

Marie-Cécile MEYER, “The PTT as reflected by its employees in company magazines and Alsatian postal societies, 1918-1939” (“Les PTT vus par les postiers à travers les revues internes et les associations en Alsace de 1918 à 1939”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Bernard Vogler, Strasbourg 2 1998, 175 p.

Our research focuses on the study of postal employees as a specific group of workers, including all categories of PTT staff, civil servants as well as agents, employees and workers. The time and place of our study is Alsace during the period between the two wars. The return of Alsace to France after the first war and its delicate situation during the 1920s and 30s were decisive for the region. Our study attempts to analyze the system of perception through which the relationship between Alsatian postal workers and their employer was perceived. In other words, how did this staff view the PTT as its administration? We consider this public service from a broad perspective, giving equal consideration to administration-as-employer issues as much as questions surrounding the administration as a professional setting. We do not look at the post office simply as an administration to be approached with one’s demands, since it represents a much more complex reality. What kind or kinds of relationships connect employer and employees? How did personnel perceive the administration? As a place of confrontation or collaboration among its professional members, was the PTT setting thought of by these individuals as a “way of life?”

We consulted various kinds of source material on which to base our analysis. The *Revue de l’Union Fédérative des PTT d’Alsace-Lorraine*, a monthly or bimonthly journal published between 1921 and 1939, was our main source. Most of its articles are in German, since most members of this professional association created on 25 April 1921 were of Alsatian origin. As the organ of the 7th region of the Syndicat National des Agents des PTT (CGT), the *Journal PTT Rhin et Moselle*, was also a rich source of material. A monthly bulletin published since 1927, it dealt specifically with the unsettling issues in the region at that time. It is of interest because it presents the national trade unionist point of view. Several PTT files from the Valot collection were invaluable in comparing staff perspectives with those of administrators. Other sources we consulted include the register of associations in Strasbourg, the private archives of the UECM (Union d’Epargne et Crédit Mutuel des PTT: a PTT credit union and savings bank), legal works of the period, and the official bulletin of Alsace-Lorraine. We have formulated three main narratives based on these documents.

The afflictions that Alsatian PTT workers underwent in the 1920s and 30s led them to voice a certain number of ethical and material demands. These material demands were an undeniable aspect of employer/employee relations. Alsace as well as the rest of France was affected by the precarious socio-economic and political situation of the times. Relationships between postal workers and their administration were important in the ongoing battle to improve living conditions. The staff was constantly proclaiming its dissatisfaction: in order to remedy the situation quickly, it often resorted to strategies of collaboration or mutual involvement, for instance, belonging to a governmental service that was responsible for addressing the problem of the “high cost of living”. The issue of wages was a perennial topic of disagreement that could only rarely accommodate collaboration. The problem of salaries was central to all discussions and requests. Low salaries and employees’ feeling that they had been abandoned by the State, together with the specific situation in Alsace, constituted a veritable quagmire. During this

period postal workers were constantly trying to improve their lot; this explains why the turmoil was relentless. The problem of salary revision unleashed several reactions ranging from simple resolutions to more organized assemblies in a common struggle that aligned itself with the national movement. The collective body of postal workers in Alsace presented the image of an active professional world that reacted strongly to legal decrees and budgetary restrictions. Although civil servants did not lose any of their buying power after 1930, they constantly felt that their position was being undermined.

Indemnities collected in Alsace were an additional source of opposition. Their structure in Alsace was particular to the region and Byzantine in nature. Besides general indemnities, there were special ones either left over from the preceding régime or the unusual situation that remained after the war. The threat of eliminating them haunted the administration and prompted various responses that were often tinged with dissatisfaction. For these reasons, some indemnities were soon perceived as bargaining chips for integrating Alsace into the French administrative system. As a result, the threat of their elimination was found to be all the more reprehensible.

Ethical demands also revealed the problems involved in grafting Alsace onto level of the French administration. The problem of promotion and the difficult process of assimilation, coupled with linguistic, legal, and disciplinary issues, were all variations on a theme that promised to create a tempestuous atmosphere in the Alsatian postal environment. The system of promotions was always a controversial topic. Any attempt to adapt Alsace to a position between two policies founded on opposing principles was risky. Consequently, the staff in charge tried to defend the former German system of promotion. This issue created a whirl of controversy and the criticism of an administrative system that was felt to be unfair and arbitrary was often acerbic. Postal workers as a group were also concerned by the delicate issue of recalling troops from military service.

After the war Alsatian postal workers who had fought in the ranks of the German army struggled to be recalled from their military service. Because of the circumstances, the wounds of war were slow to heal. The demands were always the same: financial, but above all, ethical compensation. The staff's attitude on the eve of the outbreak of World War II was conditioned by administrative measures that were far from satisfactory.

The assimilation process revealed the full breadth of the problems that appeared after 1918. The status of Alsatian postal workers in 1923, a compilation of general and local laws, sought to be the *modus vivendi* for integration and was accepted as such by the staff. But there were still obstacles. Postal workers who had local status were given the option being governed completely by French administrative laws. This alternative, however, turned out to be a trap for many and ultimately became a thorny issue. Reclassification was also a controversial topic. Until 31 March 1922, the date reclassification was officially decreed, the staff did not hide its impatience and relations with the administration were punctuated by the hesitation demonstrated by the latter.

The assimilation was not accomplished without dissension or frictions; its process deeply affected the minds of the staff at the local and general level. Problems of language, justice, and discipline were recurrent, revealing latent unrest. In this sense, the official language of choice, which could be a real handicap in performing one's duties, was often a polemical subject. Aware of these problems, postal workers took steps that showed a real willingness and openness to adapt to change. As for justice and discipline, selection committees that were established in 1918 and the extraordinary disciplinary commission (until 1929) set off several objections among the

regional postal workers. This was an ethical demand that corresponded to the highest level of the staff's moral dignity.

In order to study specific demands and refine our understanding of the mail carriers who guided the staff's system of perception, we approached several different staffing categories that were more or less emblematic of the PTT. The examination of categorical demands indicates that postal workers had significant problems adapting to a new professional world whose traditional configuration had been shaken up. The analysis of grievances on the part of employees, agents, and grievances related to the specific situation of postal managers is significant: in most cases, complaints were made against instances of the administration's lack of comprehension.

We were also able to observe relations between postal workers and the central administration. This type of relationship between direct representatives of an institution and salaried workers is a concrete aspect of postal workers' perception of the post office. The way a regional director was perceived by his or her staff as a group had a direct effect on these relations. We were also able to observe a level of reflection and personal engagement. In this sense, postal workers did not sit on the sidelines of the reform movement that animated the PTT in the 1920s and 30s. Instead they offered solutions, a gesture that indicates their concerns with their professional environment. The area of professional education was also revealing, representing yet another way of perceiving one's work environment. In fact, postal workers set up a training process (especially legal) to improve their general intellectual level and provide tools for success in different areas of communication.

Secondly, the associative fiber of the PTT is another aspect of our study. Personnel identifies with the PTT as an entity. The feeling of belonging to a group is the basis for this social consciousness. Various facets of personnel life make this associative phenomenon transparent.

During the period between the two wars, postal workers in Alsace began devoting time after work to educational activities that had two main characteristics: they were done in the context of the Alsatian postal family and their goal was to develop the staff's general knowledge. Visits to well-known industrial establishments in the region were done in a spirit of eclectic open-mindedness. All these aspects indicate that the post office was a special place where social interaction began and was developed; the postal setting became the symbolic cord that bound one great Alsatian postal family together.

The development of tourism and after-hours parties also indicates that the PTT was a setting where social interaction was encouraged to flourish, especially through the collective organization of workers' free time. Local tourism was gathering attention, the people had "re-discovered" nature, and excursions in the Vosges mountains were popularized. National and even international travel also drew some staff members, but this interest was limited to a smaller group of employees for the obvious financial reasons. Evening parties and recreation days organized by and for the staff were also one of the strong points of social life among the postal staff, involving a large section of the postal population. The parties were a pleasant way to pass leisure time, emphasizing once again the fact that the PTT was a microcosm where salaried workers built and maintained a strong interactive network that went beyond the professional setting.

Furthermore, the spread of an atypical cultural movement also evidenced the point of view of a lively postal environment that was filled with after-hours activities for its staff. Alsatian postal workers did not compartmentalize themselves into a strictly regional cultural movement; instead

they tried to integrate themselves into the national movement where they actively participated. But these efforts were mostly marginal, which explains the attempt to proliferate an original cultural phenomenon. In this sense the literary texts written by postal employees often blend regional and French culture. These texts offer us the image of an active postal environment where the staff cultivated a literary and poetic sensibility that gave the institutional setting a special nuance: cultural values supplemented professional qualifications. The cultural demonstration organized in 1923 is another example of this vitality. Personnel endeavored to give the occasion the mission of a cultural manifestation of the French post office in Alsace. Although the results were mixed, the efforts made to regroup the French postal family were undoubtedly real. Postal employees also strove to create a “cultural ecumenism.” The beginnings of an Esperantist movement in Alsace are a good example of this inclination. In a rather limited way, the staff tried to participate in this reflective gesture toward achieving world peace.

Sports were a typical aspect of the social interaction and representation of a common identity that was reflected in the various activities organized by postal societies. The example of the ASPTT in Strasbourg showed us how sports allowed staff members to affirm that they not only belonged to a tight-knit team but also wanted to be part of this team. Finally, we observed that social élan was quite prevalent in the Alsatian PTT during this period where a spirit of cooperation, mutualism, and charity all found a place. These social works were performed within the postal framework; although the administrative support was clearly demonstrated, it was the postal employees themselves who mainly instigated these actions.

We found a lucid picture of a multi-faceted philanthropy that offered us several examples to choose from that illustrate our argument. The creation of co-op stores that had as much to do with as foodstuff as with coal or leisure activities showed a concern with providing relief from the difficult situation that dominated the years following 1918. Along similar lines, postal workers also tried to solve housing problems. To do so, they invested in the Foyer du Fonctionnaire, an association whose goal was to provide housing for all civil servants. The association was managed by postal workers themselves, revealing the extent to which Alsatian postal workers toiled in solidarity. Two other associations, the Union d’Epargne and the Crédit Mutuel des PTT, highlight this experience. This banking institution that was reserved for and managed by postal workers deeply affected the solidarity and mutualism that prevailed in the postal world. It was inherited from the German system and as such was proper to Alsace and the Moselle; created in 1872, it survived the First World War and the economic crisis of 1929. Born from the initiative of the administration itself, this association was perceived as a sign of the post office’s charitable attitude toward its employees, once again emphasizing that the PTT was more than an ordinary employer. The staff also inverted other areas with its mutualism: it was also interested in health care problems, an area that could not be dealt with on an individual basis. In order to ensure a happy outcome for what it described as a “battle,” it used weapons at its disposal such as prevention and mutualism.

Prevention was necessary to halt the progress of sickness. Realizing its importance, Alsatian postal workers became involved in an information campaign, a political act that democratized medicine and promoted personal hygiene as a way of fighting tuberculosis, the postal workers’ emblematic disease. Personnel knew how to react to the biggest health problems that affected the profession and militated for better hygienic conditions. In this context the administration was seen in a negative light because its offices and workspaces were so conducive to the proliferation

of illness, especially tuberculosis. Staff solidarity seemed to be the best way of halting this scourge.

Furthermore, this solidarity resonated even more strongly in postal mutual insurance companies. Mutual assistance associations provided special evidence of this desire to regroup postal staff. Alsace had a specific system of social insurance that had also been inherited from the German system.

Clearly advantageous, this advanced system was kept intact after 1918, and personnel accepted its preservation as a positive choice. Its existence, however, did not prevent the large French SSMs (mutual insurance companies) from finding a voice in the provinces, since the local system could not address all categories of postal workers. Associations at the regional level were able to centralize many memberships. The administration was a visible presence in all these types of institutions. For this reason, the PTT was viewed by its personnel as a sort of “providential administration” that was paternalistically concerned about the livelihood of its employees.

Finally solidarity found its ultimate significance in the charitable movement that animated the French Post and Telecommunications services during the 1920s and 30s. Charitable works and actions not only emerged from the core of the PTT but also from other areas where the generosity of postal workers was apparent. This indicates that PTT personnel had strong social concerns and conferred a heartfelt social mission on the post office and its collective body of workers.

The study of different aspects of the PTT as seen by postal workers has enabled us to determine the following: the field of perception is vast and feelings are ambivalent; there is no one typical attitude, since each different situation pre-determines a different attitudinal response. Our analysis of various perceptual elements underscores the ubiquitous experience of belonging to a community of postal workers. Whether it be in the purely professional section or the area of employee associations and societies, one fundamental element is constant: Post and Telecommunications were a “way of life” that gave rise to a predefined group of employees. The PTT was a permanent backdrop to its function as employer as well as its purpose as a human lifeline: it connected the men and women whose specific job it was to connect people to each other.

Our research provided us with conclusive results. From 1918 to 1939 Alsatian postal workers felt continuously misunderstood by their administration. Although this malaise was real, it demands a more nuanced analysis. The preservation of many privileges (for instance, the law of 22 July 1923 concerning the status of civil servants in Alsace-Lorraine) and a stable if not reinforced buying power lead us to conclude that the situation must be put into a more detailed perspective. Although personnel perceived the period between the two wars as a time of hardship, the rise in activities on the part of workers’ associations and societies opened other points of view to us. The post office was an extremely vibrant professional setting during those years, a place for any and all initiatives.