

1935-36 KUSHKA
Robert Jack

The so-called “Northern Route” through Russia was used between 1939 and 1941 as a means of getting mail out of Afghanistan whilst avoiding India – useful if you needed to get mail to Germany in the early years of World War II. But was there an earlier “Northern Route”?

Only a handful of covers are known, all originating from Herat in Western Afghanistan. The theory is that they travelled from there northwards to Kushk, an Afghan border town, and then crossed to the town of the same name on the Russian side (Kushka, now Serhetabat in Turkmenistan), a distance of about 75 miles. The Russian Kushka was the country’s southernmost military outpost and a railway line was extended to there from Merv in 1898. There was therefore a direct link to the Trans-Caspian Railway.

The route makes sense - it was quicker to go that way than travel from Herat by road 500 miles to Kabul, then on to Peshawar and down to Karachi to catch a boat to Europe.

The covers I have been able to find records of are few. Major Adrian Hopkins appears to have been the first to document them. He stated (in the 1960s/70s?) that he had seen two, both apparently from August 1935. I have one cover, from August 1936, (Fig.1) so apparently additional to those of Hopkins, and I have heard of one other

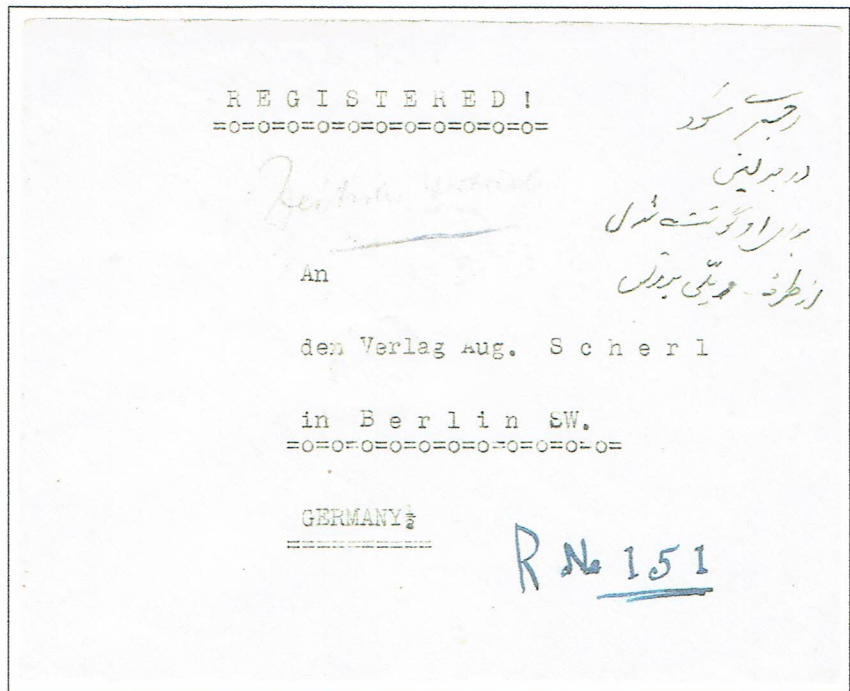


Fig. 1: Kushk (front)



Fig. 1: Kushk (back)

cover (but that may be one of those that Hopkins had seen). So that makes three, possibly four.

A short piece in "Afghanistan 1840-2002 Postal History Handbook" (John M. Wilkins RFD at pp.53-54) refers to an article by Hopkins in the Postal History Society's Bulletin, but gives no year or volume reference. It also refers to a "short article by Wortman" entitled "Northern Postal Routes from Afghanistan 1935", but again gives no clue as to where the article appeared. It does however give some details as to the Hopkins covers as

follows: both are addressed to "a firm in London" and sent from Herat, franked at 75 poul (the normal foreign rate). The one apparently illustrated by Hopkins and reproduced by Wilkins was sent from Herat on 13 August 1935 and has a bilingual Russian Kushka postmark using (according to Wilkins) Cyrillic at the bottom and Uzbek at the top and dated 16th August. It also has a Moscow transit mark of 23 August, but no London arrival mark.

My cover is to a firm in Berlin and sent from Herat almost year later on the 16 July 1936.

It has the same bilingual Russian Kushka postmark, dated 23 July, no Moscow transit, but a Berlin arrival mark of 3 August, giving a transit time of 18 days. It is sent at the normal 150 poul foreign registered rate.

The question is: are these covers genuine? Was there really a northern route this early? If so, what happened to it - was it simply a case of there being no demand, so that it was abandoned? Or have the covers had Russian postmarks "added" to increase their appeal - but if so, why are there so few of them?
