

Censorship of Civilian Mail in Germany during WWII

An Introduction

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Censorship of civilian Mail during WW II was practiced by most combatant countries. This presentation will focus on the German efforts to control all mail coming into and going out of the country, as well as any mail in transit going through Germany. We'll look at the topic as follows:

- A very short history of censorship
- German censorship plans & reality
- Basic methods and tools for censorship
- The first Censorship stations Berlin & Königsberg
- Glimpses at the expanded system

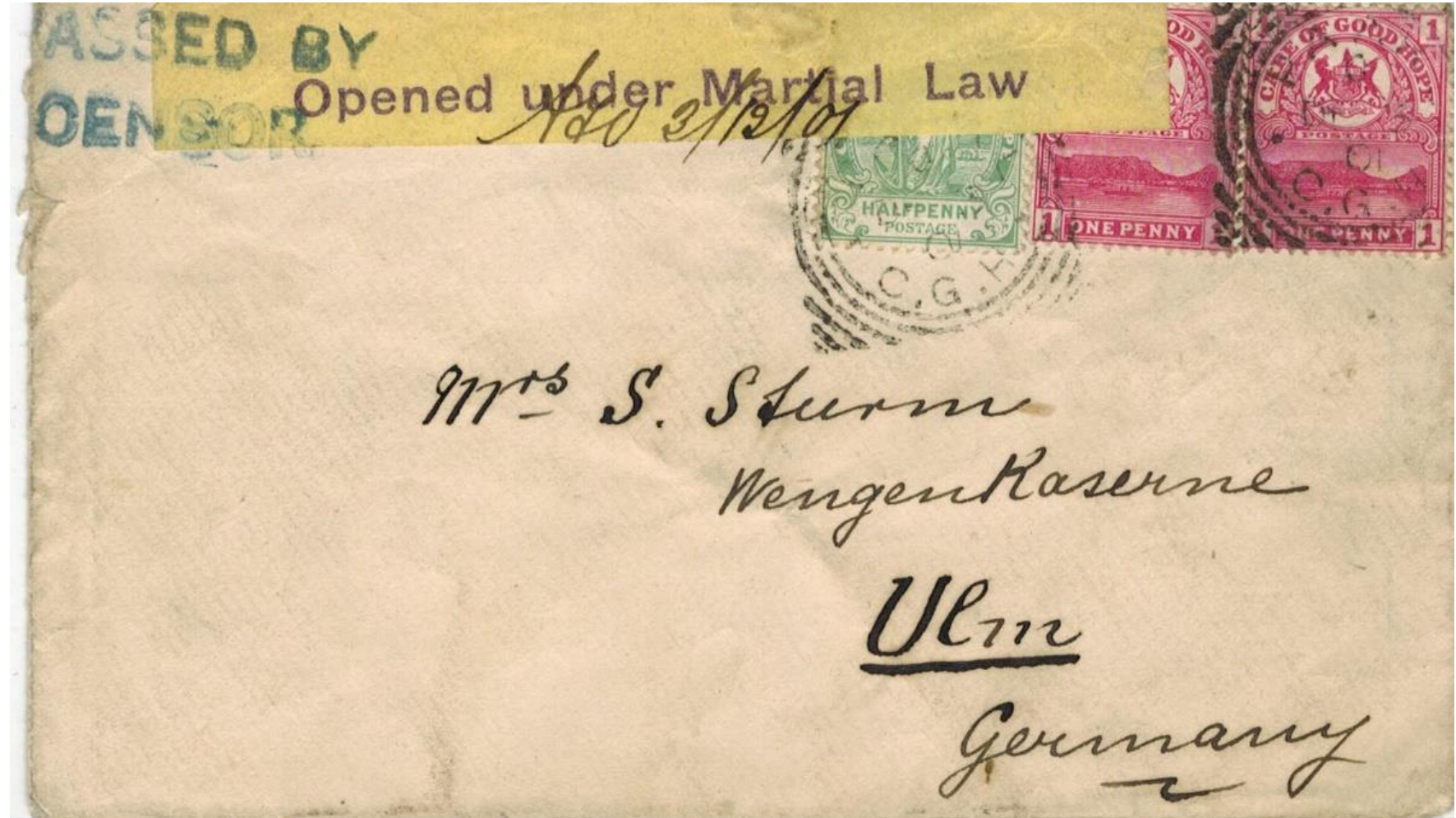
Why Censorship? The Reich's Answer:

“To paralyze enemy spying, sabotage and propaganda and to secure information about the enemy by the inspection of mail.”

“Any information which gets through to the enemy costs German blood. Any information about the enemy gathered via inspection of mail saves German blood.”
(Riemer, p. 6)

A brief introduction to modern censorship

**Censorship
during Boer
War 1901
Cover from
Cape of
Good Hope
to Ulm,
Germany**



Censorship during WW I

Letter from Patterson, N.J. to Berlin dated March 28, 1916 which was censored by the French military. Letter going to the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden (Aid Society of German Jews), founded in 1901 to improve the social and political conditions of Jews in Eastern Europe.



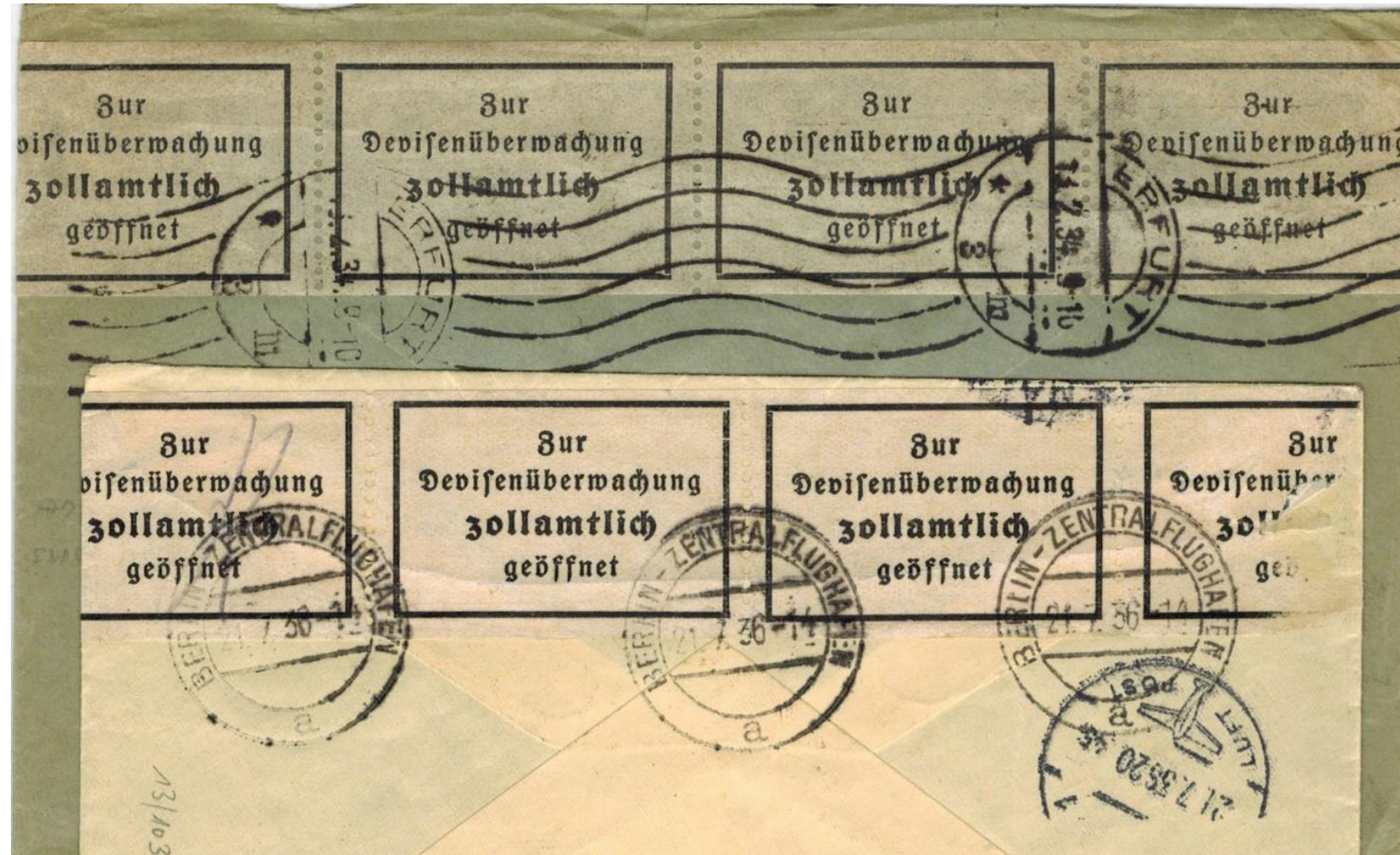
World War I German Military Censorship

Berlin to Sweden
1918 – Opened by
military per rules of
war – dated 8 Jan.
1918



Currency Control

Germany imposed strict control over import and export of currency in 1933. Often mistaken as censorship, the purpose was not censorship of letter content. The dates here are 1934 and 1936.



Initial German plans for war-time censorship of civilian mail. One 'main' Station in Berlin and a secondary station in Königsberg. All mail going out and coming into the country and mail in transit going through Germany was to be inspected. The following terms are relevant:

Auslandsbriefprüfstelle (ABP) – Foreign letter censorship station mostly on German territory – pre-Sept. 1939

Briefprüfstelle (BP) – Letter censorship station – on non-German territory

Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) – High Command of the Armed Forces

The mechanics of Censorship:

Prüfstempel – Cancel device used to certify and examination

From the **ABP**
Auslandsbriefprüfstelle at
Königsberg (PR) early in the
war. The city name was
quickly dropped in favor of
alphabetic code such as “A”
or “a” for Königsberg, ‘b’ for
Berlin; ‘c’ for Cologne; ‘d’ for
Munich, etc.

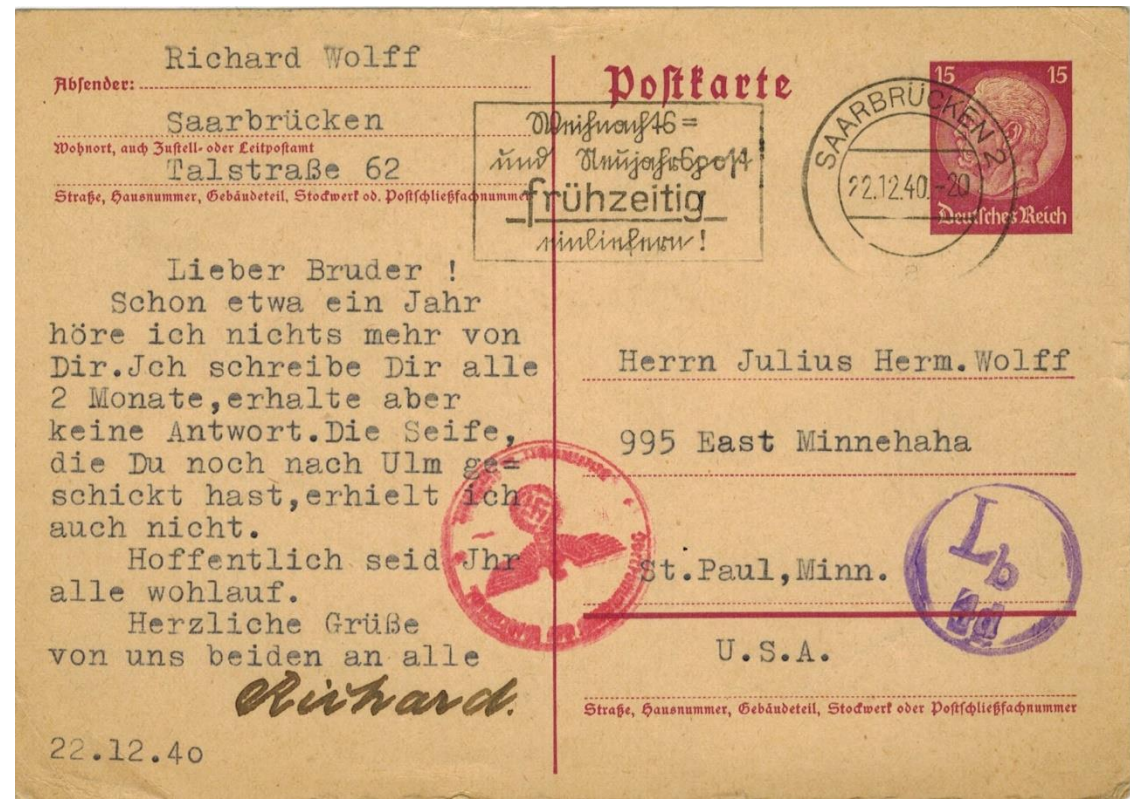


Verschluss – Sealing Tape

Tape came in all sorts of sizes and printed words or designs. Both examples are from Berlin - upper without station identification and bottom with 'b' for Berlin

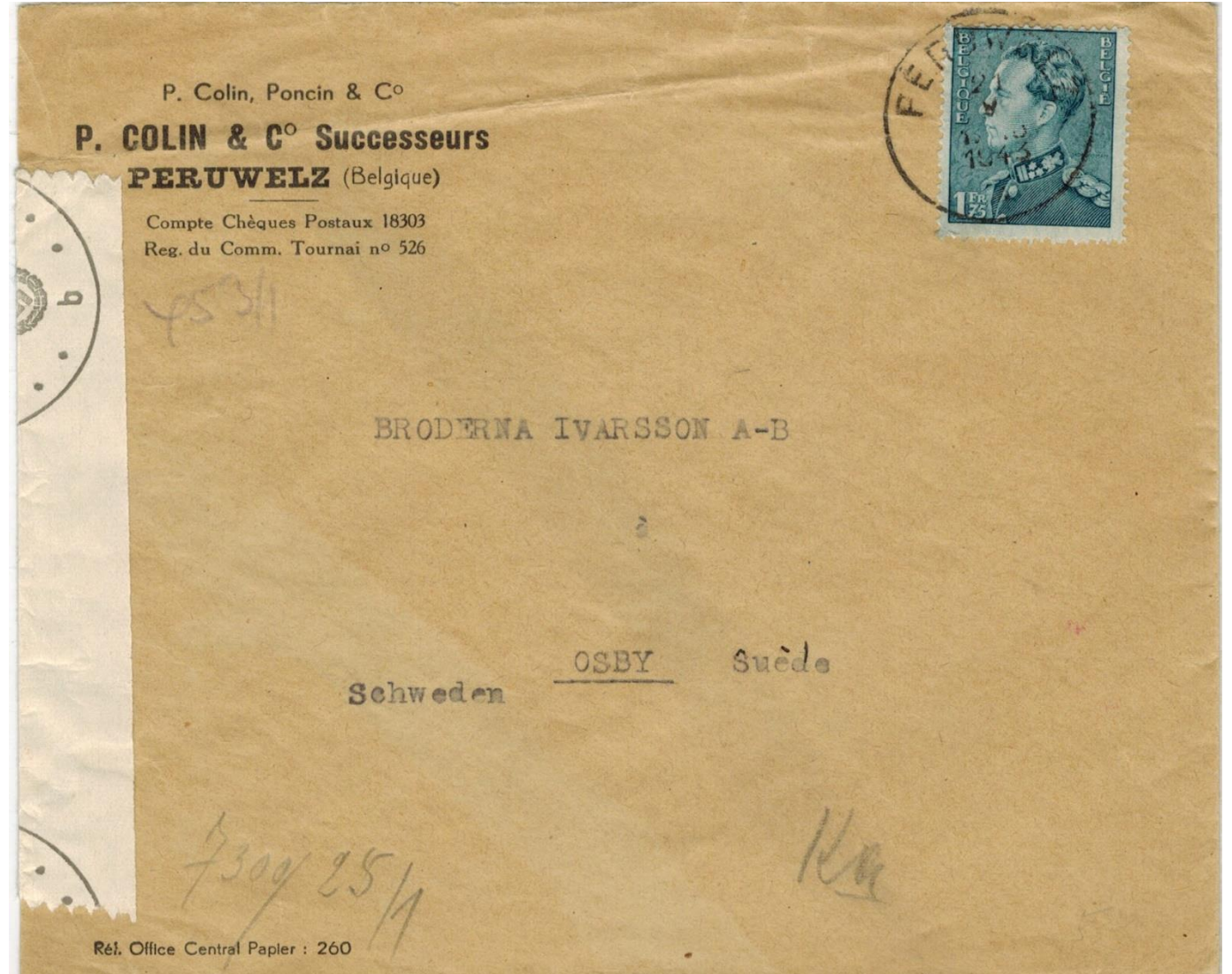


Durchlaufstempel – Pass-through cancel device which indicated a letter passed through without examination “A” is for use by and an ABP. An “L” used used by an *Auslandsleitstelle* – special post office for business mail.



Prüferstempel – cancels/stamps or notation which identify individual censors

In Berlin individual censors used initials and numbers to document their work – in this case with pencil markings. Note opening and tape at left side rather than back of envelope.



Prüfervermerke – individual Censor marks – ‘d’ Munich

Censors at Munich frequently used small rubber stamp with alpha character, digits, or symbols. He/she could also add pencil marks. The markings can be found on the envelopes, and also on each page of the letter.



Beanstandungs- und Hinweisstempel – Infractions --- cancel/cachet indicating violation of censorship rules

This rubber cachet denotes that card is to:
“Return to sender: per
regulations ‘normal’
mail to foreign
destinations must be
brought to post office
counter.”

Landsmann s. 272 – GB1.7



Some of the Censorship Rules:

- Deliver at post office counter with ID
- No illegible writing
- No secret languages, ink or Hebraic
- No lined envelopes
- No picture postcards; photos; braille; chess or crossword puzzles
- No non-business printed matter
- Maximum 4 pages in letters with name & address of sender and recipient on each page
- Stamp trading not desired
- No news about economic situation; food supply; bombings; etc.

Beanstandungs- und Hinweisszettel – Note

inserted in letter indicating violation of a
censorship rule

*“Name & Address of
Sender must not just
be on envelope but on
every page of the
letter”*



Königsberg – ABP “a” – the first functioning station

This station began operating on Sept. 4, 1939. Letter from Oct 17, 1939 to the Red Cross in Geneva has circular cancel indicating inspection and the hand-stamp: Von der Wehrmacht zugelassen – Allowed by the Army.



Königsberg – Early censor Oct. 1939

The reverse of the cover has sealing tape with hand-stamp: “*Im Staatsinteresse geöffnet*” – opened in interest of the state/country. The circular cancel is the same as on the front of the cover:

*Auslandsbriefprüfstelle –
Königsberg (Pr).*



Königsberg – Dec. 1939

German card going to Tallinn has a new cancel in red indicating examination, but the city name is still present at bottom und wreath and swastika.



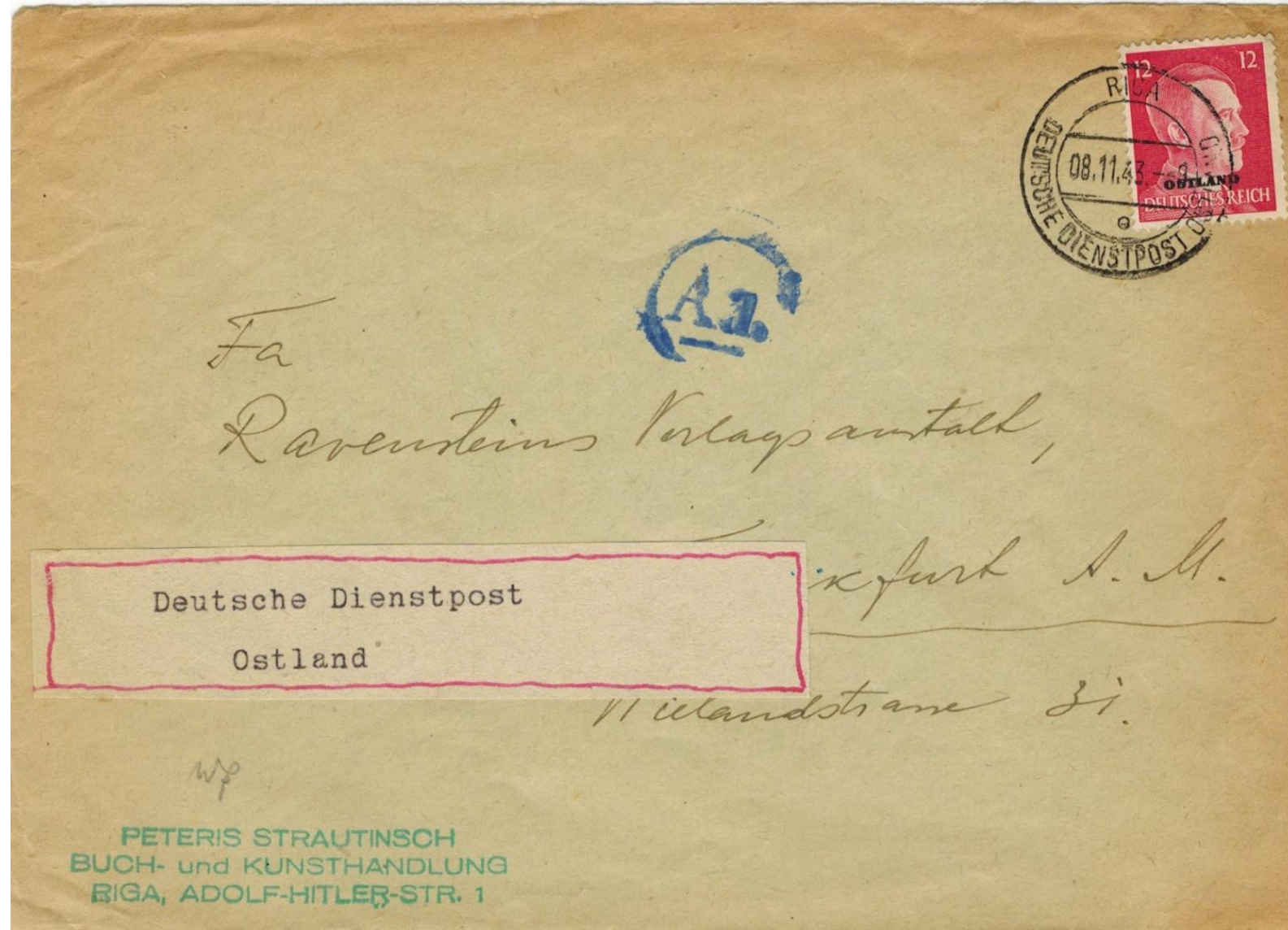
Königsberg - 1941

Card from Kaunas,
USSR to Münchberg,
Germany. The censor
cachet now in red and
uses the lower case 'a'
under the swastika - to
indicate the location of
the censorship station.



Königsberg - 1943

Letter from Riga to Frankfurt posted Nov. 8, 1943 via Deutsche Dienstpost (Official Mail) with a hand-stamp passing cancel 'Aa' indicating that the censor did not inspect the contents – thus not opened and resealed.



ABP Berlin 1939

Berlin Censor station started in early September 1939. It had no censor cancels or separate sealing strips. Thus there was continued use of the 'Currency control' strips used by customs since 1933. The letter from Potsdam bears the typical roller cancel over the labels – dated 14.10.39.



Currency Control and Censorship July 1940



Berlin Censorship 1939 and sometimes not.....?

This airmail letter posted in Berlin on Nov. 21, 1939 shows no evidence of censorship. The franking of a 60 Pf and 5 Pf Hindenburg stamp reflects correct rate – 25 Pf for foreign letter and 40 Pf for transatlantic air.



Berlin Censorship 1939

The Berlin station received its own sealing strips in late 1939. The strips show the word “Geprüft” – examined and the seal which reflects the censor: Oberkommando der Wehrmacht – High Command of the Armed Forces. There is no reference to location of the station and no censor cancel on the sealing strip.



Berlin Censorship 1940

Sealing strip with
Censorship cancel with 'b'
on both front and back of
cover going from Berlin to
New York "via Siberia".
The censorship cancel has
OKW (Oberkommando...)
at top and "Briefstempel –
geöffnet" at bottom. A
typical feature for most
subsequent cancels is the
Tilde (wavy line) under
the right wing of the



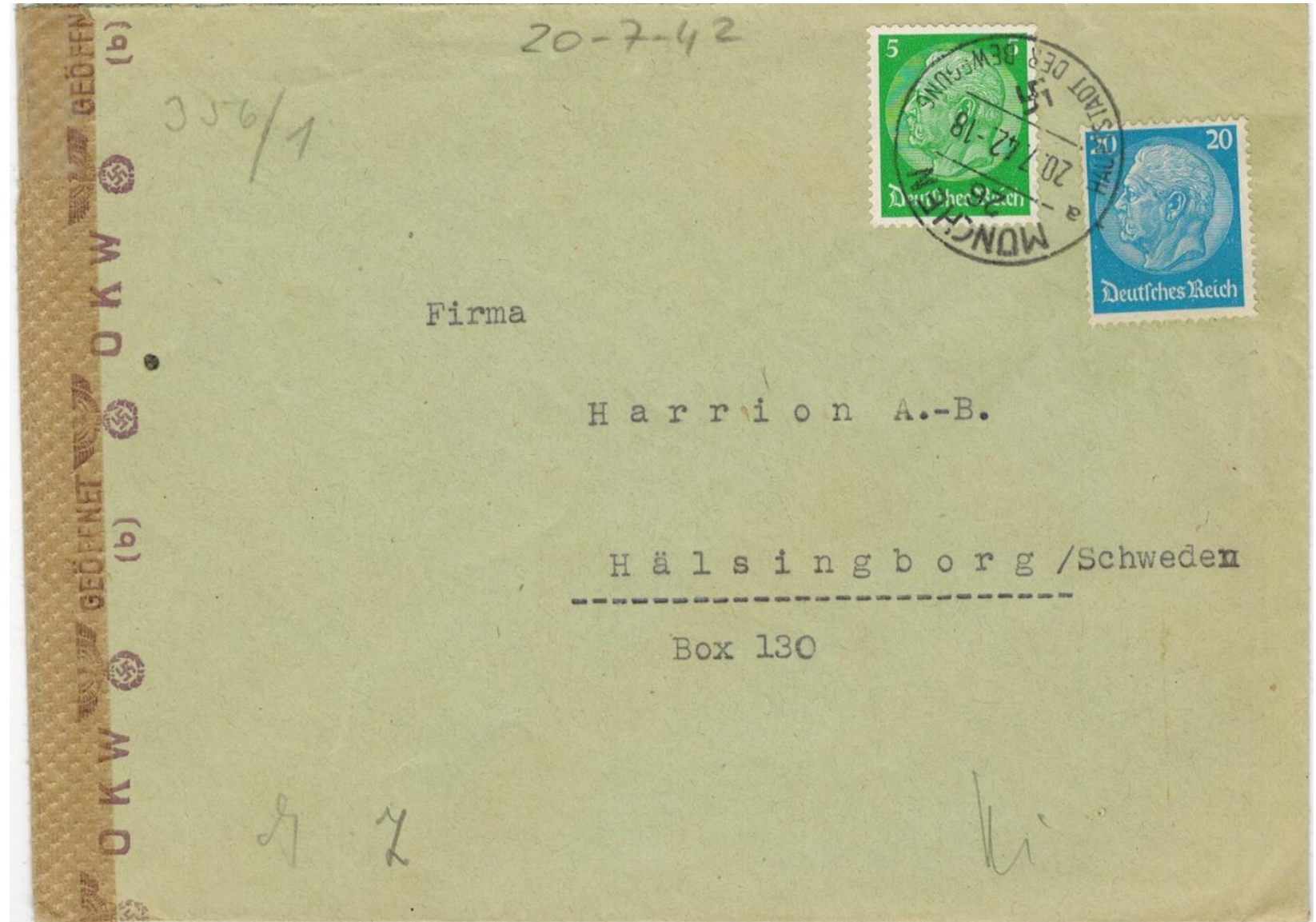
Berlin Censorship 1941

Berlin to Washington DC cover received Nov. 41. The censor cancel has the lower case 'b' under the swastika. The registry also prompted the addition of a red sequential number '42783'. The "Einlieferer" – actual person presenting the letter at post office counter was now required. Both the sealing strip and the censor cancel now show 'b'.



Berlin 'b' letter sealing machines

Special machines were used to speed up the letter sealing process. The machine also imprinted information on the seal. Here the sequence of: “OKW – eagle – Geöffnet/b – eagle – OKW”. Note several pencil marks by individual censors or processors.



Berlin 'b' Censorship 1942

The B8 censorship cancel features the 'b' on each side of the swastika and the 'Tilde' wavy line under the right wing. Censored in Berlin because this card related to patents – otherwise would have been censored in Munich.



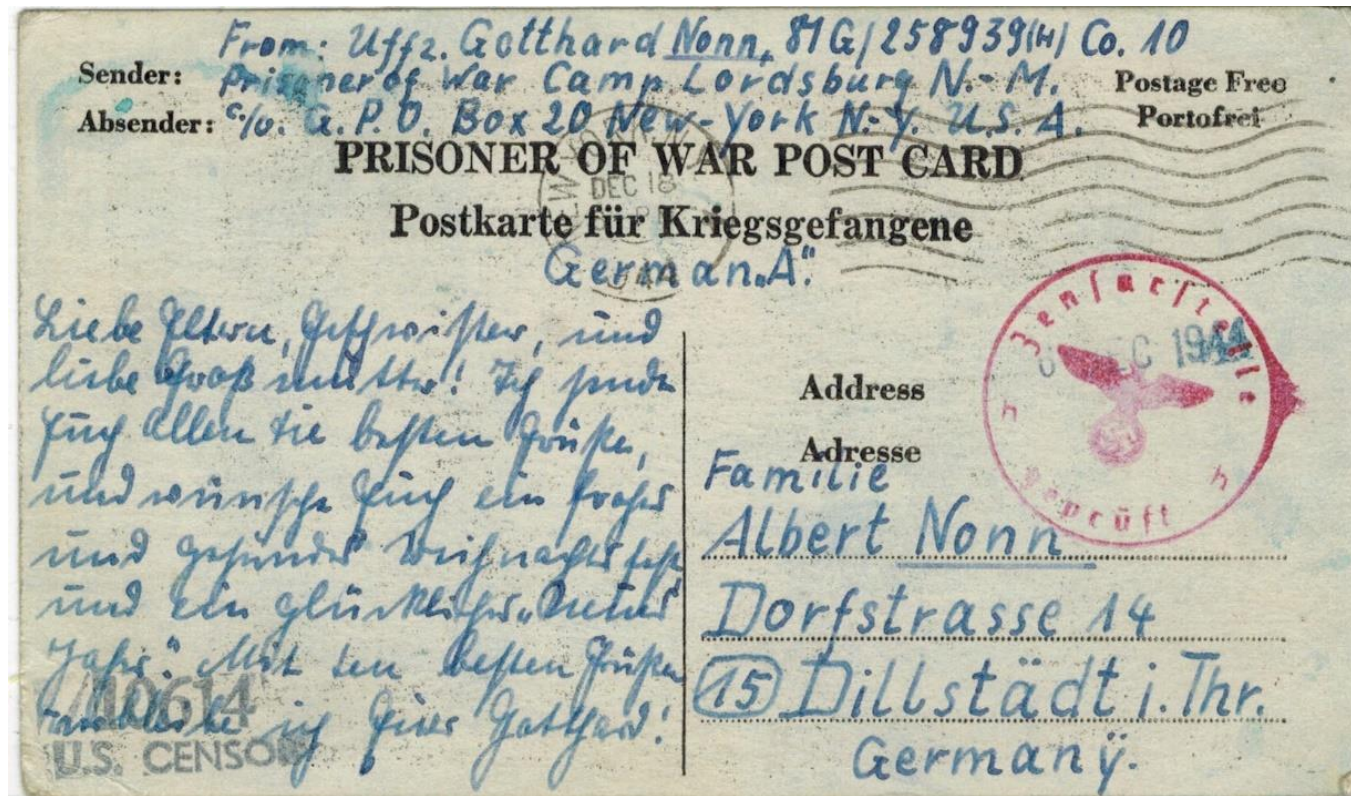
Berlin Censorship 1942

Letter from France to Sweden has another variant of this cancel – B7 – with a ‘T’ above the eagle’s head. The ‘T’ apparently referenced that this was ‘Transit’ mail.



Berlin (Hof) 'h' Censorship 1944

The station at Hof was established after the Berlin Station was severely bombed in 1943/44. Its prime responsibility was to process POW and Internee Mail which had been handled by Berlin until late 1943.



Berlin Censorship 1944-45

New censor cancels are introduced in early 1944 indicate in upper segment:

‘Zensurstelle’ and in lower half
‘b – geprüft – b’. This reflects
that the responsibility for
censorship was moved from the
Abwehr (military counter
intelligence) to the head of the
SS, H. Himmler.



Berlin pass-through censorship

The 'Ab' – which probably means

Auslandsbriefprüfstelle b – is a pass-through censorship stamp. This is one of more than a dozen similar types. The letter from Bohemia/Moravia to Sweden was not opened.



Berlin pass-through censorship

This diplomatic letter from the Hamburg consulate of the Panamanian Republic received a Berlin (Ab) pass-through censor mark and was not opened. Note the registry and the crossed-out numerator number.



Berlin pass-through censorship

Even with the pass-through marking, this letter was also opened and censored. Sometimes pass-through marks were actually applied to the paper strip. In this instance the paper strip shows that the letter went through a machine canceling device.



Berlin 'Lb' Auslandsleitstelle pass-through censorship

Public entities and some businesses could expedite mail by going through a foreign routing station of the Reichspost. These received a circular mark with 'L' – here Lb for Berlin. The round, blue cancel at top left is not a censor, but is the seal of the Reichsbahndirektion – the Reich Railway authority.



Berlin 'Lb' Auslandsleitstelle pass-through Censorship

The 'Lb' is in gothic lettering on this express letter from Switzerland probably going to a German firm or state entity. At least a dozen different types of the Lb mark have been identified.



Berlin Censorship – Rule infractions

Judging what has survived, letters not complying with rules were either returned or destroyed. This letter going to Finland bears portions of a label indicating “return to sender....” This may have been an instance where the letter was dropped in a mail box, but had to be turned in at the post office. Was this a censors label or was it a post office label?



Censorship Station 1939-45

a – Königsberg Gestapo 5

b – Berlin 1

c – Cologne 7

d – Munich 3

e – Frankfurt 4

f – Hamburg

g – Vienna 2

h – Hof

k – Copenhagen

l – Lyon

n – Nancy

o – Oslo

t – Trondheim

x – Paris

y – Bordeaux



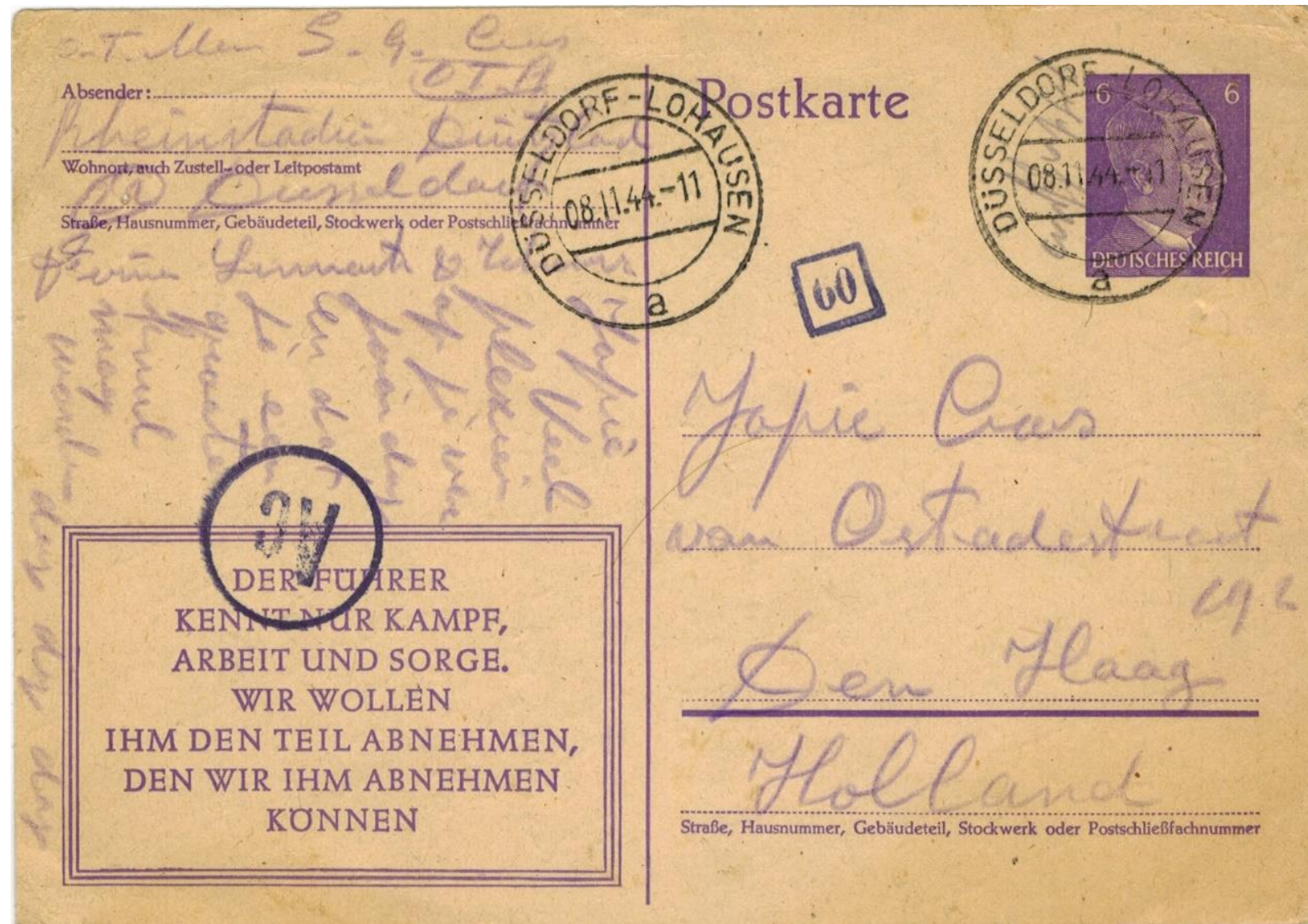
Other Stations: Köln (Cologne) 'c' Station (Nov 1939 – late 1944)

The station was in operation by Nov 1939 and probably closed in late 1944 and was responsible for mail to Netherlands, Belgium and Occ. France



Köln 'c' Censorship Nov 1944

With huge numbers of forced laborers in Germany, one can find much postal stationary with pass-through 'Ac'. Note separate boxed 60 (individual censor?) and double post office cancel which was required.



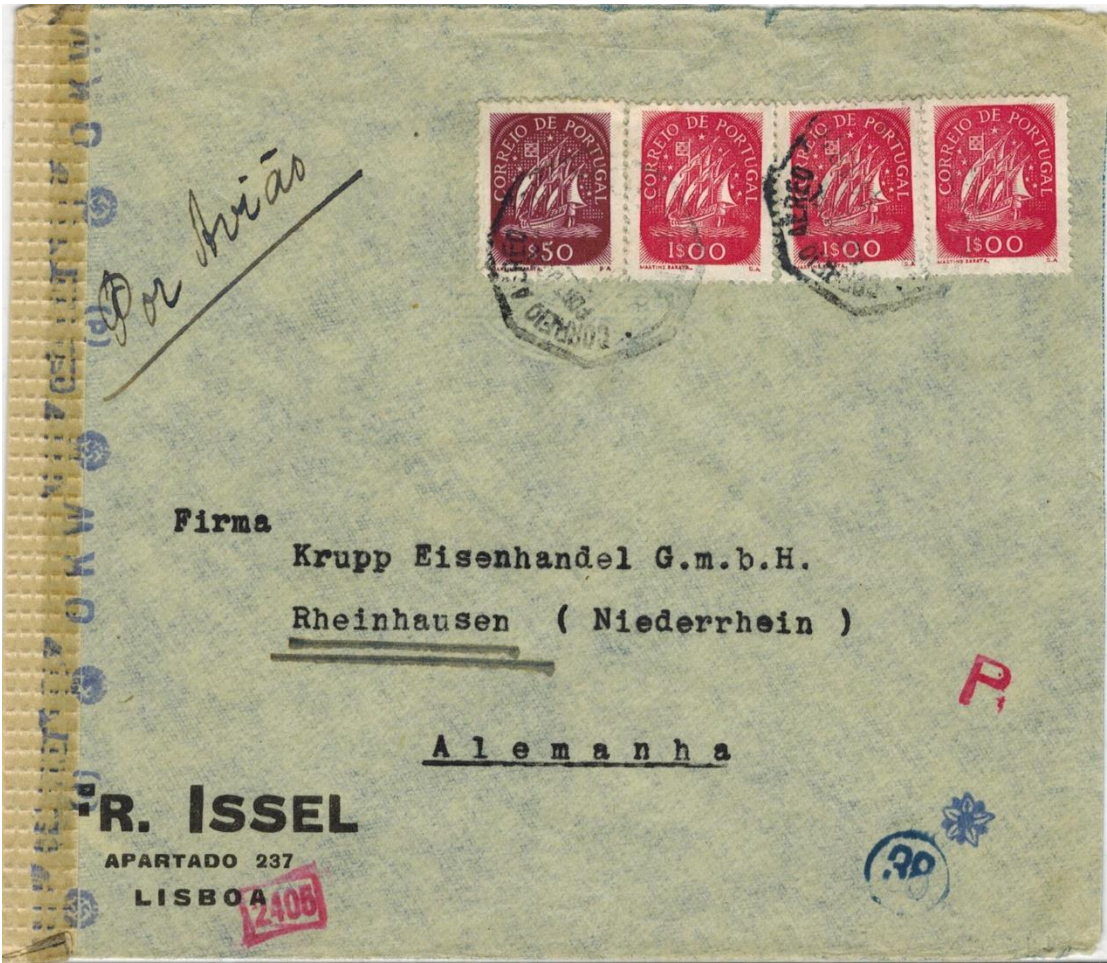
München (Munich) 'd' Censorship

Munich station opened in fall of 1939 and closed in April 1945. This station dealt with mail to/from Italy, Spain, Portugal and Switzerland. The station also had many individual marking such as digits, letter, and even floral designs.



Munich 'd' Censorship

Individual censor markings featured and at left, evidence of checking for invisible ink.



Munich 'd' Censorship on late Feb 1945

Card from a 'forced' laborer at the Italian Lager at Dessau. Note the revised text in cancel 'Zensurstelle' – no longer OKW.



Frankfurt 'e' Censorship

Operated from late 1939 to late 1944 and handled mail to/from North & South America & South France

Transatlantic air mail from Germany to USA dated Oct 30, 1940 and 'e' sealing label and machine cancel. Faint 3-digit numbers in rectangular box. The mailer was Maximilian Israel Rothschild. One may assume he was Jewish and thus required to insert the middle name of 'Israel'.



Frankfurt 'e' Censor Transit mail

Letter from Oslo to Sioux Falls dated Nov 1, 1941 reveals Frankfurt sealing tape and red cachet with 'e'. Also shows individual censor markings – small boxed numbers.

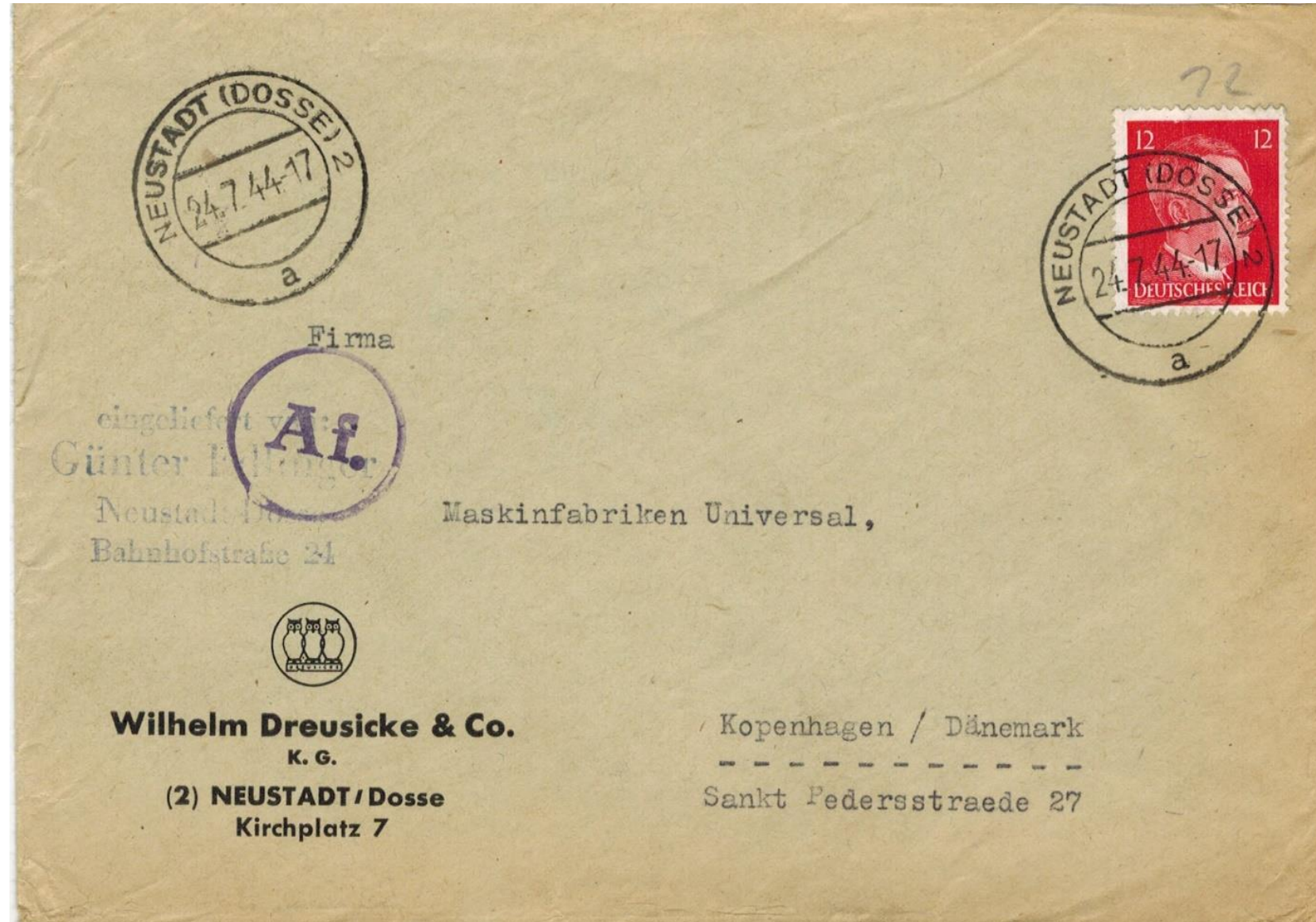


Hamburg 'f'

Operated Feb 1940 to April 1945 and handled mail to/from Scandinavia. Here a cover from Oslo going to Switzerland in Nov. 1944. Individual censor markings include digits and roman numerals.



Hamburg Pass-through Censor 'Af'



Wien – Vienna Censorship ‘g’

Operated from Nov 1939 to April 1945 and handled mail to/from Balkans, Hungary & Turkey.

This cover was sent from Zagreb to Litzmannstadt - a major Nazi ghetto for Polish Jews and Roma.



Vienna 'g' Pass-through Censorship



Kopenhagen 'k' Censorship 1943

Copenhagen station opened in April 1940 and closed in April 1945. Mail handles was from/to Sweden, Norway and Finland. This station used Danish sealing strips and Danish censor cachets as well as German language cachets.



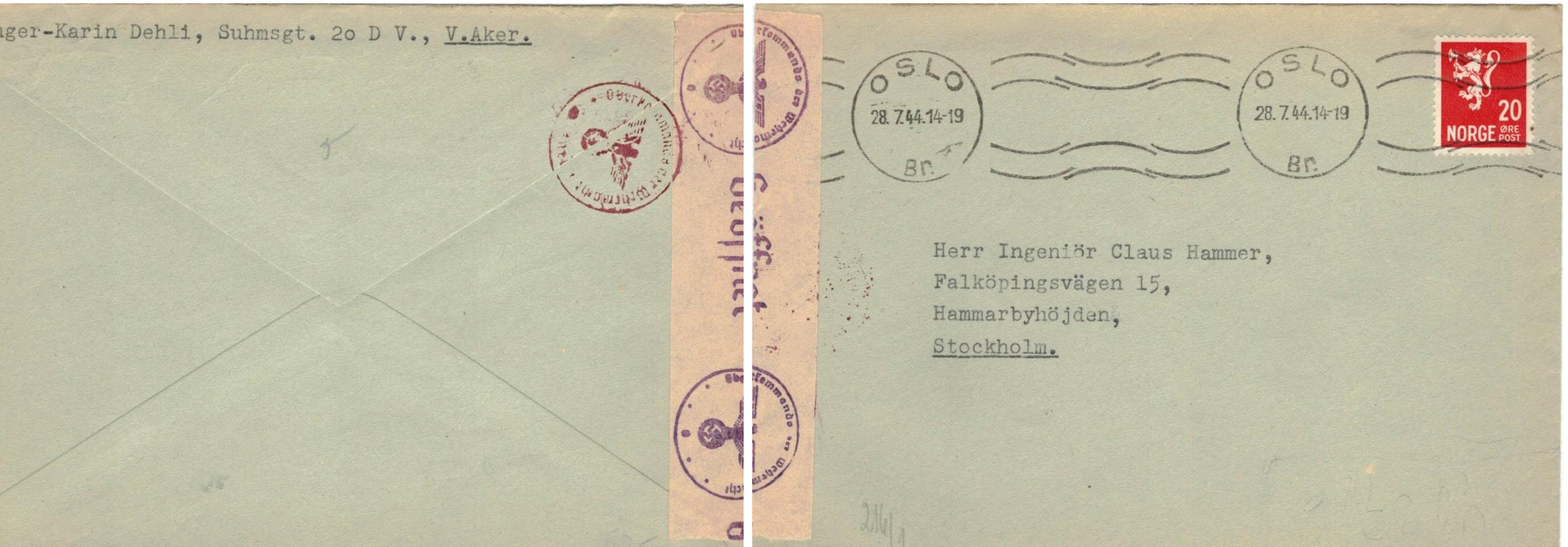
Kopenhagen 'k' censorship 1944

A German Zensurstelle cachet is used on a Danish sealing strip in Nov 1944 on this cover going from Sweden to Kopenhagen.



Oslo 'o' censor station 1944

Oslo operated from April 1940 to May 1945. The Station handled mail between Sweden, Finland and Denmark.



Oslo 'o' Censorship April 1945

Very late censored cover from Trondheim, Norway to Stockholm, Note the propaganda postal cancel and the passing Ao cachet with a plain sealing label.



Durchlauf – Pass through censor from both Copenhagen and Oslo

Relatively few instances exist where more than one censorship station left a passing-censor mark on a cover. There are many instances where a pass-through marking was used along with an opening of a letter.



Lyon 'I' Censorship

The Lyon station was opened in Feb. 1943 to inspect mail going between France and Switzerland. In Aug. 1944 the staff was moved to Nancy because American troops occupied Lyon in that same month.



Trondheim “t”

Trondheim was the smallest censoring station and operated from Nov. 1940 to April 1945. Only handled mail to/from Sweden. This cover from Kirknes, Norway to Stockholm, Sweden sent in Nov. 1943 was censored in Trondheim, Norway. The cachet shows a “Tilde” similar to those used in Berlin cachets.



Paris 'x' Censorship 1943

Operated from
Sept 1940 to
Aug 1944 and
handled mail
from Vichy to
occupied area;
Red Cross mail
and Belgium &
Netherlands



Paris 'x' Censorship 1943 typical Red Cross mail from Algeria to Geneva with passing censor of Ax, but also French, British and US censor seals and markings



Bordeaux “y” Nancy “n”

Bordeaux opened June 1941
moved to Nancy Nov 43. The
station was responsible for mail
with Spain and occupied France.
Airmail cover from Paris Airmail
Show Oct. 1943 to Ireland.
Held by British censor and
released in 1945. The ‘y’ on
short seal is right under the
swastika – hard to see.
The ‘y’ was cachets and seals
were also used in Nancy after
Nov. 1943. Nancy had its own
cachets with an ‘n’, but there is
no sealing strip with ‘n’.

