

Dear Director General,

Excellencies,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are honoured by your presence.

We have gathered here, on the occasion of a sesquicentenary, to consider 150 years of postal cooperation from a historical perspective. One hundred and fifty is an impressive number. Today, it is more than twice the global average life expectancy at birth (taking into account known disparities). And it is significantly more than the average age of the international organizations with which we can compare the Universal Postal Union. We must keep in mind that many organizations founded at the end of the 19th century and, in particular, in the 20th century, have since ceased to exist. Kiran Patel is currently launching a research project aimed at rediscovering these organizations and the many traces that they left behind. It is a fascinating project, but I am sure you will agree with me that organizations that have existed and survived for 150 years, without interruption, are also worthy of interest and have their own historical legacy to offer.

In this regard, the Universal Postal Union stands out as having held regular commemorative celebrations, but there have been relatively few events that consider the historical perspective.

I propose that we look back at four commemorative moments that shine a light both on the long development of the Union's institutional memory and, in contrast, on the new elements that we can contribute through this colloquium.

The first of these moments took place in 1897. In that year, instead of celebrating an anniversary, we paid homage following a death. Heinrich von Stephan, a Prussian postal figure, Director of Postal Services for the North German Confederation and then for the German Empire, dubbed the "Bismarck of the Post", died in Berlin, just days before he was due to leave for Washington to participate in his fifth Postal Congress. He was, and is still, considered the visionary and founding father of the Union. In Washington, the organizers of the Congress

decided to cover the chair that he would have occupied with a veil. Today, there are no veils, but his name continues to grace the room in which we are gathered.

The second event took place soon after; in 1900, during the festivities heralding the new century, the postal world celebrated not the 26th anniversary of the signature of the treaty, but the 25th anniversary of its entry into force. To mark the occasion, it was decided that a monument would be built. The ensuing competition was won by sculptor René de Saint-Marceaux. His representation of global postal traffic is visible to this day in Berne. Depicting a globe that appears to be lifted from the ground by the movement of five messengers symbolizing the five continents, who pass letters to each other in a swirling and graceful ring, the monument is the inspiration behind the Union's logo. The monument in Berne also comprises a seated female figure who calmly watches over this dance, but she does not feature on the logo. I will return to this point in due course.

To mark the 50th anniversary of signature of the treaty, in 1924, it was the delegates themselves who served as a living monument. Photographs show them parading between Parliament House and the Royal Palace in Stockholm, in top hats and ceremonial dress, lined up two by two, in (French) alphabetical country order. This was the image selected to feature on the website of this colloquium. I don't think that there are any plans for us to march down Weltpoststrasse – at the most, the speakers will just need to make their way to this podium.

I will conclude this commemorative overview – which remains incomplete as I have made no mention of various philatelic issues – with the life of a book published for the first time in 1908 by the International Bureau, entitled *“L'Union postale universelle, sa fondation et son développement”*. The book has had an exceptional life, having been republished and updated throughout the century, immediately after the 50th, 75th and 100th anniversaries and again in the lead-up to the 110th anniversary, always following the same structure, Congress by Congress. For the 125th and 130th anniversaries, two other books were published, different from the first, but both also written by postal sector professionals.

Although organized as part of the 150th anniversary commemorations, our colloquium stands out from these celebrations, first and foremost because it has brought together people who

are historians by training and, in most cases, by profession. What can we expect in view of this change? Firstly, rigorous application of a method that consists of consulting and cross-referencing historical sources (text, images and artefacts) to put into context the discussions held and decisions taken within the Universal Postal Union, placing them within a historical narrative that both encompasses and transcends them. For these historians, the aim is not to compile another catalogue of the achievements and limitations of Congresses, but to bring to light the many links between international postal relations and the diplomatic, economic, social and cultural dynamics of the last 150 years. They seek not to build a monument to the UPU – any more than they wish to destroy those that exist – but rather to examine the evidence before them. Allow me to illustrate this somewhat abstract statement with an anecdote relating to the monument to which I referred earlier, commissioned for the 25th anniversary of the Union. Although it is admired today, it once garnered criticism in Berne for its aesthetics – deemed too French – and for its symbolism – for some, this suspended globe was out of place, as if dropped from above with no regard for the place in which it landed. It would appear to be in response to the latter criticism that the sculptor added the serene figure representing the city... as if to bring the celestial globe back to earth. This is a move for us to ponder, as we contemplate the global good cause that is the circulation of mail, and the promise of the founding members to form a “single postal territory”. As we reflect upon the history of this idea, let us also keep in mind the words of our colleague Christophe Charle, who said that “ideas [...] transform the world only if the world has already transformed the ideas”. In other words, the idea that underpins the Union, and which von Stephan upheld with such conviction, transformed the world because the world (and the postal world in particular) took hold of the idea, debated it and shaped it around that which already existed, based on a multitude of capacities and interests. It is this initial process and its perpetuation throughout 150 years that interest us, more than the memory of founding fathers.

In this regard, we have much to do for, as I have already said, little has been done in the past. Legal and political experts have provided valuable analyses, with the principal groundwork laid by Louis Renault as of 1877, John Sly (1927), Georges Coddling (1964), Francis Lyall (2011) and James Campbell, in particular with regard to terminal dues (2016 and 2021). By comparison, historians have left little mark. We are not starting with an entirely blank page, but many of those who have responded to our call are approaching this subject for the first time. In recent

years, the UPU's sister organization, the International Telecommunication Union, has attracted considerably more attention from historians. Our colleague Richard John, who is here today, has explained the origin and effects of this unequal treatment of postal and telecommunications services. Specifically, it arises from a technically-minded genealogical approach whereby the precursors to the Internet were sought in electrical communication networks – telegraphy and then the telephone – without heed to the fact that telegraphy (and international telegraphy in particular) and then telephony were reserved for the rich, for the elite, whereas the Post was far more widely accessible. It was letters, postcards, packages and postal orders that served as the channels for mass communication over long distances until well into the 20th century. According to Richard John, it is the Post that most closely resembles what we might call the “Victorian Internet”.¹

It is for this reason that we should increase our knowledge of the Universal Postal Union, through which these channels became more accessible and reliable across international borders. We must “postalize” the history of globalization, by which I mean that we must understand the role of the Post in the intensification of trade, and in bringing peoples together yet maintaining significant inequalities and barriers between them. “Postalizing” the history of globalization also means linking postal networks to the birth of the idea or ideology – which has taken on such importance since the 19th century – of “infrastructural globalization”, whereby we must bring the world together through infrastructure if we are to resolve the major socio-political problems of the time. From this perspective, it is interesting to note that the current challenge of climate change is pushing stakeholders no longer to offer simply *more* networks, more integration, for instance through the Post, but rather a transformation of the integration itself.

Conversely, by studying the cooperation aspect, we can transnationalize the history of Posts, which is too often recounted within a strictly national framework. Posts, which transport millions of national emblems every day and, in so doing, have contributed to the creation thereof, are thus the product of transnational professional and technical exchanges, of cross-border cooperation and comparison.

¹ Richard R. John, “Debating New Media: Rewriting Communications History”, *Technology and Culture*, 2023/2, pp. 308-358.

I would like to conclude by offering my warm thanks to the partners who have made this colloquium possible:

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- Thank you to the members of the scientific committee that made a selection from the many proposals submitted and who will moderate the sessions. In particular, I would like to thank Pascal Griset, who supervised my thesis and recommended that I incorporate postal issues. That was two decades ago and our gathering here today is, in a way, a distantly related outcome.