

Delesalle, Charles

By [James E. Connolly](#)

Delesalle, *Charles* Emilie Marie Joseph
Politician, mayor and deputy
Born 04 February 1850 in Lille, France
Died 18 July 1923 in Unknown, probably Lille

A local notable and mayor of Lille during the occupation, Charles Delesalle was forced to work with the Germans but also sought to protect the population as best as possible. In particular, he played an important role in food provision, overseeing policing, and protesting German demands.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Occupation Mayoralty](#)
- [3 After the Occupation](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

Charles Delesalle (1850-1923) came from a distinguished family of linen manufacturers from Madeleine-les-Lille. He was the *conseiller général* of the *département du Nord* from 1907 to 1913, and, from 1904 to 1919, the moderate-right mayor of Lille, capital of the *département du Nord*, which had a pre-war population of circa 322,000. Delesalle was, therefore, an important local notable and remained mayor throughout the German [occupation](#), which lasted from October 1914 until October 1918.

Occupation Mayoralty

Delesalle was among the first individuals officially designated as “hostages” by the Germans to guarantee the good behaviour of the local population, and retained this status throughout the war. Like other occupation mayors, he was cut off from the centralised [French government](#) and thus acquired considerable responsibilities during the conflict. One of the most important of these, in a time of near-famine conditions, was overseeing [food supplies](#). In 1915, Delesalle became the head of the regional committee of the *Comité d’Alimentation du Nord de la France* (Committee for Feeding Northern France), the French subsidiary of the [Commission for Relief in Belgium](#). He and others continued to organise the feeding of the population until the liberation. Delesalle also devoted much energy to public order, liaising with local French police commissioners and assisting them with setting priorities, such as targeting fraud and smuggling. In April 1918 he oversaw the creation of a committee designed to prevent increasingly common juvenile delinquency.

Delesalle walked a fine line between trying to protect the population’s interests and obeying the occupiers. The German governor relied on Delesalle to communicate German orders to the population. Therefore, Delesalle signed German posters alongside the governor, and had considerable interaction with the occupier. This included bi-weekly or daily meetings with the governor, accompanied by the prefect of the Nord - until February 1915, [Félix Trépont \(1863-1949\)](#) - and the bishop of the Nord,

[Al  xis Armand Charost \(1860-1930\)](#). However, this did not mean that Delesalle engaged in [collaboration](#). He criticised German orders, addressing many letters of protest to the governor throughout the occupation concerning various issues, such as collective fines levied on Lille, the arrest of specific individuals, the 1916 [labour deportations](#) of civilians, and demands for French workers. Like other mayors in occupied [France](#) and [Belgium](#), Delesalle drew on [international law](#) – even consulting legal experts – to bolster his protests, accusing the Germans of breaching the [Hague Convention](#) in particular. The mayor's opposition was almost always in vain but was widely known and praised by occupied compatriots in letters, diaries, and post-war histories and memoirs. His protests even gained publicity outside the occupied zone – in August 1916, Delesalle was called in front of a German judge because Allied [papers](#) had published his letter protesting against the April 1916 deportations.

After the Occupation

During the liberation of Lille on 17 October 1918, Delesalle expressed his joy in a triumphant poster. His son, an aviator, landed near the theatre to greet his father and was met by jubilant crowds. Delesalle was made a *Chevalier de la L  gion d'Honneur* by President [Alexandre Millerand \(1859-1943\)](#) on 20 October 1918 for his actions during the occupation.

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