of duties, from ordering the removal of obstructions to the roadway or pavement, to reporting the non-functioning of street lights, to checking that doors and windows were securely locked.

The first half of this paper, which focuses on the Antwerp municipal police, attempts to map out this broad spectrum of police tasks and examines how they were performed on a day-to-day basis, taking into account the police-public relation. It will argue that, to the disliking of Antwerp policemen themselves, their numerous new duties left them with little time to fight crime and involved mainly routine work, in contrast to the late 19th-century ‘professional’ model of policing. The second half of the paper examines in particular how the Antwerp city police responded to the popular and official perceptions of the ‘crime problem’ and the growing demand for public order. It will show how, bounded by the demands on the ground as well as crucial constraints (the high volume and the complexities of police tasks, lack of material resources due to recruitment problems, etc.), the police concentrated on marginal social groups who already fit popular stereotypes of the potential criminals, the casual poor, as well as on specific ‘hot spots’ in the densely populated inner-city areas, which constituted, in their opinion, spaces of crime, danger and disorder. The bulk of police attention and pro-active intervention was, in other words, focused on a small number of people and a limited territory only, following a pattern which was continuously adjusted to the ongoing socio-economic and spatial changes the city districts experienced between 1890 and 1914.

The paper draws largely on various police documents in the Antwerp city archives, including registers of procès-verbaux, police journals (detailing patrols and describing incidents with which policemen had to deal), annual police reports, as well as statistical data.