

## Shipping Migrants in the Age of Steam: The Rise and rise of the Messageries Maritimes c. 1870-1914

### Introduction

Around the middle of the nineteenth century the full effects of steam technology were starting to be felt in western industry and transport. The steam engine had been patented by a Scottish engineer named James Watt in 1781 but the first experiments in steam powered trains and ships occurred towards the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Atlantic Ocean became a laboratory for maritime engineers. Its first crossing entirely by steam was achieved in 1838 by the SS Great Western, a wooden-hulled paddle-wheel steamer designed by the celebrated English engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel. It wasn't until the final decades of the nineteenth century, however, that steam engines came to replace sails entirely. The obstacles remained many and the new technology was adopted with some apprehension due to the spectacular explosions, collisions and shipwrecks that littered its early history (the sinking of the SS Titanic in 1912, property of the White Star Line from Liverpool, is the most well known). Nonetheless, its effects rippled across international commerce and global politics. Spearheading the change were mostly European shipping companies that, with the support of their imperial backers, exploited the decline in American shipping and the technological inferiority of Asian competitors, and rushed forwards.

One of these companies was the French Messageries Maritimes. In its heyday it was known as France's postman in the Mediterranean. In 1851 it had been awarded a substantial government subsidy to deliver post and carry government personnel across the Mediterranean, subsequently renewed at regular intervals for almost a century. At the time Algeria was France's only colonial possession in the region (it added Tunisia in 1881 and Morocco in 1912), but its commercial interests in the area were many (for instance the Suez Canal, completed in 1869, was constructed by a French company under the stewardship of Ferdinand de Lesseps, a French engineer) and the communities of French men and women living on its shores were numerous. Despite the continued reliance on government contracts, the Messageries Maritimes still had to navigate its way skilfully in a global industry characterized by large costs, high order logistical challenges and intense international competition. How it managed to do so and why it chose to enter the migrant shipping market is the subject of this case-study.

### Building a steam powered fleet

Although Messageries Maritimes means 'maritime courier', it took its name from its parent company, the Messageries Nationales, which delivered mail along France's land routes. In 1851, the Messageries Nationales combined with the state run Mediterranean postal service to form what would become the first large-scale steam-powered shipping enterprise in France. In the beginning, its Mediterranean service consisted of four lines that ran from France to Italy, Malta and the Levant (including modern day Syria, Lebanon and Egypt). The French government had awarded the postal service for North America to a rival French company named Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (CGT), but at various points in its history the Messageries Maritimes also carried cargo and passengers to North and South America on 'free' (i.e. non-subsidised) lines. It subsequently added other lines to London, the Black Sea, the Far East and Australasia. The Mediterranean lines all radiated from Marseilles, a port city in southern France and birth-place of one of the founders of the company, the ship-owner and merchant Albert Rostand. It was in

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Marseilles that the company's shipping services were managed, but its headquarters were located in the neighbourhood of the Madeleine in Paris, home to several other shipping agencies and commercial firms, and known for its seedy character and prurient nightlife. Its chief agency was in Bordeaux, on the Atlantic.

Marseilles was also the capital of France's expanding Mediterranean Empire. To increase its influence in the Mediterranean, the French state sought to develop maritime connections across the Mediterranean. Commercial ties with the silk-producing region of Mount Lebanon were strengthened in part through French foreign direct investment in the area's main port city of Beirut. In Tunisia, like in Algeria, military conquest and colonisation preceded the creation of new maritime connections to the metropole, the expansion of existing ports and the creation of new railway lines along the country's coastal areas. In both countries, the bankers Isaac and Eugène Péreire, owners of the CGT, financed the construction of railway lines and the modernisation of the ports of Alger and Tunis.<sup>1</sup> Postal communications were an essential ingredient of the imperial enterprise, which relied on regular contact with the metropole, not least to coordinate military action and suppress revolts. With the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Mediterranean became Europe's main 'imperial highway' to colonies in the Far East. Postal services were also an important aspect of the commercial life of merchants and, increasingly with European colonisation, of the social life of European settlers and immigrant communities in North Africa and the Levant. In other words, postal services were not only an arm of the government, but were also considered a public good.

In order to win the postal contracts of the French State, necessary to offset the costs of running an international shipping business, the Messageries had to demonstrate that they were capable of contributing positively to France's Mediterranean designs. It was desirable that they be self-sufficient and remain, as much as was possible, independent of rival European powers. These considerations influenced some of the management's early choices. Shortly after forming the company, the owners acquired a shipyard in La Ciotat, a port-city near Marseilles, not far from the French military naval base in Toulon. La Ciotat freed the Messageries from the need to acquire their fleet from foreign shipyards, particularly British ones. In 1868 it was considerably expanded to allow for a larger dock so that all vessels of the fleet could be fully serviced there. Dependency from foreign coal was also a source of concern and one of the first problems the company had to solve was to reduce its dependency on British coal. In 1875, following a hike in coal prices on the British market, it decided to diversify its stream by adding French coal from the Grand-Combe and subsequently from Japan and Australia.<sup>2</sup>

Coal-provision was linked to the company's other challenge, which was that of assembling a fleet of ships that could fulfil the requirements of the postal contracts relating to the frequency, regularity and range of its services. Investment in steam technology was increasingly important in order to stay ahead of competition: rival shipping companies were doing the same, not only in France, but also in Great Britain and in Germany, where most of Europe's and the world's steam powered vessels at the time were being built and put to sea. One of the main advantages to steam technology was that it guaranteed a greater regularity of service compared to sailing ships. It neutralised the risk of having to delay departure or wander aimlessly at sea at low speeds due to a sudden change in the direction or the intensity of the wind. It also multiplied the number of possible routes, allowing passage along seaways where the wind blew primarily in one direction only. A notable example was the Suez Canal, some sections of which were entirely devoid of wind, making its navigation by sail very difficult. Another advantage to steam technology was that as engines improved, the carrying capacity of ships grew significantly as its costs decreased.<sup>3</sup>

These factors made the transition to steam very desirable for shipping companies globally, even though speed differentials between steam and sail powered ships was slight until about the turn of the century. Until 1880 it was still faster to circumvent the African continent by sail than by steam. In some ways it was also more practical and convenient. Steamships relied on a constant supply of coal, which for international journeys required the creation and maintenance of coal deposits and refuelling stations around the world. In addition, foreign ports were not always equipped to handle larger vessels, but limiting the size of steamships made it difficult for shipping companies to produce enough revenue to cover costs.

The Messageries' transition to steam began in earnest around 1870, following France's defeat in a war against Prussia and following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The construction program lasted around fifteen years, during which 17 ships were produced.<sup>4</sup> It overlapped with the renewal of the company's mail contracts by the French government in 1875 (the were renewed once more in 1888 for a further 15 years) and its introduction of new subsidies for the merchant marine. The new subsidies (Law

of 1881) offered by the French government were calculated on the basis of distance travelled and the tonnage of vessels, which further aided the company's internationalisation. Between 1888 and 1908 the Messageries Maritimes received 11-12 million francs per year in subsidies (including but not limited to postal contracts), equivalent to roughly fifty per cent of the total available to France's mercantile fleet, considerably more than their British or German competitors.

The construction program provided the basic fleet that was used to carry post, cargo and passengers around the world until World War One (steamships usually had a life span of roughly 25-30 years). It included vessels like 'Uruguay' and 'Sénégal' which were built to be Oceanic steamers but were eventually transferred to the Mediterranean service in 1888, after roughly 19 years on the Orient Service and the Bordeaux-South American lines, respectively. Some smaller ships were acquired directly for the Mediterranean market, but followed an opposite trajectory. For instance, 'La Syne' (purchased in 1873 from the 'Forges et Chantiers de la Méditerranée' shipyard, weighing 1,142 net tons, iron-hulled, mixed steam and sail), initially served in the Mediterranean but was later refitted for the Far East service (in 1888). Others were added later on, such as 'Portugal', the company's first steel hulled ship with a triple expansion engine, also the largest yet built at the time, weighing 2,832 net tons with a minimum crew size of 115 people. Completed in 1886, it was placed on the Marseilles - Alexandria service in 1899 where it served until 1912. By 1900, the Messageries Maritimes' fleet consisted of roughly sixty ships, 44 of which ran on subsidised lines.<sup>5</sup>

This expansion of the fleet was also sustained by the boom in world trade that occurred once the economic recession of 1877 had abated. Shipping companies were the primary means by which countries around the globe traded with each other. More than half of the world's commerce travelled by sea. The Messageries Maritimes participated enthusiastically, carrying wool from Australia, silk from Indochina and the Levant, olive oil and agricultural products from other Mediterranean countries and exporting a number of manufactured products from France. Passenger traffic provided a third important revenue stream in addition to cargo and to subsidies for postal deliveries and the transport of government personnel. Throughout this period, cargo only ever provided half of the company's receipts in the Mediterranean. The other half was passenger traffic.<sup>6</sup>

Passenger traffic was primarily of two kinds. Wealthier passengers usually travelled recreationally or on business and commonly did so in first or second class. Europe's middle classes were developing a taste for international travel at the time as their living standards improved and the Mediterranean, once the playground of European aristocrats, became the preferred destination of a new class of travellers engaged in the 'Grand Tour' of classical civilization in Italy, Greece, North Africa and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey). Known as 'tourists', they provided a welcome revenue stream for shipping companies. Indeed, steam technology was a great democratizer of travel, for it not only lowered ticket prices by increasing capacity but it also made shorter holidays possible, which were obviously more compatible with the demands of regular employment. The other market in expansion was that of third or fourth class travel. It consisted of regional migrants who travelled between Mediterranean terminals in search of short term work on the most recent large-scale enterprise, such as the construction of the Suez Canal or the railways financed by French capital. Increasingly, it also catered to labourers who wanted to migrate beyond the Mediterranean, to the Atlantic, Indian or Pacific oceans.

In order to profit from the transport of cargo and to embrace the full variety of passenger traffic available to them, the Messageries Maritimes had to build a versatile fleet. To attract tourists, shipping companies at the time were investing in luxurious surroundings for them to sleep and amuse themselves in. First and second class travel was updated throughout the 1880s and 1890s to include better facilities (such as smoking rooms and libraries) and better services (such as intricate meals). On board electric lighting also became available around this time: by 1889, 12 of the company's ships could boast electricity. The Messageries Maritimes also started building new kinds of vessels in addition to their traditional 'paquebots-mixed' or 'mixed packet ships', which could only accommodate few goods and passengers. New contracts and better shipping conditions in the 1880s provided the necessary stimulus to invest in ships for the non-subsidised lines to capitalize on growing trade with London and the South Atlantic: 14 new cargo ships entered the service between 1884 and 1890. Sturdy, powerful and slow, they could not be converted for the purpose of transporting cabin passengers, but they could accommodate several hundred steerage passengers. As such, they also worked in tandem with ships on the Mediterranean line where the emigrant trade was growing rapidly.<sup>7</sup>

## The Mediterranean Market

The Mediterranean market was unique for several reasons, such as the proximity of France's colonies and the high number of French lines operating in the area. It was also unlike the Atlantic, Indian or Pacific Oceans due to the high number of services the company ran and the intensity of connections with other ports relative to its overall geography. Some of the rules that applied to the South Atlantic or the Far East also applied to the Mediterranean: outgoing traffic was smaller in volume than incoming traffic and consisted primarily of manufactured goods and first and second class passengers, in addition to military personnel and post, which the Messageries Maritimes were obliged to carry by contract.

In order to operate successfully in all corners of the globe, to publicise its services and coordinate the transport of goods and people, the Messageries Maritimes kept company agents in most of the ports it visited, from Bahia in Brasil to Ottoman ports like Constantinople (Istanbul, in Turkey) or Beirut (in Lebanon) to Hong Kong and Saigon in Southeast Asia. Their role was to supervise the arrival and departure of company ships, to keep an eye on the conduct of trade and on the competition. They corresponded with company offices in France, providing quarterly updates on the company's financial results in the place where they were stationed. These reports included information on the 'traffic' of post, cargo and passengers, and on local political and economic developments that might impact the company's business.

In port cities agents were also obliged to supervise the embarkation and debarkation of cargo and of passengers. For this, and for other duties, they were assisted by a staff of as few as two and as many as two dozen people, mostly boatmen or clerks. In Constantinople, one of the busiest ports of the Mediterranean, the Messageries Maritimes employed as many as twenty five people in 1881.<sup>8</sup> Employees were often recruited among the local population, to benefit from their knowledge of foreign languages and of the local context. As the passenger trade grew in importance, the ability to speak the same language as customers became more desirable. In Alexandria (Egypt), where the company's agency employed ten clerks, all of whom spoke the main languages of Mediterranean commerce (French, Italian and Arabic), the agent recommended hiring an employee who could also speak English in order to cater to British tourists who 'wintered' in Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

As economic ambassadors for the company, agents also had to promote its business interests. They advertised its services and tried to broker deals where appropriate. As far as passenger transport was concerned, they publicized itineraries and arranged for the sale of tickets. Where public authorities took an interest in regulating emigration, agents were often obliged to act as intermediaries. Officially, this meant following existing rules regarding the recruitment, embarkation and shipping of migrants, and ensuring that ship captains did the same. Effectively it also meant partaking and cooperating in various aspects of migration control, such as inspecting personal identification documents and tickets upon embarkation or administering quarantine and other forms of sanitary prophylaxis. Occasionally, agents also had to resolve trade disputes with other shipping companies to ensure the smooth functioning of their services, filling in for other political and commercial institutions where these were lacking. In the context of the Mediterranean emigrant trade, this could mean entering into market sharing agreements with other shipping companies, or carving out the market on behalf of shipping companies, responsibilities that usually lay with management.

They also advised on strategy. In each of its markets the Messageries Maritimes had to decide what kind of traffic to specialise in. In the South Atlantic for instance, the Messageries opted not to compete with other shipping companies by lowering prices in order to attract more third and fourth class passengers, but to focus on providing a luxury service for cabin passengers. Unlike their rivals they built ships that had cabins both at the bow and at the stern, converting them on the return journey to capitalise on return migration. Their strategy proved wise, and they successfully retained the loyalty of wealthy French customers (and some English ones) who travelled in First class to Brazil. While they only transported less than 10 percent of total migration from Europe to Brazil in the 1880s, they controlled roughly 25 percent of return migration. Cabin passengers accounted for nearly fifty per cent of the total passengers, roughly double the rate of other shipping companies.<sup>10</sup>

The Mediterranean demanded a more supple strategy. A cholera epidemic (in 1884-9) and diplomatic cooling with Italy reduced the importance of the Italian market, despite Naples' significance as one of the biggest ports in the Mediterranean. Unexpectedly, Beirut, in modern day Lebanon, became the company's third most important port financially in the Mediterranean by the 1890s, after Alexandria in Egypt and Constantinople in modern day Turkey. Smyrne, or Izmir, was a close fourth. All four ports presented very

different challenges: traffic from Izmir and Constantinople was mainly in merchandise; Alexandria thrived off the transport of goods (mainly cotton) and cabin passengers, with the occasional concession to steerage traffic (such as in the aftermath of British Occupation of Egypt in 1881, when political refugees fled the country). Beirut, while an important exporting port for silk and cereal products, gradually gained importance as an emigration port, first for regional migration and then for trans-continental migration to the Atlantic. By 1891, third class and steerage receipts were providing the bulk of the company's income there.<sup>11</sup>

The nineteenth century is known among historians as the 'age of mass migration'. For the first time, hundreds of thousands of Europeans left their homes not only to pick the harvests in neighbouring countries or to swell the ranks of industrial labourers in European cities, but to cross the Atlantic in search of a better life. In total roughly 50 to 60 million Europeans are said to have migrated between 1830 and 1930 to the United States of America, Canada, Brazil, Argentina and other countries still.<sup>12</sup> This was only one of several global migrations taking place at the time. They were joined by equivalent numbers of labourers from China who migrated to the Americas and 'coolies' (indentured labourers who worked for their employers until their debts had been repaid) from South Asia to the Caribbean.<sup>13</sup> Steam powered ships had a significant role in making this possible. By shortening crossings they made 'free migration' (i.e. non indentured) more affordable to labourers and their families and by making it relatively safer and more comfortable, they also made it less intimidating. More frequent connections between Europe and the Atlantic also favoured the circulation of information (and propaganda) on the opportunities available to migrants and recruitment of labourers by emigration agents. Both played a role in accelerating emigration and, predictably, shipping companies also took part.

Competition for migrants was fierce. Migrant shipping was a multimillion dollar business and one of the most important capitalist industries at the time. According to one estimate, migrant shipping represented roughly 90 per cent of total revenues for shipping companies in the Atlantic, equal to 20 million dollars in 1900; by 1913 it had increased to 70 million dollars.<sup>14</sup> The fortunes of shipping companies were inextricably linked to the emigrant trade. It was not by chance that many of the century's most important shipping companies, such as Cunard and White Star of Liverpool and Norddeutscher Lloyd of Bremen in Germany, were established in emigration ports.

Price wars ensued along the North Atlantic route as several equally matched companies competed to attract migrants. Following a slump in the trade in 1870s, Albert Ballin, the manager of the last of the 'big four' companies, the Hamburg America Line, engineered a market-sharing agreement with neighbouring lines in Belgium (Red Star) and Holland (Holland America Line) in order to stabilise prices. Temporary agreements were reached with the Cunard line, which capped their share of the German emigration market at six per cent in return for German companies foregoing the Scandinavian market altogether. A price war eventually broke out in 1903-4, but the Conference System that had emerged in the course of the previous decade stopped prices from plummeting. A similar system had been devised in the Far East, to regulate the exportation of silk and tea from China and Japan, replacing bilateral agreements between the English Peninsular and Oriental (P&O) and the Messageries Maritimes in place since 1879.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the conditions that applied to the Atlantic were lacking in the Mediterranean. With the exception of Italy post 1887, most emigration countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea lacked a national merchant marine capable of transporting tens or hundreds of thousands of migrants across the Atlantic. Even as emigration to the United States or South American countries gained ground in the 1880s, railway and port development in the South and East of the Mediterranean remained sluggish and steam technology beyond reach. Intercontinental emigration from northern Europe had reached mass proportions towards the mid nineteenth century, which also gave northern European states a head start in developing emigration laws capable of regulating the emigration market and, where necessary, of taming shipping companies. Mediterranean countries were late to the game on this front as well. However, the gains to be made from transporting emigrants were almost as lucrative as in the Atlantic, and, financially, shipping companies were equally dependent on them.

Unsurprisingly therefore, northern European shipping companies, including the Messageries, used their strength relative to Mediterranean emigrant countries to their advantage, making up the rules as they went along, ignoring them where it suited them and when they could get away with it. Demand for transport outstripped supply initially, as steam connections from Mediterranean cities to connecting ports were less frequent and less efficient than in Northern European ports like Liverpool or Hamburg. Shipping Conferences and other forms of market control were, as such, redundant. When a price war erupted among

shipping companies it was not the senior management of the Messageries Maritimes or of a rival that convened a shipping conference to stabilise prices, but the Messageries' agent in Constantinople, who chaired the conference until it became redundant once more.<sup>16</sup>

The most significant difference however was that, even as emigration picked up along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, several emigration countries, like Italy prior to 1888 and the Ottoman Empire before 1893, retained a ban on trans-Atlantic emigration. The Messageries, like other shipping companies, were faced with a dilemma. They could renounce the passenger trade altogether and repurpose some of the cargo ships that were in use in the Atlantic for the Mediterranean service, and focus on the bulk transport of goods instead. If, on the other hand, they decided to invest in passenger services, they would still have to choose whether to focus on luxury travel and the growing tourist trade, or compete for third class and steerage passengers instead, even if that meant violating the ban on emigration. They chose the latter.

### **Shipping Migrants: The Clandestine trade**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1904 the Captain of the steamer 'Portugal', of the Messageries Maritimes, wrote of a strange occurrence on his most recent journey. Upon embarking passengers in Beirut, where he had arrived from Marseilles via Egypt, he had encountered some resistance. A police officer had chased six men on-board and fired five rounds into the boat to try to halt their departure. The Captain had been forced to order his men to physically restrain the police officer, who eventually let go and retreated onto dry land.<sup>17</sup>

Although incidents of this kind rarely feature in the records of the Messageries Maritimes, they are indicative of a much broader phenomenon. In fact, Captain reports from the Mediterranean Service, or 'recits de voyage' as they were known in French, are littered with references to small subterfuges and the occasional altercation with local authorities. The reason being that emigration from the Ottoman Empire was first banned (until 1893) and then heavily restricted until 1908, when a new political party (the Committee for Union and Progress) took power and momentarily lifted restrictions, until the conscription drive for World War One made them desirable once again. In Beirut and the surrounding area of Mount Lebanon, emigration was allowed intermittently, subject to informal arrangements between shipping companies, emigration agents and local authorities that had only been formalised in 1903 on the back of an anti-corruption campaign against local bureaucrats accused of defrauding migrants. There, like elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire, in order to keep transporting third and fourth class passengers, the Messageries Maritimes had to adapt creatively to the local migration regimes. Or break the law.

The biggest source of migrants in the Mediterranean at the time was Italy. Nearly 14 million people left its shores to start a new life in a foreign country between 1876 and 1925, primarily to the United States (7,5 million), followed by Brazil and Argentina. Migration from Italy picked up in intensity in the 1870s and 1880s, around the time when steam powered navigation also came into its own. Before 1887 the only Italian port from where a migrant could take a steamer directly to the Atlantic was Genoa, in Liguria (north-western Italy), where commerce and migration to South America had been taking place since before the advent of steam technology. Naples, which became the main transit point for migrants from southern Italy, only started to run direct services to the Atlantic in 1887, when a line to New York was established by Italy's foremost steamship company, the Navigazione Generale Italiana, which like the Messageries Maritimes was subsidised by the state. Before then it was not uncommon for Italian migrants to travel to French, German and, to a lesser extent, English ports to take passage across the Ocean. The Messageries Maritimes also provided connecting services to Marseilles from Italian ports. In 1887 it carried roughly 2,000 passengers to Marseilles, of whom 1,662 were migrants (third or fourth class passengers). In the 1880s its profits from passenger services on the Naples-Marseilles line earned it between eight and ten times those from transporting cargo on the same route.<sup>18</sup> Before 1888 emigration from Italy was heavily restricted, and migration to the Americas had been temporarily banned. Consequently, the trade was of dubious legality.

Italian ships never carried much more than half of all Italian migrants who crossed the Atlantic in this period. By the turn of the century, however, the Navigazione Generale Italiana was the biggest player in the Italian emigration market and Italian ships enjoyed a sizeable majority relative to German, French or British competitors. In 1900 they transported 66,978 migrants relative to 39,539 by German ships, 30,820 by the French and 28,519 by the English.<sup>19</sup> Their ascendancy was aided by government investment in the shipping industry and improvements in maritime infrastructure and railway connections, but also by protectionist measures. In 1888 and 1901 Italy passed two migration laws. The first tried to reduce transit in foreign ports by banning recruitment by foreign agents in Italy. It also made transit more difficult by

making it more onerous (agents were required to host migrants at their expense in ports of transit) and by fixing itineraries (shipping companies had to state the name of the steamer that would be transporting migrants from a connecting port and the date of its departure, which in addition to creating a significant logistical challenge, considerably reduced their flexibility).

Talk of banning the ‘trans-boarding’ of migrants from one ship to another was successfully quashed by the lobbying efforts of the Messageries Maritimes and other French shipping companies.<sup>20</sup> In 1901, however, a new law was passed - Italy’s first emigration law proper – that banned shipping companies from recruiting Italian emigrants for embarkation abroad and, crucially, the trans-boarding of migrants in the Mediterranean. Thereafter migrants who wanted to take their passage from French ports were obliged to buy a ticket for Marseilles or Le Havre without a ticket for the Atlantic in hand, omitting their intention to migrate to the Americas. Where lobbying failed, subterfuge prevailed. The Messageries Maritimes continued to embark Italian migrants headed to the Americas via Marseilles, but on steamers they used for the Mediterranean service, not on their Atlantic fleet. A very similar strategy to that adopted in Italy was also used in Greece, where trans-Atlantic emigration had also been gaining traction around the same time (roughly 400,000 Greeks are estimated to have left for the United States alone between 1820 and 1924).<sup>21</sup> When plans to ban the trans-boarding of migrants in foreign ports and to subsidise a national shipping line for emigrants reached parliament, lobbying by the French and British governments on behalf of the shipping industry quickly stopped the bill from becoming law.

Competition for migrants in Greece was intense from the very beginning and pickings were slim for shipping companies. Writing in 1880 the Messageries Maritimes’ agent in Athens explained that the number of passengers transported by the company in that year’s business cycle had fallen from 1,064 to 742 on account of the competitive scheduling of the Austrian Lloyd, Florio (Italian) and Khedival (Egyptian) lines.<sup>22</sup> In the same year the agent in Naples wrote back to management to announce that competition was such that the company could not turn a profit unless it established a direct service from Naples to Brazil. In 1885 passenger traffic from Naples to Marseilles was down to 467 people.<sup>23</sup> Growing protectionism and the establishment of an Italian steamship line from Naples to the United States only made things worse. The Messageries Maritimes looked eastwards, towards the Levant and the Black Sea in order to make up for the loss of custom. In the 1880s, their passenger receipts from Beirut usually ranged between 45,000 to 55,000 francs. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Greater Syria became the company’s most lucrative market in the Mediterranean, and third and fourth class receipts their main source of income.<sup>24</sup>

When the Ottoman state lifted the ban on emigration in 1893, only five years after the Italian government had done the same, it deferred control to local authorities which assumed the responsibility to regulate it. In the state of Greater Syria, shipping companies were obliged to negotiate with the Governor of Mount Lebanon who was determined to put an end to the system of recruitment by local agents on behalf of foreign shipping companies. Here, as in Greece, in the absence of a national steamship company running a direct service to the Americas, trans-Atlantic emigration depended on foreign shipping companies. Through persistent lobbying the Messageries Maritimes and others were successful in having one Governor, who had threatened to divert the migrant traffic through a secondary port (Jounieh) unless shipping companies meet his demands, removed from his post. However, in 1904 shipping companies ‘capitulated’ to the new Governor and agreed to pay a tax for every migrant they embarked and consented to a number of conditions regarding the recruitment and transport of migrants, including price ceilings for third and fourth class travel. In Trabzon, on the Black Sea frontier of the Ottoman State, where bans on emigration were kept in place, foreign shipping companies, and the Messageries Maritimes among them, continued to embark migrants illegally. Where state institutions were too weak to regulate emigration, shipping companies ruled supreme and the clandestine trade flourished.

## Conclusion

By taking part in the trade in migrants in the Mediterranean, the Messageries Maritimes were breaking the law with impunity or re-shaping it to their advantage. Unease surrounding their behaviour was implicitly admitted by the fact that there no explicit acknowledgment of the trade beyond the reports of ship captains or their agents. This was despite the fact that third and fourth class passages made up the bulk of their passenger receipts in the Mediterranean, which in turn accounted for roughly half of their total revenues from the region. It is likely that without the emigrant trade, the Messageries Maritimes would have had to run a reduced service in the Mediterranean, probably limited to their postal lines. It would also have had a knock on effect on their lines in the South Atlantic. In time, this would have made them less competitive and reduced their chances of winning the government postal contracts they so relied on.

More generally, their involvement in the emigrant trade (both licit and illicit), like that of their competitors, tells us several things about how the international shipping business developed. Firstly, it underlines the financial and practical challenges that underpinned experimentation with new technologies in the transport industry. Most shipping companies were able to endure the costs only through protectionism, government subsidies and with the political and diplomatic backing of powerful states that lobbied on their behalf. Despite these advantages, they still relied to a significant extent on illicit trades in order to be profitable. Their success was also determined by company management's ability to mobilize resources and devise strategies in line with local circumstances, an arduous task given the company's global scale. Agents were indispensable to this end. Finally, the Messageries Maritimes' story is a reminder of the high potential for earnings from the transport of people generally, and of migrants specifically, and of the historical importance of international migrations to the development of the global transport industry.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Marthe Barabance, *Histoire de la Compagnie Générale Transatlantique. Un siècle d'exploitation maritime* (Paris, 1955), pp. 101-108

<sup>2</sup> Marie-Francoise Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes. L'essor d'une grande compagnie de navigation française, 1851-1894* (Paris, 2007), p. 506

<sup>3</sup> André Siegfried, Jérôme Tharaud, Jean Tharaud (eds.), *Le Centenaire des services de Messageries Maritimes (1851-1951)* (MCMLII), p. 11

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Ramona, *Paquebots vers l'Orient* (Joué-lès-Tours, 2001), pp. 50-51

<sup>5</sup> Duncan Haws, *Merchant Fleets. Messageries Maritimes* (1999), pp. 39-40

<sup>6</sup> Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, pp. 440-442

<sup>7</sup> Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, pp. 518-9

<sup>8</sup> AFL, Messageries Maritimes, Agence de Constantinople, Rapport Général de Service, Secrétariat. Exercices 1881-1914

<sup>9</sup> AFL, Messageries Maritimes, Agence de Alexandria, Rapport Général de Service, Secrétariat. Exercice 1883

<sup>10</sup> Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, p. 426

<sup>11</sup> AFL, Messageries Maritimes, Agence de Beyrouth, Rapport Général de Service, Traffic. Exercice 1891

<sup>12</sup> Imre Ferenczi and Walter F. Willcox (eds.), *International Migrations. Volume I, Statistics* (New York: 1969)

<sup>13</sup> Lydia Potts, *The World Labour Market. A history of Migration* (London, 1990)

<sup>14</sup> Drew Keeling, *The Business of Transatlantic Migration between Europe and the United States 1900-1914* (Zurich: Chronos, 2012), p. 44

<sup>15</sup> Berneron-Couvenhes, *Les Messageries Maritimes*, pp. 404 - 408

<sup>16</sup> AFL, Messageries Maritimes, Agence de Trébizonde, Rapport Général de Service, Traffic. Exercice 1885.

<sup>17</sup> AFL, Messageries Maritimes, Rapport Général du Voyage du Portugal. Voyage no.19, 10 septembre 1904

<sup>18</sup> AFL, Messageries Maritimes, Agence de Naples, Rapport Général de Service, Traffic. Exercices 1883-1888.

According to the company agent in Naples passenger receipts were consistently and considerably higher than those for merchandise. For example, in 1883 total passenger traffic earned the company 217,615 francs as opposed to 83,112 francs in freight transport. In 1886 the same trades earned the company 88,177 francs and 10,720 francs respectively. Throughout this period the majority of passengers consistently travelled in IIIrd and IVth class. Of the passengers who travelled aboard the ships of the Messageries Maritimes from Naples to Marseilles in 1887, 343 did so in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> class and 1,662 travelled in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> class.

<sup>19</sup> Relazione a S.E il Ministro della Marina. *Sulle Condizioni della Marina Mercantile Italiana al 31 Dicembre 1900*. Tipografia dei Fratelli Bencini, Roma, 1901

<sup>20</sup> AMAE, Émigration Italienne, b. 337. For example: Letter from Ambassador in Rome to French Foreign Minister, 11th December, 1900: "Je suis heureux de pouvoir vous informer que j'ai pu obtenir du Gouvernement et du rapporteur presque toutes les concessions destinées à maintenir cette égalité [entre les compagnies françaises et celles italiennes] dans la concurrence et réclamées par nos nationaux; et il m'est agréable à ce propos de rendre justice à l'esprit de conciliation et d'équité dont ont fait preuve les auteurs de la loi. Pour la vitesse, l'espace, la limite de jauge, la faculté de transborder les émigrants et de les embarquer dans un port français, les formalités onéreuses pour les compagnies étrangères à accomplir sur le territoire italien, le projet de loi primitif a subi des modifications qui ont valu à cette ambassade les vifs remerciements de tous les intéressés français."

<sup>21</sup> Ferenczi and Willcox (eds.), *International Migrations. Volume I, Statistics*, p. 230

<sup>22</sup> AFL, Messageries Maritimes, Agence du Pirée. Rapport Général de Service, Secrétariat. Exercices 1880-2

<sup>23</sup> AFL, Messageries Maritimes, Agence de Naples, Rapport Général de Service, Traffic. Exercices 1885

<sup>24</sup> AFL, Messageries Maritimes, Agence de Beyrouth. Rapport Général de Service, Traffic. Exercices 1888-1889