

THE NORTHERN ROUTE - MAIL FROM AFGHANISTAN THROUGH RUSSIA DURING WORLD WAR II

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From the creation of the Afghan postal system in 1871, all mail destined to travel beyond Afghanistan's borders was routed through India. At first, mail went through Kabul and Jalalabad before negotiating the Khyber Pass to reach Peshawar in India's North West Frontier Province; later in the nineteenth century a second route, for mail from the south, went from Kandahar across the border to Quetta [1]. The achievement of full Afghan independence in 1919 made no difference to these arrangements.

During the 1920's and 30's - the years immediately following independence - Germany built up substantial interests in Afghanistan. The first German Embassy was opened in Kabul in 1923, and by the following year there were 72 German advisors in the country making the Germans the largest European community in Afghanistan. In 1926, an Afghan-German Friendship Treaty was signed and in subsequent years German experts were involved in road construction, the establishment of radio and telephone systems, and the building of electricity power plants and schools. In 1939, a loan agreement was signed between Germany and Afghanistan under which Germany provided 50 million German marks to finance projects such as sugar mills, cement factories, coal mines, the exploration for and extraction of minerals etc.

The outbreak of World War II



Fig. 1

created a problem: mail to Germany could no longer be sent through (British) India. A new route had to be found. Afghanistan is a landlocked country and had at that time only three neighbours (if we

discount a tiny border with China which was impractically remote): India, Iran, and Russia. Afghan-Iranian relations had historically never been good with each having territorial claims against the

other, the Afghans claiming Meched, the Iranians Herat, and so that left Russia. During the 1920's, under King Amanullah, relations with Russia had been warm and close ties were fostered, however during the 1930's his successors, King Nadir Shah and King Mohammed Zahir Shah, saw Russia more as a threat than a friend. But Russia was the only alternative to India and so it was to the north that Afghanistan looked to establish a new mail route.

The new route seems to have been established commendably quickly: the earliest cover I have was sent from the German Legation in Kabul on 8 November 1939. It is endorsed "Germany via UdSSR", received an arrival transit mark at Mazar-i-Sharif on 11 November, a further Mazar transit mark on the 21st and a third on 28 November, and has an arrival datestamp in Baden of 24 December (Fig. 1). The delay at Mazar may have been due to teething troubles with the new route; it is not replicated in later covers.

There are a few points to note that are common to all northern route covers:

- the northern departure point from Afghanistan is usually Mazar-i-Sharif, but can be Khanabad. Those are the two major cities in Northern Afghanistan.
- none of the covers I have seen have any Russian markings at all: were they carried in closed bags?
- the route was not restricted to German mail. Mail to neutral countries such as

Switzerland could also be routed that way.

- all the examples I have seen have been registered mail at the normal rate; there is no surcharge for using the route.

The second example shows the route up and running at full speed. It is endorsed "Via Moskwa Moskau" and leaves Kabul on 30 December 1939, transits Mazar-i-Sharif on 2 January and arrives at Brandenburg (Havel) on 19

January 1940 (transit time 21 days) (Fig. 2). Note that German censorship has now been introduced.

The third example was sent on 8 January 1940 from Djadeh-Tchaman - the Afghan border town on the crossing to Quetta, but instead of simply crossing the border into India it has had to be sent north. The long north-bound journey within Afghanistan may account for the longer transit time, the cover arriving at Trossingen in Germany on 3



Fig. 2

February 1940 (27 days) (Fig. 3). Another cover to the same addressee in Trossingen sent from Kabul on 22 August arrived on 13 September (21 days) (Fig. 4).

As mentioned, the northern route could also be used to send mail to neutral as well as Axis countries. The next two examples, from the same correspondence, are from Jalalabad to Switzerland. Sent on 15 and 23 February 1941, they arrive on 4 and 11 April, giving appreciably longer transit times of 47 and 46 days respectively (Figs. 5 and 6). There is no apparent German censorship of either, but the crossing into neutral Switzerland presumably slowed things down as a cover just a month later to Germany shows a more usual 27 day transit time (Kabul 22 March, Nürnberg, 19 April 1941) (Fig. 7).

Germany invaded Russia on 22 June 1941 after which date the northern route was no longer available. The final cover, again addressed to Switzerland, illustrates the end of the route. It was sent from Kabul on 25 June - maybe the news had not reached Kabul yet, or maybe its significance had not been appreciated. Either way, the cover set off northwards reaching Khanabad, close to the Russian border - but it gets no further and is marked in manuscript in the top right corner "Service suspendue. Retour". With the route closed it seems to have been held there for several months before being postmarked at Khanabad on 29 October 1941 prior to being returned to Kabul on 6 November. The final postmark is again Kabul



Fig. 3

on 22 November, presumably when it was returned to its sender, Mr Keller, the Swiss manager of the Afghan Cotton Company at Kunduz (Fig. 8).

I have not yet seen a cover following the northern route in reverse i.e. from Europe to Afghanistan via Russia, but there is no reason to think that

they should not exist.

Note:

- [1] During 1935-36 it is possible some mail travelled through Russia, crossing the border at Kushka, but only a handful of covers are known.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8