A New Order for European Communication: Ideology or Technocratic Necessity? The European Postal and Telecommunications Union (1942–1945)

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Abstract

Any new regime relies upon the building of networks that hold society together – communication being one of them. In the 1930s, the two pre-eminent communication networks were the post and telecommunications (PTT). However, we can observe a decline in bilateral and international PTT co-operation from 1935 onwards. With the destruction that followed the beginning of the war, the focus of the PTT administration was to re-establish the various systems. In the case of Germany and Italy – which wanted to create a 'new European order' – this meant that the technocrats involved in both countries were faced with establishing a system of communications that would connect Europe. In 1942, the European Postal and Telecommunications Union (EPTU) was founded. Although 'Europe' was limited to Germany, Italy and a majority of the countries occupied by the Axis powers, the EPTU signified a discontinuity in European PTT cooperation. A regional union of this kind had been discussed but not implemented in the 1920s. Thus, the question arises: Why in 1942? Was it a way for the Germans and Italians to dictate a new, ideologically charged order, or simply the expression of the administrative need to facilitate communication within Europe?

The EPTU (European Postal and Telecommunications Union; German *Europäische Post- und Fernmeldeverein*) was established at the height of the Second World War with 13 member administrations. It was a European postal and telecommunications (PTT) organization that resulted directly from a German-Italian initiative (*Europäischer Postkongress Wien 1942…*, 2013, pp. 88–103); its first Congress was held in October 1942 in Vienna. This creation was in line with the major international scientific congresses and international organizations, chief among them the Universal Postal Union (1874) and the International Telecommunications Union (1865), of the second half of the 19th century. The EPTU differed from earlier undertakings through its European dimension and the fact that it was set up and actually existed during the global war of 1939–1945, a period that may at first glance have seemed unfavorable for technical collaboration.

Two stamps issued during the war probably best illustrate the seemingly divergent orientations of the EPTU: one totalitarian, in line with Axis propaganda, and the other emphasizing international technocratic tradition. The first stamp (1941) carries the portraits of Mussolini and Hitler, framed respectively by the Italian fasces and the Nazi eagle. This German stamp featured the legend *zwei Völker und ein Kampf*, meaning two peoples (nations) and one struggle. In essence, it celebrates the Axis alliance. The other label, with the inscription "European Postal Congress, Vienna 1942" in its legend, was issued after the EPTU's Congress and depicted a map of Europe and a horn player, a typical figure in 19th century postal distribution (found, for example, in many Danish stamps). The image is framed on both sides with acorn leaves. This is no longer a celebration of the Axis, but a celebration of an attempt at the unification of Europe within the PTT sector.

1. Stamp with the portraits of Mussolini and Hitler, 1941

    Source: Gottfried Klein, open license.

2. Stamp commemorating the European Postal Congress in Vienna, 1942

    Source: Erich Meerwald, all rights reserved; reproduced with the authorisation of the German Federal Ministry of Finance.

It is the impact on the EPTU of the above-described influences – Fascist ideology and technocratic internationalism – that we seek to analyze in the present article. It is important to note here that these influences were not necessarily contradictory. At times, ideological and technocratic aims overlapped. Consequently, we will attempt to describe how the Axis powers envisioned the future of communications in a so-called 'New Europe'. The main question will concern the extent to which the EPTU was simply a continuation of previous technocratic co-operation, and how much National Socialist and Fascist ideology can be found within the EPTU. Our hypothesis is that – within the expert community of the PTT sector – there was a broad consensus that close co-operation was beneficial in order to improve European PTT services. But the issue of how to organize this co-operation could not be agreed upon, which is why no European PTT union was founded during the inter-war years, though it was discussed regularly. The complete hegemony of the Axis powers on the European continent at the beginning of the war shifted the balance and made the creation of the EPTU possible. Ideology influenced the union at points where the respective Foreign Ministries were involved. Specifically, this concerned questions such as the official language of the union and whether France, a leader in the field of telecommunications, should join the union and how.

Currently, there is little research devoted to the EPTU, and that which is carried out often focuses on specific countries (Herren, 1997; Laborie, 2011; Kreis, 2011; Blüdnikow & Johansen, 1993; Lotz & Ueberschär, 1999). To sum up the present state of research: scholars generally agree that while the EPTU was a short-lived organization to which the Axis powers – and notably the *Reichspostministerium* (Henrich-Franke & Laborie, 2018) – lay a strong hegemonic claim, it harnessed the inter-war ideas for a European PTT union, and continuities can be demonstrated on an ideational, organizational, technical and individual level (Laborie, 2018; Henrich-Franke, 2018).

In order to strengthen our hypothesis, we will first contextualize the EPTU within the concept of the 'New Europe' – ubiquitous in the German presentation of the EPTU project (Rede Dr. Risch…, 1941; Ohnesorge an Hitler, 1941) – before discussing international PTT relations and their evolution from the 1930s into the war years. We will then proceed to a study of the EPTU *stricto sensu*, and attempt to determine whether we are dealing with a new organization of European PTTs in a new Europe. Finally, we will tackle the question whether the EPTU was the product of ideology or technocratic necessity, this based on two examples – symbols, and the issue of France's entry into the EPTU.

Since the EPTU could be interpreted as an organization created within the framework of the so-called 'New Europe', a short overview of the concept will be given. We will show that the lack of clear communication on the exact nature of the idea led to various definitions and designs, and not just within the Third Reich, but also within the circles of collaborators in occupied or allied countries. This gave the creators of new European organizations agency to design these bodies.

Kletzin suggests that the term 'New Europe' was nothing more than a propaganda tool to legitimate the war and obtain support from the people of the occupied territories. Politically, the argument was used so as not to explicitly demonstrate hegemonic ambitions, however, a concretization of what this would mean from a political, military and economic perspective was lacking. (Kletzin, 2000, pp. 2–5).

It was indeed a concept that was never entirely developed, even when the Third Reich made its first territorial gain. At the height of Nazi power in Europe, however, it became increasingly important to propose an idea for the future of the continent. But no united narrative was communicated, and the interpretation of the concept varied depending on its interpreter. We can see how it was influenced by the idea of *Mitteleuropa*[1] and the *Großraumtheorie*.[2] Both drew upon the notion that a big power should have its own sphere of influence wherein other big powers should not intervene. Carl Schmitt was among the foremost proponents of this idea (Gruchmann, 1962, p. 22). The 'New Europe', it was claimed, should thus be guided by the Third Reich.

The Führer himself viewed Europe primarily as a territory that could be exploited for the benefit of the Third Reich, and was therefore averse to any loftier construal of the idea of Europe. Others, however, realized the potential for mobilization resting in such an approach (Martin, 2016, p. 8) – and not just within the borders of the Reich, but also abroad. They were proven right as some National Socialists from other European countries also contributed with their own ideas as to how the 'New Europe' should look. For instance, a federation of National Socialist countries was proposed. Concepts[3] of Europe in the occupied countries of Western Europe were also often connected with the desire to regain political power, and it was put forward that a European community based

[1]   Middle Europe: The basic idea was to gather the states of Central and Eastern
       Europe under the aegis of Germany (Kletzin, 2000, p. 13).
[2]   Theory of the grand spaces (authors' own translation).
[3]   In France, for example, the creation by French intellectuals of the 'Groupe Collabora-
       tion' (September 1940), which had a deep interest in the Nazi vision of Europe. In March
       1941, the group established a number of different sections – economics, science, letters –
       and also the "youth section for a new Europe" (*Les Jeunes de l'Europe Nouvelle*).

on the autonomy of individual states would better represent national interests (Grunert, 2012, pp. 297–299).

Furthermore, it seems noteworthy to add that there were various initiatives that strove to translate the 'New Europe' into specific structures, for example in the field of culture. In his book on the 'New Order' of culture, Benjamin Martin emphasizes that "the totalitarian internationalism of the Nazi-Fascist Axis offered the specter of something else: a model of transnational co-operation based on the values of the most intense, aggressive, and racist national spirit" (Martin, 2016, p. 7). Clearly, this collaborative model lay at the foundation of, among others, the Permanent Council for International Cooperation among Composers, the International Film Chamber, and the European Writers Union (p. 6). The question now emerges: was the establishment of the EPTU, too, driven by ideology, or did the union's leading actors choose a different organizational form? What has become clear by now, however, is that they received no clear foreign policy instructions. Rather, 'Europe' remained a propaganda term with no specific definitional content.

Technocratic Internationalism and Historical Classification

When the European Postal and Telecommunications Union was founded, individual postal and telecommunication administrations had already been co-operating since the late 19th century within the Universal Postal Union and the International Telecommunications Union, both of which were well-established international communities of experts. These unions were, however, severely hindered in their work by the outbreak of war (Expédition des documents de service, n.d.). Bilateral postal relations had become less intense in the years preceding the conflict, while its onset resulted in some connections being completely cut off (Journalsager, 1935–1944). Thus, the desire to achieve a simple improvement of the status quo might also have been a reason for the creation of the EPTU.

Johan Schot and Vincent Lagendijk called this kind of co-operation 'technocratic internationalism'. At its heart was the concept that the organization of international communication was supposed to be apolitical – and thus performed by experts within the administrations – in order to overcome potential political conflict (Schot & Lagendijk, 2008, p. 197). The idea of independent experts making international governance decisions rationally rather than politically has been shown to guide infrastructure experts since the middle of the 19th century (Henrich-Franke, 2018, p. 288). Nevertheless, the vision that the technicians aimed at appears to have been political, focusing as it did on borderless communication and bringing people together, thereby avoiding war.

Not only therefore were the European PTT administrations thus used to co-operating on an international level, but also the idea of a European

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postal union was not new[4]. The reasoning of the regional postal unions was predominantly that this would make possible the creation of a common identity[5] – an argument that was also used by the National Socialists in 1942, when the German Minister of Posts, Wilhelm Ohnesorge, reminded the delegates at the Congress in Vienna that the postal services' primary role was to promote international understanding and further peace between peoples (*Europäischer Postkongress Wien 1942...*, 2013, pp. 12–16).

In the 1920s, the proponents of the above-mentioned *Mitteleuropa* concept proposed the creation of a postal union (Gothein, 1930). There were also the voices of those – among others from the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) – who focused more on economics and therefore lobbied for a postal union in order to facilitate trade. Further, the Briand Plan called for a European postal union which would be legitimized both by the improvement of economic exchange and the fact that it seemed to make feasible the implementation of a bigger project, i.e. that of a united Europe. The possible introduction of a common stamp that would function as an important unifying symbol further strengthened the value of the proposed union. However, the administrations however did not give their support for the project, among others because they feared that their co-operation would be excessively influenced by politics (Laborie, 2011, pp. 315–331). It is important to note that at the time, a postal union seems to have been part of various plans for the organization of Europe – independently of ideology.

This in no way invalidates the interpretation that the EPTU was a Nazi-Fascist construct. The point can be further made if we look at the different policy objectives of the EPTU that represented continuity. Firstly, the main aim, namely to abolish transit fees and introduce a single price for each weight category in order to create a common European postal area, was the leitmotif of German involvement since the foundation of the UPU in 1874, and had already been discussed extensively in the inter-war period (Laborie, 2018, p. 310). Secondly, from an institutional point of view, the EPTU remained committed to the principles of the UPU not just because the former was declared to be a regional union of the latter. The installation of permanent expert committees and a union office, a financing systems in dependence of size of the country, the principle of consensus for decision-making, the non-binding character of the agreement, the lack of sanction mechanisms, and that admission to the union was supposed to happen through a declaration of the administration, that wants to join the EPTU, to the union office (*Europäischer Postkongress Wien 1942...*,

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[4]   "The (French) Minister for Foreign Affairs has requested proposals to be submitted to the Study Commission for the European Union set up under the League of Nations" (Note from the Study Group..., 1938).

[5]   An idea that was also relevant after the Second World War.

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2013, pp. 98–103): all these aspects were a clear continuation of previously established rules and guidelines for international postal co-operation (Sasse, 1959), and thus do not appear to have been influenced by the Axis powers or their ideology. There were, however, also changes in the infrastructure of the EPTU that seemed to contradict the principles outlined above, and these will be the focus of the next part of the article.

Ideological Influences Within Symbols of the EPTU

The EPTU took shape during multiple preparatory meetings held in 1941 and specifically following the signing of a bilateral agreement between Germany and Italy (Abkommen zwischen der Deutschen Reichspost, 1941), which additionally revealed that these two countries would lead the union. At the end of the Vienna Congress in October 1942,[6] 13 administrations[7] signed the EPTU convention and became members: Albania, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Italy, Croatia, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, San Marino, Slovakia and Hungary (*Europäischer Postkongress Wien 1942...*, 2013, pp. 102–103), all of which were either occupied by or allied with Germany and Italy. The hegemony of the Axis powers found expression in certain symbolic choices, and the ones mentioned here will be the location of the union office, the official languages, the flags flown at the seat of the union, and the stamps issued by the Third Reich, Norway and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, there was also ambivalence in the way these symbols were employed within the framework of the EPTU.

The head office of the EPTU was located in Vienna and was under the supervision of the German postal administration. This approach was clearly an attempt at implementing hegemony within the new European postal order, as it meant that the *Reichspostministerium* would be supremely responsible for its functioning (p. 100). The official languages of the EPTU were German and Italian (p. 99), which represented a change, as French was typically the language of international co-operation. The initial German draft of the agreement did not even foresee Italian as an official language, although this was changed during the Congress in order to show the parity between the two Axis powers (Summary of the report of Legationsrat Stahlberg, 1942). This shift in languages and the initial non-integration of Italian obviously illustrate the disparity between the Third Reich and Italy, but also show a clear desire to use geopolitical power

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6   Two other committee conferences were held in 1943, and a congress was planned for 1944.
7   Some were observers – Spain, Switzerland, the Vatican, and Turkey (*Europäischer Postkongress Wien 1942...*, 2013, p. 10).

in order to change the countries' position in an international organization. After all, language can be viewed as tantamount to power.

It was the tradition that the flags of the countries of all the participating administrations would be flown outside the congress venue. But although the practice was observed in 1942, the German Foreign Minister opposed it.[8] From his point of view, it could point to the perceived independence of the occupied countries – which they de facto did not have (Note for the Foreign Minister of the Third Reich, 1942). Ohnesorge, the Minister of Posts, used his connections with Adolf Hitler, who then decided that all flags should be flown (Summary of the report of Legationsrat Stahlberg, 1942). This question shows the general tension between a technocratic and a political approach to the EPTU. It is remarkable that the incident was solved in the way it was, as it meant the geopolitical hegemony would not be implemented.

Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Slovakia issued stamps commemorating the Congress and the foundation of the EPTU in 1942. What they all had in common was that ideology did not seem to play a major role in their graphical presentations, and they were therefore free of any references to the Nazi-Fascist idea of a 'New Europe'. The two German stamps show a postman – on horseback in one and on foot in the other – blowing a post horn, with a map of Europe in the background (just a map and Europe on a globe). In both the postman has been made to look larger than the European continent, which could be interpreted as referring to hegemony. The stamps do not contain any typical references to Nazism or its ideology, for example the face of the Führer (Europäischer Post- und Fernmeldeverein, 1942). This would be in line with Tröger's hypothesis that the German postal administration did not utilize the propaganda potential of the stamp (Tröger, 2019, p. 420). It could however also mean that the postal administration did not want to undermine the technocratic nature of the union by emitting a stamp tainted with ideology. The Dutch stamp has a post horn in the background and the lettering "European Postal and Telecommunications Congress" in the foreground (*Michel® Europa 2017/2018*, 2017, p. 1228). The Norwegian stamp presents the head of Vidkun Quisling, the then Prime Minister of Norway, next to the lion that was on the first stamp ever issued by the Norwegian state. Only the headline points to the EPTU (Europeisk Postforening frimerker,

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8   "Yesterday, however, the Reich Minister of Postal Services expressed his urgent wish that the flags of all countries of the postal administrations represented at the Congress be shown publicly in Vienna. The flags will be displayed at the railroad station and in the courtyard of the former Palais Rotschildt, the venue of the congress. We have pointed out to Mr. Risch that such a hoisting of flags does not really correspond to the technical character of the congress, which is also his opinion. He assumes, however, that the Reich Minister of Postal Services will nevertheless stick to his intention" (Note for the Foreign Minister of the Third Reich, 1942).

Avisartikler, 1942) (Europeisk Postforening frimerker, Avisartikler, 1942). It would seem therefore that this stamp was a tool for the legitimization of Quisling as Norway's leader in the 'New Europe', especially as the Norwegian administration joined the union without any deeper reference to the concept of Europe or to international postal relations. The Slovakian stamp was an exception in that it presented the flags of the participating countries – visible were the German, the Italian and the Slovakian, together with their ideological symbols (*Michel® Europa 2018*, 2018, pp. 555–556). In all, the stamps do not contain many elements referencing ideology or 'hegemony'.

To sum up the present section, the utilization of ideology or political hegemony by the National Socialists and Fascists in the symbolism of the EPTU was not as clear-cut as one may imagine. Indeed, the former is very difficult to find, while hegemonic power was used to some extent to change long-established international rules. While the location of the office, as well as the choice of official languages clearly demonstrate the significance of the latter, the question of the flags and the stamps shows a more differentiated picture, in which where the technocratic and the hegemonic aspects are in contrast to each other and in the end the technocratic prevail.

Between Technocratic Expertise and War – the Emblematic Case of France

In the 1930s, the French PTT administration was prepared for the idea of a European postal organization (Laborie, 2018, p. 308). However, the novelty of the EPTU lay both in its unification of postal services and telecommunication, and, perhaps even more so, in Germany's dominant position[9] within the organization.

When contacted by the *Reichspostministerium* in 1942, the French administration (Vichy Regime) therefore found it difficult to accept the role of "arbitrator between States" which the *Reichspostministerium* emphasized, noting that the new union constituted a "permanent body independent of the International Bureau operating in Berne" (Organisation et fonctionnement d'une union postale européenne, 1942?). Doubts about the neutrality of the organization at the internal level resulted in French refusal to join.

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[9] "Germany's attitude reflected much more an intention to establish Germanic hegemony over Europe than to conclude a postal or even economic arrangement of interest to all European countries" (Note de la Direction de la Poste et des Bâtiments pour le Secrétaire d'Etat, 1942).

Nevertheless, the stance of the French evolved, and in September 1942 it was declared that France would participate but "exclusively in the technical field."[10] A problem quickly arose: the language used by the new-created body would not be French, and the gold franc would be replaced by the Reichsmark as the reference currency. This represented a reversal of the practices of scientific internationalism and its symbols – which the French side was not willing to accept (*Historique des pourparlers concernant la conférence de Vienne*, 14 October 1942, 1942, p. 6). Any French influence on the debate was removed completely when, on 22 September 1942, France was disinvited[11] from the Vienna Congress by order of the *Reichspostministerium* (Martius an Dir. Ha. Pol., 1942).

Was this the end of France in the EPTU? Certainly not![12] Indeed, Germany was constantly interested in French participation in the discussions, and this is the *Reichspostministerium* asked the French to take part in meetings held in 1943 in Berlin and Vienna. Some of the French experts, who had been initially invited in 1942, attended these negotiations. However, these sessions seem to have been semi-successful and indeed wrought with contradictions, as is evidenced by the divergence of views between German[13] and French[14] specialists.

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10   "After a fairly long exchange of views on the whole question, the Department of Foreign Affairs [...] considered that the principle of the French resubmission should be maintained, it being understood that the intervention of the French delegation should be exclusively in the technical field and that it should avoid using any argument of a political nature" (Note from the Direction of Posts and Buildings to the Secretary of State, n.d.).

11   "On September 22, during an interview, the Armeefeldpostmeister informed Mr. Inspector General Girodet that he had received a telegram from Berlin the same morning, advising him that the higher authorities of the Reich considered that there was no need to invite the French PTT Administration to the Congress of Vienna" (*Historique des pourparlers concernant la conférence de Vienne*, 14 October 1942, 1942, p. 6).

12   Certain elements would lead us to believe that France would finally be integrated into the EPTU as a member: "On the other hand, on the occasion of the forthcoming entry into force in France of the Vienna Agreements concerning the European Postal Union" (The Secretary of State for Industrial Production and Communications to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 12 May 1944, 1944).

13   "The meetings were informally distributed to them in French translation. In addition, the two French representatives had a personal meeting with the unprecedented opportunity to express their views [...] with broad Franco-German agreement on all technical matters, so that the subsequent entry of the French administration into the European Union of Posts and Telecommunications would not give rise to many differences of opinion or difficulties in a specialised field" (RAV Pressburg 233, 16 September 1943, 1943).

14   "However, the interventions of the delegates speaking German or Italian were not translated into French and the head of the French delegation declared and confirmed in the minutes that he could only play the role of observer under these conditions" (Note for the French Minister of Industrial Production and Communications, 24 September 1943, 1943).

Conclusion

Our results concerning the primary impact of ideology or technocratic necessity are not unequivocal. Traces of both can be found, accompanied by changes in previously existing institutions that clearly resulted from the use of hegemonic power (for example regarding language and currency).

The EPTU does not entirely fit into the concept of the 'New Europe'. While the union could definitely function as propaganda material, being an implementation of this 'New Europe', it seems that in reality it was not as strongly driven by ideology as some may be led to think. The graphical design of the German stamp is telling in this regard, as was its continuation of certain rules, such as consensus-based decision-making, which clearly showed that the different administrations were treated equally, and with much less interference from the Foreign Ministries. The case of France is a perfect illustration of the non-coherent approach to the future of Europe. What place was to be occupied by a country that was comparatively respected, especially in the sector of telecommunications? And how was its administration to be integrated into a changed environment that clashed with its ideas of international co-operation (for example concerning the official language)? These tensions would remain until the end of the EPTU in 1945.

Further – and this fact is also deserving of mention – the openness of the term 'New Europe' necessitated negotiating every question anew. And politicians would not always get their way, as evidenced by the example of the flag incident, in which the German Foreign Minister could not impose his will on his colleague from the *Reichspostministerium*.

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