



Island. Zensurdiebs
LOMP. A. Bern

War, Espionage, and Mail Robbery

Philatelic Treasures With Hidden Messages and More

BY STEVEN J. BERLIN

The early history of war and espionage dates far back, at least to the pre-Christian era of about 1450 B.C. with the story of Joshua and the Siege of Jericho. There was a harlot named Rahab who betrayed her city by protecting spies in order to ensure her family's safety.

So it should be no surprise that soon after the British Post Office was formed in 1657 it created a secret office for the purpose of intercepting and evaluating letter content that may have military and/or political espionage. This secret office was not made public until 1742 and received financial support from the British Treasury. The office was eventually transferred to the foreign secretary and it was finally abolished in 1847 by Lord Palmerston. Austria-Hungary established possibly the first permanent espionage structure in 1848–1849. For other countries — Italy in 1900 and Russia in 1906, for example — these came a little later. Formal departments of military intelligence and censorship also developed. These early intelligence services were often dedicated to specific countries or geographic zones. Both the British and Americans assigned the offices of naval intelligence as early as 1882. Various military attaches were established by various governments that established the collection of military information in these countries.

During the Second Boer War (1899–1902), the British obtained significant experience in censorship. World War I started less than two decades later and the British Post Office played a pivotal role in both censorship and espionage. They were trying to catch spies by intercepting mail on one hand and preventing leaks of vital military secrets on the other. Postal censorship became routine to safeguard intel-

ligence in all countries involved in the war and later became prominent in any country at war or in political turmoil. The postal service also supported its employees who served in the military during this conflict and acted as a returning home port for their postal hero employees. Perhaps illustrating the close link between the military and postal service, the 12,000-member Post Office Rifles battalion, made up entirely of postal employees, fought mainly on the Western Front and suffered 1,800 killed and 4,500 wounded. The Post Office even supported convalescent facilities if needed.

Great Britain's main intelligence agencies, MI5 for domestic intelligence and MI6 for foreign operations, stemmed directly from the creation of the Secret Service Bureau in 1909. Both were in full service as WWI approached in 1914. Vernon Kell was the head of domestic intelligence service and Mansfield Smith-Cumming led the foreign side for the United Kingdom. Smith-Cumming died in 1923 and was replaced by Admiral Sir Hugh Sinclair, who served until 1939. Kell remained head of MI5 until 1940 when he was dismissed by Winston Churchill. With the winds of the forthcoming WWI, Germany began training individuals to collect information in European countries and around the world. This practice also was instituted by the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy and even the United States with the underlying premise to ensure their countries' safety.

Carl Hans Lody, a former German seaman and a lieutenant in the German Naval Reserve, traveled to Edinburgh at the outbreak of WWI. Posing as an American, he took notes on warships and communicated with Berlin through Sweden, which at that time was a neutral country. Having never

received any formal training as a spy, Lody was quickly and easily captured, followed by a high-profile trial. Found guilty, Lody was the first person executed in the Tower of London in 167 years.

In another case, Norwegian Alfred Hagn, an alleged German agent, was arrested in London May 24, 1917. He sent messages written in special inks in his communications with the Germans. Hagn was arrested, sentenced to death, but released after the war ended. Even before such activities, clandestine actions involving philately were building as the world edged toward war.

The British in the early 1900s forged a small number of Austrian and German stamps for secret service purposes. These were often the German 10- and 15-pfennig stamps. They were often used to mail British propaganda as well as providing military information over the borders of their enemies.



Figure 1. World War I-era forgeries featured the iconic Germania figure.

Herbert A. Friedman wrote an article in the September 1973 issue of *The American Philatelist* titled “British Espionage Forgeries of the First World War.” In his article, Friedman points out that a London auction house was offering vintage German and Bavarian stamps. The stamps were counterfeits from WWI [Figure 1]. Interestingly, they were the British forgeries created of the 10- and 15-pfennig stamps in WWI, having a different stamp perforation than the German stamps. The British also counterfeited stamps of Austria and Bavaria. They may never have been discovered had not a very well-known allied diplomat shown them to a philatelic friend.

The first reference of the forgeries appeared October 7, 1922 in the *Philatelic Magazine* of Great Britain. The so-called “espionage stamps” at the time of discovery put many stamp dealers at potential risk by supplying these various forged stamps. As mentioned earlier, many agents had possession of these stamps and used them in various ways to transmit messages or propaganda behind enemy lines; often using a neutral country to send the mail to a contact. Of course, this was down played by the British au-

thorities after it was discovered. The British firm of Waterlow was the printer. Friedman believes there were as many as eight stamps and three bank notes forged by the British in WWI. Allied spies in Germany somehow obtained these stamps through military channels and often used them to write messages with special ink on the back of stamps. The stamped paper had been specifically prepared so that messages could be sent to certain addresses often in neutral countries and from there forwarded on to the intended parties. The stamps were often removed from the envelope and the messages, either behind or on the stamp, were read. However, the censors became so strict in Germany that it often became almost impossible to send mail.

This way of sending messages was used also by those who needed to get word to others, not necessarily spies. Ken Lawrence, a well-known philatelist and philatelic author, has a permanent exhibit at the Spungen Foundation. His philatelic exhibit reveals a cover sent from one family to another between concentration camps during the Holocaust. The similar method of writing on or behind the stamps was used [Figure 2].

The Germans counterfeited (1915–17) the 15- and 20-kopek stamps of Russia and changed the last three lines to anti-Russian messages. The original letters are reported to have all been destroyed and it is estimated that maybe only six covers may still be in existence. This information was brought to light at the Great Belgian Stamp Exhibition in Brussels by Belgian Minister of State Jules Renkin.

Of course, there were other methods of communication for spies, such as coded telegrams, newspaper articles and even carrier pigeons. They are difficult to find today but are expensive when bought in auction. In *Linn’s Stamp News* (August 10, 2015, page 13), was an advertisement from

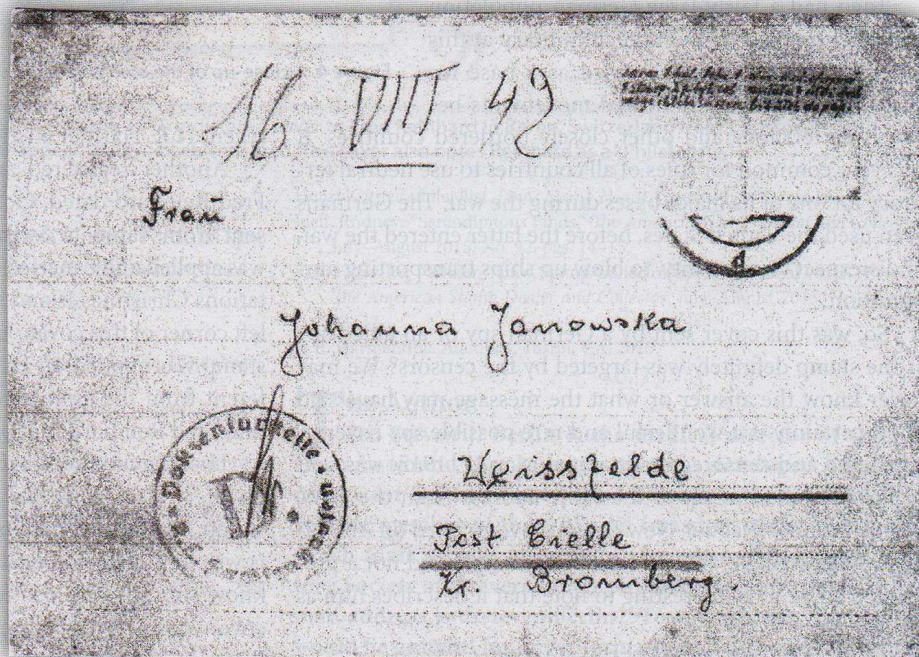


Figure 2. Concentration camp cover with secret writing beneath the stamp. Courtesy Ken Lawrence.

Henry Gitner offering WWI and World War II propaganda stamps for sale. This brings to light the cover nearby [Figure 3], which I obtained in May 2015 while I was at Europhilex in London. It was a registered cover dated December 28, 1916 from Lome, Togo with three stamps from the Gold Coast a half- 1-, and 2-penny. The fourth stamp was missing (denomination unknown). The stamps were overprinted Togo/Anglo-French Occupation and the cover was sent to Monsieur Fred. Reinhard at 41 Bantigerstrasse, Berne, Suisse 17. French military censor markings are noted on both the front and back of the cover. A very interesting foreign censor marking was applied “Ausland. Zensurdieba stahl” meaning also that the mail or stamp in this situation was stolen.

There also was an orange notation and arrow pointing to where the stamp was taken and you can see the area by the circular Lome postmark where the stamp was removed from the cover [Figure 4]. There is also a straight line marking “P.A. Bern” from the postal authority in Berne, Switzerland also covering some of the area where the stamp was taken.

Togo had a fairly large German population but was occupied by the French military at this time. Switzerland also was used as a base for allied intelligence as it allowed movements between its territory and other closely bordered countries. It was very common for spies of all countries to use neutral territory for one of its major bases during the war. The Germans even used the United States, before the latter entered the war, in disrespect of neutrality, to blow up ships transporting ammunition.

So, was this cover sent by a German spy or an allied spy as the stamp definitely was targeted by the censors? We may never know the answer or what the message may have said but it certainly is a wonderful and rare possible spy cover. A registered and censored cover, dated May 17, 1915, was sent to Fred Reinhard, Esq. to the same address from the N.W. Pacific Islands, (Rabaul, New Britain) overprinted on Australia postage stamps. This was a typed example and not a pre-printed cover. It is interesting to note that it describes him as an attorney.

Did this have any unusual codes? This cover also is in a



Figure 3. A registered cover from Togo to philatelist and dealer Fred Reinhard in Switzerland that has a stamp removed. French military censors examined the letter and indicated the stamp was “stolen.”



Figure 4. A close-up of the area where the stamp is missing.

recent H.R. Harmer auction [Figure 5].

Another registered and preprinted cover [Figure 6] to Fred Reinhard dated, October 31, 1918, two years later, was sent from Tahiti to Switzerland. A 30-cent Oceania stamp was applied and canceled in Papeete. A 5-cent Coconut Plantations Christmas Island stamp was also applied to the lower left corner of this cover. A New York and San Francisco backstamp was applied on December 28, 1918. This cover is different from the espionage cover in general because it notes that Fred Reinhard is a “philatelist.”

Looking at the Christmas Island stamp being upside down, it also looks like the stamp covers over a previous stamp, maybe one possibly hiding a message? The question is was he a collector, dealer, or philatelic spy? We may never know this answer. It is further interesting to note that this cover was received by him at the end of World War I. Maybe this also is a reason there was no censorship to this cover

because the war was basically over. This cover was just recently noted in the September 3, 2015 stamp auction catalog of Channel Islands Postal Bid Sales No. 40, Lot 2319.

Just when I thought I was finished writing this article I received a July-August copy of *The American Stamp Dealer and Collector* and there were two articles that mentioned philately and potential espionage. Rodney Juell tells about a customer, Ken Newman, who had purchased a cover that struck his interest in 1945 that was addressed to Ernest Wallis in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It turned out that Wallis also was a collector, but was arrested in Chicago in 1947. It seems Wallis was guilty of stealing pictures of the atomic bomb.

Another such instance was mentioned by Kevin Lowther while he was working as a reporter in South Africa in 1965. South Africa at this time did not permit journalists to visit the “south west” as it was an oppressed African population. He apparently took letters from a person or persons to be mailed outside South Africa. He was also constantly watched as he was thought to be a United Nations spy. Well, perhaps philatelists do make the best philatelic spies.

References

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 Ken Lawrence, philatelist, personal communications.
 MS Templewood III (47) pg. 5–6.



Figure 5. A 1915 cover sent to Fred Reinhard from Australia to Switzerland was reviewed by a censor.

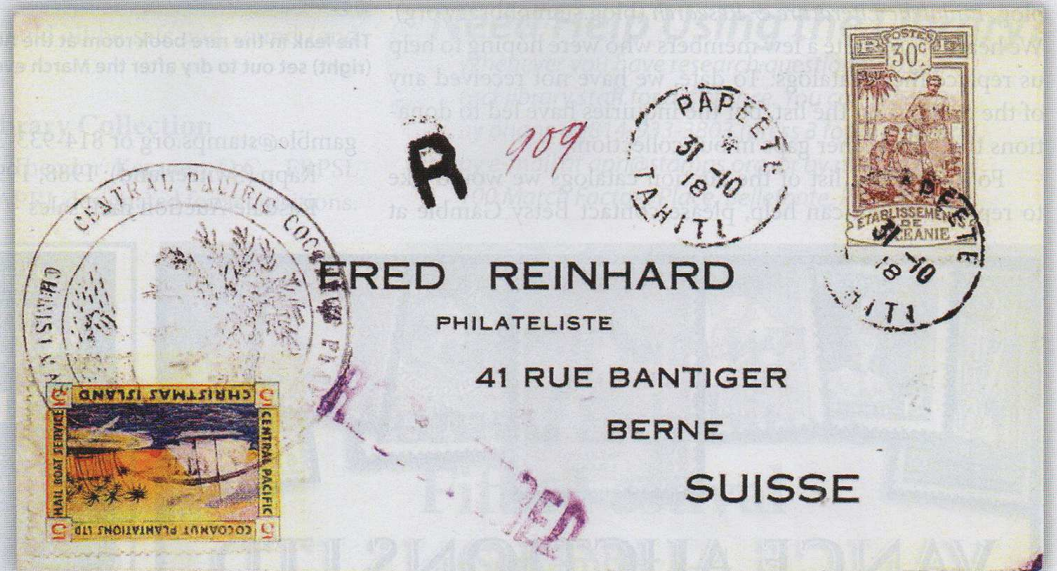


Figure 6. An October 1918 registered cover to Fred Reinhard in Berne, Switzerland from Christmas Island does not appear to have been censored. The cover also notes Reinhard as a “Philatelite.”

Henry Gitner, philatelist. *Linn's Stamp News*, August 10, 2015, pg. 13.
 Juell, Rodney: “Serendipitous Finds.” *The American Stamp Dealer and Collector*, July–August 2015, No. 92, pgs. 14–15.
 Kevin Lowther “Tinker, Tailor, Stamp Collector, Spy: A Personal Postal History,” *The American Stamp Dealer and Collector*, July–August 2015, No. 92, pgs. 28–32.
 H.R. Harmer, Inc. Auctions, Tustin, CA, 2015.

The Author

Dr. Steven J. Berlin is the medical director of Ogenix Corp., a wound care company that has developed new technology for healing diabetic and difficult to heal wounds. He is a life member of the APS and treasurer of the Wreck and Crash Mail Society. He also is a member of the Postal History Society and several other philatelic organizations. His e-mail address is drstevenjberlin2916@gmail.com. The author would be grateful for any information on this cover or others related to espionage and mail robbery.