

**Didier Rey, *Le timbre-poste, une mémoire de l'histoire européenne 1840-2020* (Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2025), 431 pages**

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In our times, philately, and the more general habit of collecting objects such as stamps, banknotes and coins, postcards and other collectibles, is in decline. Perhaps that is why historians are increasingly turning their attention to these fascinating fields of research. Not only is (or was) philately the most widespread hobby, but the historical research dedicated to it is also surprisingly extensive. There are entire libraries dedicated to this subject around the world, a fact confirmed by the book published in early 2025 by Didier Rey, historian, professor at the University of Corsica and, last but not least, avid stamp collector. In Romania, the historical analysis of philately is in its infancy, but historical research is not lacking (see, for example, the book by Cristian Andrei Scăiceanu, *Istoria mişcării filatelice din România* [A history of the Philatelic Movement in Romania] (Bucureşti: Ed. Oscar Print, 2011).

Didier Rey's book is dedicated to European philately between 1840-2020. However, the geographic framework extends well beyond Europe, because the author (also) takes into account the huge and complex system of colonies, possessions and territories held by European countries outside the Old Continent. Nonetheless, we should note that the author starts from the premise – to which we fully subscribe – that the stamp is a keeper of European historical memory, regardless of whether it is colonial history or the history of European countries themselves. The book demonstrates a thorough knowledge of European political history (including its overseas dimensions), but also of

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modern and contemporary world history. At the same time, the author is well acquainted with the ideologies circulating in Europe during this period of almost two centuries and understands philately as an instrument for affirming, expressing and manifesting ideologies – for example, national ideologies, not coincidentally citing the fundamental book of French historian Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales. Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècles* (Paris : Éd. du Seuil, 1999).

“Each stamp corresponds to an intention,” the author states in the *Introduction* of the book (p. 9), citing one of the works he consulted. These words capture the essence of the book: stamps are part of the long list of tools (institutions, press, books, images, media) which helped the State promote its political and ideological messages, but, at least in the case of stamps, it is difficult to quantify their efficiency. Moreover, the *Introduction* convincingly explains the intentions of the book and its “philosophy.”

Didier Rey's book is systematically organized, following chronological and thematic lines. Part I (chapters I-V) represents a general excursion through the beginnings of philately: the emergence of postage stamps in the context of the postal revolution and their place in modern society (as early as 1840-1850). Stamps were perceived as a sign of civilization: a country that wanted to be modern and important internationally had to print stamps, which soon came to reflect political and territorial realities, but also claims and demands (pp. 22-23). Just as early, by abandoning the representations of monarchs, the stamps issued by different countries began to express political ideas, even ideologies; for example, the South American countries printed stamps representing their *founding fathers* (Simón Bolívar and others) (pp. 63-68). Very interestingly, the author demonstrates that shortly after the spread of stamp production, they became collectibles and even investment items (pp. 27-39, 65). Additionally, he discusses the institutionalization process of philately (publications, magazines, catalogues, associations, collections, even museum collections) (pp. 41-67).

Part II investigates stamps as instruments for representing the Nation and other identity values. Even though stamps are a medium in which the possibilities of linguistic expression are very limited, Didier Rey convincingly demonstrates that the linguistic policies of the issuing states are represented on them (chapter VI, pp. 71-87). Colonial philatelic issues, to which the author will refer in the following chapters, are also analysed here. In chapter VIII,

the author traces the emergence and evolution of themes linked to identity on European philatelic issues, namely political figures, historical characters and scenes, symbols, mythology, folklore, and landscape. He also observes how much the countries' relationship with their own philatelic themes changes over time. There are numerous examples, some of which are rather spectacular – for instance, the relationship between Republican Türkiye and the Hittites or Troy, and especially the Ottoman Empire, particularly today, when we are talking about Neo-Ottomanism (p. 108). Other examples are also interesting: Spain, Belarus, Italy. As can be seen in other media used to represent the nation (for example, postcards), stamps depicting *national* landscapes contribute to the consolidation and popularization of regions deemed important to the Nation-State and, implicitly, to the development of tourism (pp. 136-138).

Chapter IX is deeply historical, tracing the changes suffered by philately at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, amid a dramatic decline in the postal circulation of stamps and in the number of collectors, as well as in the context of the growing competition from audio-visual media (which postal stamps could not realistically counteract). The author provides a compelling analysis from the perspective of cultural history, following the new relationships between the State (Nation) and the stamp, thus, implicitly, between society and stamps. There are also numerous references to literature, films, and popular culture (pp. 149-163).

Part III of the book is dedicated to colonial philately. Although Didier Rey's book focuses on Europe, it by no means neglects the colonial empires of European countries. From the very beginning of Chapter XI (*A Stamp for Every Colony*, pp. 177-184), the author notes that the development of European colonial empires had a major impact on philately, leading to the printing of a huge number of stamps for the multitude of colonies, territories and possessions spread throughout the world (p. 167). The author states that colonial stamps are a form of triumph (including domestically) and international prestige for the issuing states, and is not wrong when he speaks of a true "imperial mystique" (p. 177). Moreover, it should be noted that the author is very attentive to the colonial issue and often vehemently condemns colonial domination, exploitation and violence.

The next chapter discusses the main themes depicted on colonial stamps and analyses the extent to which the stamps reflect the political discourse and ideology of the issuing states in relation to the colonies' own

themes. To what extent do colonial stamps represent the Metropolis and to what extent do they represent the colonies? Obviously, they largely express the political discourse of the Metropolis, exemplifying the economic, cultural, social and even sanitary benefits brought to the colonies (pp. 185-219). The author drawn attention to the stamps depicting natural landscapes in the colonies as an exhortation to promote tourism (even before the First World War) (pp. 206-207). Another interesting aspect is the portrayal of the local populations on stamps (pp. 208-219).

Chapter XIII, entitled *The So-called Return of the Latins to the Maghreb* (pp. 221-233) offers us a very interesting case study that starts from the previous chapters, dedicated to colonial philately. The chapter analyses how France, Italy and Spain, the “Latin” countries that acquired colonies and possessions in the Maghreb, justified their colonial policies with the help of stamps that invoked historical references, especially to the Roman Empire. The most interesting and spectacular examples are those of Italian philately (“Roma torna!”, references to the Mediterranean as “Mare Nostrum,” the evocation of Rome’s victory over Carthage, etc.) (pp. 223-229). The following chapter deals with the participation of the colonies in the wars waged by the Metropolis (the European colonial states) and the reflection of this participation through postage stamps (pp. 235-247).

The last chapter of Part III is dedicated to the decolonization process and its consequences for philately (pp. 249-282). Didier Rey demonstrates that this historical process is accurately reflected by philatelic issues. How do colonial powers react – philatelically – to the decolonization process? What is the nature of their relationship with the former colonies? How do the newly independent states relate to the former Metropolises? The author demonstrates that the (philatelic) answers are extremely varied, because the historical process itself was long and extremely uneven. However, we can see that the new states have preserved the philatelic traditions of colonial times, and in many cases their philatelic issues were proposed, designed and even printed in their former Metropolises (pp. 251-252).

Perhaps in these chapters dedicated to colonial philately (“the paper empire,” p. 185) one can best see how spectacular and interesting philately is. Echoing both minor and major political gestures, as well as territorial assertions and claims, expressed through hundreds of thousands of philatelic issues, these small stamps illustrate the larger historical narratives. The author, a true

connoisseur of colonial philately, identifies several particularly compelling examples: some philatelic colonial issues did not even enter circulation in the respective colonies, having been strictly intended for collectors in the Metropolis; in times of war, colonial countries continue to issue stamps even for colonies that are occupied by the enemy (pp. 187-188). In World War II, the Vichy regime and Free France (*France libre*) confronted each other for the French colonies not only by military and political means, but also by philatelic means (pp. 240-241).

The chapters in part IV of Didier Rey's book investigate particular themes of European philately: the participation of European countries in wars ("the stamp in uniform," pp. 285-309), the contestation and claim of territories, revisionist actions and demographic mutations (pp. 311-335), the Cold War (pp. 337-361). In chapter XIX (*The Return of History*) (pp. 363-377), he discusses the political and territorial restructurings after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. The Holocaust is also discussed here. These major themes of European political and military history are reflected in numerous philatelic representations, which the author of the book analyses very well: victories on the battlefield, the issue of the repatriation of prisoners of war, the triumphalist propaganda of the Soviet Union and the countries of the Communist Bloc, the representation of persecuted or contested personalities, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, territorial revisionism; all of these give the author the opportunity to make pertinent analyses and comments that result not only in an excellent overview on European philatelic issues, but also on European history in general. Moreover, it should be noted that without a very good knowledge of European history, political and territorial developments, ideologies, national histories, personalities, and great European cultural themes, the author would not have been able to write this impressive book.

Didier Rey's book is very valuable for historical research. It illustrates the vastness and variety of historical processes that have taken place in Europe (and the rest of the world) in the last two centuries by appealing to the stamps that have reflected them with great precision. At the same time, the book is also valuable for philatelic research, because it provides the historical substance without which philately would remain a merely superficial field. Whether approached from the perspective of a historian or a philatelist, Didier Rey's book makes it clear that stamps document the explosive growth

of the world in the consciousness of the general public and of stamp users (i.e., billions of people) and collectors alike. It is an awareness of the size of the world that began with the Age of Discoveries/Age of Explorations (15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries), reaching its peak during the Industrial Revolution, with printing and postage stamps, and continuing today, in the age of the Internet.

We must confess that we read the book alongside several online philatelic catalogues, as we wanted to admire as many of the stamps presented and discussed by the author as possible. He tried to insert numerous illustrations of the stamps into the book, but most of the images are too small and do not capture their graphic or written details. All of the stamps illustrated in the book would have deserved to appear in excellent graphic conditions, like those in the four colour pages that can be found after page 282. This is not the fault of the author, who is an exceptional historian and philatelist. This small shortcoming can be an opportunity for the philatelic reader to open their catalogues or even their own collection, and for the non-philatelic reader it can be an incentive to take up philately...