

European Postal Services During the Second World War – German Hegemony vs. Technocratic Traditions

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1. Introduction

At the time of the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the official military beginning of the Second World War, the national postal and telecommunications administrations had been cooperating as part of a global organisation for six decades. The Universal Postal Union (UPU) was established in 1874 – the leading figure in founding the union was Heinrich von Stephan, a German postal expert.¹ The strength of the participating administrations' cooperation had already been tested by the First World War, but the postal experts nonetheless succeeded in protecting and restoring the UPU during times of great division in Europe.²

The Second World War foreshadowed by European postal relations; this is especially applicable to the relations between Germany and other

1 Sasse, Horst: *Der Weltpostverein. französischer und deutscher Text des Weltpostvertrages und anderer grundlegender Bestimmungen mit einer Einführung*, Metzner 1959, S. 11.

2 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, p. 250.

administrations due to censorship issues. Germany began censoring foreign mail as early as 1933. Despite complaints of and fear among the *Reichspost* that this would cast a poor light on Germany among other administrations, censorship continued to be reported and the number of censorship cases rose.³ The German postal administration started preparing for war in 1935 and the first tests of wartime protocol for the field and civil post took place in 1937.⁴ Postal protection⁵ was reinforced in “the time of tension”⁶ before the war in September 1935.⁷

High politics found their way into the UPU’s affairs during the Postal Union Congress in Buenos Aires in 1939. The question of representation for the annexed territories of Czechoslovakia and their continued recognition in the agreement of 1939 led to the refusal to sign and *de facto* exit of not only Germany but Italy, Spain and Hungary as well. The *Reichspost* did not favour this withdrawal but had no power to challenge the Führer’s decision. To overcome this isolation within the UPU, in 1940 the *Reichspost* resolved to apply the conditions agreed upon in the 1939 congress in services with non-hostile countries. Despite the fact that German delegate Karl Ziegler reported that no political questions were discussed during the congress,⁸ pre-war German aggressions influenced the discussions nevertheless.

The beginning of the war in military terms entailed a worsening of European postal relations and a further weakening of the UPU as well as other regional postal unions such as the Nordic Postal Union, which had to pause its activities between 1941 and 1946.⁹ Repercussions of war for the UPU included limiting its services to member administrations only and

3 Ueberschär, Gerd R.: *Die Deutsche Reichspost 1933 – 1945. Eine politische Verwaltungsgeschichte* (Bd. 2), Berlin 1999, p. 201.

4 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R470-154 and R4701-12132.

5 The postal protection was a service to ensure that the send items reached their goals unharmed.

6 Writer’s own translation: „Spannungszeit“. Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-11161, Anweisung für den verstärkten Postschutz, p. 2.

7 Ebd.

8 Ueberschär: Die Deutsche Reichspost, p. 281 – 284.

9 Riksarkivet, Oslo, S-1342 Samferdselsdepartementet, 1. postadministrasjonskontor A, F Konvensjoner og overenskomster med utlandet, 1946 – 1948, F 0042.

censorship, prompting the office to request that its mailing activities become protected as diplomatic mail.¹⁰

Despite being restored after the First World War, traditional technocratic cooperation strategies and organisations, such as the UPU, were challenged by the fact that the Second World War was driven by National Socialist and fascist ideologies and that the Axis powers occupied large parts of Europe for certain periods of the war. This difficulty applied not just for the administrations of the occupied countries but for the German postal administration as well. The European Postal and Telecommunications Union (EPTU), founded in October 1942 in Vienna, is an example of the reaction to such a challenge. Despite multiple attempts, a European postal union had never been created before because numerous administrations, particularly the British administration, opposed it. One proponent of such a union in the 1930s, Karolý von Forster, served as the Hungarian delegate to the EPTU congress in 1942.¹¹

The EPTU (1942 – 1945) was thus a first in European postal services, but it did not mark the beginning of international cooperation in the area of postal services. The Axis powers had prepared the union's founding intensively with bilateral agreements, a fully drafted agreement, and regulation proposals for both postal services and telecommunications. Delegates from 17 administrations were officially present at the congress in 1942, and 13 later signed the agreement and became members in April 1943 when the agreement came into force. The four other administrations were observers from Switzerland, Spain, Turkey and the Vatican. The 13 signatories were Germany, Italy, Norway, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, San Marino, Albania, Croatia and Bulgaria.¹² The main question explored in this paper regarding the newly founded union is as follows: *Was the EPTU created to promote German hegemony in the European continent and to dictate the continent's postal rules, or did the pressure of path dependency and technocratic traditions lead to an organisation without (geo)political influence?*

In order to answer this question, the EPTU will be analysed from three perspectives: 1) the processes of cooperation, 2) the scope of standardisa-

10 PTT Archives, Bern, P-00C_0128_11, Expédition des documents de service par le bureau international aux Administrations de l'Union, 05.1943.

11 Laborie, Léonard: „Enveloping Europe. Plans and Practices in Postal Governance, 1929 – 1959“, in: *Contemporary European History* 27 (2018), p. 305 – 310.

12 Europäischer Postkongress, p. 10 – 103.

tion and 3) the use of hegemonic force by the German postal administration. Each section explores the ways in which the balance between the two influences (technocracy and politics) was renegotiated. The paper ends with a conclusion.

2. *Processes of Cooperation*

The new geopolitical situation, caused by the early wins of the Axis powers within Europe despite Mussolini's reluctance to join the war, gave Germany and Italy the opportunity to lay new grounds for PTT (Post, Telephone and Telegraph) cooperation and European postal services – at least within the boundaries of occupied and allied territories.

The postal administration of the Reich and particularly Dr Friedrich Risch, who served as the head of the foreign department within the *Reichspost*, worked continuously to conclude bilateral agreements with other European administrations. To do this, Risch and his colleagues had to convince the responsible parties of the idea of a European postal union in (at least) three other institutions: the German Foreign Ministry, the targeted postal administration and its respective government or foreign ministry. After an initial agreement between the Axis powers on 8 October 1941,¹³ agreements with Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania and Slovakia were signed and came into force between April and September 1942.¹⁴ The success of the representatives of the *Reichspost* was mixed. Importantly, when it came to the abolition of the transit fee,¹⁵ the other administrations – including the Italian administration – did not agree. In the beginning, only three out of nine administrations agreed to a complete abolition,¹⁶ while a reduction of 50%

13 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-25935, Abkommen zwischen der Deutschen Reichpost und der Königlichen Italienischen Post- und Telegraphenverwaltung, 08.1941.

14 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-25935, Bilaterale Abkommen.

15 For example, when sending a letter from Copenhagen to Rome in 1942, the sending person would pay for the transport services provided by the Danish, German and Italian postal systems. Because Germany would neither be the country of origin nor the country of destination of the letter, it would be a transit country; thus, the fee that the German post would receive was called the transit fee.

16 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-25935, Bilaterale Abkommen.

was negotiated with all the other administrations.¹⁷ In the end, agreements with Denmark and Finland were also adapted to abolish the transit fee,¹⁸ which meant that five out of nine administrations had agreed upon it prior to the congress of 1942.

Cooperation during the congress itself seems to have been marked by continuities of the habitus of international postal conferences, such as the hoisting of every administration's national flags,¹⁹ the occupation of the posts within the presidium and committees, the committee structure itself, regular meetings and their scheduling, references to the UPU and the financial contribution system to the international organisation.²⁰ All these aspects suggest an effort to present the EPTU as a simple regional union of the UPU and legitimised it not only to the other member administrations but also to the respective foreign offices²¹ and administrations outside the union. For the newly founded organisation in the area of cultural policy, Benjamin Martin stated,

Ironically, these institutions were built on the practices of the kind associated with precisely the internationalism that Nazis and fascists rejected. Founding multilateral institutions with regular conferences, subcommittees, and multi-language journals, Nazis and fascists deftly deployed what have been called *the mechanics of internationalism* for political ends antithetical to the internationalist spirit.²²

This can easily be applied to the PTT as well. The key issue for the German *Reichspost* might have not been to change these mechanisms but rather to be in control of them.

The two delegates from the Swiss PTT administration both confirmed that their reception had been welcoming, but Hans Keller, the Swiss delegate for telecommunications, also reported that “despite all friendliness and form one had the feeling of an invisible power that steered the con-

17 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-25935, Abkommen zwischen der Deutschen Reichpost und der bulgarischen, ungarischen, kroatischen, und rumänischen Postverwaltung.

18 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-25935, Abkommen zwischen der Deutschen Reichpost und der norwegischen sowie dänischen Postverwaltung.

19 Politisches Archiv, Berlin, R106301, Bericht des Legationsrats Stahlberg, 20.10.1942, p. 2.

20 Europäischer Postkongress, p. 98 – 103.

21 The argument could have been that the EPTU was not a political union but a simple continuation of technocratic work.

22 Martin, Benjamin George: *The Nazi-fascist new order for European culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2016, p. 6.

gress from the beginning to the end”²³ and that private conversations with other delegates that he had met before were difficult. Ernest Bonjour, the Swiss delegate for postal affairs, designated the bilateral agreements as the last barrier to joining the union: “If adhering to the new European postal order would cause hesitations within one administration or the other, they would have to be expressed before the conclusion of the bilateral accord”.²⁴ This comment underlined the ambition of the *Reichspost* to create a new European postal regime on the basis of the changed geopolitical situation. Ernest Bonjour noted the comparatively short duration of the congress and the few discussions due to the intensive preparation by the *Reichspost*.²⁵ These hints within the reports of the Swiss delegates point to an important question: was the new European postal order mainly a German one?

In terms of the processes of cooperation, it is worth mentioning that some countries’ administrations might not have been *de jure* part of the EPTU framework but were rather *de facto* participants and would thus constitute examples of *hidden integration*;²⁶ this was the case for Belgium and France as well as for Spain, Switzerland and Sweden to varying degrees.

France never officially joined the EPTU, but French officials felt adherence was imminent in May 1944.²⁷ In the report for May – June 1945, the military commander of Germany in France states that the French government had declared to apply the provisions of the EPTU agreement on the 8

23 Writer’s own translation: „Trotz aller Freundlichkeit hatte man das Gefühl einer unsichtbaren Macht, die den Kongress von Anfang bis Ende beherrschte.“, Archives des PTT, Berne, P-00C_0108_01, 1. Bericht über den europäischen Postkongress, 04.11.1942, p. 12.

24 Writer’s own translation: „Si l’adhésion au nouvel ordre postal européen pouvait susciter des hésitations chez une administration ou chez l’autre, c’est avant la conclusion d’un accord bilatéral qu’elles devaient se faire jour.“ Archives des PTT, Berne, P-00C_0108_01, Congrès postal européen de Vienne, p. 1.

25 Archives des PTT, Berne, P-00C_0108_01, Congrès postal européen de Vienne, p. 2.

26 Misa, Thomas J. / Schot, Johan: „Introduction. Inventing Europe: Technology and the hidden integration of Europe“, in: *History and Technology* 21 (1), pp. 1 – 19. DOI: 10.1080/07341510500037487, 2005.

27 Archives diplomatiques, La Courneuve, Vichy Guerre 245, p. 157, Ouvertures des relations postales entre l’Allemagne et le territoire français non-occupé.

June 1943,²⁸ which could be interpreted as France unofficially joining the union.

The Belgian administration was – like the French administration – first invited as an observer at the congress of 1942 but then was uninvited; this may have been because the head of the Belgian telecommunications administration declined the invitation, though the head of postal services had accepted.²⁹ The Belgian administration nevertheless signed a bilateral agreement with the *Reichspost* in December 1942 that contained the exact provisions of the EPTU agreement.³⁰ As such, from a German perspective, Belgium was part of the European postal area. However, from a Belgian point of view, there were simply favourable conditions for German-Belgian postal relations. Being part of the union therefore had the advantage that favourable (and equal) conditions were valid with a number of countries at once.

In the case of Spain and Switzerland, the *Reichspost* tried to sign a bilateral agreement but failed.³¹ Both countries' administrations sent observers to the congress of 1942. The Spanish administration sent six delegates, while the Swiss sent two. Nonetheless, the two administrations remained outside of the union; it seems as though political arguments³² were the decisive factor, even though both administrations also named more technical obstacles.³³ The *Reichspost* nevertheless maintained contact with the two administrations by continuing negotiations with them at least

28 Lagebericht April – Juni 1943 (MBF), AN, AJ 40/444, <http://www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/prefets/fr/content/lagebericht-april-juni-1943-mbf> (20.10.2019).

29 Politisches Archiv, Berlin, R106301, Kurier an den Reichsaußenminister, 08.10.1942.

30 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/25935, Abkommen zwischen der Deutschen Reichspost und der belgischen Postverwaltung, 09.12.1942.

31 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R901/116970, Aufzeichnung Martius, 12.11.1943.

32 Political arguments included the ongoing war, the neutrality of Switzerland and the interests of Spain in South America rather than in Europe.

33 Technical arguments included loss of revenue due to the abolition of the transit fee and the non-entry of France that Spanish delegates cited as a hindrance. If France did not join the union, the transit fee between Spain and the rest of the EPTU would not be entirely abolished, leading to higher costs but also operational difficulties.

up until the beginning of 1944.³⁴ The *Reichspost* also informed the Swiss administration of developments within the EPTU and even extended an invitation to a conference planned for October 1944 in Vienna, but the Swiss administration declined.³⁵ Thus, though out of the EPTU formally, the Spanish and Swiss administrations remained connected to the project through the work of the *Reichspost*.

The Swedish PTT administration was invited to the congress in 1942 and serves as an example of an attempt at hidden cooperation. After careful discussions with the Swedish Foreign Ministry, which closely monitored what the Swiss administration would do,³⁶ the head of the Swedish postal administration declined to send any observers or experts to the conference, whereas the head of the telecommunications administration announced that it would send experts who were not official observers to the 1942 congress in Vienna,³⁷ which the German side refused.³⁸ The Swedish case thus also illustrates the rift between the PTT administrations and foreign ministries.

The *Deutsche Reichspost* aimed at integrating the PTT services through its representatives abroad or the *Armeefeldpostmeister*.³⁹ Their work was defined as building connections to the PTT administrations of other countries and reporting back information to the *Reichspost*. Representatives of the *Reichspost* were therefore part of the German diplomatic mission to other countries.⁴⁰ These representatives were also present during the congress of 1942.⁴¹

This kind of cooperation led to attempts of knowledge transfer, such as in the visit by a delegation of the Dutch postal administration in Germany from 24 November to 5 December 1942. In addition to dinners, cultural

34 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-11628 and Archives des PTT, Berne, T-00B_0148_09.

35 Archives des PTT, Berne, T-00B_136_02 and P-00C_0143_03.

36 Riksarkivet, Stockholm, UD 1920 års doss HP 3258, Kungl. Utrikes Departemente ang. postkonferens i Wien, 03.08.1942.

37 Riksarkivet, Stockholm, UD 1920 års doss HP 3258, Kungl. Utrikes Departemente ang. postkonferens i Wien.

38 Riksarkivet, Stockholm, UD 1920 års doss HP 3258, Söderblom an Chargé d’Affaires E. von Post, Berlin, 07.10.1942.

39 Depending on the status of occupation of the country.

40 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/13657, Richtlinien für die Leiter deutscher Abordnungen im Ausland, ohne Datum.

41 Europäischer Postkongress, p. 326.

events and meetings with the heads of the *Reichspost*, this visit also included appointments at post offices; training centres, such as the prestigious training centre Zeesen; and (recreational) establishments for the staff of the *Reichspost*.⁴² Furthermore, the *Reichspost* concluded or offered help with concluding contracts for the delivery of PTT material to other countries, for example with the administrations of Romania⁴³ or Croatia⁴⁴.

Lastly, the role of foreign ministries within these processes of cooperation is noteworthy. Both in Germany as well as in Italy, the foreign ministries did not seem convinced of the idea to create a postal union in wartime.⁴⁵ Several times, the *Reichspost* and the German Foreign Ministry did not agree on certain elements of the project, such as flags, languages and/or the invitation of ministers. Similarly, it remained uncertain up until the end of September 1942 whether Mussolini would allow Minister of Transport Host Venturi to participate in the congress.⁴⁶

Hence, European postal cooperation was embedded in a larger context of high politics, and conflicts and cooperation depended upon these factors. What is unquestionable is that all administrations – regardless of their belonging to a neutral, occupied or allied country – were or seemed interested in this kind of European postal cooperation⁴⁷ and its proclaimed benefits, and the fact that a war was raging at the same time sometimes appeared to have been of smaller importance. However, the war seems to have been the most important point for the foreign ministries, which might also partially explain the small scope of standardisation within the EPTU regarding postal services.

42 Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, 2.16.09.993, Verslag Reis naar Duitschland, 24.11. – 05.12.1942.

43 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R901-112730, Junker an Reichwirtschaftsministerium, 08.07.1940.

44 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R901-110878, Hudeczek an HaPol Iva 4465/42, 19.05.1942.

45 Politisches Archiv, Berlin, R60609, Bericht Wiehl, 15.07.1942, p. 3.

46 Politisches Archiv, Berlin, R106301, Telegramm Mackensen, 29.09.1942.

47 One can see for instance that the Swiss administration calculates the costs of joining the union. Archives des PTT, Berne, P-00C_0108_01, Bonjour an Generaldirektor der PTT, 27.03.1942.

3. Standardising Services in Times of Constraints

The administrations successfully concluded an agreement for the EPTU within three sessions, and the postal committee negotiated the provisions for postal services within the EPTU over four sessions.⁴⁸ As stated, the Swiss delegates justified attributed the speed with which agreements were made to the preparations made by the *Reichspost*, but another reason can be added, namely the limited scope of the agreements. Within this scope, however, the progress in terms of establishing a single European postal area was notable and remains – concerning the transit fee in particular – unparalleled up to today.

The postal service agreements included provisions for letters and postcards sent via land. The weight categories for letters were significantly enlarged⁴⁹ in comparison with the 20g steps that the UPU provisions fore-saw.⁵⁰ Sea and air mail were initially excluded.⁵¹ All the bilateral agreements that were concluded before the EPTU contained additional aspects of postal services, such as journals, printed material and business papers.⁵² The whole division of packages and postal cheques was not mentioned in any of the negotiations;⁵³ there could be several explanations for this, including that a further cheapening of the services would have meant even higher financial losses for the administrations. Additionally, the time for discussions during the congress was very limited. It was thus important to focus on the more pressing aspects of the (German) standardisation agenda. The EPTU was intended to function fully in the post-war peacetime period when postal services would run without disruptions, which made the advantages of further standardisation questionable. On the other hand, this meant that Germany was further integrated into this postal network than the other countries – including Italy.

However, it does not seem uncommon to start with only a few standardised aspects. Since the creation of the UPU, the process of technocratic postal cooperation was built upon the idea of incrementally facilitating international communication. In a sense, this incremented approach repre-

48 Europäischer Postkongress 2013.

49 Up until 20g, 20g – 250g, 250 – 500g, 500g – 1000g.

50 Sasse: Der Weltpostverein, p. 19.

51 Europäischer Postkongress, p. 98 –103.

52 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-25935, Bilaterale Abkommen.

53 Europäischer Postkongress, p. 104 – 144.

sents the use of old strategies in new times. For example, the Danish delegate mentioned during negotiations that it would be desirable to waive the sea transit fees as well, but the Italian administration did not judge this to be financially practical; the president, Heinrich Poppe, asked almost immediately to restrict the discussion to land transit fees. The question of sea transit fees could then be discussed in a later session of the permanent postal committee.⁵⁴

The two crucial postal service successes of the *Reichspost* with the creation of this union were the new larger weight categories that were introduced and – even more importantly – the abolition of the transit fee for land post within the territory of the member administrations.⁵⁵ Both points had the potential to reduce the bureaucratic burden of the PTT administrations immensely and thus also reduced the staff needed, and they manifested two goals of the German postal administration ever since the creation of the UPU in the previous century.⁵⁶ The standardising was not supposed to stop after the congress in 1942 but should have been continued by the permanent committees.

The permanent postal committee met for the first and last time in Copenhagen in June 1943 to further work on the postal provisions of the EP-TU. A total of 12 proposals to enlarge and specify the existing provisions were discussed.⁵⁷ Among other things, these proposals treated the extension of the weight levels up to 2,000g, inclusion of more postal services such as the transport of journals, extension of the abolition of the transit fee to sea mail, a maximum weight for journals and a system for dealing with insufficiently franked letters. The proposals came from Germany (3), Finland (1), Italy (5) and Croatia (3).⁵⁸ They were discussed in the order presented here. The latter eight proposals were – according to the report by undersecretary Risch – of practical and operational nature and were all either deferred or rejected. The German proposal concerning the extension of the weight levels for letters was accepted, augmenting the foreseen

54 Ibid., p. 126.

55 Ibid., p. 118.

56 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-11248, Vortrag auf der Gesamtsitzung des Reichspostministeriums von Oberpostrat Timm, 07.09.1940, S. 4 – 14.

57 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-25935, Vorschläge der Vereinsverwaltungen für die 1. Tagung des Europäischen Postausschusses (Ständiger Ausschuss), Kopenhagen, Juni 1943.

58 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4791-25935.

prices. The second proposal, which would have included journals, printed material, samples and mixed shipments, was generally accepted but deferred until various concerns, including legal concerns,⁵⁹ were addressed. The abolition of transit fees for sea mail was similarly accepted but deferred due to Italian opposition. The Finnish proposal to render correspondence between the administrations free of charge was accepted.⁶⁰ In total, two out of 12 proposals were accepted, while further decisions were postponed. Risch explained this outcome by referring to the administrations' wish not to differentiate the provisions too much "in order to give the administrations not yet belonging to the union the possibility to integrate into the coming reorganisation without difficulties".⁶¹ By *reorganisation*, he probably alluded to the new order of Europe after the victory of the Nazi-Fascist Axis. One could argue that the outcome also might have been the expression of the heavy restrictions that the administrations faced due to the ongoing war, uncertainty about who would win the war and the lack of unity between the Axis powers. Indeed, Risch himself reported to Georg Martius⁶² that the Germans "have to always take into consideration the sensitivity of Italy".⁶³ This sensitivity was likely also heightened by the Allies' victories in Italy and the country's subsequent division in September 1943. As the *Reichspost* internally claimed the obviousness of German leadership of the EPTU⁶⁴ from the beginning, the question is how German the union really was.

59 For instance, whether or not the provisions were in compliance with UPU rules.

60 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4901-116969, Bericht des Ministerialdirektors Risch über die Kopenhagener Tagung des Europäischen Postausschusses, 18.08.1943.

61 Writer's own translation: „um den heute noch nicht dem Verein angehörenden Verwaltungen die Möglichkeit zu bieten, sich ohne Schwierigkeiten in die kommende Neugestaltung einzugliedern“. Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4901-116969, Bericht des Ministerialdirektors Risch über die Kopenhagener Tagung des Europäischen Postausschusses, 18.08.1943, p. 3.

62 Martius was responsible for different international organisations, also for inland navigation, within the German Foreign Ministry.

63 Writer's own translation. Bundesarchiv: „immer auf die Empfindlichkeit Italiens Rücksicht nehmen müssen“, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4901-116969, Risch to Martius, 09.04.1934, p. 2.

64 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-11248, Vortrag auf der Gesamtsitzung des Reichspostministeriums von Oberpostrat Timm, 07.09.1940, p. 17.

4. A European Postal Union – German Style?

There are several aspects that lead to the hypothesis that the EPTU might have been a German-European postal union, including the *constructed* line of continuity with Heinrich von Stephan, the integration of the EPTU into the *New Europe* discourse, the changing of long-standing international rules and the EPTU's use as a tool for different national administrations.

The frequent references to Heinrich von Stephan by different German actors⁶⁵ underline the *Reichspost*'s aim to establish a link between the UPU and the EPTU both for an inner-German as well as for an international audience. Von Stephan was credited with the creation of the UPU in 1874 and represented as a national hero. The EPTU symbolised the continuation of his work and the fulfilment of his dreams, which were the abolition of the transit fee and a unified postal area.⁶⁶ As such, the postal branch of the EPTU was, despite its international character, Germanised in order to fit into the National Socialist vision of German greatness. The line of argument surrounding the continuation of Heinrich von Stephan's work could be used as a legitimisation for other postal administrations: The idea that the same cooperation would be continued in a regional organisation might have been utilised to assuage fears of a National Socialist and fascist organisation that was less technocratic and more politically charged.

The political bent of the EPTU leads to the second point: whether or not the EPTU was integrated into the larger discourse of the *New Europe*. It must be noted that this was not one coherent discourse but rather a melting pot of different ideas of how to organise the future Europe that Adolf Hitler himself showed little interest in.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the foundation of the EPTU may have been rhetorically linked to this vague concept. For instance, Postal Minister Wilhelm Ohnesorge did mention the fight against bolshevism in a letter inviting the Slovakian administration to bilateral ne-

65 cf. Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/11248, Vortrag auf der Gesamtsitzung des RPM von Oberpostrat Dr. Timm; Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/11263, Rede Dr. Risch über: „Gedanken zu einer Reform des Post- und Fernmeldebewesens“, S. 9 – 15; Risch even wrote a book about him after the war (Risch, Friedrich Adolf: *Heinrich von Stephan: die Idee der Weltpost*, Hamburg 1948).

66 Sasse: *Der Weltpostverein*, p. 11.

67 Kletzin, Birgit: *Europa aus Rasse und Raum. Die nationalsozialistische Idee der Neuen Ordnung*, Münster 2000, p. 5 – 10.

gociations prior to the congress in 1942.⁶⁸ The opening speeches of the conference by Ohnesorge and Venturi underlined the intention of creating ever-closer cooperation between the European PTT administrations that would eventually lead to a united continent.⁶⁹ If Ohnesorge remained more vague about the connection between the war and the foundation of a European postal union, Venturi explicitly linked them in his speech: "This congress, the aim of which is the organisation of European PTT services, is another proof of our certainty regarding the final result of the tremendous conflict that currently takes place".⁷⁰ The vagueness of the German postal minister seems to have been a strategy. In internal documents and correspondence, the responsible people in the *Reichspost* were more direct about certain objectives and the political aspects of the union. This might have been a strategy to gain domestic support but leaves a question mark as to which approach reflected the real intentions. For example, in a letter to Hitler, Ohnesorge justified the need for a European Postal Union by arguing that it would provide the means to economically exploit occupied countries.⁷¹ He further stated that the exact design of the union depended upon the political reorganisation of Europe after the war.⁷² The idea of said reorganisation can also be identified in some organisational aspects of the newly founded union.

Within the EPTU, long-standing international rules concerning the official language, reference currency and the location of an official office were changed. French had been the international language not just in the UPU but in other international organisations as well. Language is power, and the change from French to German and Italian as official languages of an international union is significant because it represents the translation of a hegemonic status into the institutions of the EPTU. It is also important to

68 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-11627, Der Reichpostminister an das Ministerium für Verkehr und öffentliche Arbeiten, Postverwaltung, 03.03.1942.

69 Europäischer Postkongress, p. 12 – 20.

70 Writer's own translation: „Dieser Kongreß, dessen Ziel die Organisirerung der europäischen Post-, Telegraphen- und Fernsprechdienst ist, ist ein weiterer Beweis unserer Gewißeheit in Bezug auf das Endergebnis des ungeheuren Konflikts, der sich gegenwärtig abspielt“, Europäischer Postkongress 2013, p. 16.

71 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-11200, Reichspostminister an den Führer des Großdeutschen Reichs, 21.06.1941. He mentions more technocratic arguments and a union's possible contribution to international understanding as well.

72 Ibid.

mention that the original draft of the treaty did not include Italian as an official language – the German Foreign Ministry in cooperation with its Italian counterpart and the Italian PTT administration lobbied successfully to change this in order to show full parity between the Axis powers during the congress.⁷³ However, the language spoken during the negotiations seems to have been predominantly German.⁷⁴

Similarly to the change in official language, the reference currency was changed from French gold francs to the *Reichsmark*.⁷⁵ Concerning the choice of currency, inequality between Germany and Italy again emerged and appears to have been consistent throughout the different institutions of the EPTU. The French PTT administration together with other French ministries tried to fight against this deprivation of international standing and power. “an agreement was made [between the French Finance Ministry and the French PTT administration] about the necessity of keeping the gold francs as reference currency”.⁷⁶

The UPU had its office in Berne,⁷⁷ Switzerland, a politically neutral and comparatively small country. This was different in the case of the EPTU: the choice of Vienna with an office in a building of the *Reichspost* (thus under the supervision of the *Reichspost*)⁷⁸ represented a power grab by Germany. Original plans even foresaw the office in Berlin.⁷⁹ The two-man team of the official union office was staffed by German and Italian employees, which only reinforced the hierarchies within the union.

Given all of the points presented thus far, the idea that the first-ever European postal union was heavily shaped by German hegemony and thinking seems justifiable. However, in addition to contextual and institutional aspects, the EPTU also needs to be analysed from the perspective of a

73 Politisches Archiv, Berlin, R106301, Aufzeichnung Bericht des Legationsrats Stahlberg, 20.10.1942, p. 1.

74 Ibid.

75 Europäischer Postkongress, p. 314.

76 Writer's own translation: „Un accord se réalisait sur la nécessité de maintenir coûte que coûte le franc-or comme monnaie d'étalement”. Archives nationales, Pierrefitte, 19870773/33, Historique des pourparlers concernant la Conférence de Vienne, p. 5.

77 Sasse: Der Weltpostverein, p. 12.

78 Europäischer Postkongress, p. 101.

79 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-11248, Vortrag auf der Gesamtsitzung des Reichspostministeriums von Oberpostrat Timm, 07.09.1940, p. 17.

day-to-day war situation: what advantages did the EPTU bring to the different member administrations in this particular moment of World War II?

Starting again with the German point of view, the EPTU presented a possible solution to deal with loss of staff resulting from military mobilisation that could not be compensated by foreign PTT workers in Germany.⁸⁰ If one did not have to weigh every letter due to the larger weight categories agreed upon in 1942, it promised a more efficient service despite the reduction of staff. Additionally, territorial wins meant an enlarged area of responsibility for the *Reichspost*, ergo additional work that the administration needed to cope with as well.⁸¹ Against this background, the EPTU can be interpreted as a tool for the facilitation of everyday postal services.

Furthermore, the EPTU can be understood as a tool for propaganda. Not only could the unity of the Axis powers be presented to the outside,⁸² but the EPTU could also be used as an illustration of how the *New Europe* would look. The *Reichspost* used both stamps to circulate the news of the foundation of the EPTU⁸³ as well as its own journal to present a unified postal Europe to the outside.⁸⁴ The German administration even planned the publication of two new and multilingual journals, *The European Post* and *Wire and Ether*, in order to integrate the PTT administrations even more. Due to the lack of paper because of the war, these plans had to be stopped.⁸⁵

From the perspective of other European PTT administrations, the EPTU could be viewed as a tool to improve their own particular situations. The Danish government had chosen a politics of cooperation to appease the German occupiers,⁸⁶ and their cooperation within the EPTU fits into this

80 Ueberschär: Die deutsche Reichspost, p. 302.

81 Ibid, p. 296.

82 Politisches Archiv, Berlin, R106301, Aufzeichnung Bericht des Legationsrats Stahlberg, 20.10.1942, p. 1.

83 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/11445, Bulletin No.1 du Bureau International de l'UPU, 16.01.1.942.

84 For example: Ohne Verfasser: Der Erste Europäische Postkongress und seine Ergebnisse, in Postarchiv: Zeitschrift für das gesamte Post- und Fernmeldewesen, 70 (1941/1942), pp. 468ff.

85 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/13438.

86 Lund, Joachim: „Denmark and the ‘European New Order’ 1940 – 1942“, in: *Contemporary European History* 13 (3), p. 305 – 321. DOI: 10.1017/S096077304001742, 2004, p. 320.

strategy. The Norwegian administration used the foundation of the EPTU for state-building or rather to legitimise their new leader, Vidkun Quisling. A stamp showing his head next to the motive of the first stamp ever emitted by a Norwegian state⁸⁷ was published to commemorate the congress in 1942. However, despite the heading “European Postal Union”,⁸⁸ this stamp has virtually no connection to the PTT sector or any idea of Europe. Rather, it seems that Norwegian membership in the EPTU was used to try to convince the Norwegian public of the benefits of the new leadership. With Quisling, Norway would have a place in the *New Europe*.

The French PTT administration tried to eliminate the demarcation line that divided the territory of France and thus also the French postal services in two. In July 1943, when discussing the possibility of a French entry into the EPTU, the director of postal services within the French PTT administration, M. Moignet, argued: “It would be otherwise not understandable if facilitations were introduced for interstate services, while the exchange of messages within the French territory would be subject to the strongest obstruction in the area of inner French service”.⁸⁹ One can detect the use of the EPTU as an argument to revise the condition of postal services under German occupation.

These examples demonstrate that while the EPTU was a useful tool for the *Reichspost*, other PTT administrations utilised it as well to improve their postal services in wartime despite the first impression that the EPTU was mainly a German construction, at least for the field of postal services. Nevertheless, their room for manoeuvring was limited, and every improvement had the price of integrating the administrations more deeply into a European postal union that was heavily dominated by representatives of a National Socialist *Reichspostministerium*.

87 Lion with a double paw.

88 Writer's own translation, „Europeisk Postforening“. Riksarkivet, Oslo, Postens sentralleddelse, Fa-008, 309-310 Postforening, Merknader, not dated.

89 Writer's own translation: „Es wäre andernfalls nicht zu verstehen, wenn Erleichterungen für den zwischenstaatlichen Dienst eingeführt werden sollen, während andererseits im Bereich des inneren französischen Diensts der Nachrichtenaustausch innerhalb des französischen Gebiets schwersten Behinderungen unterworfen ist.“. Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701-11618, Niederschrift über die Eröffnungssitzung der deutsch-französischen Besprechung am 20. Juli 1943 im Reichspostministerium zu Berlin, p. 2.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the footprint of the wartime experience in postal services cannot be described in a simple way. It bears witness to hegemony but also the agency of occupied countries' administrations, to continuities and discontinuities in technocratic postal cooperation, to Axis powers whose cooperation was conflictual because the foreign ministries and postal administrations did not always work hand in hand, and to big achievements in the standardisation of European postal infrastructure and yet strong constraints due to the war. The two poles described in the introduction – an organisation dominated by Germany or an apolitical, technocratic one – were not necessarily opposites but rather were often two sides of the same coin. After all, German interests and technocratic ideals overlapped regarding certain issues, such as the cheapening of international postal services by abolishing the transit fee.

It is difficult to define what remained of the EPTU after the war. The idea to create another regional union was not buried with the end of the Nazi dictatorship. In fact, multiple plans arose in the 1950s within different frameworks, such as the Council of Europe and the European Coal and Steel Community.⁹⁰ Here, Hans Schuberth's – the first Western German postal minister – strong engagement in the creation of a new union in the beginning of the 1950s is interesting: Dr Friedrich Reiss was responsible for foreign affairs in Schuberth's ministry.⁹¹ Dr Reiss had worked in the foreign department of Dr Friedrich Risch during the Second World War.⁹² Though Schuberth's plans failed, the end of the 1950s saw the creation of two European PTT unions. In the Eastern Bloc, the Organisation of Cooperation between the Socialist Countries in the Field of Postal Services and Telecommunications was founded in 1958.⁹³ In the Western Bloc, the Eu-

90 Laborie: Europe mise en réseaux, S. 347 – 367.

91 Bundesarchiv, Sankt Augustin, B257/ORG4, Organisationsplan des Bundesministeriums für das Post- und Fernmeldewesen, 01.08.1951.

92 Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde, R4701/11256, Geschäftsplan des Reichspostministeriums, Abteilung Min-A, 04.1942.

93 Henrich-Franke, Christian: „Die Gründung europäischer Infrastrukturorganisationen im Ost/West-Vergleich: die PTT-Organisationen OSS und CEPT“, in: Ambrosius Gerold / Neutsch, Cornelius / Henrich-Franke, Christian (eds.): *Internationale Politik und Integration europäischer Infrastrukturen in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 1. Auflage, Baden-Baden 2010, S. 113 – 142.

ropean Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations (CEPT) was created in 1959. Though the members of the CEPT underlined their technocratic traditions and continued working in similar structures as the pre-war experts had done,⁹⁴ the very fact that two organisations were founded and that the UPU had a clause that new members needed to be approved by a two-thirds majority⁹⁵ and the CEPT had a waiting period before accepting new members⁹⁶ shows that the political surroundings had gained significant influence international postal cooperation. However, this development did not start after the Second World War but during it.

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94 Laborie: L'Europe, pp. 378 – 381; Benz: Integration, p. 197.

95 Sasse: Weltpostverein, p. 26.

96 Amtsblatt des Bundesministers für das Post- und Fernmeldewesen 1960 (5), Nr.6/1960 Europäische Konferenz der Verwaltungen für das Post und Fernmeldewesen, p. 22.

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