Domesticating a Transnational Model of Public Health and Hygiene: Training Nurses for the Luxembourg Red Cross in the Interwar Period

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Contribution

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The Luxembourg Red Cross was established in 1914, as part of a larger expansion movement of Red Cross societies in all countries affected by World War One. In wartime, the Luxembourg Red Cross was effective in organising humanitarian relief. In peacetime, the Red Cross turned towards peace-building activities and – more importantly – engaged in questions of public hygiene, welfare, popular education and social reform. This paper uncovers key aspects of the Luxembourg Red Cross during the interwar period, with a special emphasis on its transnational European dimension. In particular, it will be shown how the training of its nursing staff was part of a cultural transfer between France and Luxembourg.

Firstly, the paper analyses the central leaders of the Luxembourg Red Cross. It will be shown that key figures of the society belonged to the country’s business elite. One of the leaders of the Red Cross movement in Luxembourg was Emile Mayrisch (1862-1928), president of the ARBED steel conglomerate and Luxembourg’s most powerful industrial magnate. Alongside him, his wife Aline Mayrisch-de Saint-Hubert (1874-1947) was active for the Red Cross. Both were extremely well integrated in the country’s economic, political and cultural networks. The Mayrisch couple was also active in other welfare organization, such as the Ligue luxembourgeoise contre la tuberculose.

Secondly, this paper highlights the transnational networks that actors of the Luxembourg Red Cross mobilized for their benefit. Partly as a consequence of Luxembourg’s occupation by Germany at the beginning of the war, the
institutionalisation of the Grand-Duchy’s Red Cross followed a close cooperation with French actors. The Mayrisch couple, for example, was well integrated in the so-called Colpach Circle, a group of European intellectual, political and economic leaders of various nationalities who regularly met in the Luxembourgian village of Colpach to exchange their views on world affairs.

Thirdly, this paper concentrates on the training of the first nurses for the Luxembourg Red Cross. One of the central problems of the Luxembourg Red Cross was a lack of qualified personnel. Moreover, Luxembourg as a small country did not have sufficient experience in this field. As a remedy, the Mayrisch used their international acquaintances. The paper discusses in detail how actors related to the Luxembourg Red Cross organized the professional training of nurses in the 1920s and 1930s. Aline Mayrisch-de Saint-Hubert made use of her contacts with Léonie Chaptal (1873-1937), a pioneer of nursing instruction in France. Consequently, nine young women were sent to France in the late 1920s and fourteen more during the 1930s, all on Red Cross fellowships. The funds were made available by generous donations from the Mayrisch and other industrialist families. The background of the nurses, their education and experiences in France and their subsequent service in Luxembourg will be analysed.

Method

The paper is based on a hermeneutical analysis of text documents. Published sources include books and pamphlets issued by the Luxembourg Red Cross and individuals closely related to it. Furthermore, unpublished documents in the Archives nationales de Luxembourg will be screened.

Concentrating on the Red Cross movement in Luxembourg, the paper discusses the transnational circulation of knowledge in interwar Europe. In particular, the paper uses the methodology of cultural transfers (transferts culturels) developed since the 1980s in a Franco-German context by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner and later Matthias Middell. Scholars of cultural transfers distinguished four phases of transfer processes. Firstly, there was a deficient situation in the home context of Luxembourg. Secondly, a group of actors (in our case the Mayrisch couple and others) actively tried to change the situation and for this purpose turned abroad, making use of their international acquaintances. Thirdly, a phase of intense transnational contacts followed, in our case the sending of Luxembourgian young women to France to receive a nursing education. Finally, the foreign knowledge was applied in the Luxembourgian home context. This transfer process will be traced on an empirically solid basis.

Expected Outcomes

This contribution is part of the FAMOSO project headed by Professor Karin Priem at the University of Luxembourg in the education, health and welfare sectors. The paper elucidates how the Red Cross in alliance with other organisations contributed to fabricating a modern society in the context of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg. The paper makes a contribution to studies on education for health professions and is also of interest for scholars working on genuinely transnational themes. It is planned to submit a revised version of the paper to a leading journal in the field of history od education.

References

FUNCK, Antoine, En souvenir d’Emile et d’Aline Mayrisch-de Saint-Hubert, promoteurs de la Croix-Rouge luxembourgeoise, Luxembourg, S.E.L.F., 1965, 44 p.

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