

Swiss Specialties. Switzerland's Role in the Genesis of the Telegraph Union, 1855-1875

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Electric telegraphy was first tried in the 1830s and national networks were installed in the 1840s, a decade in which almost all European states introduced a telegraph service, mostly in the form of a public monopoly.¹ Already in the late 1840s and early 1850s the telegraph proved to be relevant for national and international communication because it could intensify political, economic and social relations with other nations. Communicating at an international level, however, also involved creating a series of political, economic and technical regulations, principles and models essential for standardizing technologies, introducing homogeneous norms and establishing tariff agreements.² For this reason, after a series of bilateral and multilateral treatises, the Telegraph Union, nowadays better known as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), was founded in 1865. It was the first supranational organization to unite different countries, with the aim of regulating a public service.³ Originally all the countries in which the telegraph service was managed under a state monopoly took part,⁴ thus excluding nations of primary importance such as Great Britain and the United States.⁵ The main aim of the Union was to guarantee international telegraph communications, something which could be done only through technical standardization, regulatory uniformity and mutual agreement on international tariffs. It was therefore essential for the States, through periodic conferences, to decide which machinery and which telegraphic materials to use on the international lines, which standards to adopt to manage the internal and supranational telegraph service and, finally, what tax to apply to each single telegram sent from one state to another. At the time, these conferences represented a real novelty because for the first time all of the European states gave up a small part of their national sovereignty in the name of

1. J.L. KIEVE, *The Electric Telegraph: a social and economic history*, David and Charles, London, 1973.
2. S. FARI, *Una penisola in comunicazione. Il servizio telegrafico italiano dall'Unità alla Grande Guerra*, Cacucci Editore, Bari, 2008, pp.429-504.
3. On the reasons why ITU was the first organization of that kind, see S. FARI, G. BALBI, G. RICHERI, *Last in First Out. How the Telegraph Brought to International Organization Before Post and Trains*, International Committee for the History of Technology (ICOHTEC) Conference, Barcelona, July 2012.
4. Private companies that managed the telegraphic service using subsea cables were also invited to take part in the Conferences. However, they did not have the right to vote.
5. Great Britain took part in the Conference of Paris in 1865 on behalf of the Indian colonies. In 1869, the British government nationalized the telegraphic service and, as of the Conference of Rome of 1861, it took part in the meetings of the Telegraph Union representing its own metropolitan area. In the United States the telegraph service was always managed by private companies and so no US official delegates were ever invited to the telegraph conferences even though observers were present without the right to vote. The United States took part officially in the Conferences of the International Telecommunications Union only after the Conference of Atlantic City in 1947.

the development of a service which was becoming indispensable for commercial and economic relations as well as for diplomatic ones.

Up to the present day, its history has been little studied and the few scholars who have dealt with it have conducted analyses on political/diplomatic rather than communicative dimension.⁶ Furthermore, with the exception of Coddington's monograph, the literature has mainly focused on the role played by relatively few countries in the various phases of its history.⁷ Thus Leonard Laborie holds that Belgium played a crucial part in the birth of the union, and claims that the new institution was first addressed by Napoleon III's policy.⁸ Mildred L.B. Feldman points to the role of the States, especially in the regulatory phase at the turn of the century.⁹ Switzerland has gone practically unnoticed, which is surprising for three reasons: 1) it was (and still is) the seat of the Bureau, with the executive office sited in Berne; 2) until World War II the secretary was always a Swiss citizen; 3) the Bureau was placed under the direct control of the Swiss government.¹⁰

Through its influence in the creation and development of the Telegraph Union, Switzerland played an active and decisive role in creating a European space for communication. As the group of historians of technology gravitating around the association *Tensions of Europe* would say, Switzerland played a crucial role in "networking Europe".¹¹ Indeed telecommunications can be seen a decisive infrastructure in developing the so-called "hidden integration" process which, according to some scholars, began in Europe back in the nineteenth century and so long before the European Union was set up at the end of the Second World War.¹²

6. G.A. CODDING Jr., *The International Telecommunication Union. An Experiment in International Cooperation*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1952.
7. G.A. CODDING, A.M. RUTKOWSKI, *The International Telecommunication Union in a Changing World*, Artech House, Dedham, 1982.
8. L. LABORIE, *L'Europe mise en réseaux. La France et la coopération internationale dans les postes et les télécommunications (années 1850-années 1950)*, PIE Peter Lang, Bruxelles, 2010, pp.76-82; Idem., *La France, l'Europe et l'ordre International des communications (1865-1959)*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2006, pp.129-144.
9. M.L.B. FELDMAN, *The role of the United States in the International Telecommunication Union and pre-ITU conferences*, on: http://openlibrary.org/works/OL6938023W/The_role_of_the_United_States_in_the_International_Telecommunication_Union_and_pre-ITU_conferences, 1975.
10. The only two papers considering the role of Switzerland in the birth of the Telegraph Union were written by V. GROSSI, *Le rôle international de personnalités suisses du XIX^e siècle dans le domaine des télégraphes*, in: *Hispo*, October 1984; Idem, *Technologie et diplomatie suisse au XIX^e siècle*, in: *Relations internationales*, 39(1984).
11. E. Van der VLEUTEN, A. KAISER (eds), *Networking Europe. Transnational Infrastructures and the Shaping of Europe, 1850–2000*, MA: Science History Publications, Sagamore Beach, 2006; F. SHIPPER, J. SCHOT, *Infrastructural Europeanism, or the Project of building Europe on infrastructures: an introduction*, in: *History and Technology*, 3(2011), pp.245-264; A. FICKERS, P. GRISET, *Eventing Europe: Electronic Information and Communication Spaces in Europe (1850-2000)*, Palgrave/MacMillan, London, forthcoming.
12. T.J. MISA, J. SCHOT, *Inventing Europe: Technology and the Hidden Integration of Europe. Introduction to the special issue*, in: *History and Technology*, 1(2005), pp.1-20.

The role of Switzerland in creating and making an institution out of the Telegraph Union was therefore crucial – politically, diplomatically, economically and technically. The aim of the present article is, therefore, to revisit the historical beginnings of the Union, and focus on the key role played by Switzerland in favoring its birth, structures and principal trajectories in the ten years preceding and following its creation.

“Bringing together the two large electric currents that divide Europe”
(1849-1864)

The international management of the telegraph between the late 1840s and the mid-1860s went through three distinct phases. In the first period various European countries signed bilateral agreements; in the second two unions were created, one German speaking and the other francophone; while in the third the Union itself came into being.

The first international telegraphic convention copied preceding bilateral postal models and was signed between Prussia and Austria in October 1849. Towards the mid-1850s it was followed by numerous bilateral telegraph agreements between both states in Germany and Central-Eastern Europe.¹³ Switzerland was pro-active in signing bilateral agreements and, given its strategic geographical position, stipulated them both with German and French-speaking nations.¹⁴

In a second phase, before the Telegraph Union was actually created, two other international unions were established.¹⁵ The first, known as the Austro-German Telegraph Union (AGTU), was founded in Dresden on 25 July 1850 by Austria, Prussia, Bavaria and Saxony. In the following years other German and Austrian territories joined, as well as independent countries with close ties to them.¹⁶ The equivalent of AGTU for the Latin block had no official name, but was known as the Western European Telegraph Union (WETU); it was established on 29 December 1855 in Paris by France, Belgium, the Kingdom of Sardinia, Spain and Switzerland. Other states joined it over the years, as happened with AGTU.

13. V. MEYER, *L'Union Internationale des Télécommunications et son bureau*, type script, Bern, 1946, p.2.
14. The Swiss Confederation came to an agreement with Austria (26 April 1852), France (23 December 1852), Sardinia (25 June 1853), again France and Baden (8 August 1853), Württemberg (25 August 1854) and Spain (24 November 1854).
15. G. BALBI, S. CALVO, S. FARI, G. RICHERI, ‘Bringing together the two large electric currents that divide Europe’: Switzerland’s Role in Promoting the Creation of a Common European Telegraph Space, 1849-1865, in: *ICON*, 15 (2009), pp.61-80.
16. E.g., the Netherlands, the Duchy of Modena and Parma, Tuscany, the Papal States.

In the late 1850s the two unions grew closer and began to overlap in their functions, eventually creating a single institution for regulating international traffic.¹⁷ As the Swiss Federal Council put it in 1854, its aim was that

“we gave the idea of a European conference by inviting the administrations of the most important neighbouring to take part in the undertaking. This idea was favourably welcomed by France and the Kingdom of Sardinia; but Austria did not deem it useful as together with Germany and Holland it is part of the Austro-German Union and already enjoys all the advantages of their common provisions”.¹⁸

The Swiss proposal was transformed into action at the Berlin Conference (June 1855) where Belgium, France and Prussia took part (in the name of AGTU). After its disappointing results, the French government decided to organize a second Telegraph Conference with France, Belgium, Spain, Sardinia and Switzerland. It was there at the Paris Conference of December 1855 that WETU was created. The Swiss government gave its delegate Karl Brunner-von Wattenwyl precise instructions about Switzerland’s expectations, and also invited Brunner to promote a gradual merging of these two Unions by allowing for mutual concessions. The goal was mainly reached and for both Brunner and the Swiss Council, the 1855 Paris conference was a constructive step towards setting up a European telegraphic union.¹⁹

The Conference that officially attributed to Switzerland a key intermediary role between the two unions was probably the one which took place in Turin in 1857. The Kingdom of Sardinia entrusted the Swiss government with the task of inviting Austria, but Switzerland did not succeed probably because of political tensions between Sardinia, eager to annex the Lombardo-Veneto territories, and Austria itself.²⁰ Even though the Turin conference took place in the absence of Austria, WETU’s main aim, perhaps for the first time, was “to set up an organization common to all the states on the Continent”.²¹ In order to achieve this common space, however, an agreement had to be reached with AGTU.²² Yet again the Federal Council carried out an intermediary role between the two associations and Switzerland offered to host the meeting between the two. Brunner declared he had the orders to ask the Conference to decide on

17. The moving closer of the two unions was already under way in the early 1850s, given that bilateral treaties were being signed by countries belonging to the two different associations. Specific mixed conventions were also drawn up between countries from the two different blocks.
18. FF [Feuille Fédérale], vol.1, 09.01.1856, p.110. All the translations from the French originals are ours.
19. The explicit use of the term “European” surprises for its precocity and long-sightedness. Brunner said: “I pursue the hope that this agreement of which the commission has just laid the basis will one day carry the name European Convention”. SFA [Swiss Federal Archives], Fond E 52, Archiv nr. 440, Session of Paris International Conference, 18.12.1855. The Federal Council defined it “a big step towards uniformity in telegraph relations in the whole of Europe”.
20. SFA, Fond E 52, Archiv nr.443, Département des Postes et des Travaux publics de la Confédération Suisse au Conseil fédéral Suisse, 17.08.1857.
21. SFA, Fond E 52, Archiv nr.441, Légation du Roi de Sardaigne en Suisse à Fornerod, president de la Confédération, Berne, 06.06.1857.
22. Ibid., Session of Turin International Conference, 21.05.1857.

Berne for the venue of the next meeting and the other WETU states willingly accepted Switzerland's candidature.

In the months leading up to the Berne Conference of 8 August 1858, the Federal Council made a considerable diplomatic effort to invite some AGTU members.²³ Though yet again Austria did not take part, other countries of the German-speaking union (The Netherlands, Württemberg and Baden) joined in. The 1858 Brussels and Berne Treaties, which came into force at once "constituted a kind of uniform organization for Western Europe".²⁴

Further steps followed to bring the two unions closer, with Switzerland always playing a fundamental role as in the drawing up of the 1858 Friedrichshafen and 1863 Bregenz Conventions. In a political document of 1859, the Swiss government was extremely clear about its aims, which were:

"bringing together the two large electric currents dividing Europe. On the one hand France and the Western states; on the other, Austria and the member states of the Austro-German union. Each of these two great powers wanted their own system to prevail. Switzerland, neutral country, was tasked with finding an agreement and, if possible, unification"²⁵

The Telegraph Union, founded in 1865, was the institution in which the two European electric currents merged, so rewarding all the earlier Swiss effort. Two features in the Swiss approach to telecommunications had contributed to its success. One was its policy in encouraging reciprocal concessions, consisting in small steps which made the AGTU and WETU conventions more and more similar to the point of totally overlapping.²⁶ This was a practical application of the art of mediation which was part of Switzerland's cultural heritage. The second was the fact that, unlike many other countries, Switzerland had peaceful relations with Austria and the European telegraph union could not have been created without the participation of a key country like the Austro-Hungarian Empire.²⁷ This second aspect was an indirect effect of another Swiss specialty: perpetual neutrality guiding its relations with all other countries.²⁸

23. Département des Postes [...] au Conseil fédéral Suisse, op.cit., and SFA, Fond E 52, Archiv nr.443, Session of Berne International Conference, 24.08.1858.
24. E. SAVENEY, *La télégraphie internationale. Les anciens traités et la conférence de Paris*, in: *Revue des deux mondes*, 15.09.1872, p.365.
25. FF, vol.1, 05.02.1859, p.110.
26. The Federal Council commission, whose task was to evaluate the outcome of the Berne and Friedrichshafen conventions, declared that the main objective of the two conferences was to create "by means of reciprocal concessions, two almost identical conventions" (FF, vol.1, 05.02.1859, p. 110).
27. This relation between Austria and Switzerland was probably cemented by the fact that Brunner, director of Swiss telegraphs, the promoter of the Europhile policy of the Swiss Confederation, became director of the Austrian Empire's telegraphs in 1857. His closeness to the Federal Council and friendship with Louis Curchod were probably decisive in bringing the countries closer (V. GROSSI, *Le rôle international de personnalités suisses* ..., op.cit.).
28. Switzerland's right to permanent neutrality was recognized during the Vienna congress in 1815. A. MORIN, *Les lois relatives à la guerre selon le droit des gens moderne* [sic]: *le droit public et le droit criminel des pays civilisés*, Marchal & Billard, Cosse, 1872.

The Birth of the Telegraph Union: the Paris Conference and Austria's participation (1864-1865)

The first European Conference which led to the foundation of the Telegraph Union was organized by the French government with the aim of gathering in Paris representatives of all the countries in which the telegraph was run directly by the state as a public monopoly. However, it was Switzerland which put pressure on Austria to take part, too. In July 1864 the French home secretary invited all the countries present at both the Brussels (June 1858) and Berne (August 1858) conferences to participate, which automatically excluded Austria. When the head of the Swiss Post department Wilhelm Matthias Naeff presented the French invitation to his government, he observed that for a real European telegraph unity, it was necessary to invite "not only" delegates who joined Berne and Brussels, but also extend the invitation to other European countries.²⁹

It was above all Louis Curchod, the able new director of Swiss telegraphs, who thought up an efficient strategy: he suggested putting pressure on the French government in order to invite all the States that had taken part in the Friedrichshafen and Bregenz conferences. Austria was the only country that had been present at these conferences and had not received a new invitation. Though the reference to Austria was not explicit, it was quite clear. Curchod brought up the fact that Austria was in an important geopolitical position for the good functioning of the Telegraph Union: its empire bordered on several nations about to enter the new European network (the German states including Prussia, Switzerland itself as well as Italy) and was furthermore a gateway towards Eastern Europe.³⁰

In November 1864, Naeff, realizing that only a diplomatic intervention would resolve the situation, took the problem to the Federal Council. He sought to move the Swiss government to action by making a smart political comment. From a geopolitical point of view, the union risked being weighted too much in favour of France; excluding Austria meant in fact that France would be geographically in the centre of the European telegraph network. Switzerland would consequently be pushed to the outskirts and isolated politically ("as a central European power, Switzerland is completely isolated").³¹ On the contrary, if the network included Austria too, the Swiss Confederation would be at the centre, increasing its political weight in Europe as well as its income from telegraph traffic in transit. Switzerland lay, in fact, at the crossroads of mainland communications in Europe and pocketed notable profits from international transit telegraph traffic, i.e. the small percentages received whenever a com-

29. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.502, Naeff au Conseil Fédéral, 16.07.1864. Brunner, by then director of the Austrian telegraphs, repeated the concept in a letter to Curchod: "if you aspire to a European system, invite all [underlining in the original document] the states in the Union, so that they can form a committee at once". SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.502, Brunner to Curchod, 11.08.1864.
30. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr. 502, Curchod to de Vougy, 26.09.1864; Brunner to Curchod, 10.10.1864.
31. Ibid., Naeff to Swiss Federal Council, 10.11.1864. See also K. CLARK, *International Communications. The American attitude*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1931, p.93.

munication between two foreign countries transited on the Swiss networks on the way to its destination. Furthermore, as the government itself recalled many times, with domestic telegrams alone Switzerland would go into loss and would not be able to afford lower telegraph charges than the rest of Europe (one of the liberal benchmarks of the country).³² The sustainability of the domestic network depended in fact on the high rewards that came from international traffic.³³

At the end of November 1864, the Federal Council instructed its ambassador in Paris, Johann Konrad Kern, to put before the French government “the proposal to invite the States contracting the Friedrichshafen Agreement, offering, if necessary, its diplomatic support”.³⁴ A few days later, Kern informed the Council that the French Post Office had accepted the Swiss proposal without him having to intervene. All the states that had stipulated the Friedrichshafen convention then received a direct invitation.³⁵

So Switzerland came out well in this delicate question which could have compromised the conference. First of all, it had obtained an invitation for Austria with all the underlying advantages for the Confederation. Secondly, it had been invested by France (and other countries) with an important diplomatic role especially in relations with Austria. Finally, though the Confederation had shown itself willing to make a diplomatic move, it had not been necessary and therefore it had not had to expose itself politically.³⁶

The Paris International Conference opened on 1 March 1865. The goals on the agenda were to agree on a single international convention, uniform and standardize telegraph principles and technologies, and as far as possible to establish new univocal and general tariffs.³⁷ The talks over the articles in the convention were left to a commission of telegraph experts and technicians designated by national diplomats themselves. The commission included some of the best known researchers and directors of the European public telegraph networks, including the French, Vougy; the Austrian, Brunner-von Wattenwyl; the Belgians, Fassiaux and Vincent; the Italian,

32. See for example FF, vol.1, *Rapport de la Commission du Conseil des Etats concernant le projet de loi sur la correspondance télégraphique dans l'intérieur de la Suisse*, 17.03.1877, p.423; S. CALVO, G. BALBI, S. FARI, G. RICHERI, *La voie suisse aux télécommunications. Politique, économie, technologie et société (1850-1915)*, in: *Revue Suisse d'Histoire*, 4(2011), pp.435-453.
33. One of Switzerland's major victories at the Paris Conference was the introduction of the principles of the less expensive routes. When sending a telegram, telegraphers had to direct it not via the shortest way, but the cheapest. This criterion, together with the cheapest transit tariff in Europe established by Switzerland, made it more economical and also mandatory to transit telegrams via Switzerland (*Message du CF à l'Assemblée fédérale concernant le traité télégraphique international de Paris*, 10.06.1865, pp.136-137).
34. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.502, Federal Council to Kern, 18.11.1864.
35. Ibid., Kern to Federal Council, 28.11.1864.
36. V. GROSSI, *Technologie et diplomatie ...*, op.cit., p.299. In a letter sent to Curchod to thank him for his support, Brunner recognized Switzerland's role in the event (“the honor of the initiative goes to your administration”). SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.502, Brunner to Curchod, 09.12.1864.
37. *Documents diplomatiques de la conférence télégraphique internationale de Paris*, Imprimerie impériale, Paris, 1865, pp.76-77.

Minotto; the Prussian, De Chauvin; and naturally the Swiss, Curchod. For the first time, indeed, the Paris Conference had brought together a large group of experts with a long experience in the telegraph sector and telecommunications in general. It was an European élite which had been weaving a network of bilateral and multilateral relations ever since the 1850s.

One of the issues discussed in Paris, proposed by the French, was the establishment of a standing body to handle international telegraph traffic: it was rejected.³⁸ However, thanks to Swiss interest, the issue of establishing a permanent office came up again in the 1868 Vienna Conference.

On the whole, Switzerland came out of the first conference stronger than before. First of all politically, for the major role it had played in inviting Austria and therefore in bringing about the success of the conference which would have been greatly diminished without the Austrian presence. Second, in international prestige, especially for the role of Curchod, who enjoyed great credibility as a technician and was also able to act as mediator in the most difficult situations. Finally, technically and geographically, the country became the centre of this period's international telegraph traffic. The Paris Conference provided for the Confederation to be recognized as having an important role in telecommunications at a European level, a role that was later to become far more explicit.

The Vienna Conference and the creation of the Bureau desired by Switzerland (1868)

In February 1868, the Austrian delegation at Berne informed the Federal Council that a second international telegraph conference would be taking place in Vienna the following June, but with a different format to the Paris meeting. The Austrian government envisaged a “meeting of technicians” in order to solve questions emerging from the international handling of telegraphy and to limit as far as possible the presence and importance of diplomats.³⁹ The Confederation named Curchod as its only representative at Vienna. Shortly afterwards, he sent the new Director of the Swiss Post department Jean-Jacques Challet-Venel a long memorandum on the goals he wanted to follow at the conference. The most important was to improve the ordinary handling of the network in order to solve “inconveniences that practice alone could reveal and that consequently were difficult to prevent”.⁴⁰ To redress the situation, the Director suggested setting up a body which was to become, with slight modifications, the “Bureau international des administrations télégraphiques”.

First of all, Curchod re-examined the French project which had been hastily turned down in Paris and identified the reason for its failure. The permanent commission

38. Ibid., p.216.

39. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.508, Département des Postes au Conseil Federal, 09.03.1868.

40. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.509, Curchod to Challet-Venel, 12.03.1868.

proposed by the French did not appear able to tackle the network's everyday problems because it took too long to get all the representatives together and consequently to take any decisions. The alternative proposal was to have a "special agent" appointed and financed by all the countries involved. The special agent would deal with everyday problems arising from the practical application of the convention, seemingly of minor importance but actually fundamental to the working of the telegraph service. He would be arbiter in all questions concerning their common interests. He would regulate relations between the Telegraph Union, countries which had or had not yet signed the convention, as well as private companies. He would also collect and circulate the figures on the development of the telegraph service in the various countries. Curchod also insisted on the practical need for a permanent seat for the new agency, recalling the pre-1848 Swiss institutional system (thus clearly showing the strong influence of the Swiss political model on the Telegraph Union structure):

"25 years ago the management of federal affairs was in the hands of a canton government and passed every two years from one government to another. The government changed, together with its place of residence, but what did not change was the Federal Chancellery, armed with its archives, documents and traditions, which prepared the Vorort's [read: the Swiss government] work and implemented its decisions. Thanks to the Federal Chancellery, these regular changes of government took place with no upsets, no business coming to a halt, no compromising the unity of the system and the canton governments could take charge of the affairs without becoming vulnerable to heavy sacrifices, for Chancellery expenses were covered by all the Cantons together".⁴¹

During the Conference, Curchod identified at least "two gaps" in the Paris convention that needed to be treated separately. On the one side, the convention between two established international conferences might need modification; the special commission proposed by France would see to this. On the other side, a body needed to be created to handle the ordinary workings of international telegraphy. The Swiss project was not therefore an alternative to the French one, but complementary. The Swiss amendment was, naturally, just like the one Curchod had shown Challet-Venel in the months running up to the conference, which foresaw the appointment of a special agent in charge of affairs, financed by all Telegraph Union state members and dependent of the "Directive Administration".

Curchod's most solid support came from the Belgian delegate Vincent. First of all, he recalled how this project was not an entire novelty, and that other examples of similar institutions already existed in railway transport. He then began to outline the profile of an ideal candidate which fitted in perfectly with Curchod's credentials:

"To be fittingly accomplished, a similar mission would call for a man combining experience of the telegraph service and business with recognized merit and knowledge of several languages. But he would be difficult to find if he is obliged to change residence every three

41. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.509, Curchod to Challet-Venel, 12.03.1868.

years and move from capital to capital. The essential condition for a good choice is a stable residence".⁴²

In order to find a candidate of this level, Vincent felt that a "stable residence" was necessary, that the agent would not be forced to move every three years to the designated seat of the Conference. This point was very close to Curchod's heart, though he had not brought it up, presumably for political reasons.

De Chauvin, the North German delegate, also held the proposed figure indispensable, and added that the agent would also have to edit a newspaper on telegraphy (it would be entitled *Journal Télégraphique*) and significantly suggested the seat should be "sited in a neutral city". Switzerland had, of course, a status of permanent neutrality and Berne fitted de Chauvin's profile perfectly. The delegate from the Grand Duchy of Baden, Zimmer, held that this office "had to be attached to one Administration, so that it finds itself, so to speak, surrounded by everyday current affairs".

The Netherlands delegate, Staring, detailed that it would be a Conference-appointed telegraph Administration with at its dependence the International Bureau, and only in this way would it have "the stability and all the advantages that had been called for in the creation of a Secretary-general", as had happened for the Union of the German Railways.⁴³ At the end of the debate the nature of the new body was clarified and summed up in the new article 61:

"A conference-appointed Telegraph Administration will take the measures to facilitate the implementation of the Convention. To do this, it will organize under the name of "Bureau international des Administrations télégraphiques" a special service which will operate under its orders [...] It will gather all kinds of information about international telegraphy, draw up tariffs, prepare general figures, go ahead with research of common utility it perceives, and edit a French language telegraph paper".⁴⁴

Although the State in charge to host the Bureau had not yet emerged, all the elements that had come to light in the debate led to the "natural" candidature of Switzerland. It was, in fact, the only neutral country with someone at Curchod's level, an esteemed technician of long experience in the telegraph sector, conversant in several languages. With practically no debate at all, the Vienna Conference "unanimously designated the Swiss (Post) Office" as the administration the International Bureau would depend from, more precisely the Post department, and "declared its formal wish to see M. Curchod placed at the head of the Bureau".

At the end, Brunner sent to Jakob Dubs, the new president of the Swiss Confederation, a letter in which he detailed some of the reasons why the delegates had chosen Switzerland. Some of them had already been aired during the debate (e.g. the fact that the "political position", or in other words the neutrality, of Switzerland weighed on

42. *Documents de la conférence télégraphique internationale de Vienne*, Imprimerie impériale et royale de la Cour et de l'Etat, Vienne, 1868, p.388.

43. Ibid., pp.389.

44. Ibid., pp.433-434.

the choice).⁴⁵ Brunner also explained two other reasons which did not appear in the conference minutes. The first one was that Switzerland's "geographical position" played in its favour, in particular the fact of being situated in the centre of Europe and therefore also at the centre of the network to be managed. The Vienna Conference most probably felt that to work in the general interest, the telegraph service needed to be entrusted to an administration geographically at the heart of international communications. Secondly, according to Brunner, the Confederation was chosen because the Conference desired to "pay homage to the precision of the telegraph service so well exemplified by Switzerland". In other words the final reason which put Switzerland at the head of the Bureau was also international recognition for the efficient running of its domestic telegraph service.

That the Bureau and the figure of the director/secretary general would become extremely important for the running of world telecommunications was not immediately clear either to Curchod or to the Federal Council. Curchod was convinced that the secretary general "would move in a wider sphere" than an exclusively administrative one, but did not seem to have a full understanding of what this might mean.⁴⁶ The National Council Commission,⁴⁷ charged with evaluating the work of the Federal Council and the Federal Tribunal, was the first to highlight the fact that the "establishment of the International Telegraph Bureau in our country proves Switzerland is enjoying a greater and greater prestige among the members of the European family".⁴⁸ One of the ways in with the Confederation acquired prestige and recognition was precisely in the way it "specialized" in running supranational bodies, where it could deploy its political and diplomatic knowhow. The Telegraph Union was only the first of the many international organizations allocated to Switzerland from the 1850s onwards.⁴⁹

The organization of the Bureau and its ambiguous relations with the Swiss Government (1868-1869)

After Vienna, it was still left to establish how the new office would be institutionally organized. The subject had already been discussed in the 1868 Conference, which furnished some general guidelines to the Federal Council, suggesting that the Bu-

45. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.510, Brunner to Dubs, 25.07.1868.

46. *Documents diplomatiques de la conférence télégraphique internationale de Paris*, op.cit., p.390.

47. This was a body which expressed the main Swiss political forces, and therefore had a less pragmatic role than the Federal Council.

48. FF, vol.2, 26.06.1869, p.229.

49. To give only a few examples Switzerland (and today particularly Geneva) has hosted and still hosts the seat of the International Red Cross, the Universal Postal Union (UPU), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Society of Nations, the International Olympic Committee (CIO, today in Lausanne), the United Nations Organization (ONU), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Federations of Football Associations (FIFA), the World Trade Organization (WTO).

reau's director should depend not from the Swiss director of the telegraphs, but directly from the Head of the Post department.⁵⁰

In the institutional organization of Switzerland, however, the Federal Council had a role like that of the “directory” governing France after the 1789 Revolution.⁵¹ Though the seven ministers headed their own departments, they were also called to exercise their executive power in a collegial way, and with all the departments being equally important, the federal councillors held the same power within the government. Therefore, the International Bureau was to depend not only on the ‘Minister of the Post’ but also on the Federal Council altogether, which could choose autonomously the course and strategies to follow.

In a letter that the department of the Post sent to Curchod on 14 October 1868, the powers and especially the limits of the new Bureau head were traced out in great detail. The Federal Councillor heading the Post Office in fact reserved the right to approve the expenses for the new international office. On the advice of the Bureau Head, who was allowed to present his own list of candidates, the Federal Councillor also appointed the staff, who not surprisingly ended by being Swiss for a very long time. And the memorandum was very clear about relations between the International Bureau and the Head of Swiss telegraphs: the Swiss Head would have the same relation with the Bureau Head as the Heads from all other nations involved. Furthermore, these two figures would be “in a completely different position from each other and will be placed, each dealing with what concerns him, under the direct orders of the Federal Councillor in charge of the higher direction of Telegraph Affairs”.⁵² Because of this independence between the two figures, Curchod was invited to resign as head of the Swiss telegraphs before taking up the post of Bureau head from 1 January 1869.

The Swiss department of Post, and therefore substantially the Swiss government, had control over the budget, the staff and the service run by Bureau. In managing the office which was to regulate European telecommunications, the Federal Council found itself in the position to influence decisively telecommunications in Europe.

The Rome Conference and the attempt to remove the Bureau from Swiss control (1871-1872)

Curchod led the Bureau for only one year, and partly because of divergences with the Federal Council, he moved over to manage the “Société du câble transatlantique

50. *Documents de la conférence télégraphique internationale de Vienne*, op.cit., p.456.

51. H. KRIESI, *Le système politique suisse*, Economica, Paris, 1998.

52. ITU [Archives of the International Telecommunication Union, Geneva], Correspondances du Bureau International des Administrations Télégraphiques (hereafter ITU, Correspondences), paper 1/3, Swiss Post department to Curchod, 14 October 1868.

français", from 1 January 1870.⁵³ The Swiss government then found itself with the tricky problem of a replacement. The main problem was that Curchod had not been appointed by the Federal Council, but by the Vienna Conference. Formally, therefore, the Swiss government had no authority to designate a new head, a task which should fall to the next conference. Yet the Swiss government was forced to take measures for the Bureau to go on functioning even in this hiatus. And therefore

“regretting no longer being guided by the enlightening evaluations of the delegates of the contracting States, the Federal Council will strive to carry out the mission entrusted to it in conformity with the Conference's views”,

namely handling the Bureau.⁵⁴ The Federal Council decided not to replace Curchod and in December 1969 named Charles Lendi (director of Swiss telegraphs) as director *ad interim* of the Bureau too.⁵⁵ It would then be up to the Florence Conference (which actually took place in Rome, the new Italian capital) to decide on the new Head. This move is open to two interpretations. As already mentioned, it is symptomatic of the caution and tact with which the Federal Council moved in a somewhat delicate situation, which could have compromised the Swiss control of the Bureau. A more Real-politic reading shows Switzerland trying to continue the strategy that had already been successful in Curchod's case, by suggesting that the director of the Swiss telegraphs was the “natural” candidate as International Bureau's director. It was no imposition, but an attempt with which to secure the approval of the next conference. The temporary mechanism however became accepted practice, so that up to the Second World War, the heads of the Telegraph Union (later International Telecommunications Union) were recruited from the management of the Swiss telegraphs.

During the Rome Conference, which began in December 1871, Germany, which had recently completed unification under Prussia's leadership, presented a long amendment aimed at removing the Bureau from the influence of one country and turning it into a really independent body that “will answer to the Conference alone”.⁵⁶ Though the name of Switzerland was mentioned in the document only in positive terms, it was a direct attack against the power it had assumed within the Bureau. The Germans listed three different ways of running an international office. The first provided for the director to be nominated by the conference and put under the direction of the telegraphs department of the state hosting the last conference. In this way the director of the Bureau, placed under the Post Office of the country which had hosted the conference, would not be able to avoid the interests and influence of this administration. For reasons close to those emerging in the Vienna conference

53. ITU, Correspondences, paper 1/121, Swiss Post department, Bureau Management report, year 1869, 31.12.1869; P. GRISSET, *Technologie, entreprise et souveraineté: les télécommunications transatlantiques de la France (1869-1954)*, Ed. Rive-Droite, Paris, 1996.

54. Swiss Post, Telegraph and Telephone Archive, GDIT, T00A, 0059, Post department to Swiss Federal Council, 06.11.1869.

55. ITU, Correspondences, paper 3/1 (1871), International Bureau budget's project addressed to Swiss Post department, 10.1.1870; paper 1/120, Post department to Lendi, 31.12.1869.

56. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.515, Mémorandum du directeur général des télégraphes de l'Empire allemand, Berlin, 10.12.1871.

three years earlier, this hypothesis was put aside. A second hypothesis provided for the appointment not so much of a civil servant as an administration. At the Vienna Conference the choice had fallen on Switzerland, but according to the Germans, not so much for its intrinsic characteristics (the document quoted its central geographical position and political neutrality), as for the considerable esteem enjoyed by Curchod. The model presented a basic flaw which the Germans felt could no longer be tolerated and the very action of Switzerland, which had tactfully not wanted to replace Curchod and had made *ad interim* nomination, proved that in this management model there was a problem of independence of the Bureau head from a telegraphs administration, in this case the Swiss one.

The third German proposal provided for the Conference in full sitting to appoint the Bureau Director directly, “subordinated exclusively to the Conference, its consulting and executive authority, which constitutes its tradition and whose existence is closely linked to that of the Conference itself so as to guarantee as far as possible the most precise execution of its duties”. Once the director had been freed from the influence of one sole administration, a state was still needed to maintain some form of surveillance, especially over accounts and the secretary general’s correct handling of funds, which could all be entrusted to Switzerland.⁵⁷

The Swiss government’s reaction was swift. Challet-Venel, the federal councillor at the head of the Post department, pointed out the intolerable parts. Firstly, the administration of the country chosen as seat of the International Bureau had no power to appoint either director or staff. Secondly, the German project was seen as an attempt to increase the power and the competences of the Bureau and create an authority which went far beyond the ideas and intentions aired at the Vienna Conference. Knowing he would find fertile ground in the liberal ideology current in the period, Challet-Venel declared the new bureau would question the national sovereignty of the individual countries:

“This would allow the International Bureau to enter a new sphere of action and give the bureau an authority which seems incompatible with the dignity and freedom of contracting telegraph administrations [...] the general agent using sovereign authority in the interval would not take long to become an obstacle for the international service”.⁵⁸

Finally, the fact that the Confederation might be recognized as having a role of controller over the accounts was not only an “empty formality”, but actually “it seems to me derisory to leave to this higher administration [...] in this manner the dignity of the higher administration is [...] managed and undermined”. It was not excluded that in the case of the German proposal being accepted that “the Swiss Administration could refuse to go on with its co-operation even in the diminished position as-signed”.⁵⁹

57. Ibid.

58. FA, Fond E52, Département des Postes de la Confédération Suisse au Conseil fédéral à Berne, 18.12.1871.

59. Ibid.

During the debate over the German proposal, Switzerland was represented in Rome not by Lendi, who was sick, but yet again by Curchod, nominated by the Federal Council on the insistence of Lendi himself.⁶⁰ First of all, to highlight the transparency and liberalism of the Swiss government, Curchod recalled that the Federal Council deliberately opted for not replacing him with Lendi definitely, in order not to “compromise at all the decisions of the next Conference”. In other words, Curchod wanted to remind everyone that, in the moment when Switzerland could have taken advantage of the situation, it had instead opted for a provisory solution. Secondly, the Swiss delegate remembered that his country would accept whatever decisions taken by the Conference, but “would reserve the right in the case of residence being kept in Switzerland, with conditions of organization changed, to examine these new conditions before giving its consent”. Expressing in an elegant way the uneasiness of the Federal Council, Curchod told the assembly that if the German proposal passed, the Swiss government reserved the right to decide if and how it would keep the Bureau on its territory.

The most important delegates were all in favour of Switzerland. The Belgian Vincent recalled how the problem of the preponderant influence one administration could have over the others had been long debated at Vienna. The facts had shown, however, that these fears had proved unfounded with the Swiss.

Brunner too made a speech in favour of Switzerland. First of all he repeated that choosing it as the seat of the Bureau and entrusting it with the running of the service had really been subordinate to the choice of Curchod as director. This was understood by the Swiss government too, so it had not sought a permanent replacement when Curchod had resigned. The German proposal was a waste of time since the Swiss administration had had the tact to wait for the Conference's opinion before appointing a successor.⁶¹ For the Austrian delegate in the future too it would be quite sufficient to send either formally or informally a proposal to the Federal Council, which would continue to listen to the will of the conference over the appointment of the director. What Brunner did ask for, was that the general agent stayed independent from the Swiss telegraph administration and that Curchod took up his Austrian colleague's point and proposed some formal changes capable, he felt, of doing away with any doubts on interference by the Swiss Telegraph Administration on the Bureau:

“it is enough, to obtain this, to specify that the authority managing this service is the Higher Administration, the same the telegraph service answers to in any way. [...] In this way will be satisfied the desire not to attribute to a telegraph Office a prevailing influence over the International Bureau, while leaving it under the strict surveillance and regular control of a state”.⁶²

60. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.515, Lendi to Swiss Post department, 04.12.1871. Curchod took part in the conference as both the manager of a French telegraph company and the Swiss delegate.
61. *Documents de la conférence télégraphique internationale de Rome*, Bureau international des administrations télégraphiques, Imp. Rieder & Simmen, Berne, 1872, pp.482-484.
62. Ibid., p.485.

Given the structure of the Swiss government, however, this change was more formal than structural. Control over the Bureau passed from the Swiss Post to the Federal Council but, given that the Director of the Post department was a member of the Federal Council and all departments were on the same level, the Bureau practically continued to be under the control of the Swiss Government.

Seeing himself in the minority, the German delegate asked the assembly to take a decision at least over a central issue in his amendment, i.e. if the appointment of the director was up to the Conference or the designated administration, therefore Switzerland. The result of the voting was a triumph for Switzerland and the cautious policies of the Federal Council: the German amendment was rejected by 15 votes to 3 while Curchod's version was “passed without comment”.

So during the Rome Conference, Switzerland had not only avoided the danger of losing control over the Bureau, but had acquired a greater power legitimated by the other delegates. While previously the Bureau had been formally subject to a technical control by the Post department, it was now to be controlled in a politically explicit way by the Swiss government. It was a further international recognition for Switzerland but also a change in status: the Swiss government could now legitimately apply a political strategy to the running of the Bureau.

The St. Petersburg Conference: what controlling the Bureau meant (1875)

Three years after the Rome Conference, the Telegraph Union representatives met in St. Petersburg to give a stable organization to international telecommunications. It was the last conference to have a diplomatic value. The following ones would be purely administrative.⁶³

The 1872-1875 period sanctioned the definitive institutionalization of the role exercised by the Bureau in regulating international telegraphic relations. Totally under Swiss control the Bureau indeed was able to exercise to the maximum its influence in the procedure to modify tariffs and conventions. For tariff variations the Bureau only had to contact all the administrations and/or directly interested companies to submit the proposals for changes. They in turn sent back their acceptance or refusals. In the cases of agreement, the Bureau informed all administrations of the changes. Any proposals for modifications to the convention were sent to the Bureau, which took on the task of collecting them all. They were then published in the convention project, to be formally presented by the country hosting the conference.

Often the role of the Bureau in these procedures was not passive, and in most cases it accompanied the proposal for changes with its own opinions. Sometimes its opinion on possible changes was called for by administrations themselves. The most clam-

63. L. LABORIE, *En chair et en norme. Les participants aux conférences de l'Union internationale des télécommunications, de sa fondation à sa refondation*”, in: *Flux*, 4(2008), p.92.

orous case of interference took place while the project for the St. Petersburg convention was being set up. The Russian Administration, which organized the upcoming event, had sent the Bureau a letter asking the opinion of various administrations about the possibility of changing the voting system at the conference.⁶⁴ The need for radical reform, which had first been brought up at the end of the Rome Conference, emerged very clearly. On the request of the Russian administration, the Bureau expressed its own opinion on the general changes to be made, in view of the project the Russians were to design in their role as organizers. The Bureau then drafted a real project, which was then used, if not exactly copied, by the Russian administration to be submitted to the delegates.⁶⁵ This project proposed the suppression of diplomatic conferences, drafting of a more agile convention containing only the general principles of the Union and a resolution of the colonial vote problem. All these indications later met the approval of the delegates and so St. Petersburg could be considered the most noteworthy example of how the Bureau was able to use its “political influence”, well beyond what had been foreseen by the Vienna Convention as merely following administrative procedures.⁶⁶

This represented a new strategy of Swiss government: after 1871, indeed, Switzerland influenced the Union in a less evident way than in the past, cutting down diplomatic actions and direct government interventions during the plenary conferences, given that it could count on the indirect and implicit power that came from its direct control of the Bureau. It was not by chance that the indications furnished by the Federal Council to its representatives at St. Petersburg did not differ in purport from those of the other states. The recommendation was basically to follow the indications for reform suggested by the Bureau, except in very particular cases. From a general point of view, the principles which had always animated the Swiss international policy over telecommunications were left unvaried: “The delegation will hold to all proposals having as their aim the improvement and simplification of the service without damaging financial interests”.⁶⁷

The years between Rome and St. Petersburg were therefore essential for regulating international telecommunications, not so much because of the contents of the two meetings as for the progressive importance assumed by the International Bureau itself. This institution, which was originally presented as a simple office designed to deal with current problems, turned out to be the real driving force behind the development of telegraphic relations. Despite the numerous changes at its highest levels, it managed to carry out efficiently its original tasks and, above all, thanks to the work of Curchod, a propositional role that had not been envisaged at the outset.

64. ITU, Correspondences, paper 29/1, 18.12.1872.

65. ITU, Correspondences, paper 29/22, 11.06.1873; paper 29/25, 28.09.1873.

66. The expression “political influence” referring to St. Petersburg convention is used by G.A. CODDING Jr., op.cit., p.51.

67. SFA, Fond E52, Archiv nr.519, Federal Council instructions to delegates at the St Petersburg Conference, 14.05.1875.

Conclusion

The Swiss Confederation had a considerable influence over the origins, structures and consolidation of the Telegraph Union, one of the first examples of the so called European “hidden integration”. In the ten years before and after its creation, Swiss influence was felt at three principal moments: first, when it acted as the main mediator in bringing together the two separate telegraph unions in the 1850/60s; second, when it took an active part in the constitution of the Telegraph Union in 1865, bringing in Austria and, more in general, realizing a long-standing idea of Swiss technicians and politicians; and third, when it suggested, then carried through the motion for and defended a permanent office for the ordinary running of international traffic, then placed under Swiss control. As we have seen this Bureau was established in Switzerland, with a Swiss director up to 1939, and answered directly to the Post department and later on the Government.

How and why was Switzerland, a small country in the middle of Europe, able to reach this complex, international goal? The most relevant reason was the ability of Swiss politicians and technicians to use political, economic and technical features already intrinsic to parts of the country’s culture: Swiss specialties, in other words, helped Switzerland to dominate the Telegraph Union.

From a political point of view, Switzerland had a long tradition of neutrality and it was recognized in Europe that a neutral country had to be impartial: this impartiality was crucial in the negotiations with Austria for its entry into the International Union in the early sixties.⁶⁸ The Confederation had always sought an international image, role and prestige, moreover.⁶⁹ Specializing in running international bodies was an adroit way of reaching this objective and the Swiss did not fail to recognize that acquiring the Bureau was a decisive step in this direction. Another political specialty of Switzerland was its diplomacy: during the formative years of ITU, the peak strategic moment was probably the interim replacement of Curchod, which obtained a double result – it showed that Swiss government acknowledged the desires of the Conference and, at the same time, indicated a route that was then followed (the “natural” candidature of the director of the Swiss telegraphs to the post of secretary general of the Union).⁷⁰

Seen through the lens of economic interests, Switzerland also had specialties that it exploited in its manoeuvres to dominate the Telegraph Union. After 1848 the Swiss government had one of the most liberal and liberalistic ideologies in Europe and

68. H.U. JOST, *Origines, interprétations et usages de la “neutralité helvétique”*, in: *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps*, 93(2009), pp.5-12; M. LINIGER-GOUMAZ, *La Suisse, sa neutralité et l’Europe*, Éd. du Temps, Genève, 1964.

69. M. HERREN, *Governmental Internationalism and the Beginning of a New World Order in the Late XIX Century*, in: M.H. GEYER, J. PAULMANN (eds), *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp.132-135.

70. C. ALTERMATT, *Les débuts de la diplomatie professionnelle en Suisse: 1848-1914*, Ed. universitaires, Fribourg, 1990.

focused on the importance of foreign trade for its companies.⁷¹ Swiss politics transferred this ideology to a European level too, promoting for example the tariff containment it had already applied internally.⁷² As we have shown, a cut in international tariffs meant an increase in traffic and consequently an increase in income from telegrams in transit. The latter were essential to sustain Swiss telegraphy, making up for domestic losses. Switzerland could therefore be most interested in running the Union partly to promote, as it did, progressive reductions in the tariffs in order to increase international traffic and therefore its own revenue.

Finally, Switzerland had a long tradition in technologically advanced sectors like clocks, high-precision instruments made by highly skilled technicians who handed down their art from generation to generation.⁷³ It was no coincidence that Switzerland was one of the first countries in which technical teaching institutions and technical elites acquired relevance. Members of these technical elites pressed Swiss politicians to take interest in the creation and management of a sole European telegraph union, with crucial roles played by Louis Curchod. It was not by chance that, as Karl F. Brunner-von Wattenwyl remembered to the Swiss president of Confederation in 1868, Switzerland was chosen as Bureau seat also for its technical progress in telegraphy. These international bodies, on the other side, could consecrate Switzerland as a technologically advanced country and put it at the head of a wider European technical elite consisting of the most illustrious scholars of telecommunications who periodically met in international conferences and took decisions which had general consequences on the development of European and then world communications.

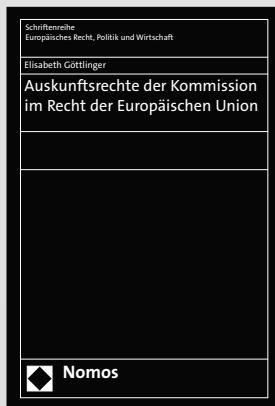
Thus Switzerland exploited its national skills in running the Telegraph Union, and this international institution marked the beginning of the international recognition of the prestige (political, economic and technical) that Switzerland had patiently built up in previous years and which would then increase in size and be consolidated in the following decades. The ITU, carefully constructed on Swiss specialties, also helped to reinforce, spread and, perhaps, even stereotype those Swiss attributes.

71. R. RUFFIEUX, *La Svizzera dei Radicali*, in: *Nuova Storia della Svizzera e degli Svizzeri*, Ed. Casagrande, Bellinzona, 1983.

72. While most countries had chosen to adopt top prices tariffs to limit use to certain categories and classes, Switzerland had chosen from the beginning to make the telegraph “within the reach and at the service of the country’s economy” and therefore charged rock-bottom prices. S. PRAVATO, *De Télécom PTT à Swisscom*, in: M. FINGER, S. PRAVATO, J.-N. REY (eds), *Du monopole à la concurrence. Analyse critique de l'évolution de 6 entreprises suisses*, LEP, Lausanne, 1994, p.71.

73. Switzerland had a long tradition in the clocks’ making which went back to the 1685 Fontainebleau edict promulgated by Louis XIV who obliged the rich Huguenot community to emigrate to Roman Switzerland where they set up the flourishing industry of *Swiss horlogerie*. This sector laid the basis for the telegraph industry too: like clocks, telegraph equipment was not simple to construct given the need for synchronized gear pieces. Hence the use of clockmakers and watchmakers in Switzerland and elsewhere to build the first telegraphs.

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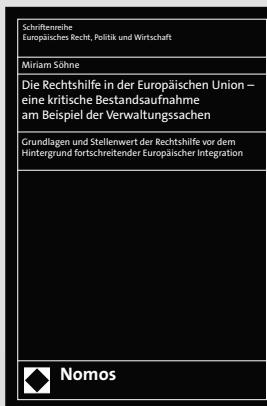
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