

**Audrey BOOS, “Women’s Work at the PTT in Alsace, 1918-1939”(“Le travail féminin dans les Postes, Télégraphes et Téléphones en Alsace, de 1918 à 1939”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Michel Hau, Strasbourg 2, 1999, 176 p.**

World War I brought a period of anguish and atrocity to a close, and the concluding peace treaties returned the Alsace-Moselle region to France. Early euphoria soon gave way to difficult realities, including the question of regional assimilation. Changes that were instated at the time directly affected public services and the PTT, a vital and necessary service, had to be rapidly assimilated to French regulations. Many women employed by the PTT became responsible for the post offices where they worked.

This thesis studies the role of women in postal service where they had been historically employed for centuries, including the role assigned to them by the French service and the modification of their status. We also study these employees’ daily duties and their ramifications as well as the demands they made of the postal administration.

Upon returning to the Alsace-Moselle region from which it had been absent for nearly fifty years, the French administration immediately had to resolve personnel issues. The German staff that had been officially repatriated to Germany had to be replaced by French personnel, especially citizens of Alsatian-Lorraine origin. Although they initially had no official status, the decree of 17 October 1919 made these individuals supernumerary candidates or potential women employees; both positions were unrecognized as such in all other departments of France.

After taking its first tentative steps, the hiring of PTT personnel sought to conform to legal standards by using the regulations in force in other departments of France as a model. The situation was far from simple for applicants of Alsatian-Lorraine origin, since the Reichspost’s hiring methods were completely different. The decree of 17 October 1919 set the hiring conditions for these applicants: the minimum age was 16 and each applicant was required to take an individual test. The tests did not produce the expected results and many applicants were found to be unqualified; however, they were kept in service. The administration’s hiring campaign did not stop there. After 23 June 1919 a decree announced the open competition for women stenographers in Strasbourg: those hired would have legal work status, but the competition was only open to those who had an A or B card. The same conditions applied to the employment of other women whose hire was guaranteed by the decree of 19 August 1919. Despite this effort to make hiring practices uniform, there were discrepancies, especially the bilingual requirement for the competitions in Alsace-Lorraine.

The transition from the German to a French regime was far from simple: the Alsace-Lorraine staff formerly hired by the Reichspost found themselves with no civil status for the first few months. The law of 17 October 1919 adopted an interim regime to remedy this situation. Awaiting their assimilation, the local staff received the same remuneration as under the Second Reich but it was converted into francs. However, other problems were just on the horizon. Through their selection committees, the French authorities were responsible for weeding out undesirable citizens. Only holders of the type A identity card (issued only to those who would have been French if not for the treaty of Frankfurt) and the type B (assigned to inhabitants in families where one member was a foreigner) were kept in service by the French administration. This system was inappropriate to the local situation and many errors were committed: many employees with A or B type cards were dismissed on the basis of a simple denunciation with no

detailed inquest. This atmosphere of suspicion and rigidity on the part of an overly bureaucratic system did nothing to assuage the fears of a population that had already greatly suffered from wartime activity. Other problems, especially with stipends, appeared. During the waiting period before the decrees establishing the status of auxiliary and local staff, advances on stipends were made to interested parties by the decrees of 29 September and 29 December 1919. Despite these increases, there were persistent problems, especially for the staff who were not affected by these measures (it became almost impossible to find candidate for these positions). Conceived only as temporary duties, they diminished in number after 1925. Problems were numerous and the professional horizon seemed limited for these employees in the original job framework.

In France, access to all jobs was guaranteed to anyone who passed the supernumerary examination. With the exception of a few highly placed civil servants, the staff was divided into three categories: agents (helpers, post masters, and women employees), sub-agents (mail carriers, ambulant couriers and other carriers) and commissioned workers who were hired to maintain transportation lines or do manual work. There were also many auxiliary employees, assistants, and other non-commissioned agents. However, eligibility for women's work was not a factor of the supernumerary examination but depended on the results of a different exam; the supernumerary posts were available only to men. Article 3 of the decree of 22 September 1919 set the conditions for admission to the PTT's supernumerariat, specifying that military service guaranteed that the candidate would be accepted at this level. The same hiring condition applied to work as draftsmen, checkers, and engineers; women were discreetly and implicitly excluded from all these jobs. Ultimately, only less important jobs were available to women, like the position of assistant or helper (circular of 17 October 1918), described as a permanent female auxiliary worker (as their title suggests, these women worked in simple post offices). Appointed as helpers, they could then apply for employee position by taking a special examination, if they met the requirement of 8 then 5 years of experience as an assistant. The law of 30 January 1923 will forcefully curtail the possibility of entering the ranks of the PTT administration by the assistant track, since three-quarters of the openings for assistants were reserved for widows and war orphans.

Regardless of whether they worked inside or outside the PTT administration, women were confined to "women's work" by these restrictions, although the examinations for women and supernumeraries were similar (with the exception of a few differences in the math tests). So why were there two different hirings? Once they had become regular employees, these women could apply for the position of supervisor, a minor managerial position in the administration's eyes, and give orders with no right of inspection, often to the detriment of the staff. As supervisors, these employees could then apply for the position of general supervisor. Since these positions did not exist at the Reichspost, the French administration had to create them in Alsace-Moselle. According to the requirements for promotion that were in force in France at the time, it took at least 12 years for a woman employee to be appointed as a supervisor. But because this position did not previously exist in the regional departments that were recovered by France, many women lacking the appropriate seniority were appointed as general supervisors. For this reason, the return to the French system was a real windfall for women affected by these measures.

Beside the usual placement possibilities for women employees, the position of post master, who was responsible for managing a post office was open to women, but only in the least important

offices (with the exception of border office). It is important to note that only women who were “dames employées” or supervisors were eligible to apply for these positions; it was much easier for men coming from different job levels (writer, head or ordinary assistant, checker) to apply for higher positions.

It was not until the by-law of 5 September 1919 that women became eligible for the position of copywriter. However, at the same time the administration announced the reorganization of the group of copywriters: since a surplus of these editors was found in external services, many of these copywriters were appointed to the central administration. This meant that the hiring of new copywriters was severely limited. Women were forced to wait several more months before being able to take advantage of this measure which originally did not include a plan to offer the course that would prepare candidates for the examination required for the position of copywriter. Nevertheless, numerous advantages were granted to widows and young women who were war orphans in the area of women’s work. They were given exclusive access to certain examinations and the age limit was raised for them. Some traditional “men’s jobs” such as desk-jobs were opened to women (by-law of 10 August 1923). Access to the position of postmistress, 6<sup>th</sup> class, was also opened to widows and women who were war orphans on the basis of one person per family (by-law of 31 January 1921).

The PTT administration acted paternally by protecting the most disadvantaged. However, there were ongoing problems, especially ones of language: candidates who did not write the entire examination in French were confined to the Alsace-Moselle region. It was not until 1929 that women candidates were accepted for the position of supernumerary (by the by-law of 25 January 1929) but hiring was uneven and the number of these positions reserved for men was regularly higher than that for women: at the January 1929 examination, the number of positions allotted to women was four times less than those for men. Despite these limitations, this measure instates a single examination for outside hiring that bespoke a greater sense of equality for the future. Similarly, the by-law of 13 June 1929 introduced the possibility for women employees to join the echelon of clerks, but this group was limited to 1,900 employees. Interested women would have to wait until 1934. The by-law of 1 December 1931 opened an examination for the hiring of order and accounting clerks was an innovation, although still on the weak side. One-third of the positions were reserved for forwarding agents; if the number of qualified candidates was lower than the number of positions to which they were entitled, these jobs were still assigned to women.

Some of these by-laws promoting uniform hiring for men and women were only fleeting. This was certainly true in the case of the by-law of 1 September 1930 that set the hiring conditions for clerk responsible for stenography and typing, reserving these positions for women, as well as for the 11 August 1933 by-law on the employment of clerks in the administrative services branch. Realistically, what changed for women was neither their occupation or their allocation but simply their job title. This fact illustrates the limitations of the politics of this type of “equal opportunity” hiring but does nothing to stop it.

Entitlement to the positions of supernumerary and clerk were not isolated measures: after 1929 there were many by-laws that simplified admission to certain jobs that were either already open to women or else allowed access to new, highly diversified occupations. Thus the by-law of 21

March 1932 instated equal opportunity in the hiring of men and women for the position of copywriter, but it was not until the by-law of 4 February 1935 that the limits on the number of positions reserved for women were raised. By the same token, a note dated 8 October 1931 created positions for women comptrollers, with the same allocation as their male counterparts. Second- to sixth-class collection offices were progressively opened to women with some restrictions (especially for border offices) between 1929 and 1939.

Despite these advances, the by-laws of 15 July 1930 represented a step backwards. These by-laws created specialized jobs for women (in telephone and telegraph service, for instance) but denied any further possibility of advancement. A new compartmentalization was thereby created for women who entered the postal administration.