

Amandine LE BER, “The Military Mail, from rear lines to the front during the First World War” (“La Poste aux Armées, de l’arrière au front pendant la Grande Guerre”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Annette Becker, Paris X, 2002, 139 p.

Like the other branches of the army, the military mail ended its tour of duty by demobilizing its forces. Just as soldiers were dismissed after the armistice, the staff of the military mail and treasury was also demobilized. Almost all postal divisions were dissolved between November 1918 and July 1919 and their formations were reassigned to the civilian mail. Every demobilized soldier was required to give an address to his post orderly so that any mail received after his departure could be forwarded to him.

When a letter arrived for a demobilized soldier for whom the post orderly did not have a home address, it was marked “demobilized” and then sent to the depository for the unit to which the soldier belonged after demobilization. Military postage was eliminated after 24 October 1919. The first employees from the military mail and treasury to be demobilized were reassigned to the civilian financial and postal services being set up in Alsace.

After that time, the military mail only provided service for French troops stationed outside France. For this reason the BCM was briefly continued for the purpose of routing correspondence that had been sent to these troops; it was finally eliminated on 1 April 1921. Its services were transferred to the Sarrebruck office for troops occupying Germany and to the main post office on the rue du Louvre in Paris for troops outside France.

At the beginning of the war, the military mail was considered to be a secondary organization attached to the treasury of the armies for economical reasons. It was generally viewed as a fossilized service that had not evolved historically. Its structure had not changed since 1870 and despite its apparent flaws, it was expecting much less mail traffic and a shorter war. This was without taking into account the consequences of the Ferry laws making primary schooling mandatory and the creation of a long and usurious conflict.

Internally as well as in the area of depositories, the service was soon deluged with mail and disaster was imminent: mail was piling up in the depositories and sweeping reforms were urgently needed. After the press and parliamentarians denounced the failure of the military mail, a military postal inspector general was appointed to reform the military mail in November and December 1914.

A series of in-depth reforms, the creation of military postal sections and postal divisions, the elimination of the postal function of depositories, the separation of paymasters’ offices into a postal and a financial section as well as the modernization of modes of transportation allowed the military mail to better process and route the influx of mail it was responsible for.

Surpassing its original mission of transmitting mail from rear to front lines using reports from the postal monitoring commission, the military mail became a necessary participant in the resolution of the conflict. The realization that the troops’ moral when confronting the enemy was an obvious asset for victory was seamlessly transformed into actions within the military treasury and mail administration.

To understand the value of the millions of letters that were exchanged during the war, attention must be called to the experience of writing as a means of opening up the front lines of the conflict. These letters enable memories of the war and its hardships to exist even as they banalize the knowledge of war. Through its postal itineraries, the military mail, as both a vector and a prop for the knowledge of war, provided another way of conceiving the geographic and psychological borders of armed combat: from then on, these written connections and lines of correspondence became a proper metaphor for a modern war where there was a permanent shattering of the front lines. The myriad links of this postal chain evidence the effort that was made to ensure this postal transmission - besides the issue of postage, staffing and the modernization of means of transport are all proof of how effectively the State took charge of postal communication.

This is why the support of that administration so clearly reveals the reintegration of Alsatians into the nation (since they had been excluded from France), but also the reintegration of the entire social body that was united during wartime through the instance of equal standards before conscription, the right to information and correspondence for even the most modest household. The military mail not only proposed but also made a national mobilization possible. The military mail service operated appropriately until the end of the war, so fittingly that the reforms of November and December 1914 remained in effect and the separation of the treasury from the military mail was definitively confirmed by the law of 21 January 1921.

From that same year onward, the military mail became an autonomous agency, and the time required to route the mail was reduced through the use of postal airplanes. The last major improvement to the military mail took place from May to June 1940 with the adoption of a five-figure postal division that represented the full mailing address of mobilized soldiers from that time on.

The innovations that were realized by this administration when put to the test by the Great War were also of major importance to the role of the military mail during the Second World War. In fact (and once again) the staff was quickly mobilized but rapidly overwhelmed by the massive amount of mail that had to be routed; the occupation created new roles for the men and women who were living testimony of the desire to maintain national integrity in an occupied country. Some were also central to the collaboration because to their postal and military assignments.

Other employees were often active members of the resistance, since they worked in close contact with major channels of communication and were considered to be the eyes and ears of the resistance movement. Jewish employees were dismissed and deported, while Free Masons were removed from State service.

Finally, although the military mail played a decisive role in the areas of resistance and collaboration during World War II, it was also useful in the context of global warfare. In the case of the Great War, these notions are still being processed. This is why it is interesting to study the role of the military mail in constructing combat fronts and a culture of war. Indeed, if the mail conveys significant words and images of this culture of war, it is because it occupies a pivotal position in the communication between men and women who are separated from each other. For

these individuals, the mail represented their former life and in some cases life itself. A letter signals life or announces death; it becomes reliquary of memory whose publication is commemorative.

As such, the military mail reveals attitudes toward the enemy and violence and perpetuates the memory of conflict as the material incarnation of the suffering and hardships of war.