

# ALL WAS NOT QUIET ON THE EASTERN FRONT!: PART 1

By Douglas N Muir RDP

The postal history of the Eastern Front during and immediately after World War I reflects the tumultuous conditions of wartime and postwar Europe. Douglas Muir RDP presents a study of the postal history and the stamps produced during the German occupation of the Baltic, western Russia and the Ukraine during and after the war.

The German newspaper headline proclaimed, in great, bold, black type, 'Waffenstillstand im Baltikum' – 'Armistice in the Baltic'. But the November date was the 26th not the 11th, and the year was 1919. What did it mean? (Fig 1).

There is no real beginning to this story (it could go back to the Middle Ages and beyond) – but this is perhaps a starting point. Contrary to most people's ideas today, World War I did not end in November 1918, certainly not in the East where Germany, of course, had been victorious. Come the Armistice in the West, German troops remained in the occupied Baltic territories 'at the behest of the Allies' to then withdraw back to Germany as and when the Allies felt the situation warranted it. This was because they were the only power available to keep order there and protect against the invasion, or insurrection, of Bolshevik revolutionaries.

This extraordinary situation in 1919 was complicated further by the attempted German revolution and Spartacist attitudes at home, civil war in neighbouring Russia with a variety of essentially bandit groups fighting the Bolsheviks, not to mention British intervention in northerly Murmansk. Then there were the local Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, together with Poles and German Balts, all with their conflicting, long suppressed, national loyalties and demands for often the same territory. Indeed, Germans had been major landowners in the area for centuries. In all, a witches' cauldron seething with animosities and contradictions, while at the same time new nations were trying to establish themselves in this adversity.

All such military, political and social events were naturally reflected and illustrated in the stamps and postal



Fig 1 The front cover of the left-wing Berlin newspaper Vorwärts dated 26 November 1919 announcing an armistice in the Baltic

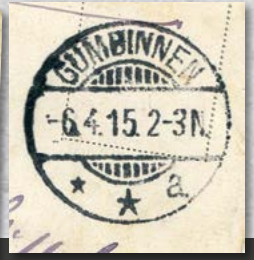


Fig 2 A propaganda postcard postmarked 4 April 1915 illustrating the destruction by the Russians in Gumbinnen, East Prussia

history of the area. When I began collecting this subject (the whole of the Eastern Front during and immediately after the war) I had only a faint idea of just how complex the history of the area was. It is a huge and fascinating subject but to make it more digestible this article concentrates on the area around the Baltic – and ignores yet more, related turmoil further south and east. Part of the fascination for me is to trace the different place names in postmarks as military or political overlordship changed.

The German title of Erich Maria Remarque's great 1929 novel set during World War I, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, was the snappier *Im Westen, nichts Neues* – (literally, *In the West, nothing new*). In the East everything was new; everything had changed; and everything was in flux. Strangely, it was an area in which Britain was to have a great deal of influence.



Fig 3 A commemorative postcard celebrating the taking of Libau on 7 May 1915

All covers shown reduced

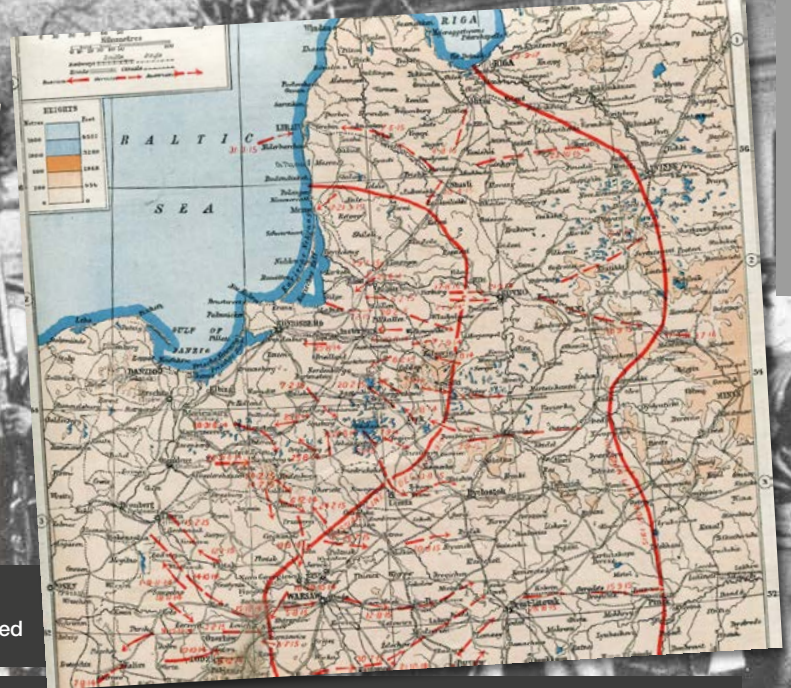


Fig 4 Map illustrating German troop advances towards Riga in 1914-15

## World War I in the East

World War I in the East began with the Russian onslaught on East Prussia in mid-August 1914. At that time, of course, the Russian Empire incorporated all the Baltic States, Poland and the Duchy of Finland, thus largely surrounding that part of the German Empire. During the attack, towns like Gumbinnen, on the main railway line from Königsberg, suffered considerable destruction as can already be seen on a postcard sent from there in April 1915 (Fig 2).

Later in August 1914, however, at the famous (second) battle of Tannenberg, the Russian Second Army was routed, to be followed by the destruction of its First Army shortly afterwards – which made the reputations of both German generals Ludendorff and more importantly Hindenburg. About two thirds of East Prussia were initially overrun and it obviously took some time for normal postal services to be restored.

German troops then concentrated to the south to assist Austria-Hungary and effect the Russian collapse in Poland and Galicia. So, it was not until after the winter snows in 1915 that reinforced German troops began to advance towards Libau (now Liepāja), an important ice-free port in the Russian protectorate of Courland (more commonly Kurland in German), occupying it and the neighbouring area on 7 May 1915. This was later marked by a commemorative postcard (Fig 3). As can be seen from the map (Fig 4), with red lines marking the limits of the periodic German advances, there was then a hiatus until the autumn of that year when, in the south, Warsaw was occupied on 5 August, and then further east the great fortress of Brest-Litovsk on the 26th.

Back in the north, at the same time there was a push towards Mitau (now Jelgava), just south of Riga, being taken on 2 August. Further south-east the



Fig 5 German troops in Mitau outside the post office. Signs for the German Feldpost and civilian post can be seen on either side of the doorway

Fig 6 A photograph taken in October 1915 showing the interior of the Feldpoststation depot hall, Mitau, with a large number of mail sacks



cities of Kowno (Kaunas) and Wilna (Vilnius) were occupied on 21

August and 20 September respectively. A new front line was then established, after the Russian retreat, incorporating all of the provinces of Kurland and Litauen (Lithuania) under German control. With the advance of German troops in the Baltic came the introduction of the Gregorian calendar rather than the Julian still used in Russia.

All this can be traced through mail from the German troops with Field Post markings but obviously no stamps; often by postcards with views of the occupied towns, the most interesting of which for me are those with a postal connection, or showing German troops in the Russian streets. These latter cards were frequently printed as propaganda for the war in the East, where there were victories to celebrate.

A good example of this can be seen in the card of Mitau, an important hub (Fig 5). Two German soldiers stand in the middle of the Poststrasse with the post office building on the right. Flanking the entrance to the post office are two signs with the black German eagle. Although difficult to see, that on the left reads 'Kaiserlich Deutsche/Feldpoststation'; that on the right 'Kaiserliches/Postamt'. In other words, the post office was for both German Field Post and non-military mail and, sensibly, the military authorities had utilised existing post office facilities.

From this pre-1916 period, and also from Mitau, is a real photo postcard showing the Feldpoststation depot there in October 1915 with its mountain of sacks of mail (Fig 6). On the propaganda side there is a printed postcard illustrating war in the East,

or rather a peaceful '*Stimmungsbild*' (impressionistic picture) of German officers motoring in Libau – sent via *Feldpoststation* No. 168, which was based there (Fig 7). Such Field Post numbers were incorporated into datestamps until February 1917 when they were removed (and thereafter only used on mail bundle labels).

### 'Postgebiet Ob. Ost'

Mail described above was all from the military, sent post-free through the Field Post system. Civilians in the occupied area of the Baltic (Kurland, Litauen in 1915) petitioned the German authorities for access to mail services as well. On 15 December the *Postgebiet des Oberbefehlhabers Ost* (Postal area of the Supreme Commander in the East) was established to provide this. Normally, this clumsy name was abbreviated to *Postgebiet Ob. Ost* and administratively it was separated from occupied Russian Poland which became *Generalgouvernement Warschau*. Initially at least, the *Oberbefehlhaber* was Hindenburg, subsequently Ludendorff (who thought to turn the area into a German colony, as did other German commanders later).

Some 18 post offices were opened on 15 January 1916: Augustow, Bausk, Bialystok, Bielsk, Grodno, Hasenpoth, Kielmy, Kowno, Libau, Mitau, Olita, Poniewiez, Schaulen, Sokolka, Suwalki, Wilna, Windau und Wylkowyszki (Wilkowischki). Others were to follow later during the year, such as Tuckum and Talsen. These all ran in tandem with the Field Post Offices.

The current Germania low and high value stamps (the latter for telegrams), together with imprinted postal stationery, both postcards and envelopes, were overprinted 'Postgebiet Ob. Ost' in Fraktur type, and brought into use at these offices. Standard German-style handstamp postmarks were also created. (Fig 8 and Fig 9).

Mail, standard and registered, had to be open. If sealed, or if it lacked the sender's name and address, it was not allowed. Also accepted were postcards, printed matter, trade samples, German newspapers and limited telegrams. Postal tariffs (the same as non-local rates within Germany) had to be prepaid by *Postgebiet Ob. Ost* overprinted stamps or stationery. Everything had to go through censorship and anything written about military matters was obviously strictly forbidden. Initially, the rate for postcards was 5pf.; that for letters up to 20g. 10pf. In August 1916 these rates were raised to 7½pf. and 15pf. respectively, and this was reflected in the stamps and stationery issued.

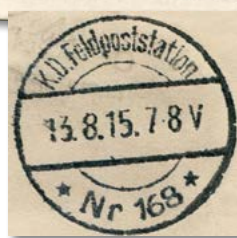


Fig 7 A picture postcard, with a Field Post cancel No. 168 dated 13 August 1915, showing German troops driving along a main street in Libau



Fig 8 A postal stationery card (with additional 5pf. adhesive stamp) sent from the new *Postgebiet Ob. Ost* office of Mitau on 23 March 1916 (Reduced)

After the Russian Revolution in March 1917 (known as the February Revolution because of the Julian calendar) the Provisional Government granted the Baltic States nominal autonomy. But then, in the autumn, German troops resumed their advance with Riga being taken on 3 September, a victory loudly proclaimed in the German newspapers of the day. The following month they began the occupation of Estonia but halted during an armistice, while peace negotiations took place at Brest-Litovsk with the new Bolshevik government. When Trotsky tried to stall these, German troops began a new offensive in February 1918, eventually occupying the whole of Estonia (Walk was occupied on 22 February, Dorpat two days later and Reval on the 25th) expelling the Bolsheviks. This forced the Russian Bolsheviks to sign a humiliating treaty abandoning vast stretches of land to the Germans, including the Baltic States.

These new districts were now incorporated into the *Postgebiet Ob. Ost* postal system and many new post offices were opened, both in Estonia and in smaller towns in the whole of the rest of the enlarged area. Riga was the first, shortly after its occupation (22 October 1917) and then Dorpat, Hapsal, Reval, Werro, Wesenberg and others on 1 or 2 May 1918 (Fig 10 and Fig 11). New offices were still being opened through to November that year, totalling more than 80 in all. Short-lived offices are obviously much more difficult to find, and can be expensive. A few had crude single-line provisional handstamps before the standard cancellations were introduced. These, such as those from Dorpat, were also extensively forged.

Next month I will look at the postmarks and stamps from the immediate post Armistice period.

Fig 9 A letter, postmarked 21 February 1916, correctly rated at 10pf. from the new Postgebiet Ob. Ost office of Wilna to Berlin, with censor marking of Königsberg in Prussia



Fig 10 A Postgebiet Ob. Ost postcard sent from Reval (Tallinn) in Estonia on 22 August 1918



Fig 11 Postgebiet Ob. Ost postmark dated 8 October 1918 from Wesenberg with the censor marking 'Re' of Reval

