

Erwann LECUYER, “The postal administration during the Paris Commune” (“L’administration des Postes durant la Commune de Paris”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Aimée Moutet, Paris 13, 1998, 104 p.

The postal administration is in the foreground of the history of the Paris Commune. Indeed, the post office was one of several theatres of civil confrontation that pitched the standing government against the Communards. This civil crisis began on 18 March with the famous episode of the disarmament of the National Guard that was to the insurgents’ advantage. This meant that the government could no longer use military force against the Parisian insurrection. Rejected and ejected from Paris, the foremost representative of the State’s escape has often been compared by historians to a haphazard rush instigated by panic; for instance, this is P.O. Lissagaray’s sarcastic recollection of the event. However, it now seems that the flight from the capital was not so unplanned.

As I have demonstrated, the sacrifice of the postal service was the result of a premeditated political decision. Through his representative, Rampont-Léchin, Adolphe Thiers disorganized the entire postal service within Paris. The legitimate government’s control of the mail allowed it to set up a complete embargo against Paris. The dismantling of postal structures, however, was not so simple. As we have seen, Rampont-Léchin’s first action was to have large quantities of material removed between 20 and 30 March. Searches undertaken in post offices and homes affected during the Commune evidence the breadth of these abductions of material objects. Tills were emptied of their cash, stamps were either hidden or taken away, and coaches were hijacked. The expropriation of material succeeded in suppressing the very things that were needed for any postal function. Rampont-Léchin then rallied a large number of staff members to the Versailles administration. During the night of 29-30 March he had an anonymous poster put up ordering all postal employees to rejoin the standing administration “as soon as possible;” once again, searches reveal the extent to which services were disorganized. Some offices had to close their doors while others were unable to offer even minimal service.

This systematic disorganization of the postal administration confirmed its importance in the legitimate government’s tactics. First of all, this made it possible to isolate Paris politically and diplomatically from the provinces. Without the post office, the Commune lacked the concrete means of communication it needed to rally other insurrectionist movements around it. In this way Thiers avoided a military battle on several fronts. Moreover, postal paralysis prevented the Commune from making financial transactions with the outside. Consequently, Paris and its Commune found themselves completely isolated. The postal administration was deeply integrated into all areas and at all levels of French society. Within the framework of the history of the Paris Commune, the post office correlated with a logistical support of primary importance to the apparatus of power: an intimate relationship connected the post office to the State and power.

The day after the events of 30 March the Commune attempted to restore postal service. A Theisz was then nominated as managing director of the post office. His responsibilities were considerable, since he had to find a way of mitigating the significant lack of staff and materials. Sources such as the *Journal Officiel* or the archives of the land army reveal several measures undertaken by the Commune in attempts to revive post services. In fact, A. Theisz had to make a

significant hiring call and changes to the existing staff to compensate for deficiencies in some areas of service. Nonetheless improvements to postal service that were made still did not allow it to meet all of the people's expectations.

Thus the reorganization of the postal service appeared to be largely unsatisfactory on many levels. Although directions and orders were given in order to re-establish minimal service, this only served to prompt new problems that arose in basic postal operations. In fact, the auxiliary staff that was hired to replace administrative executives could not satisfy the demands of that service. Their unfamiliarity with postal procedures and lack of training only contributed to decelerating the most basic postal operations. Despite their lack of formal training, the new staff enabled service to recommence in the offices that had been completely abandoned in the flight to Versailles. Nonetheless, they were unable to develop the organizational abilities of a seasoned postmaster.

For these reasons the Commune had to give free rein to the individual attempts of those who absolutely had to communicate with the provinces and outside France. The decree of 6 April in particular authorized the creation of private enterprises. For a fee these new businesses would send or receive mail. The postal administration granted a large portion of its monopoly to these new agencies. For the first time in the history of the post office, this public service entered the communications market competitively. The postal administration would recover its monopoly after the victory in Versailles at the end of May 1871. Postal chronology during the Paris Commune is rich in lessons on the procedures that linked power and the post office. The fact that it was so well integrated into all areas of French society positioned the post office between society and the apparatus of power as an intermediate agency. Thiers and Rampont-Léchin perfectly understood the usefulness of the post office as a logistical support that was of primary importance to the victory in Versailles.