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Figure 1. Postcard showing the Germans arriving to sign the Armistice on November 11, 1918.

The disintegration of the Hohenzollern Empire 1918–1923

Alfred F. Kugel

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The House of Hohenzollern originated during the eleventh century in the area around the town of Hechingen in the Swabian part of Germany. Its name was derived from the Hohenzollern castle, which I can attest still remains as a significant tourist attraction in Württemberg today. The family had several branches, of which the most successful was the Franconian, for which the first important milestone was the acquisition of control over the Electorate of Brandenburg in 1415, with the second being the acquisition of the Duchy of Prussia in 1525. These territories were later merged to create the Kingdom of Prussia in 1701.

The most famous Hohenzollern monarch was King Friedrich II (the Great), who reigned from 1740 to 1786. During this period, Prussia participated in the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War (of which the North American portion is known as the French and Indian War), and as a result of which its territory was significantly expanded through the acquisition of Silesia from Austria. West Prussia and Ermland were added as a result of the First Partition of Poland in 1772.

By 1815, Prussia had become regarded as one of the primary European powers based on its participation in the coalition with Austria, Britain and Russia that defeated Emperor Napoleon I. It was a full participant in the Congress of Vienna, chaired by the Austrian Foreign Minister, Prince von Metternich, which established the boundaries of much of Europe for the ensuing fifty years. As part of the arrangements, Prussia received further territorial enhancement westward to the Rhine.

The expansion of the country continued during the time (1862–1890) when Otto von Bismarck was Prussian Prime Minister (as well as the Chancellor of Germany from 1871 to 1890), with the annexation of Schleswig-Holstein and Hanover following successful wars with Denmark in 1864 and Austria in 1866.

His most significant achievement, however, was the proclamation of the German Empire (which was known as the Second Reich in deference to the old Holy Roman Empire) in the Versailles Palace on January 28, 1871. At that time, King Wilhelm I of Prussia was declared Emperor of Germany in association with the victory in the Franco-Prussian War and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine.

As it turned out, the dynasty was undone by the excessively expansionary policies of Emperor Wilhelm II who ruled from 1888 to 1918. Although a grandson of Queen Victoria, Wilhelm was seen as a threat to the British control of the seas and its overseas possessions as a result of his aggressive naval construction program. This drove Great Britain, which had often been an ally of Prussia in the past, into the arms of its ancient enemy, France. As a result, when World War I broke out, the Germans could only call on relatively weak allies: Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria, while France had relatively strong allies in Britain, Russia and, eventually, the United States.

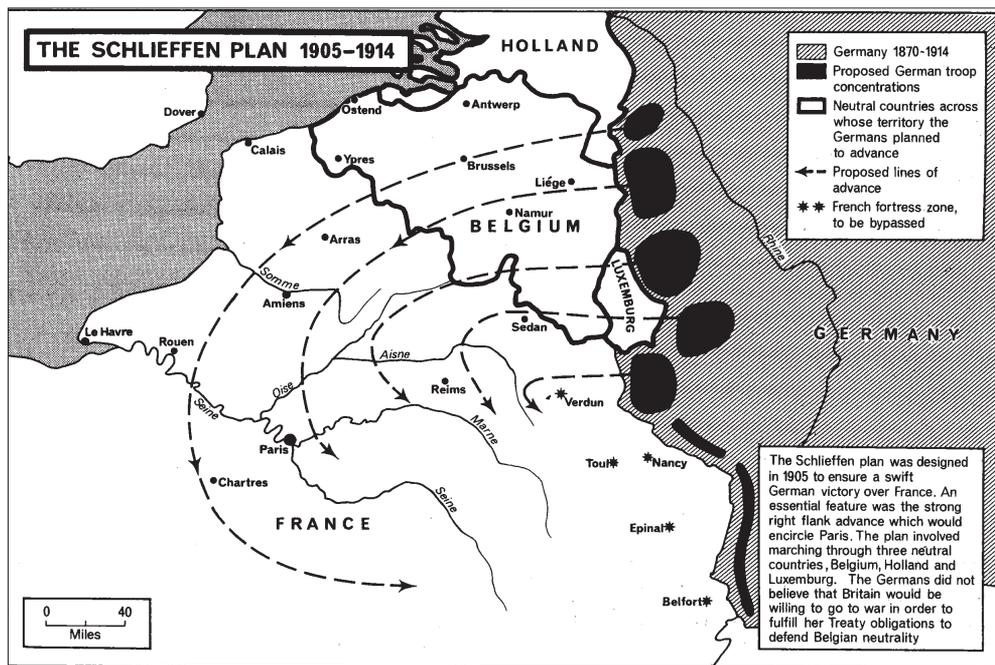
This juxtaposition became crucial when the war lasted much longer than had been envisaged by those on either side. The original combatants became increasingly exhausted and, after mid-1918, the likely outcome of the fighting became clear as the German forces were weakening day by day while fresh American troops were arriving on the other side of the battlefield on a regular basis.

When it was finally recognized that Germany had lost the war, the Kaiser and Crown Prince abdicated and went into exile in The Netherlands on November 9, 1918. Two days later, the German representatives signed an armistice with the Allies in the famous railway car in the Compiègne Forest at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, thus ending the fighting as well as the Hohenzollern Empire. Figure 1 shows the arrival of the German delegation to sign the Armistice agreement.

GERMANY IN WORLD WAR I

Following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the thrones of Austria and Hungary, by a Serbian anarchist in Sarajevo, Bosnia on June 28, 1914, World War I became seemingly inevitable. Austria-Hungary mounted a punitive invasion of Serbia a month later,

Figure 2. The Schlieffen Plan of 1905 for the Invasion of France.



which brought Russia into the war to support its Slavic brethren, thus causing Germany to join in to support its ally, Austria. Soon, most of Europe was involved as a result of the alliance systems that had been created over the prior decades.

The primary focus of the Germans was to attack Russia's ally, France. However, rather than do this directly across the heavily fortified border area between the two countries, Germany implemented a plan that had been drawn up by Count Alfred von Schlieffen in 1905, when he was Chief of the General Staff. It called for a massive flanking attack through Belgium and swinging around to the west and south of Paris in order to throw the French army back on itself in a giant encircling movement. See Figure 2 for a map of the Schlieffen Plan. Even on his deathbed in 1911, von Schlieffen urged the military leaders to "keep the right wing strong" so that the plan could succeed. However, this is not what actually happened.

In fact, Russian forces mobilized more quickly than anticipated by the Germans, which permitted them to mount an invasion of East Prussia very early in the war. Concerned about an adverse impact on public morale by this violation of the fatherland, the High Command decided to transfer two army corps from the right wing of the Western Front to the east at just the crucial time. As a result, the Germans were forced to shorten the proposed radius of their advance and turn east before reaching Paris.

This move permitted French reinforcements moving out of the capital by buses and taxis to hit the German flank and force them to pull back. This outcome in what became known as the First Battle of the Marne, meant that the Germans had lost their opportunity to knock the French out of the war in the early weeks and condemned the combatants to four years of bloody stalemated trench warfare on the Western Front. This situation resulted in millions of casualties but did not change the basic position of the combatants in any significant way.

The ensuing years produced German victories on other fronts, as the Russians were driven out of Poland, Lithuania and southern Latvia in 1915–1916; Serbia was overrun in 1915 and Romania in 1917. However, none of these developments were crucial to the outcome of the war. In fact, the need to send German troops to stiffen the Austrians fighting in Galicia, Serbia and Italy as well as to aid the Turkish forces at Gallipoli and then in the Caucasus and Palestine served as a diversion of German strength.

Even the withdrawal of Russia from the war in March 1918 did not have a major impact. While this event did free up large numbers of German troops for a final effort on the Western Front in the spring of 1918, a potential breakthrough against exhausted British and French forces was averted by the arrival of large numbers of fresh American soldiers at the front. By late summer it was apparent that Germany had lost the war, and events then played out based on that scenario.

THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

The negotiations leading to the peace treaties between the Allies and the Central Powers took place in and around Paris and involved a large number of participants, including representatives of the countries that had supported the Allies as well as a variety of groups seeking recognition, including Armenians, Kurds and others. However, most of the key decisions were made by the Council of Four—Premier Clemenceau of France, Prime Minister Lloyd George of Great Britain, President Wilson of the United States and Premier Orlando of Italy.

In fact, the major Allies were very sympathetic to the cause of ethnic reordering and generally supported the breaking away of various minority groups from the old Empires. As a result, some territories were stripped from Germany without much ado, including Alsace-Lorraine to France, Posen and the Corridor to Poland and small bits to Belgium and Czechoslovakia. In addition, plebiscites were scheduled in various other territories to determine which country

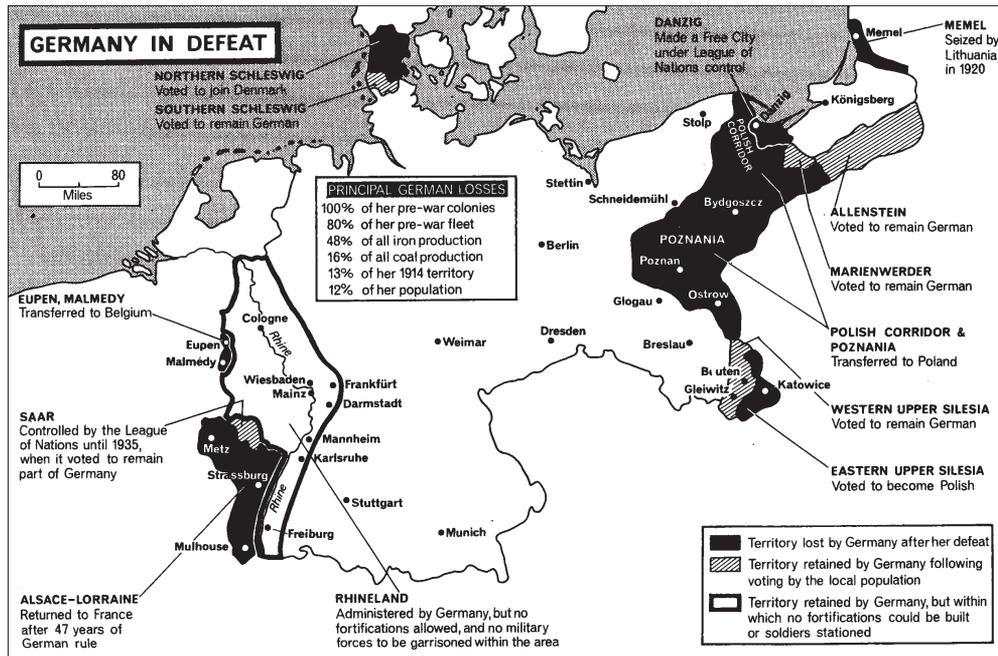


Figure 3. Map of Territories Lost by Germany in the Treaty of Versailles.

the inhabitants would prefer. As a result, Allenstein and Marienwerder elected to remain with Germany, while Schleswig and Upper Silesia were partitioned between Germany and Denmark or Germany and Poland, respectively. Figure 3 shows the territories lost by Germany as a result of the war.

The Peace Conference gave its highest priority to settling the questions relating to Germany, then provided an outline for dealing with the lesser members of the Central Powers, leaving

Figure 4. Signing of the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919.





Figure 5. Cover sent by a member of the German peace delegation in Versailles.

the specifics to be resolved by working groups. In general, input was not sought from the Germans, who were essentially ordered to sign the final terms and were not in a position to resist. As a result, the German delegates reluctantly signed the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919—exactly five years since the assassination of the unlucky Archduke Franz Ferdinand started the inexorable march toward war. Figure 4 shows the signing of the Treaty, while Figure 5 is a cover sent by a member of the German Peace Delegation in Versailles.

One of the most controversial parts of the Treaty was a section which required Germany to accept the entire blame for the origin of the war, thus subjecting it to severe penalties in terms of losses of population and territory as well as monetary reparations far beyond its ability to pay. This non-negotiable demand poisoned the atmosphere in Versailles and led to a German determination to overturn the Treaty at the earliest possible opportunity, which later played into the hands of a rising political agitator, Adolf Hitler.

ANNEXED TERRITORIES

A key decision made by the Allies was to strip Germany of a number of strategic territories coveted by its neighbors. Alsace and Lorraine were at the top of the list as the French sought revenge for the annexation of these provinces by the Germans in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. In addition, it was decided that Poland needed an outlet to the Baltic Sea, which required that a corridor be carved out of Posen and West Prussia, thus severing East Prussia from the rest of the Reich.

As to Alsace and Lorraine, these provinces in the *twilight zone* between France and Germany had been fought over by the two rivals over the centuries, with the French having taken them from the Holy Roman Empire (Alsace by Louis XIV in 1648 and Lorraine by Louis XVI in 1766) until the Germans recovered them in 1871. They were, of course, immediately reannexed by France in 1918.

As a separate entity, Poland had disappeared entirely as a result of the three partitions between 1772 and 1795. Although Napoleon subsequently created a vassal Duchy of Warsaw, it came to an end with his defeat, and the Polish people were divided between Austria, Prussia and Russia. In 1918, the Allies agreed to restore Poland to nationhood, and the former German territories of Posen and West Prussia were incorporated into the new Polish state.

Elsewhere, the French felt strongly that Belgium should have some territorial compensation for the damage caused by the Germans during the war. As a result, several towns along the border, including Eupen, Malmedy and Moresnet, were transferred to Belgium in the peace treaty, and they were formally annexed on January 1, 1920.

In addition, the minor Hültschin Territory went to Czechoslovakia, while Danzig and Memel were set up as free cities under Allied supervision. However, the latter was seized by Lithuania in 1923, while the former remained independent until being reannexed to Germany in September 1939. Moreover, the former German colonies in Africa and the Pacific were divided up between the Allies—mostly to Britain, France and Japan, with some bits of East Africa going to Belgium and Portugal.

PLEBISCITE TERRITORIES

There were several areas for which the ultimate disposition was unclear, so the Allies decided to hold plebiscites so that the inhabitants could determine for themselves which country they wished to live in. Such voting was conducted in two separate portions of East Prussia—Allenstein and Marienwerder—during 1920, with both deciding to remain with Germany rather than joining Poland. The voting was more complicated in Schleswig, with the ultimate resolution being to divide the territory, with the northern portion going to Denmark and the southern remaining with Germany.

As to Upper Silesia, the plebiscite in this area in this eastern part of Germany was held on March 20, 1921. There was sectarian fighting between irregular forces for some months both before and after the voting. The vote came out with 60% favoring continuing as a part of Germany. However, there were areas with large Polish majorities so the Allies decided to partition the territory. In the end, the Poles got one-third of the land area but 80% of the heavy industry—with neither of the participants being satisfied with the outcome.

The final plebiscite dealt with at the Peace Conference was the Saar, which consisted of a portion of the Rhine Province of Prussia and adjacent parts of the Bavarian Palatinate. The French were highly desirous of obtaining the raw materials produced in the Saar in order to help in the rebuilding of their economy. However, the other Allies did not favor allowing France to annex this strongly Germanic area. As a compromise, the French were allowed to govern the territory for fifteen years, after which a plebiscite would be held to determine its future. When the vote was held on January 13, 1935, the outcome was strongly for rejoining Germany, and the reunification took place on March 1, 1935.

THE FREE CITIES

Reflecting the heavily (95%) German ethnicity of the residents, the Allies were reluctant to attach the city of Danzig to Poland but recognized that the Polish economy needed a convenient port on the Baltic Sea. As a result, a decision was reached to separate the area from Germany and create a Free City under League of Nations supervision, effective as of January 10, 1920. Danzig was included in a customs union with Poland, thus permitting free importation and exportation of goods, and the Poles were allowed to control all of the railway lines in the area. The city was administered by an elected Senate, but actions needed approval from a High Commissioner appointed by the League of Nations. It was reannexed to Germany on

September 1, 1939, at the time of the invasion of Poland.

A similar situation arose with regard to the Memel territory at the far northern tip of Germany. The city itself was heavily Germanic, but the Lithuanians needed a port on the Baltic. Thus, the Memel area was established as a protectorate of the Allies, including a French High Commissioner, with the intention being that it would eventually be a self-governing territory on the model of Danzig. However, the Lithuanian army marched into the area in January 1923 and held control of the city until March 22, 1939, when it was turned back to Germany.

THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Back home in Germany, a republic was declared on November 9, 1918, by Philip Scheide-
mann, a leader of the Social Democrats in the Parliament. In the ensuing weeks, severe street
fighting took place in Berlin and other cities as supporters of the Socialists battled against
Communists for control. In the end, an election for the National Assembly took place on
January 19, 1919, with the Socialists receiving a solid majority. Figure 6 shows the leaders of
the new German republic. The new Parliament met in Weimar and approved a constitution,
which became effective with the signature of President Friedrich Ebert on August 11, 1919.

Unfortunately, there was an economic disaster caused by the unavailability of raw materials
and other supplies from the lost territories, demobilization of the armed forces and heavy
reparations payments to the Allies. Making the situation worse, the central government
was relatively weak, and it was difficult to preserve order in the face of continuing violence
between right-wing Freikorps units and leftist Red Guards.

Because Germany was not producing goods that could be exported, and large quantities of
paper money were printed to pay unemployed workers and the reparations demands, rapid
inflation broke out in the early 1920s, thus destroying the savings of the middle class. This
situation was obviously untenable and, as a result, there was a series of weak and seemingly
ineffective administrations throughout the 1920s. As a result of the political situation, voters
were increasingly alarmed by the turmoil and more of them were attracted to the radical Na-
tional Socialist German Workers Party (Nazis) under Hitler, which was able to take control
of the government on January 30, 1933.

Figure 6. *The leaders who founded the German Republic, including President Ebert.*



THE PHILATELIC CONSEQUENCES

Needless to say, the territorial changes outlined in the prior sections were reflected in the postal situation on the ground in the respective areas. The successor governments, in particular, were highly aware of the propaganda value of publicizing their control in the new territories through the issuance of special postage stamps. This policy of self-promotion was seen as having benefits both domestically (to take political credit for the change in the status of the respective areas) and internationally (to enhance their image as a significant new source of political power).

As a result, there was a flood of new stamps, including many overprints on the basic Germania definitives of Germany as well as entirely new designs. Most of the new stamps that were issued in the annexed and occupied territories during this period are adequately covered in the major philatelic catalogs. Therefore, emphasis in this article has been given to the more unusual issues, including a number of stamps that were prepared but not actually issued for one reason or another. In some cases, only a very limited quantity of these managed to get into philatelic hands, so certain examples have become significant twentieth century philatelic rarities.

Comments on the postal activities in the various former German territories follow, generally on a geographic basis, starting from West to East and from North to South.

GERMAN REPUBLIC

In the aftermath of the war, enormous changes took place in Germany, mostly related to the collapse of the *ancien régime* that consisted of an imperial superstructure that had been built on top of kingdoms (i.e. Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony and Württemberg), principalities, grand duchies and a whole collection of lesser entities, some of which dated back to the Middle Ages. All of this came crashing down overnight in mid-November 1918, and for some considerable while it was unclear what the nature of the replacement system would turn out to be.

Figure 7. Stamps and souvenir card for the meeting of the National Assembly.





Figure 8. Cover with the “Eupen & Malmedy” overprints from 1920.

Philatelically, although the old stamps showing the bust of Germania remained valid for postage until they became obsolete as the result of the postwar inflation, the stamps issued by the Republic were meant to suggest a new beginning for a peaceful Germany. Such a theme was clearly set forth in the set issued on July 1, 1919, to commemorate the meeting of the new National Assembly in Weimar (Figure 7).

ALSACE-LORRAINE

Because the administration of these provinces was immediately taken over by the French authorities following the Armistice, the postal service was restored using French stamps and, in due course, new French postmarks. There were no overprints or provisional issues involved. In 1940, following the invasion of France, Alsace and Lorraine were temporarily reannexed to Germany until this situation was reversed in 1945.

EUPEN-MALMEDY

The postal activity in these towns was assumed by the Belgian authorities on January 15, 1920. The first stamps were seven Belgian definitives overprinted “Eupen & Malmedy” (Figure 8). They were issued on that date and valid only until March 19. These were then superseded by new sets of overprints reading “Eupen” and “Malmedy” separately, which remained valid until 1931. This area was reannexed to the Reich in July 1940 following the invasion of Belgium—but also reversed in 1945.

HÜLTSCHEIN TERRITORY

This very minor bit of former German Silesia was transferred to Czechoslovakia on February 4, 1920, along with the formerly-Austrian part of Silesia. No new stamps were issued but German issues along with the new Czech ones could be used in 1920. A new Czech postmark



Figure 9. Cover with mixed franking of Czech and German stamps from Hültschin in 1920.

inscribed “Hlučín” was provided (Figure 9). Hültschin was reannexed to Germany in 1938 in the aftermath of the Munich Agreement with regard to the Sudetenland.

POSEN-WEST PRUSSIA

The old imperial stamps continued on sale until January 20, 1919. However, five Germania definitives were overprinted “Poczta Polska (Polish Posts)” in Posen and issued on January 10, 1919 (Figure 10). On January 27, 1919, an entirely new set of twelve allegorical definitives was issued with denominations in German currency, i.e. fenigow and marka. (All of Poland was converted over to groszy and zloty under a new monetary system in 1924.) These territories were reannexed to Germany following the invasion of Poland in 1939 but then had to be given up again in 1945.

Figure 10. Cover with “Polish Posts” overprints used from Posen in 1919.

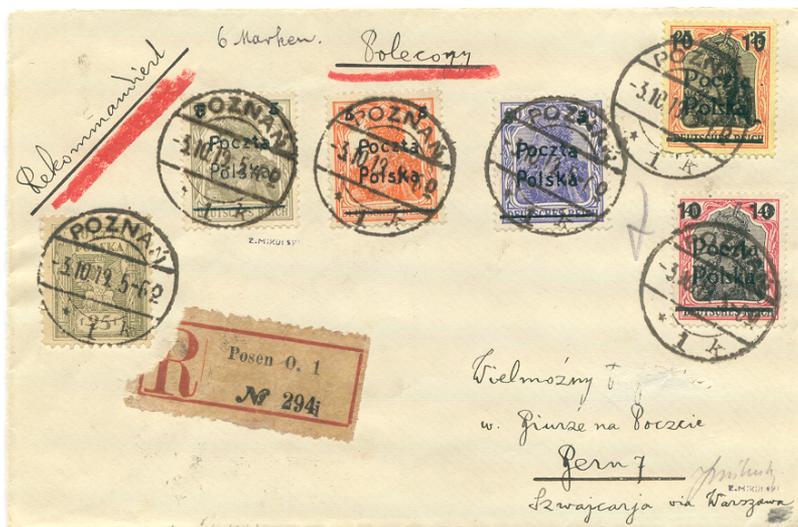




Figure 11. “On Active Service” cover from British representative in Schleswig in 1920.

SCHLESWIG

The first territory to actually hold a plebiscite was this northernmost part of Germany. Based on the initial vote on February 10, 1920, northern Schleswig (called Zone I) voted 75% to join Denmark. A second vote five weeks later confirmed by 80% that the southern part of the province (Zone II) would remain with Germany. New stamps with the Schleswig coat of arms and depicting a landscape that were denominated in pfennigs and marks were issued for use in the territory on January 25, 1920, followed by a similar set denominated in ore and kronor in May based on the fact that part of the territory would be reverting to the Danes, which action took place on June 15. Figure 11 shows a cover sent by a member of the British forces supervising the plebiscite.

ALLENSTEIN

An official Allied plebiscite commission arrived in this portion of East Prussia on February 14, 1920, with the task of making arrangements for the vote to be held on July 11, 1920, to determine whether the inhabitants wished to join Poland or remain with Germany. In the event, the vote turned out to be overwhelmingly (98%) in favor of Germany, so no territorial change was called for. However, in the interim two sets of fourteen denominations of overprinted Germania stamps were issued between April and June 1920. The plebiscite supervisory forces departed on August 12, 1920. Figure 12 shows a cover from a British member of the Plebiscite Commission, while Figure 13 is a cover franked with some of the overprinted stamps. There were several additional stamps that were prepared for Allenstein but not issued. These are shown as Figure 14.

MARIENWERDER

Also in East Prussia, a separate plebiscite commission arrived in Marienwerder on February 17, 1920, to make arrangements for the voting. As was the case in Allenstein, the July 11,



Figure 12. APO cover from British member of the Plebiscite Commission in Allenstein 1920.



Figure 13. Insured value declared cover franked with Allenstein overprints in 1920.

Figure 14. Prepared but unissued stamps with Allenstein overprints.





Figure 15. Registered cover by a British member of the Commission in Marienwerder 1920.

1920, plebiscite strongly favored Germany with 92%, which decided the issue. During the interim, two sets of overprints and two newly-designed sets printed in Milan were used between March and August. The supervisory forces then departed on August 16, 1920. Figure 15 shows a cover sent by a British member of the Commission, and Figure 16 shows a cover franked with overprints on the Germania issue.

Figure 16. Special delivery cover franked with Marienwerder overprints on Germania 1920.



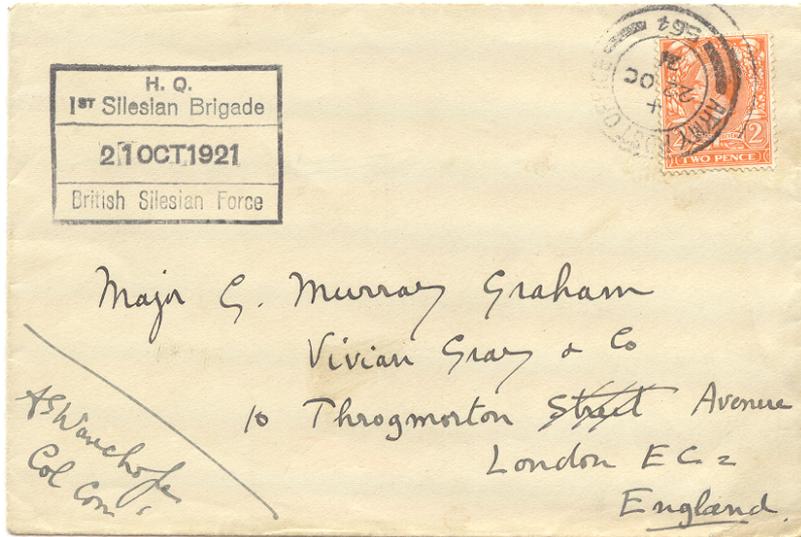


Figure 17. Cover sent by a British soldier in Upper Silesia in 1921.

UPPER SILESIA

The old Germania stamps were used as forerunners in this territory up through February 19, 1920, when a definitive set printed in Paris was introduced. A second definitive set depicting mining and manufacturing was introduced in March 1920 and remained in use until July 1922, when the Polish and German postal authorities took control in their assigned areas. The Polish portion of the province was reannexed to the Reich in 1939 but went back to Poland following the end of World War II. Related images are Figure 17 and 18 for items sent by British and Italian members of the Plebiscite forces.

Figure 18. Military postal card sent by Italian trooper in Upper Silesia in 1922.



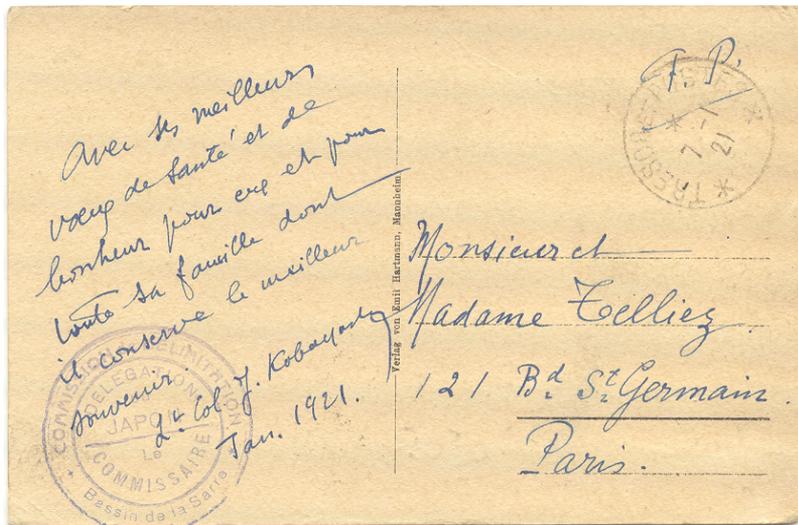


Figure 19. Postcard from a Japanese member of the Boundary Commission in the Saar 1921.



SAAR TERRITORY

Figure 19 is a cover from a Japanese member of the Commission that defined the boundaries of the Saar. As in other territories, Germania stamps remained in use until April 15, 1920, sometimes in mixed franking with similar stamps overprinted “Sarre,” which were issued from January 29 to March 1, 1920. A similar overprint on Bavarian stamps was introduced on March 1, 1920. Supplies of the highest values of the stamps available for overprinting were scarce, resulting in two of the great rarities of twentieth century German philately. Only a single sheet of twenty of the German 3 mark stamp and just one sheet of sixteen of the Bavarian 20 mark were overprinted; none of these were regularly sold to the public, but the stamps came into philatelic hands (Figures 20 and 21). A large number of additional overprints and definitives, including airmails, semi-postals and postage dues, were issued for the Saar in the period through 1934. Figures 22 and 23 show items mailed by Dutch and Italian military personnel supervising the plebiscite in 1935.



Figure 20. Prepared but unissued German 3 mark stamp overprinted for the Saar.

Figure 21. Prepared but unissued Bavarian 20 mark stamp overprinted for the Saar.



Figure 22. Cover sent by a member of the Dutch forces supervising the Plebiscite in 1935.



Figure 23. Cover sent by a member of the Italian forces supervising the Plebiscite in 1935.

Figure 24. Prepared but unissued German stamps overprinted for Danzig.



DANZIG

The old Germania stamps were used in Danzig as forerunners from January 10 until June 13, 1920. On June 14 stamps overprinted “Danzig” were introduced. See Figure 24 for unissued stamps with this overprint. These were then followed by several more sets of overprints in different fonts (some surcharged with new denominations) in the latter part of 1920. The first definitive stamps for the Free City were issued on January 31, 1921, and many additional issues, including airmails, semi-postals and postage dues, were provided until the territory was reannexed to the Reich in September 1939. See Figures 25 and 26 for items mailed by American and British military personnel in Danzig.

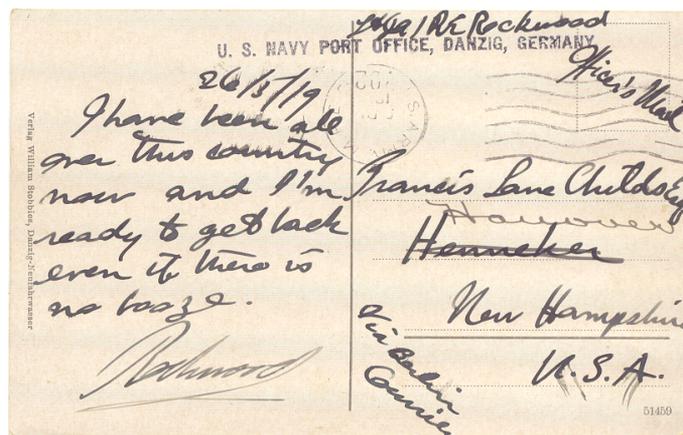


Figure 25. Postcard sent from the “U.S. Navy Port Office” in Danzig in 1919. Only recorded example of this marking.

Figure 26. Cover sent by a member of the British forces in Danzig in 1920. One of two recorded examples of this cachet.



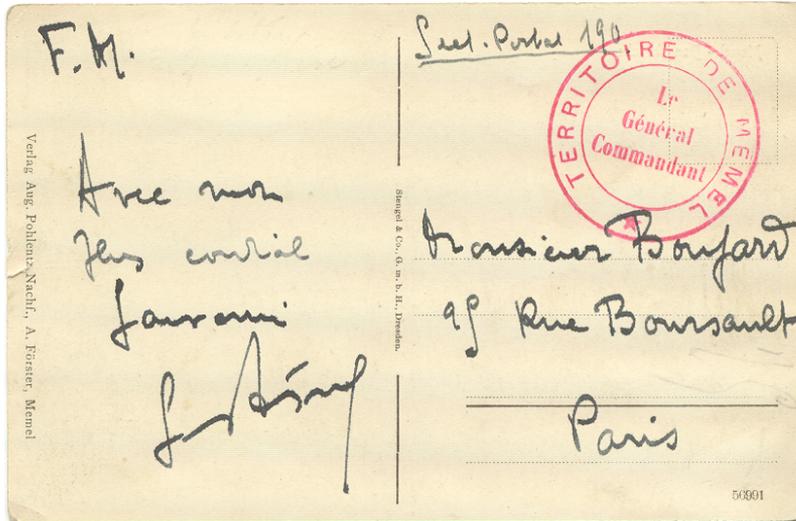


Figure 27. Postcard from a member of the French occupation forces in Memel



Figure 28. Prepared but unissued German stamps overprinted for Memel.



Figure 29. Prepared but unissued French stamp overprinted for Memel.

MEMEL

Stamps of Germany continued in use in Memel until July 7, 1920. Figure 27 shows a card mailed by a member of the French occupation forces. The first special stamps for the territory were overprints of “Memelgebiet” on the Germania issue. In addition to the issued stamps, two overprints were prepared but not issued (Figure 28). Since the French were the occupying power, these were followed by series of overprints of “Memel” on the current French definitives, which continued in use until early 1923. The final stamp was overprinted “Memel” and surcharged with a denomination of 500 Mark. Although a total of 150 pieces were prepared, it was not issued because of the takeover by Lithuania on January 10, 1923 (Figure 29).

AFTERMATH

While the Nazis, who came to power in Germany in 1933, were not interested in a restoration of the Hohenzollerns, they were very focused on undoing the provisions of the Versailles Treaty, especially those that had transferred significant territories to neighboring countries. This effort was eminently successful both prior to the outbreak of World War II and in the early stages of the war. However, with the subsequent Allied victory, the regime collapsed

and the reannexation program was reversed. Moreover, additional German territories to the east of the Oder/Neisse Line were transferred to Poland in 1945.

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