

Camille HENRI, "The airplane as transportation mode in France. Between birth and growth of the French air-mail transport 1935-1955" (L'introduction de l'avion comme moyen de transport régulier et exclusivement postal en France métropolitaine. Entre apparition et essor de l'aviation postale intérieure, 1935-1955), Master thesis in contemporary history directed by Jean-Claude Vimont, University of Rouen, 2008, 295 p + annexes.

For more than ten years the Post Office has been studied under various angles, nevertheless transport remains an unexplored field of study. However it is transport, the transmission of the correspondences (mail-order), which is at the origin of its existence. Emblematic sector in France of what one hears by public service, *la Poste* (the French Post Office brand named) is, according to the definition given by the Universal Larousse dictionary "a public administration established for the transport of letters and dispatches, [...] there is only postal service when there is transport". Also we mainly interest us at the postal transport changes of the postal transport: the purpose of this Master's memory is to observe the appearance of a new kind of transport like its progressive integration in transport's panoply used by the postal service.

With this intention, I made the choice on one mode of transport which exponentially developed in France as across the globe at the 20th century: the air transport. The plane is totally new in history of techniques that it does not replace any existing machine, the mail transport per plane constitutes a new mode of delivery as well to the course 20th century as in postal historiography. It is still necessary to distinguish two forms of air-mail transport: in one hand use of the plane according to exclusively postal needs, that is exploitation of an aviation dedicated to the exclusive transport of the mail - the postal aviation; in the other hand, passenger, freight and mail transport on commercial airlines, which one indicates under the term of airmail.

Theses researches are only limited to postal air transport within the limits of French metropolitan territory between 1935 and 1955.

By this role of conveyor, the company *la Poste* is linked to the history of techniques and transport, but also with the "innovation process" – that's the whole of the social and technical innovations adopted by a society given - because one of the dominant concerns throughout its history was "to adapt the postal organization to the last technical improvements as regards transport [...]". Also at the contemporary period, postal relations were they successively regulated on the rate of old diligences, on the speed of day in day accelerated of steam trains and cars, on that even larger of the rail-cars and finally on the extreme speed of planes and TGV. It is in this technical evolution context of this king of transport used for mail delivery in France that this study takes place. Because *la Poste* (the French Post Office) – whether it is the old Administration or the recent company - always tried to deliver correspondence objects as quickly as possible. It has, throughout its history, adopted mode of transport with the most recent and powerful techniques in order to fill its public service mission.

It is about an unpublished thought on mail transportation in France during the 20th century. Keeping in mind good postal transportation during the first 20th century, it is a matter of redrawing the story of the domestic mail aviation during the last twenty years of its existence. It is about a preliminary work focusing on a mode of transport: the plane; putting in prospect for broader research as well from the set of themes point of view as chronological.

Various questions are used to structure this reflection which aims at understanding how the postal administration integrates airplane in mail delivering. Does the French Post Office appear as a developer of the various means of transportation invented by man? In what the mail and this administration were they vectors in French air transport development? Within the framework of this will of experiment ceaselessly renewed by *la Poste*. It is about emphasizing the continual improvement policy of the transport. Do the creation of an interior postal aviation and a specifically

postal air grid system illustrate the technical modernization of the post administration? The goal is to show how the plane became, during two decades, the essential means of transport in the mail delivery organization in France. It is a matter of emphasizing the various technical and politico-economic means which contributed and gave rhythm to the introduction of the plane within the mail transport. From this questioning this report got organized in three times:

At first, we shall give a wide vision of the object of study by approaching the three main subjects of the subject: the Post office, air transport and mail.

This first part approaches at the same time the genesis of air postal transport but also the various concepts relating to mail transportation: mail “sacrality”, the heritage of air-mail transport pioneer (1910-1930), concept of public service, the legend surrounding air postal transport, the role of Didier Daurat (the “the interior postal aviation’s father”), etc. He defined the concept of domestic mail aviation and the various notions which bring there.

After this global view, the second part suggests the examination of the various stages interior air-mail network constitution. The year 1935 marks the creation of a postal grid system which did not exist before. A new postal network develops on the rhythm of technological, economic and political economic situations. The two studied decades correspond to one experimentation period of this novel mode of postal transport, which had its equivalent in no country.

One distinguishes three great phases in the history from this metropolitan air postal network which is constituted as from 1935:

- pre-war period (1935-1939) which tell about the first experiments of exclusively air postal ;
- the Second World War period (1939-1945), a true caesura in the interior postal aviation network exploitation but one capital period for the postal administration on interior air postal;
- the last period of this study materializes the network rebirth in 1945 and its rise until the middle of the fifties.

In theses works, the communication system network concept was used as logical link in the evaluation of the logics implemented around the use of the plane within the framework of the postal service.

The third and last part presents a thought on the use of the postal plane in France. It is question of considering the place of the plane in domestic postal transport organization: why use the plane, and especially why to use it in a strictly postal transport? We have to estimate in which measure *la Poste* and the mail contributed to the country aeronautical development. But also to be interested in some hypothetical filiations between the metropolitan airmail transport and the creation of an internal commercial airline company. Does the domestic postal aviation open on the history of commercial air transport in France?

Theses researches approach the history of *La Poste* under a new angle:

- transport at the 20th century (development of many concepts relating to the administration history)
- transport and techniques in France.

When we wonder about the reasons of the appearance of planes in the postal service, two considerations must be underlined. When one wonders about the reasons inherent in the appearance

of planes fleet to the postal service, two considerations must be underlined. From the administration, it appears in its conception and its organization as a solution to problems posed by the ground transport of the mail in France. From the aeronautical circles, it establishes a first stage in the aeronautical development of France. The mail appears as a first stage towards diffusion of the air transport in France and in the internal commercial air transport development.

These researches highlight a major aspect of the PTT (Post, Telegraph and Telephone) administration, that of the desire of modernity at a lower cost and at lesser risk. In the bend of the years 1935-1936, *la Poste* modernizes its services: with profitable means and at a lower cost. It is notable that any airline company was ready to begin this experimentation. This question of technical innovation use exceeds the mail frame of this study. It is question of seeing how an entity, whether it is administration or company, integrate innovation into its services. The use of the plane and the internal airmail network exploitation illustrates the will of the administration of the French Post Office to have fast and modern ways of transportation. The plane appears in the middle of the 20th century as the means of transportation the best adapted to the needs of *la Poste* because of its speed and of its potential of specialization (its use according to the only needs of the mail administration).

This demonstration on the introduction of the plane underlines the importance of the economic situation, the technological evolution and last but not least of the policy influences in the history of the French Post Office. The integration of a new means of transportation is bound to these three factors which seem inseparable of *la Poste* contemporary history. This reflection underlines this administrative dichotomy which characterizes the PTT after the Second World War and during second 20th century. Consequently, this demonstration presents the particularity of *la Poste* which appears closer to an industrial and commercial company than an administration itself: *la Poste* was not either completely an administration in spite of its function of public utility, nor completely a company in spite of its function of carrier.