

Postal Forgeries in Two World Wars

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SECRET

The sharp-eyed philatelist spots vestiges of wartime intelligence operations and learns something of their nature.

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The history and high state of development of stamp collecting has long since made collectors alert to forgeries of postal stamps. Not long after the first stamp appeared in 1840 forgery began to plague collectors, and as early as 1862 a Brussels dealer published a treatise on the subject. As stamps proliferated and the rarer early issues brought a higher price, the forgers' techniques improved. Collectors were forced to educate themselves in methods of production, papers used, postal rates, and cancellations. Today thousands of collectors in all countries can differentiate at a glance among fine color shadings, perforation gauges, papers, and printing methods.

Government-sponsored postal forgery for intelligence purposes began near the end of the first world war. Thereafter, and again after World War II, collectors found on the philatelic courses of Europe both forgeries and political parodies of wartime postage stamps. Although the intended or actual use of these stamps is obscured from the public by government secrecy, serious devotees of philately were able to identify the origin of many issues by deductions from sketchy evidence and a comparison of production techniques. They found that in both wars stamp forgery proper was done only by the western allies, and that of these the British were by far the most active. For intelligence officers, the archives of the

Central Intelligence Agency contain definitive operational information on American forged printings and reveal by analogy the probable purposes of those sponsored by Great Britain.

Purposes and Problems

Postal forgery was done for purposes of psychological warfare rather than of espionage. Agent communications are in such small volume that genuine stamps could be obtained and used without risk. But the mass nature of the war mailing operations precluded purchase of genuine stamps from legitimate dealers in neutral countries, once hostilities were under way. A sudden demand in Sweden or Switzerland, for instance, for 100,000 12-pfennig German stamps of the regular 1941 issue would have betrayed the probability of a mass mailing operation, which then might have been traced to its source before it started. Thus large-scale forging was the only feasible approach.

Also to psychological warfare belonged the political parodies of enemy postage stamps. Whereas the forgeries were a means for disseminating black propaganda through the enemy postal services, the political parodies were themselves black propaganda. The production of both kinds of stamps was a sub-operation of complex and varied clandestine printing enterprises that included stickers, leaflets, music, pornography, newspapers, surrender passes, and false documents. The elaborate stamp operation also usually produced forged envelopes, addresses, postmarks, and sometimes even mailbags.

The quality of the intelligence forgeries varied considerably. The British were by far the best because they were done by regular postage stamp production facilities in England. Those of the Americans and the French resistance were a good deal poorer, reflecting the cruder production facilities available in the field. It was apparently considered unnecessary to create exact reproductions for mass mailing purposes, and imperfections were probably unavoidable because of wartime shortages of material and technicians. A major problem in some British and all American issues was color control, achieving and maintaining precisely the right mixture of the printing ink; in wartime this is a problem even for legitimate postal administrations. Field production required substitute

printing methods as well, with photolithography replacing engraving. Paper shortages and the apparent lack of suitable perforating machines led to other major technical discrepancies. But the imitation of watermarks on postal paper proved unnecessary: the watermark is undetectable once the stamp is affixed to an envelope.

The production and operational use of postal forgeries reached a climax toward the end of World War II. British production, judging from the relative quantities of stamps that eventually reached collectors and the time periods during which the German and French originals were in use, appears to fall roughly into two stages -- a few issues of high quality during the first years of the war, and more varieties of a slightly poorer quality in later years. American postal forgeries were first used in full scale in early 1945. Political parodies also multiplied as the war went on, the intensification of effort paralleling the social disintegration of Germany. Opportunities to use the intelligence forgeries increased as enemy postal services were increasingly disrupted, and the divisive potential of the political parodies was augmented with the growing prospect of Axis defeat.

Britain Takes the Lead

In 1918 the British, having decided to organize a propaganda system to undermine the enemy will to resist, mounted from Crewe House, their propaganda headquarters, an operation for distributing antiregime pamphlets, leaflets, and newspapers in the territory of the Central Powers. They planned to use air drops but also to post propaganda to selected addresses through the enemy mails. For this purpose they reproduced regular-issue common-denomination stamps -- the German of 10 and 15 pfennig, the Bavarian of 5, 10, and 15 pfennig, and the Austrian of 5, 10, and 25 heller. All of these were probably printed within the same period of a few months, and the die proof of one shows the date "25 September 1918." The end of the war overtook the project before it became operational, but it is worth noting that it contained all the basic ingredients used by the allies during World War II.

When copies of these stamps appeared on the philatelic market in 1921 the philatelists soon discovered where and by whom they had been

printed. They found, by comparing the papers, printing methods, gums, and perforations, that they could have been produced only in England, and only in the plant of De La Rue and Company, one of the three printers then making stamps for the British post office. The British government, pleading the Official Secrets Act, has never admitted to authorship of these issues.

In World War II the first reported instance of postal forgery was a German operation: in December 1939 British newspapers said envelopes containing German propaganda had been delivered to British householders. These, franked with stamps of neutral countries, had forged postmarks and had not passed through the mails. But this early case is the only evidence that the Germans were at all active with postal forgeries, and the British held their lead.

The British origin of many forged French and German stamps could be conclusively established by virtue of a slightly misplaced pin in the perforation machine used in their production. The resultant perforation drop at a certain position in the second vertical row of stamps in each sheet is exactly the same as that occurring in the regular British 1937 issues printed by the government's contract printer, Harrison and Sons of London. It is therefore virtually certain that Harrison's produced the stamps; they were definitely perforated on a machine owned by that firm.

French Stamps

Forgeries of French stamps used during the Pétain regime are practically all British in origin. Earliest were the 25- and 30-centimes values of the 1938 "Mercury" regular issue, which was in use until 1942. The forgeries are typographed, like the originals, and the color matching is very good. But aside from minute but definite printing variations, they differ from the originals in the gauge of their perforations. The forgeries of the Pétain issues could pass scrutiny the more readily because of a wide variation in the printings of the genuine French stamps resulting from the scarcity of proper paper and inks.

The British also forged a single value of the "Iris" issue of 1939 and eight varieties of the Pétain regular issue used from 1942 until the invasion. While no samples of the forgeries have turned up in used condition, it is likely they were widely and successfully used in the extensive agent operations run against France from the United Kingdom.

A single forgery of the Pétain issue was produced in France itself by the French resistance movement at the so-called "Atelier des Faux de Défense de la France" on the Rue Scribe in Paris. Its actual use in mailing operations is questionable: it is ungummed, printed on poor quality paper, obviously perforated differently from the originals, and lithographed instead of typographed; the whole design is clogged with color. Reminders were exhibited in November 1945 as part of the production of the Atelier.

German Stamps

Both the United States and Great Britain forged German regular issues. That the British started early in the war is evident in the existence of a forged 12-pfennig stamp of the 1933-36 issue with a portrait of President Hindenburg: by the end of 1942 all stamps of this type had been superseded by those with Hitler's portrait. This stamp is technically the most deceptive forgery of the Second World War; single copies almost defy detection. It is identical with the original in color, paper, perforation, and method of reproduction. It was printed in sheets of four, however, and examples with sheet margins are readily distinguished by a wide colored band not seen on the margins of original sheets. It was used on envelopes, probably dropped inside Germany. An envelope with stamp uncanceled, containing a propaganda leaflet and addressed to Munich, is extant. None showing postal usage have been discovered.

The British subsequently forged the 3-, 4-, 6-, and 8-pfennig values of the Hitler head regular issue current from 1941 until the end of the war. They were printed in accurately perforated sheets of twenty (5x4) with plain margins, but the forgery has no watermark and the gum is yellowish rather than clear. The engraving also can readily be differentiated from the original by highlights on the portrait. It is fairly certain that these saw operational use, probably in airdrops Military

franchise labels for German army field mail were also reproduced by the British and apparently used in disseminating propaganda to troops on active duty. Except for some small discrepancies of color and perforation the reproduction is quite passable. They were printed in sheets of twenty with plain margins, rather than the colored and numbered margins of original sheets.

American forgery of German stamps was first made public with the sale of President Roosevelt's stamp collection after the war. The examples in this collection were accompanied by a letter from OSS head General Donovan saying they had been "printed in Switzerland by O.W.I. representatives" and used since November 1942 in cross-border mailing of the Frankfurt Zeitung and other propaganda material.

These forgeries are rather poor in quality and easily distinguished from the originals by a great difference in perforation, a poor cloth match, and in the case of the 12-pfennig stamp by the fact that they were done by photolithography while the originals were recess printed (engraved). In one case the reproduction was reportedly so poor that a second printing was necessary before it could be used.

Italian and Dutch Stamps

Only one forgery of an Italian stamp is known; details of its production suggest that it is British. It is an unwater-marked reproduction of the 25-centisimi green of the 1929 - 42 regular issue bearing the portrait of King Victor Emanuel. It is extremely deceptive, being readily distinguishable only by sheet size (20) and the lack of a watermark. Like the original, it was produced by photogravure, and its perforation differed only very slightly from the original. In 1941 the only printers among the allies with facilities and experience in the photogravure process were Harrison and Sons, the owners of the faulty perforation machine. The absence of further Italian issues is probably accounted for by Italy's early surrender.

There was a very poor forgery of unknown origin of the 11/2-cent stamp of the 1934 - 46 Netherlands issue, used during the war to mail printed papers. The reproduction was presumably intended for propaganda papers and leaflets. Its poor technical quality suggests that it may have been done by the Dutch underground in the Netherlands itself or with

makeshift facilities abroad. The color, paper, perforation, and even size are wrong. The ink is a bluish gray, not the clear gray of the original, and sunk into the paper. It could have passed in a dim light, but it is doubtful that any postal clerk used to handling the genuine article would be deceived.

In mid-1944 the Office of Strategic Services began planning that led to the production of forged 6- and 12-pfennig stamps of the regular German issue to be used for mass mailing of anti-Nazi propaganda. Earlier attempts to disseminate propaganda widely in the Reich had been frustrated by lack of access. A complicated operation was devised by which the Army Air Force, after shooting up enemy mail trains, would drop faked German mail sacks containing subversive material in forged envelopes alongside them.

During the first four months of 1945, 21 people in the OSS Morale Operations unit attached to the Mediterranean Theater of Operations were occupied in carrying out this scheme, labeled "Operation Cornflakes." Their task was to exploit the disintegration of German administrative functions in the last weeks of the war by infiltrating printed propaganda -- principally the "underground" newspaper *Das Neue Deutschland* -- into the Reichspost. Their objectives were to weaken further the will of the German people to fight, to increase confusion in the communication and transport services, and to convince the German people that there was an anti-Nazi underground in Germany especially active in business and banking circles.

"Cornflakes" was built up from scratch. Interrogators, under cover of "administrative research," debriefed former mail clerks among the German prisoners on postal procedures and packing and labeling methods. The MO unit studied the latest German postal regulations and reproduced German stamps, postal cancellations, business stationery, and mail sacks. A special unit in Rome culled from German telephone books more than two million names and addresses in cities all over the Reich, and typists addressed forged envelopes at the rate of 15,000 a week. Some envelopes were addressed by hand to provide a plausible mix in each bag.

The drops were executed by the 14th Fighter Group of the 15th Air Force, a unit which was successfully conducting low-level air attacks against rail traffic in southern Germany and Austria. The letters to be dropped on each bomb run had to be so addressed that they would have been

carried to, from, or through towns on one of the rail lines on the day's hunt; and this meant that postal cancellations, prepared and predated in Rome, had to be stamped on the envelopes at the airfield immediately prior to takeoff. In order to avoid the telltale traces left by the ordinary leaflet bomb, a special bomb was developed that would eject the mail sack from the canister on signal from a control button on the pilot's panel.

The 14th Fighter Group worked out its technique for the mixed mailbag and high explosive bomb runs in several practice sessions and began operations in early 1945. The Group would seek out an enemy train, preferably with a mail car attached, moving north from southern Austria, and attack and demolish it. The mailbags would be ejected from fifty feet above the train, so that they would drop undamaged. In the resulting confusion the bags would be picked up from the debris and forwarded to the nearest post office.

In February and March 1945 ten sorties were successfully run and about 120 mail sacks dropped. Prisoners interviewed following the surrender of the German army in Italy verified the receipt of *Das Neue Deutschland* through the military post and said the paper was known as far north as the Baltic Ports. They reported it widely rumored in Germany that an underground movement called "Das Neue Deutschland" existed in Austria and parts of Germany.

"Cornflakes" was not executed without mishaps, however. At least one bag, dropped near St. Poelten, Austria, in February 1945, was neutralized by the misspelling of a return address printed on an envelope. A German postal clerk noticed the substitution of C for K in the word "Kassenverein," and postal inspection followed. The project was also endangered at one time by attempts of the screened German prisoners employed for hand addressing to use it for their own purposes. They were discovered addressing envelopes for letters written home.

Propaganda Stamps

Propaganda variations of enemy postage stamps resulted naturally from combining the practice of stamp forgery with the simultaneous production of miscellaneous propaganda stickers and labels. They can

be considered in two classes -- comparatively subtle changes meant to serve specific propaganda ends, and broad propagandistic parodies probably intended for world philatelic markets.

In the first category, several stamps produced by the British and apparently intended to promote divisions within the Nazi leadership may represent different facets of a single operation launched late in the war. They all follow the principle of removing Hitler's portrait from a regular stamp and substituting that of another Nazi leader. The Hitler birthday commemorative was used as the prototype for a souvenir sheet of six stamps showing Field Marshal Goering and commemorating his birthday on 12 January 1944. The frequently forged 6-pfennig Hitler head regular issue was changed to show Himmler. (Harrison's perforating machine is again in evidence on sheets of the Himmler stamp.) Hitler's head was also removed from one value of the Polish occupation issue and replaced with that of Governor Frank. This stamp was reproduced by Harrison's photogravure method.

Two efforts, one German and one British, were made in support of national liberation and resistance movements. In 1944, when the leader of the Azad Hind movement, Subhas Chandra Bose, followed the Japanese into India, the state Printing works in Berlin issued a series of ten Azad Hind stamps which were never used. And the British, some time after the August 1944 execution of General Erich von Witzleben, one of the chief conspirators in the 20 July bomb plot, substituted his portrait for Hitler's on a German stamp issued in November 1943 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Munich uprising. Changing also the legend on the original, they retained its color and design.

The broad propaganda parodies are chiefly American and German. American production centered around a reworking of the 12-pfennig Hitler head stamp to show a Hitler skull, under which "Futsches" (Collapsed) was substituted in the legend "Deutsches Reich." One important item in this production was a photolithographed parody of a Hitler Souvenir sheet with four skulls resembling Hitler.

German efforts were late, amateurish, and ineffective. Himmler reportedly broached the idea of philatelic parodies to Hitler in February 1944 in answer to the Fuehrer's complaints that the German foreign propaganda organs had failed to tell the world how completely Britain

had sold out to the Russians. He was authorized to market parodies throughout the philatelic world to deliver this message and use the proceeds to finance SS development.

Parodies were made of one value of the 1935 issue commemorating the Silver Jubilee of King George V, of a single stamp issued for the Coronation of George VI, and of six low values of the then current regular British issue. Himmler's design ideas are reflected in liberal use of the Star of Zion and the substitution of Stalin's head for those of the British monarchs. Some of the regular issues were overprinted to advertise the "Liquidation of Empire." The German parodies were printed on the watermarked paper used for ration books. Few examples are extant because the idea never got far beyond pilot production.

Himmler's scheme met with widespread resistance from officials of the intelligence services, who regarded it as a waste of time. Attempts to market the stamps through the "Operation Bernhard" network, already engaged in forging and selling British banknotes, and through agents of the foreign Sicherheitsdienst never panned out. Himmler, at last thoroughly frustrated by the failure of his idea, ordered that the stamps be given to Sir Oswald Mosley's Black Shirts for dissemination in England, but with the incipient collapse of Germany the confusion in Berlin overtook this final alternative as well.

The Outlook

Forgery of postage stamps for intelligence purposes may be unnecessary in future operations. Postage meter marks have already largely replaced stamps for commercial mailing purposes in most countries of the world. The most widespread use of meters is for bulk mail and newspapers, printed matter, precisely the medium through which written propaganda is most easily disseminated. Meter marks eliminate the need for both stamp and cancellation forgeries, and reproduction of the simple red-inked double-purpose impression should be quite easy and effective. In any one country, meter impressions are to a high degree standardized in design, differing only in the letter and serial number of the machine. Unlike postage stamps, moreover, which are changed every few years, meters remain in use for long periods of

time, the widespread distribution of all sizes of machines in post offices and business firms precluding frequent change. The American directors of Operation Cornflakes anticipated this development in including a meter mark -- the only meter mark known to have been forged in wartime -- in their mailbag mix.

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