

Sinai & Gaza - Part 2* : World War I, Turkish, German and Austro-Hungarian Forces

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This article is dedicated to Zvi Alexander, who died in Switzerland on November 30, 2008, at the age of 86. Zvi won many awards with his Holy Land material, including the best and most extensive collection of Turkish Military mail in the Sinai and Palestine. He donated his collection to the Ha'aretz Museum in Tel Aviv. He had a flat a few minutes away from our Saturday meeting place and a few years ago I would often pop round after a meeting where Zvi sought my advice on matters Gaza and Sinai. He was under the illusion that I knew something about the subject, but it did not take long before the student became the teacher. It was not unusual to receive a phone call from him about something, with the request: could he come over immediately to discuss it? Often this involved him asking about some definitive point - he was in contention with someone else, and my response of certainty was required. It usually, at best, brought forth only that I saw he had a point that maybe I could support. He knew I had planned a series of articles on the Sinai and gave his generous approval to use several of his delicious pieces for illustration. This may have been some fifteen years ago and I have assumed that this offer still holds true. I do not believe that any other philatelist will ever be able to assemble a collection of Turkish military mail of this area again.

When I set out to find information about Turkey and her allies some 25 years ago it was somewhat sparse, comprising a few articles in *OPAL*, the *BAPIP* bulletin and some foreigner philatelic magazines in German and a slim monograph by Pollack. However, in the last dozen years much has been published, notably the two excellent books, one by Norman Collins, *The Ottoman Post and Telegraph Offices in Palestine and Sinai* (2000) and the other by Zvi Alexander, *The Ottoman Field Post Offices Palestine 1914-1918: The Alexander Collection* (2000).

In part 1* I put forward my arguments for including Sinai and to some extent the area now known as the Gaza Strip. In the case of Gaza and its surrounds, before 1948 there could be no reason to justify its postal history as part of Egyptian Philately, but ignoring that fact I give a brief account of the Turkish post in an attempt at completeness.



Before the war only Gaza and Khan Yunis had post offices in what was to become the Gaza Strip, with Gaza of some importance, having 40,000 inhabitants at the outbreak of war. Above are shown most of the recorded postmarks of the civil post office, which opened in May 1865, and Turkish postmarks are known until the town was taken by the British in 1917. There are also recorded a boxed type and a negative seal, both very rare. I have given no numbers or types, as the literature has no common nomenclature. For further information, see Collins or Coles and Walker. None of these marks are particularly common either on stamps or covers, of which I only have one.



Khan Yunis post office opened in 1909 and its postmark is quite rare, with only a few covers known, I have only a part strike on stamp and have seen only a couple offered in 20 years.

Soon after the war began the Turkish army, with German and Austro-Hungarian troops in support, crossed the Egyptian border into the Sinai and so, as they were on Egyptian soil, it can legitimately be said that postal material from them rightfully deserves a place in Egyptian philately. Most philatelic accounts deal with all of the Eastern Army, based on Damascus and covering Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Sinai, and some also the Hejaz and southern Turkey. But here I will cover only Gaza and the Sinai, and that not to the depth found elsewhere, and touch briefly on some of the other areas. This is of course quite an artificial distinction - but our story concerns only those areas as seen from an Egyptian viewpoint.

* Sinai & Gaza Part 1 pre World War I, September Quarter 2001 *QC*. 198, Volume XVII No.11 Pages 255-268.

After the Turko-Italian war (1911-1912) and the equally disastrous two Balkan wars (1912-1913) Turkey was not looking to embroil herself in another. Her army was in a poor state with the loss of equipment and troops and it was apparent that she had not yet come to terms with the new equipment from Europe despite the efforts to modernise the military after the 1909 revolution.

In 1913 many senior officers were retired and replaced by younger men, many of them trained by the German military mission of Von der Goltz during 1886-1895. At the same time power was seized by the Committee of Union and Progress led by three army officers from the Young Turks movement, Enver Pasha (1881-1922), Mehmed Talaat (1874-1921) and Ahmed Djemal (1872-1922).

Under threat from within and outside its borders, the Turkish Government sought a protective agreement from one of the two European power blocs: the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente. Initially she turned to Britain, but only secured an order for two warships, and seeing Russia as her main enemy leaned towards the central powers and invited the German Liman von Sanders to help to modernise her army.

With the outbreak of war after Austria's declaration of war against Serbia on July 28, 1914, followed rapidly by further declarations by Germany on Russia and France and Britain on Germany on August 4, the Ottoman Government, acutely aware of its military weakness, remained neutral for several months. The only member of the ruling triumvirate in favour of action was Enver Pasha, who was party to a secret treaty with Germany though this did not commit the Ottomans to declaring immediate war on Germany's enemies.

Two modern battleships, the *Sultan Osman I* and the *Resadiye*, partly paid for by public subscriptions and built in British shipyards, were nearing completion when the war started. The British Admiralty's seizure of these ships for the Royal Navy had a devastating impact in Istanbul, even among pro-British groups. Within a few days two large German warships, the cruisers *Goeben* and *Breslau*, arrived off the Dardanelles seeking sanctuary from a pursuing British fleet. They were permitted to enter Ottoman waters, where they were soon transferred, by a fictitious sale, to the Ottoman Navy, becoming the battle cruiser *Sultan Selim Yavuz* (normally abbreviated to *Yavuz*) and the light cruiser *Midilli*. Their crews put on Ottoman uniform and their commander, Admiral Souchon, became head of the Ottoman Navy.

British vessels patrolling off the Dardanelles then gave notice that henceforth any warships venturing into the Aegean Sea would be regarded as hostile. The Ottoman Navy promptly closed the strait to foreign shipping and laid further mines. Even so, the Ottoman Empire remained neutral, until October 29, 1914, when the *Yavuz*, *Midilli* and other Ottoman warships suddenly opened fire on Russian naval bases in the Black Sea.

The reasons for the attack remain a matter of debate. The main responsibility lay with Enver Pasha, without the knowledge or consent of the Sultan's Grand Vizier and most other government ministers, supported by a pro-German faction within the ruling Committee of Union and Progress. On November 2 Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire, followed three days later by her alliance partners Britain and France. The outbreak of war was greeted in Istanbul with deep gloom, with Cavit Pasha, one of four ministers who resigned in disgust at their country's entry into the war, declaring: "It will be our ruin - even if we win."

Until Britain declaration of war Egypt was a political anomaly caught between two worlds. The British, though at war with Germany and Austria-Hungary, were officially unable to expel enemy diplomats and agents from Egypt. Turkey was still neutral, and such a dismissal on her technically sovereign soil would have provoked a diplomatic incident. Things began, however, to change rapidly. Lord Herbert Kitchener left Egypt in early August, having been promoted Secretary of State for War, followed shortly by Byng leaving Lieutenant-General Sir John Maxwell in charge of the Force in Egypt. Maxwell's fame at the Battle of Omdurman had been enhanced by a command of the Force in Egypt from 1908-12.

A series of troop embarkations, disembarkations and transfers progressed throughout autumn as troops from India arrived in Egypt and were sent on to the battlegrounds of France. While the pressing need was for troops on the Western Front, the Turkish threat to the all-important Suez Canal meant that Egypt could not be denuded of too many of its forces.

A conference in August between Turkish and German representatives had proposed that the Turks adopt a strictly defensive posture toward the Russians on the Caucasus front while seizing naval domination of the Black Sea. But all such plans were academic while the positions of Bulgaria and Romania remained undecided. However the Austro-Hungarians were having problems on the Galician front and requested an

urgent Turkish seaborne invasion of the Ukraine to divert the Russians. The Germans promised huge territories in the Russian-ruled Caucasus and Central Asia, and even neutral Iran, in return.

But Turkey, fearful of diverting the Russian Bear against itself, preferred a strike against the Suez Canal to disrupt Britain's communications with its Indian Empire. Eventually the Germans acquiesced and so the Turkish invasion into the Sinai, and even the conquest of Egypt, was put in train. The British had pulled out of Sinai the few Egyptian manned police posts and established their defensive line at the Suez Canal.

Turkish forward positions were established at El Arish and Nekhl. There were only three possible routes across the expanse of the Sinai desert: by the coast (the advantage being water and desert tracks, but it was within fire of British ships); a southern route from El Kosseima to Suez (quickly discarded by the Turks); and finally the central pass from Beersheba to Ismailia. Chief responsibility in both planning and execution lay with General Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein, with Djemal as the expedition's figurehead. The central route was chosen because it would provide the Ottoman troops with better access to Cairo.

The expedition left Beersheba on January 14, 1915. The advance across the Sinai took ten days, tracked all the way by British and French aircraft of an Anglo-French naval squadron and a small air reconnaissance force. With the Turkish expedition heavily reliant on total surprise for any possibility of success, when on February 2 advance elements of the Ottoman Fourth Army reached the Canal and began the assault they were met and beaten back by an Indian force, subsequently reinforced by Australian infantry. Djemal persisted with his assault until the next day but after losing some 2,000 casualties (to the British 150) authorised a full retreat to Beersheba. The entire Turkish force withdrew, unmolested by the British, who did not follow them in any force, back across the Sinai. There was no sign of Arab insurrection in Egypt - the expedition had been a failure - and this was the only Turkish attempt of the war to capture the Canal.

A small Turkish force under the German General von Kressenstein (*right*) remained in the Sinai and carried out several nuisance raids at points along the Canal. Whilst these maintained pressure on the British and kept them guessing about another attack, they were insufficient to halt the movement of troops away from the Canal defences to Gallipoli throughout the summer of 1915.



In December 1915 there was a change of plan on the British side. A Commission under Major-General Sir Henry Horne recommended that the defensive line should be moved forward from the west bank of the Canal to the east, and far enough away from the Canal for it to be beyond the range of the enemy's heaviest guns. Three new defensive lines were constructed and the supply railways from Cairo were doubled in capacity. This construction effort was largely undertaken by locally-recruited workers, organised as the Egyptian Labour Corps. The Egyptian theatre was placed under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Archibald Murray, recently arrived, who proposed to the War Office to undertake limited offensive action to be able to control the area of El Arish. Sir William Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, gave cautious approval in March 1916. A visit in November by Kitchener also thought Egypt's defence should be based within Sinai, to place the Canal beyond artillery range.

The British made a careful advance across the Sinai, taking El Arish on December 21, 1916, Rafa on January 9, 1917, a minor victory that ended the Sinai campaign of 1916. A small Turkish presence remained inside Egypt. The first, at Magdhaba, was captured on December 23, 1917.

Three battles of Gaza followed. In the Third battle of Gaza, October 31-November 7, 1917, the British under General Allenby finally forced the Turks out of their strong positions. Allenby's successful breaking of the Gaza-Beersheba defences opened the road to Jerusalem, which he occupied on December 9, 1917.

Turkish Civil Post offices.

In preparation for the expected conquest of Sinai the Turkish authorities had made datestamps for 38 locations within the peninsula. Questions have been raised as to why they should do so, as the locations chosen were nearly all uninhabited. A list, with illustrations of the intended postal points, appears in *BAPIP* 110 in an article by Anton Steichele, though nine of these are classified as being “in the Negev” i.e. Gaza. Two types were produced for each postal point, one negative seal, the other with the place name and usually the figure 1 in the lower half. Most had the figure 1 and the place name in European script, i.e. Quossemer. From early in 1915 the whole of the Sinai peninsula was classified as a new administrative district based on Qala’at en Nachal.



In *OPAL* (circa 1984) Avraham Zakai gives a tabulated list, after Steichele, and suggests that the intended postal points were politically motivated, to indicate ownership and dominance of the region. My own ideas, as normal, subscribes to the cock-up theory: when some official was given the task of preparing the offices he acquired a map of the Sinai, and passed it on to his junior. With little knowledge of the area, he simply took for granted that the major place names on the maps must be inhabited, at least to some degree.

Some 35 years ago I crossed part of the Sahara in Niger, going west to east with the guide pointing out our destination on the map. Being some 400 miles away from our starting point and the only place name on the map given prominence, I imagined the suq and other delights that awaited us. After a day’s steady journey we arrived in late afternoon to find the “importance” was that the 1m-wide well had a protecting wall two bricks high. There was nothing else but stone and sand.

What I do find intriguing is the fact that no handstamps were prepared for South Sinai. Did the Turks have no intention of occupying it, or was it simply that places like Tor remained in British hands? The Turks did attack Tor, but a small garrison of Egyptian and Indian troops, mainly Gurkhas, repulsed them.

Three unaddressed covers with clear cancels were sold at Feldman’s in 1984 at a high price and stamps on piece with cancels can be found also fetching high prices. At the stamp show Tel Aviv 83 a whole sheet with 26 of these postmarks was exhibited, to much acclaim. But many of the dates don’t make sense, made in periods when the places were not occupied by the Turks. Dates as late as 1920 can be found. It is now agreed that few of the datestamps were ever issued and that these pieces and covers were all probably prepared ready for someone to supply the philatelic market sometime after the war. I had longed cherished a piece with the cancel for Qatia with a date when it was occupied for three days by the Turks. I had not thought to question the fact that in the heat of battle it was unlikely that a civil post office had been set up.

For some time it was agreed that only two post offices actually functioned; El-Arish and Qussima. However in April 1987 a question was posed in *OPAL* 164, by K.R.Jung, about a postmark of Ibin dated 25.5.15. He referred to the Coles and Walker article in *PJGB* Jan/Feb 1985 in which it was stated that Ibin was the Jordanian place of that name. There were responses in *OPAL* 165, 167 and 168. Two of the respondents



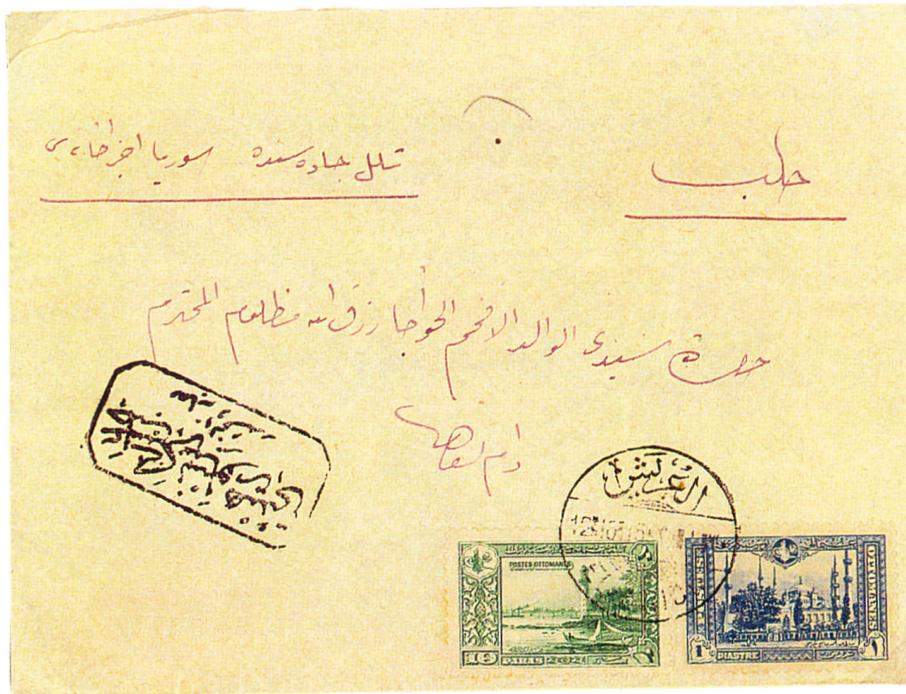
pointed out that the Arabic spelling for the two places were quite different عيبين for the Jordanian and ايبين for the one in Sinai. Other pieces have surfaced and it is now accepted that a Turkish post office operated here for a short while with a civilian type postmark. Ibin was uninhabited, but after the retreat from the attack on the Suez Canal von Kressenstein was ordered by Djemal Pasha to form a special camel corps. Ibin was chosen as the headquarters by virtue of its many tracks leading into the Sinai. As civilian staff were probably stationed there for specialist tasks, it make some sense that a post office was opened there. Collins illustrates a cover with the Ibin datestamp.

He also states that a datestamp for Kalaat el Nahal has been seen on piece. As this was proclaimed the official capital of the Turkish Sinai and featured the end of a telegraph line, it is conceivable that a postal station was positioned there.

Qussima was a major military campment for the Turks and Germans and the light railway from Al-Auja was extended to it. Nearly all the known covers were part of the Alexander collection, coming from the same correspondent.



El-Arish was an obvious candidate for a post office, which opened soon after the Turkish occupation. Initially two types of postmarks are found, but now **EL ARICH OTTOMAN** is considered a fantasy made by Major Weltch, a German philatelist who served in Palestine.



One thing all these markings have in common is their scarcity, with only a few covers or pieces recorded. I have none in my collection. Having made a few futile bids over the years, I now consider them way beyond my price range.

Turkish Military Post.

Like most military organisations of the period, Turkey provided a postal service for its forces with the aim of maintaining morale. I often hear among philatelists, Egyptians among them, that there was little post because countries like Egypt and Turkey had high levels of illiteracy. While this is so, there existed professional letter writers and the receiver could most probably find someone to read his letter.

The books of Alexander and Collins give almost identical accounts of the Turkish military post, either done in co-operation or copied from the same source. In *OPAL* 173, which preceded the two books by a decade, an article by Ünal Karakaş gives a more complete picture. Combining the three sources, but drawing mainly from Karakaş, a slightly confused picture emerges, with all three agreeing that various difficulties make it almost impossible to reach a definitive conclusion. The story goes something like this.



Permanent FPOs were formed, with first and second post centres and postal dispatch offices. These were allocated at divisional, corps and army level under the control of the Post and Telegram Directorate, one of the inspectorates of the Army General Command. At Army level there was a director, five clerks and a postal inspector. A more local Field Postal Service arrangement existed for mobile units, each given a numbered FPO with no connection to the unit's recognition details for security reasons. The FPO service handled both private and official mail as well as parcels, registered mail and money orders. Post was free up to the rank of sergeant; officer and private mail was paid.

The numbered FPO read in Turkish SAHRA POSTASSI (military post) and the number below (*left above*) is No. 46, used in the Sinai by the 1st Expeditionary Force.

From an article in *Die Postmark*, 1929, Adolf Passer states that the military marks were distributed along the following lines: numbers below 25 were given to the division of the same number; numbers 25 to 36 were given in ascending order to Army Corps i.e. 1st Army Corps had FPO 25, up to the XIIth with FPO 36; 38 onwards were issued to the First Army and so on. Okay and Steichele also subscribe to this idea, but later Ünal Karakaş and others think it unlikely. What is known that each handstamp was used by several units,

making it very difficult to pinpoint where cancelled covers originated. By using transit markings or identifying the unit which had a particular FPO its whereabouts at that time can be guessed at.

Similar to the civil postmarks, negative seal and normal datestamp were issued for each number. Some 92 numbers, 1 to 92, have been recorded, with the negative seal type being extremely rare. Only a few are known used in the Sinai and Gaza area and the actual placement and dates of use are open to some speculation. For this area, and anywhere within the old Turkish Arab empire, covers are scarce, well sought after and command high prices.

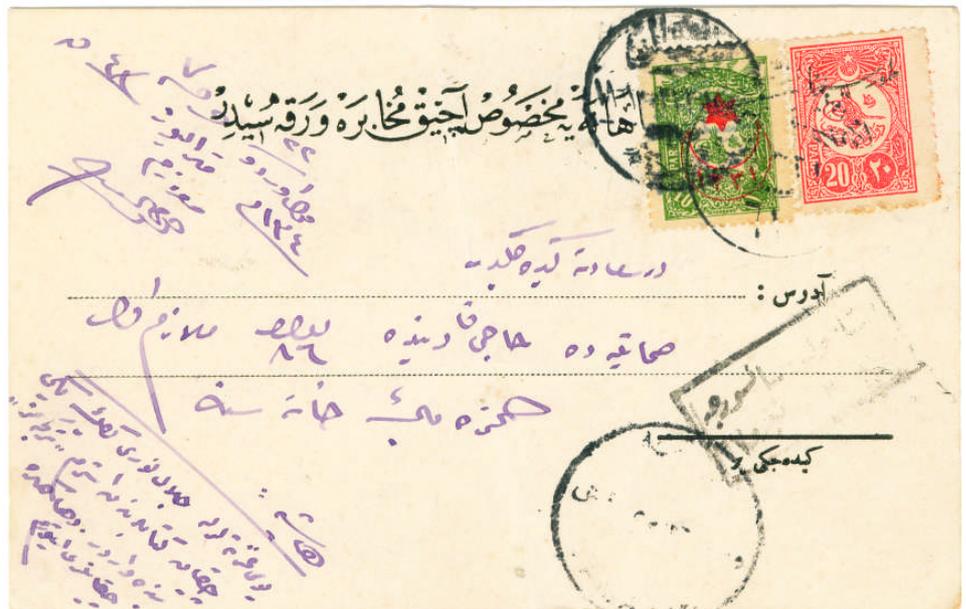
Numbers report to have originated in the Sinai:

No 27. El-Arish 1915. No 46 from El-Arish used by the 1st Expeditionary Force mid July to Sept 1916, later at Gaza. No 48 Kossaima 10.5.1916.

Used in the Gaza area:

No 22. March-April 1917. No 23 Oct 1917. No 59. April-May 1917. No 61. 1917.

FPO 61, the only one in my collection not recorded at Gaza or in the Sinai.



However, this card with a lovely FPO 61, was recently in auction and clearly endorsed Gaza. Perhaps mine may also have been from Gaza.

Stamps

In 1916 a set of six stamps was overprinted Tor Sinai on 1901-1913 issues for general use.



3x10 para stamps cancelled
Quds 1 (Jerusalem 1)



Another set of six stamps had been prepared in the hope of the conquest of Egypt, five of which had a small vignette showing the Sphinx and Pyramids: 10 para - Dome of the Rock, 20 para - The well at Kossaima, 1 piaster - Guard at Beersheba, 5 piaster - Sultan Mehmed, 10 piaster - El Arish, 25 piaster - camel troops (possibly crossing the Sinai). These stamps were never issued, but can be found imperf and perforated, and recently some sheets of colour trials were offered in auction. Later, after the war, due to a stamp shortage, some of these were overprinted with the Sphinx and Pyramids blotted out for general use in Turkey.



During the third battle of Gaza there was a shortage of 5 para stamps for use on money orders. Several sheets of the 10 para were locally surcharged.

When I was actively collecting these areas, some 20-30 years ago, another set of stamps was purported to have been prepared for the conquest of Egypt. I proudly obtained a set at auction during the big stamp show in 1980 at a large sum. The stamps even made an entry into Pulhan's *Turk Pullari Katalogu XII* 1974. It is now recognised that they were fantasies and are now readily obtained on eBay for a few dollars.



Known as the Cihadi Mukaddes - Holy War Stamps, these were first reported in *L'Orient Philatelique* April 1954 by Ernest A. Kehr.

He tells how he chanced upon these adhesives quite by accident when he interviewed a Turkish pasha who owned some. The pasha spun a lovely tale:

I'm not a collector myself, but I do have the only unused set of four stamps issued for use by the Army to which I was attached during World War I. While the army was assembling, the Minister of War and the Minister of State authorized the production of postage stamps to be taken to Egypt and used to replace the ones found in Sinai in Post Offices there. To prevent any leak of the plans for sending an occupation force from Turkey to Egypt, the designing and printing of the stamps was undertaken with the strictest security measures. After the attack on the Suez Canal, because of the defeat by the British forces it became necessary to completely destroy the cases of stamps before the British captured the pasha's forces. I had not the slightest interest in postage stamps, and I still cannot account for my reason in doing so. But even as those cases were being emptied and the sheets of stamps were fed into the flaming blaze I took this single set and put it in my pocket.

The full set, however, is of seven stamps rather than four.

German and Austrian Forces.

Germany had a Military Mission to Turkey, having been the main European power to arm and train the Turkish Army before the war. From early 1916 the numbers of German troops grew considerably to bolster the Turks.

The first fighting forces sent to Palestine consisted of some 1,200 men, who arrived on April 1, 1916. They comprised mainly artillery and heavy machinegun companies and included the Flying Corps Unit 300. They were placed under the command of Kress von Kressenstein, along with the 3rd Turkish Infantry Division, and formed the 1st Expeditionskorps. Units were posted in the Sinai, including El-Arish. An air unit operated from an airfield at El-Arish between April and September 1916 until the British pushed the Turko-German forces back to Gaza.

After the disastrous Gallipoli campaign the command structure in Egypt was simplified with the formation on March 19, 1916, of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force under Sir Archibald Murray, who had pushed into the Sinai with patrols out as far as Jifjaffa during April and May and implemented the defence into the Sinai.

Von Kressenstein decided to retake the whole of the Sinai and possibly mount another attack on the Canal. 18,000 men of the 1st Expeditionskorps left Shellal, near Beersheba, on July 19, 1916, and advanced to Bir Abd. After the battles of Katia and Romani during August, with a decisive defeat for the Turko-German forces, the 1st Expeditionskorps fell back to Bir Abd, having lost 50 per cent of their troops. The British took nearly 4,000 prisoners.

The British kept up the pressure, and eventually were able to clear the Sinai of enemy forces.

From early 1916 special datestamps FELDPOST MIL MISS were brought into use as the numbers of German forces sent to bolster the Turks grew considerably: the Germans set up their own postal service to supplement the erratic Turkish service. Some 29 handstamps were ordered for use throughout the Turkish Empire: these are illustrated with dates of use by Findeiss. Postage was free to all forces irrespective of rank.

From the time of the advance into the Sinai up to the Third Battle of Gaza, three of the German handstamps were in use with the German-Austrian forces. Like the Turkish FPOs, their whereabouts and dates of usage are not entirely clear and the philatelic articles contest the data.



The 1. EXPEDITION KORPS datestamp was used by the troops in the Sinai, with reported usage at Khan Yunis, El-Arish, and later at Beersheba. Dates of use 21.6.1916 to 2.10.1916. Findeiss gives a double valuation "Post aus Ägypten" but without dates for this period.

On the retreat of the Tuko-Egyptian forces to Beersheba the remnants of the 1.EXPEDITION KORPS were dispersed to various Turkish divisions. The datestamp was replaced by the Beersheba (Bir es Seba) one with dates reported 6.10.1916 to 1.11.1917. It is also reported used at Gaza. There has been much debate about the location of A.O.K.4 (4th Army Command) and Findeiss reports dates 20.5.1916 to 10.7.1917 with a triple valuation for usage in Beersheba 20.5.1916 to 30.5.1916. It was also used at Gaza.



1.EXPEDITION KORPS endorsed Bir Mazar.

Also has cachet of Field Hospital 213, which was at Bir Mazar for a brief period.

Later the hospital moved back to Beersheba. For some reason it has a stamp affixed. To speed the mail stamps were overprinted with a pre-censored marking. This meant the card or letter was except from censorship.



A.O.K. 4 endorsed Gaza and signed by Tilla, commander of the German forces at the date shown





A card showing the provisional handstamp.



The philatelically inspired sheet showing all known handstamps prepared for use in the Sinai

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