

# German Careers within the European Postal and Telecommunications Union (EPTU) – Continuities and Discontinuities

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## *1. Introduction*

The creation of the European Postal and Telecommunications Union (EPTU) – the first European body for these two sectors – in 1942 involved multiple actors from different countries. To trace continuities and discontinuities and to understand the individual motivations of the actors involved, we need to shine a light on their backgrounds and career paths.

To this end, we have chosen to focus in detail on the careers of two high-ranking German officials who promoted cooperation in the postal and telecommunications sectors during the Second World War: Helmut Bornemann (1902-1991) and Friedrich Risch (1895-1965).

Both are representative for careers of actors within the German postal and telecommunications services involved in the creation of the EPTU. Helmut Bornemann was a telecommunications engineer working within the *Reichspostzentralamt* (the German postal service's technical department and centre for technical research) during the war. Friedrich Risch was head of the international department within the *Reichpostministerium* – the ministry in charge of the German postal and telecommunications services and tasked with the creation of the EPTU. Both also reflect the spectrum of actors involved – from higher ministerial levels to renowned experts within

the administrations, from very little to vast experience in international relations and from a responsibility for settling the general and/or legal aspects of international cooperation to negotiating technical standards.

Both men's careers share similarities with other actors in the sector: hence, Bornemann's career, that culminated in his appointment as secretary of state in the *Bundespostministerium* in the 1960s, resembled that of Paul Jäger and Friedrich Gladenbeck. Risch shared a similar career path to Willi Köhn: a high-ranking member of the SS, Köhn became a ministerial director and head of the department "East" (*Abteilung Ost*), which was responsible for the occupied territories in Eastern Europe. He had no specific knowledge of or experience with national or international postal affairs. The vast majority of the *Reichspost*'s appointees abroad, such as Wilhelm Engelhardt, Heinrich Habig, and Fritz Harder, charged with liaising with the other postal and telecommunications administrations also rose quickly through the ranks of the international scene. After having been promoted quickly after 1933, Risch's career in the postal services ended abruptly after the war – as did for instance Kurt Timm's.<sup>1</sup>

We assume that, alongside institutional and organisational structures, individual actors are also important vectors of continuity and discontinuity. Due to the war, they acted within contested institutional and organisational structures, and they made practices of cooperation visible. In this article, we examine how these two career paths developed and how they were influenced by their involvement in the EPTU. As a conclusion, we will outline some explanations for the differences between Bornemann and Risch's careers.

## 2. *Helmut Bornemann: A Linear Career – Before, During and After the War*

Helmut Bornemann was among the most prominent driving forces behind international telecommunications cooperation within the European Postal

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1 Ueberschär, Gerd R.: *Die Deutsche Reichspost 1933 – 1945. Eine politische Verwaltungsgeschichte* (Vol. 2), Berlin 1999, S. 30.; Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/39795, Haupt-Kartei Habig; R4701/39830 Haupt-Kartei Engelhardt; R4701/39829, Haupt-Kartei Harder; Landesarchiv Schleswig-Holstein, Abt. 460.13 Nr. 436 Timm, Kurt; Staatsarchiv, Hamburg, 221-11 C(P)774, Erwin Jacobi, Fr. Gienapp, Walter Donandt an Zentralstelle für Berufungsausschüsse zur Ausschaltung Nationalsozialisten, 30.07.1947.

and Telecommunications Union (EPTU) during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> Convinced that the regulation and standardisation of telecommunications was a purely technical issue, Bornemann saw no reason to cease the activities of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) during wartime, which included the meetings of the International Consultative Committees for Telegraph, Telephone and Radio (CCIT, CCIF and CCIR). After the ITU had postponed all conferences, in the autumn of 1940 Bornemann joined forces with Giuseppe Gneme, an Italian engineer and CCIF pioneer in the years preceding the war, and proposed to continue the committees' activities with some minor changes, e.g. standard setting for broadcasting and television by the CCIR. Bornemann and Gneme envisioned a working group as a temporary solution during the war, but the format was adopted by the EPTU. Bornemann therefore became a key player in EPTU meetings and modelled its institutional design on the ITU. Throughout the war, he even managed to maintain a connection to the few engineers from foreign telecommunication administrations such as the Swiss, who did not participate in the EPTU, and to indirectly involve them in technology-related discussions.

His involvement in the EPTU did not prevent Bornemann from returning to the international organisations, committees and networks responsible for the regulation and standardisation of international telecommunication and radio networks and equipment after the war. When Germany officially rejoined the ITU in 1949, Bornemann saw himself appointed to leadership positions as a chairman within the CCIs or as a head and vice-head of the German delegations to the plenipotentiary conferences in 1952 (Montreux), 1959 (Geneva) and 1965 (Buenos Aires). He even served as a member of the ITU's administrative council between 1959 and 1963. As a leading expert for international telecommunication issues, Bornemann was appointed as the German representative to the Spaak Committee, set up to discuss the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1955/56. In 1959, he became the chair of the European Conference of Postal and Telecommunication Administration's (CEPT) working group for telephony, and he

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2 Henrich-Franke, Christian / Laborie, Léonard: "European Union for and by communication networks: continuities and discontinuities during the Second World War", in: *Comparativ* 1 (2018), p. 82 – 100; Henrich-Franke, Christian: "Engineering Expertise and the Regulation of International Telecommunications in Europe from the 1950s to the 1970s", in: Schneiker, Andrea / Henrich-Franke, Christian / Kaiser, Robert / Lahusen, Christian (eds.): *Transnational Expertise*, Baden-Baden 2018, pp. 75 – 100.

headed the establishment of intercontinental direct dialling. He was internationally well-known and well-respected in the telecommunication sector by the time he retired from the international arena in 1967.

Bornemann was able to pursue this linear career because engineers were bound together in specific expert communities that transcended political tensions and pressures. These engineers enjoyed a high degree of independence on the international stage, protected by a 'tacit political agreement' with the political authorities. They were given considerable leeway, provided that they enabled international connections and national equipment producers were protected from international competition. This 'tacit political agreement' existed before, during and after the war. Of course, their expertise also played an important role as technical staff with a unique and indispensable knowledge could not be easily replaced.

Bornemann entered the expert community in the interwar period. He studied engineering at the Technical Universities of Berlin and Darmstadt between 1921 and 1925. He attended lectures given by famous German physicists such as Albert Einstein, Max Planck and Max von Laue, forming part of a new generation of engineers trained in experimental research rather than in the traditional style of theoretical education. At that time, the amalgamation of mathematical, theoretical and experimental research resulted in a new type of (telecommunication) engineer with a distinctive self-image, setting them apart from other types of engineers. Bornemann, who was an expert for both undersea cables and radio technologies, began his professional career at the *Reichspostzentralamt* and became a CCIF member in the late 1920s. He was a pioneer in the field of international telephone connections in Europe and belonged to a generation of engineers, who transformed the three CCIs into important transnational forums for the standardisation of international telecommunications and radio in the 1930s. Joining the CCIF as a national engineer for Germany, Bornemann was equipped with a transnational approach to technological efficiency. Throughout the 1930s, Bornemann represented the German telecommunication administration at all Administrative Telephone Conferences and CCIF meetings. He became chair of the CCIF's study group IX, where he was responsible for reaching reasonable compromises that satisfied national needs across Europe. After the Second World War, the CCIF resumed its activities with a plenary assembly in London as early as August 1945, followed by a second one in Montreux just a year later. Germany was not invited and, as a result, Bornemann was not present at the meetings. He was, however, informally kept up to date about the CCIF's activities and encountered few difficulties being readmitted to the CCIF officially in 1949.

Subsequently, Bornemann rose up through the German administration's internal hierarchy and was in a position to shape international cooperation in the telecommunication sector. In the Spaak Committee, Bornemann and some of his international engineer colleagues, who were also appointed as their governments' representatives, were in a key position to influence decisions about a supranational European policy on telecommunications. There, they tried their utmost to prevent the supranational EEC from entering the telecommunication sector, which they perceived as a potential threat to the independency of engineers. Technical experts such as Bornemann rejected everything they deemed incompatible with the established forms of regulation and cooperation.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that Bornemann's motivation came from his experiences during the war, when the idea of an expert working group was superseded by a (political) project like the EPTU.

In 1963 Bornemann finally crowned his career with the appointment as secretary of state in the German Ministry for Post and Telecommunications, with responsibility for the entire area of telecommunications, reporting directly to the federal ministers Richard Stücklen and Werner Dollinger until his retirement in 1968.

### 3. *Friedrich Risch – A Wartime Career*

As the head of the international department within the German *Reichspostministerium*, ministerial director Dr Friedrich Risch was instrumental for the creation of the EPTU. His department was also key for international postal relations, as Germany had formally left the Universal Postal Union (UPU) in 1939. After the Postal Union Congress in Buenos Aires the German administration refused to sign the final agreement because Czechoslovakia was still mentioned as a signatory.<sup>4</sup> However, the UPU's German vice-director Wilhelm Triest stayed in his position after 1939.<sup>5</sup>

The *Reichspostministerium*'s international department was founded by *Reichsminister* Wilhelm Ohnesorge in late 1940, with the primary aim of shaping the EPTU. Risch, however, stated that he had travelled to Russia as early as in the spring of the same year to discuss the idea of a European

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3 Franke, Christian: "Das Post- und Fernmeldewesen im europäischen Integrationsprozess der 1950/60er Jahre", in: *Journal of European Integration History* 2 (2004), pp. 95 – 117.

4 Ueberschär: Die Deutsche Reichspost, pp. 281 – 284.

5 Politisches Archiv, Berlin, RAV Bern 2582, Durchdruck Deutsche Gesandtschaft Nr. 183, 13.01.1941.

Postal Union.<sup>6</sup> From the end of 1940, Risch worked both with actors within Germany – including the staff of the *Reichpostministerium*, the *Reichspost* and the Foreign Ministry – and colleagues from other countries towards the creation of the EPTU in October 1942. From an organisational point of view, Risch was at the core of the EPTU project. In the area of postal services, he was the key figure in drafting and implementing the German European postal agenda in the following years. Present at all the preparatory meetings and committee sessions, his aim was to implement the goals that the *Reichpostministerium* had set for the EPTU in September 1940<sup>7</sup>, most importantly abolishing the transit fee and harmonising the fee schedules based on the domestic German postal system.

Friedrich Risch was a lawyer before he joined the *Reichspost* aged 29 in 1924. He first worked in Regensburg, where he stayed for ten years before being promoted to the *Reichspostdirektion* in Berlin in 1934. In 1938, he became part of the ministerial staff and was promoted to ministerial director a year later. His promotion meant a career advancement from the administrative to the higher ministerial level.<sup>8</sup> After the war, he made no attempt to regain a position in the *Reichspost* or the ministry. Instead, he chose to work again as a lawyer within the administration of the Evangelical Regional Church in Hamburg. This confines his rather short-lived career to the National Socialist regime and the war years.<sup>9</sup> Despite his post-war career change, in 1948 Risch published a book about Heinrich von Stephan, the driving force behind the creation of the Universal Postal Union in 1874. Notably, the book only focused on von Stephan and makes no reference to the political situation at the time.<sup>10</sup>

While Risch's career within the postal services followed a typical path – first employed locally, then promoted through the *Reichspostdirektion* to the ministry – it was unusual in that careers within the international postal

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6 Staatsarchiv, Hamburg, 221-11 C(P)774, Erwin Jacobi, Fr. Gienapp, Walter Donandt an Zentralstelle für Berufungsausschüsse zur Ausschaltung Nationalsozialisten, 30.07.1947, p. 3.

7 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/11248, Vortrag auf der Gesamtsitzung des RPM von Oberpostrat Dr. Timm.

8 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/39833, Haupt-Kartei Risch.

9 Staatsarchiv, Hamburg, 221-11 C(P)774, Erwin Jacobi, Fr. Gienapp, Walter Donandt an Zentralstelle für Berufungsausschüsse zur Ausschaltung Nationalsozialisten, 30.07.1947.

10 Risch, Friedrich Adolf: *Heinrich von Stephan: Die Idee der Weltpost*, Hamburg 1948.

services were generally quite long.<sup>11</sup> He had not been trained in the postal services before 1924, and on becoming head of the international department in 1940, he had never participated in an international postal congress. Under his authority, the *Reichspost*'s representatives abroad created a new system of international connections that compensated the lack of an established network.<sup>12</sup> His rise within the ministerial structures in 1938 is surely also due to the staff policies of Reichspostminister Wilhelm Ohnesorge. Before becoming minister, Ohnesorge had already been state secretary, but his new position gave him the power to implement staff policies strongly influenced by National Socialist thinking. Officials close to him, including Risch in his early days at the ministry, benefitted from this, which also explains his promotions. Risch's relationship with the minister worsened as he refused to renounce his religious beliefs.<sup>13</sup> His career was also limited to Ohnesorge's tenure and therefore cut short by the end of the war. After 1945, Risch claimed that the EPTU was nothing short of a resistance movement, as it attempted to connect people in times of great division, and that it had been counteracting the general direction of the *Reichspostministerium*. He insisted that this difficult "game against all rules of diplomacy"<sup>14</sup> had only been possible because the Reich's leading figures, including Reichspostminister Ohnesorge, lacked understanding of the EPTU project. Risch attempted to prove his point by highlighting that his article on the possibilities of a European postal union had been published by the Universal Postal Union and that he had even received praise by an English telecommunications expert.<sup>15</sup> The expert referenced was General Mance, but his alleged praise of the EPTU could neither be verified in the German nor in the English version of his book.<sup>16</sup> It is also debatable whether the higher-ranking ministerial officials, including the minister Ohnesorge, did not understand the EPTU. He had ample experience in the postal services – having started his

11 Laborie, Léonard: L'Europe mise en réseaux. La France et la coopération internationale dans les postes et les télécommunications (années 1850-années 1950), Bruxelles 2011, pp. 115 – 122.

12 Politisches Archiv, Berlin, RAV Zagreb 147, Aufgaben der ins Ausland entsandten Beauftragten der DRP, undatiert.

13 Ueberschär: Die Deutsche Reichspost, pp. 25/26.

14 Own translation: "ein Spiel gegen alle Regeln der Diplomatie", Staatsarchiv, Hamburg, 221-11 C(P)774, Erwin Jacobi, Fr. Gienapp, Walter Donandt an Zentralstelle für Berufungsausschüsse zur Ausschaltung Nationalsozialisten, 30.07.1947.

15 Ibidem.

16 cf. Bridg.-Gen. Sir Mance, Osborne (1944): International Telecommunications, London, p. 7; German edition: p. 8.

career in 1890.<sup>17</sup> The idea that the EPTU was a peace project connecting peoples was also promoted overtly by the minister and the *Reichspostministerium*.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Comparison

As mentioned above, the two careers are strikingly different, which partly can be explained by the positions Bornemann and Risch held within the ministry and the *Reichspostzentralamt*. We will base our comparison on a variety of criteria: from their training to the length of their career, their role within the EPTU and their post-war careers.

- Bornemann was a highly trained expert in his field. He had an expertise that was difficult to acquire and therefore it was difficult to replace him. He was a key member of the transnational expert community within the CCIs. Risch was a trained lawyer with a broad rather than specific knowledge of the postal services and the international postal communities.
- Bornemann had a career of just under 40 years in the telecommunications field – with more than 30 years at the top tier of international co-operation. Risch worked for the *Reichspost* for 21 years, with 5 of these years spent as the head of the international department. This was certainly the height of his international career in the postal services.
- Bornemann was primarily involved in the committees that focussed on technical standardisation and regulation due to his participation in the initiative to create a working group for telecommunications late in 1940. Risch was appointed as head of the international department with the task of creating a European Postal Union. He was therefore involved in the committees regulating international postal services and the EPTU's organisational aspects. In his position, he was the leading figure on the German side. He was also responsible for the political and/or diplomatic negotiations with the German Foreign Ministry.
- Bornemann's position during the Third Reich did not damage his post-war career. He quickly rose through the ranks in the *Bundespost* and reached an even higher ministerial level than Risch when he had be-

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17 Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, R4701/25644.

18 Europäischer Postkongress, pp. 12 – 16.

come head of the international department within the *Reichspostministerium* in 1938. Risch left the postal services to work for the Evangelical Church in Hamburg. His undersecretary Dr Friedrich Reiss would later be responsible for the foreign relations within the *Bundespost*, which made Risch's publication about the EPTU resurface in the files in 1951.

How can we explain the differences in these two careers?

- There is a difference in infrastructure systems that may have a decisive influence on careers in these sectors: the postal services depend on other infrastructures' physical communication and transportation networks such as roads, railways or airlines. The technical standards of these networks are predominantly defined outside the postal administrations' sphere of competence. They are by their nature less technical. Negotiations on international postal networks focus on tariffs and legal standards as well as revenue, while telecommunications have their own physical networks that require technical standardisation.
- The more technical an infrastructure system is, the more indispensable the experts become, as a high degree of specialist expertise is required. The case of Bornemann illustrates this quite well: he developed a very specific knowledge that made him difficult to replace – not just from a German, but also from an international perspective. The postal services on the other hand are only technical in terms of transportation and the knowledge required seems easier to transfer as it is less specific. The actors in the postal services are therefore more interchangeable.
- Telecommunication and in particular telephony saw a period of rapid technical development during the 1930s and 1940s. It spread across European societies in the interwar period and turned out to be a transnational technology. It was planned and built by an enthusiastic, transnational community of engineers, which transcended the political tensions between the wars. In the postal services (with the exception of airmail) no such bonds between experts formed on an international level.

In conclusion, both Bornemann and Risch's careers were fairly typical for German officials within the EPTU, although with very different outcomes in terms of continuity. Tracing these individual careers sheds new light on reasons and mechanisms behind continuities and discontinuities surrounding the European postal and telecommunications services.

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