

Postal History of WWI Germans and Austrians Interned in British India

Purpose: This six-frame-five-chapter exhibit describes the internment of Germans and Austrians in military and civil camps through postal history supported with scans of drawings and photographs.

Background: WWI was fought from August 1914-November 1918 armistice. All belligerents interned their respective enemy nationals. Most enemy prisoners left India by December 1919.

Scope: Inbound, outbound and intercamp mail of Indian military and civil camps 1914-1919.

Philatelic Importance: Prisoner of war mail was sent “on postal service”. The exhibit demonstrates the waiver of registration fees, and the differences between camp staff and prisoner postal rates.

Organization: Title underlines color code each chapter:

Chapter One: Ahmednagar Camp Inbound Mail (gray)

Chapter Two: Ahmednagar Camp Outbound Mail (blue)

Chapter Three: Transit and Rest camps, and Intercamp mail (yellow)

Chapter Four: Family Camps (green)

Chapter Five: Men’s Civil Camps and Repatriation(purple)

Important covers are bordered in red. Supplemental information boxed in light blue.

Rarity Challenges: Ahmednagar military camp had capacity of 1700 men. Belgaum and Yercaud civil camps held about 140 adults and the other civil camps 50 or less. Covers from the small civil camps are difficult to acquire because of low prisoner numbers and short operating periods. Not more than four letters per month per prisoner and on average 7.5 postcards/month/prisoner were sent. Inbound mail was not restricted but less likely to survive the internment.



Prisoners included German and Austrians resident in India, taken from East Africa, Persia, and Thailand, and sailors and ship passengers in Indian waters.

Men of military age were sent to Ahmednagar regardless of occupation. Women, children and husbands over military age were sent to civil camps. Men, over military age, were sent to civil men's camps.

Sketch map of British India showing the approximate location of the camps. Large cities are in boldface. Military camps – orange; rest camps -red; family camps – green; men’s civil camps – blue. Ahmednagar, shown only in orange, had separate civil and military camps.

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Special Items of Interest:

- Registered Mail to and from internees.
- Cover sent just before the war returned to sender who had been taken prisoner.
- Cover sent to a vendor at the camp from Aden with scarce censor marks.
- Ramandrug to Yercaud women's rest camps. Only known example.
- Covers sent from the repatriation ship, S.S. Golconda to Ahmednagar Camp.

Synopsis: The exhibit is organized by inbound and outbound mail for the internment camps. Important covers are boxed in red. Ancillary information in light blue boxes. The exhibit relates the postal history of the camps and provides insight into camp life. The latter is supported by scans of camp photographs and prisoner drawings.

There are five chapters in six frames as summarized below. The exhibit sheets have a thin underline of different colors to identify each chapter. Exhibit highlights camp censor marks and labels and explains the routing to through the War Office (London). Outbound prisoner mail was "on postal service" without franking; registration fees were waived.

Chapter 1. Inbound letter mail from neutral, ally and enemy countries for military and civil internees, staff and vendors.

Chapter 2. Military prisoners outbound letter mail to various countries showing different postal and censor marks, and Canadian War Tax stamps. Ahmednagar military camp stationery: postcards, envelopes and letter sheet.

Chapter 3. Transit camps, civil and military rest camps and intercamp letter mail.

Chapter 4. Letter mail of family civil camps: Bellary, Belgaum, Katapahar, Kodaikanal, Sholapur, Shwebo, and Takdah. Underlined camps not included in Baker Catalogue.

Chapter 5. Men's Civil Camps Ahmednagar and Yercaud; and end of internment.

What is not included: Parcels, newspaper, and money order mail; Ottoman military and civil internee mail; essays of camp stationery.

Scarcity: The civil camps except for Belgaum held fewer than 50 adults and most operated for periods of less than two years, making the extant correspondence scarce to rare. Where known from public sources or the exhibitors 15 years of collecting experience, the number of known covers is mentioned.

General references:

Baker, A. and C.R. Entwistle (Ed) A Catalogue of Indian Censorship 1914-1920. 1994.

Gray, R. 2022. Civilian Internee Mail in WWI British India. American Philatelist 808-813.