

Stamps and postal markings have always been recognised as a powerful way of sending messages to an international audience; ranging from a simple appreciation of a special anniversary, to powerful political propaganda deliberately designed to be antagonistic. Sometimes, mainly for political reasons, these messages—however innocent (or not-so-innocent)—can be ill-received by other countries, resulting in a postal administration 'waging war' on mail carrying offending stamps, or cachets. Numerous so-called Postal Wars have taken place, the casualties of which are all-too-often the covers obliterated by labels and cachets bearing political counter-messages. Jan Heijs, editor of the recently released *Catalogue of Postal Wars 1870-2008*, talks us through several fascinating examples.

## Postal Wars

By Jan Heijs

In 1960 Britain produced a slogan postmark commemorating the UN-declared 'World Refugee Year' (Fig 1). The mark was applied to a countless number of letters, including this letter destined for an address in Romania (Fig 2). However, upon arrival in the country the Romanian postal authorities obliterated the British slogan with a specially prepared cachet featuring Romanian text, rendering it virtually unreadable. The obliteration was done in a very deliberate way and was applied as a result of a 'Postal War'.

In 1959-60 about 70 countries issued postage stamps and postmarks commemorating 'World Refugee Year'. As most of the world's refugees at that time had fled the Communist Bloc countries, many of these countries refused or obliterated such stamps and/or postmarks that entered into their postal system. Romania did so in a special way, namely with a cachet containing a political counter-message. The Romanian text translates as: 'Fighting for peace we guarantee the life, tranquillity and happiness of our children'.

### What is a Postal War?

A Postal War is defined as measures taken, for political reasons, by competent national authorities against postage stamps issued by the postal authority of another postal area, as well as against postmarks or other postal material, including postal rates, by the same authority. Such measures may be:

1. The refusal of mail bearing such postage stamps or postmarks.
2. The refusal of other postal material.
3. The complete or partial removal or obliteration of either 1 or 2.
4. The imposition of postage due payments despite the fact that the mail items in question have been properly



Fig 1 Britain's 'World Refugee Year' slogan of 1960

Fig 2 The Refugee slogan on this cover to Romania was completely obliterated with a cachet bearing a counter political message (Reduced)



Fig 3 This correctly franked letter was surcharged in Argentina because of the politically-charged Falkland Islands stamps attached (Reduced)



## SOUTHERN RHODESIAN STAMPS

The States of Jersey has announced that stamps issued in Rhodesia of the kind used on this postal packet have no legal basis. The packet is accordingly surcharged.

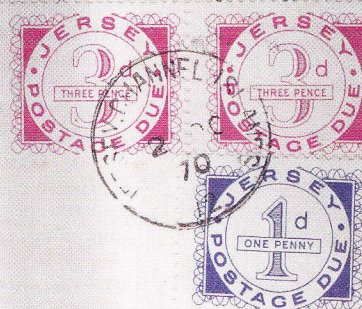
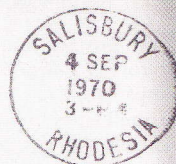


Fig 4 The sticker attached to the top left corner of this surcharged letter sent from Rhodesia to Jersey in 1970, explains that the stamps used 'have no legal basis'



Fig 5 It has been reported that mail bearing this controversial stamp from Pakistan, with the message 'Jammu and Kashmir (final status not yet determined)' was refused in India



Fig 6 Many Eastern Bloc countries refused mail bearing this 1985 West German Stamp commemorating the 40th anniversary of the integration of dislodged Germans

franked in accordance with the rules of the country of origin.

5. The addition of political propaganda cachets.

About 290 such Postal War incidents have been recorded between 1870 and 2008. Most Postal Wars had a Cold War motivation, with the two German

nations at the centre—although around 70 other countries have been equally involved in the practice at some point in time. It may thus be useful to recall that Postal War is known as *Postkrieg* in German.

There were Postal Wars between the Falkland Islands and Argentina as early as 1933, instigated by the release of the set marking the centenary of British administration of the islands (Fig 3); in this case a correctly franked letter to Argentina was charged with postage due.

### 'Illegal' stamps

Also well documented are the surcharges on mail from Rhodesia to the United Kingdom when Rhodesia unilaterally declared itself independent in 1965. The stamps were declared illegal by the UK

government, and in 1970 the GPO even used red stickers explaining the reasons for the surcharge to the unenthusiastic addressees. Such examples are relatively easy to find; they concern the 1965 independence stamps and the 1970 decimal currency series.

Less known, perhaps, is that mail with Rhodesia's 'Post and Telecommunication' issue of 1 July 1970 was equally surcharged and that many postal administrations followed the UK's example. Fig 4 shows a Rhodesian letter of 4 September 1970 to Jersey with a white sticker stating that, 'Southern Rhodesian Stamps. The States of Jersey has announced that stamps issued in Rhodesia of the kind used on this postal packet have no legal basis. The packet is accordingly surcharged.'

It was also reported in the philatelic literature that India refused mail bearing the Pakistani postage stamp 'Jammu & Kashmir (final status not yet determined)' (Fig 5). Can anyone confirm this by producing a copy or scan? The writer of this article has never seen such mail.

As already mentioned, plenty of German stamps have been involved in Postal Wars. The 1985 West German stamp on this letter (Fig 6) is commemorating '40 years of the integration of dislodged Germans.' As was the case with many previously issued West German stamps, many Eastern Bloc countries refused mail bearing the 1985 stamp because, according to official Communist doctrine, those Germans involved went to the Allied

P o l e n

1985.1-II. Bhd. via



occupied Western Zones after World War II voluntarily. Poland, for example, returned this correctly franked letter with a red cachet 'Retour, circulaire BI UPU cf. no. 153/1985.' This number refers to the Polish protest to the UPU against this postage stamp.

Every postal administration can lodge such protests with the UPU against a stamp; the UPU is obliged to inform all members about such protests by means of a Circular, in this case number 156 of 1985. According to the UPU Convention, the issue of stamps should contribute to better understanding between nations, their different cultures and to international friendship (UPU Convention Ottawa 1957, C14). However, the UPU cannot declare a stamp issued by a member's postal administration as invalid.

### Postal cat and mouse

Postal Wars continued on well after the end of the Cold War. On 8 November 1995 the Palestinian Authority (PA) gained the

right to issue its own postage stamps, with Israel agreeing to forward or deliver mail bearing such stamps. However, according to the Palestino-Israeli agreement, the PA stamps should only use 'Fils' as the currency and were to use the name 'Palestinian Authority' and not 'Palestine'. The PA challenged Israel by showing 'Palestinian Authority' in very small letters and using a stamp-on-stamp design depicting a 1948 British Mandate stamp which used the forbidden name 'Palestine' in larger letters (Fig 7).

However, the Palestinian Authority scored a postal own goal by overlooking one thing: On the British Mandate stamp, in the lower left corner written in Hebrew are the words 'Yeretz Israel'. This translates as 'Greater Israel' and includes the PA territories now occupied by Israel! Inevitably, mail bearing such stamps was refused by the Israeli postal authorities, as was mail with four other stamps. To ensure that mail bearing the stamps was handled by Israel the PA covered the

controversial issues with white stickers and added the cachet 'Palestinian Authority, Postage Paid' (Fig 8).

Postal War covers are an attractive element in many exhibition collections. They can add special effects to traditional country as well as to thematic or postal history collections. Political propaganda on postage stamps is not only sometimes offending to states, but may also cause problems to the innocent sender and addressee: they are the real victims of Postal Wars.

A bilingual (German/English) publication entitled Catalogue of Postal Wars 1870-2008, edited by the author of this article is available to order from [heijsmo@xs4all.nl](mailto:heijsmo@xs4all.nl) priced at €34, plus €6.32 postage. The catalogue includes a thematic index and describes the scenarios in about 100 chapters with 290 main numbers (postage stamps and postmarks) and about 800 sub-numbers (different measures). Each chapter begins with a short description of the relevant political and postal situation.



Fig 7 This 'stamp-on-stamp' design issued by the Palestinian Authority was refused by Israeli postal authorities because as it depicted an earlier stamp bearing the outlawed name 'Palestine'



Fig 8 To ensure that mail bearing the controversial stamps was handled in Israel, the Palestinian Authority covered them with stickers and added a 'Postage Paid' cachet