

Michaël ARRAULT, “The PTT in Tours during the Third Republic: morphology, dynamism, and urban partnering” (“Les PTT à Tours sous la Troisième République : morphologie, dynamisme et partenariat urbain”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Jean-Marie Moine, Tours, 1999, 190 pp. + appendices.

This study of the PTT in Tours during the Third Republic demonstrates the complexity of the three major services – Post, Telegraph, and Telephone.

The Post Office was originally perceived as a broad-based service entity that exercised multiple activities in many places: main post offices, sub-stations, multiple service offices, additional mail boxes and mail sorting centers all symbolized the post office for its customers. Telegraph service was impacted by the Post Office and their merger in 1878 constituted a weak link. But it was not without its own vitality, since the many operations that passed over the wires were proof of telegraphic activity. But the third and final installment dealt a fatal blow to the telegraph: telephone service mobilized the PTT the most at the end of the 19th century.

The second part of our study evidences the struggles between the three different institutional partners: the influence of the municipality that furnished the urban space these services needed and the pressure groups that challenged the post office every step of the way. The departmental manager played his role admirably with an iron fist in a velvet glove. Other departmental representatives, like the prefect and the General Council, exercised their influence discreetly on departmental decisions.

Despite some actions in favor of postal development, the lack of financial investment on the part of the chamber of commerce, because of budget problems, was a hindrance to postal progress.

Finally, the growing workforce and the richness of the club life of postal staff are factors of primary importance in this urban enclave in the region of Tours.

Our research confirms several hypotheses: the role of the merger in freeing up the post office as the telegraph service gradually declined; the demands for quality service from local municipalities; and the significance of the telephone at the beginning of the 20th century, especially for the hiring of women telephone operators. But we have also been able to refute certain theories, notably the belief that postal agents undeniably came from the proletariat and that women agents were locked into their position without the possibility of promotion.

Muriel Le Roux has perfectly summarized the significance of the PTT in this period: “service jobs whose chronology crystallizes the changes in the urban world reflected in the position of the mail carrier.” The urban mail carrier is the one person who has the most contact with the urban world: living in town, he brings life to it as he fashions it according to his customers’ wishes. At the national administrative level, no staff member has such a privileged connection with a city.