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Belgium: The Origin and Development of Postal Instructional Labels

Gregg Redner FRPSC

I BEGAN COLLECTING BELGIAN INSTRUCTIONAL MARKINGS and labels fifteen years ago, when I became interested in the rich variety that existed. I have found it a fascinating and challenging specialisation and am constantly on the hunt for early labels issued between 1892 and 1914. These are extremely difficult to find, in part because many of the first and second-generation labels were returned to other countries where they did not survive. As such, amassing a complete collection is a lifetime's work.

This study will concern itself with the first four generations of these labels, beginning in 1892, and concluding in August 1914 with the German invasion which began World War I. Following the invasion, postmasters across the country destroyed a good deal of the postal items in their possession, to prevent them from falling German hands. This resulted in a decrease in the use of labels, which were replaced largely by handstamps.

The history of Belgian postal labels has been relatively under-researched. In fact, only two larger studies have ever been published. The first, by Firmin Neyt, is relatively incomplete and contains a good number of generalisations and incorrect conclusions. The second, by Andre Vatlet, is much more comprehensive, but does not deal with the background to the labels, focusing more on production issues. Daniël Goffin's article (2021) treats the subject in more detail than Neyt, but is still essentially an introduction to the subject.

The UPU and the origin of postal labels

The second General Postal Union (GPU) Congress in Paris, (2 May-4 June 1878) saw thirty-eight countries and colonies gather to ratify the Convention of Paris, which would change the organisation's name to the Universal Postal Union (UPU). At this meeting a minor discussion on the growing international nature of the postal service expressed concern over the proper handling of mail that moved from the purview of one country's administration to another.

The subject of postal instructional labels did not appear until the end of the nineteenth century when it was first raised in terms of returned mail. The issue of properly and consistently identifying the reason for a piece of mail's return was first raised in connection with the Agreement of Paris, and on 1 April 1887, the following clause took effect for members of the UPU:

All letters and other items, which for one reason or another cannot be delivered to the Administration of a country of destination, must on the reverse, in French, explain the reason for non-delivery. This advice can be by means of a handstamp or by applying a sticker. If desired, a warning in the country's own language may be added. (No. 10 in the GPU despatch of 28 February 1887).

Despatch No. 10 suggested that the primary device for marking returned mail would now be the handstamp, but a sticker could be used alternatively. However, the inference is clear that these were preferred to the use of manuscript markings which were hard to read or imprecise in terms of the reasons given. It would be another four years before the decision to use postal labels for this purpose would be mandated.

At the 1891 UPU Conference in Vienna (20 May-4 July), the delegates restated the policy that postal items must be returned to the sender when they were undeliverable, and that the reason be clearly stated: *The correspondence that is undeliverable must be returned with the reason for deliverability stated.*

A directive to this effect mandated the use of the new labels on returned mail from 1 July 1892, and that this would apply initially only to international correspondence. The goal of the change was to transfer the responsibility for oversight to the frontier offices, which would now ensure (and confirm by the use of labels) that all proper protocols had been followed when declaring a letter undeliverable. This included checking to see that the proper address had been tried, and whether the mail in question could or should have been forwarded. To satisfy this new directive the following labels were to be created addressing the specified reasons for return: *Décédé* (Deceased), *Inconnu* (Unknown), *Non-reclamé* (Unclaimed), *Parti* (Gone away) and *Refusé* (Refused). In the event where the labels could not be employed, handstamps or manuscript markings could be substituted, but these had to be clearly written and legible.

The earliest countries to make use of these new instructional labels were France, Germany and Austria, all of whom had adopted their use by the late 1880s. The earliest French labels included: *Inconnu*, *Refusé*, *Décédé*, *Rebuts* (Not returnable), *Adresse incomplete* (Address incomplete), *Parvenu sans adresse* (Received without address), *Non réclamé*, *Parti sans laisser d'adresses* (Gone away without leaving addresses), *Nom commun à plusieurs personnes* (Name common to several people). In addition, the German Postal Authority had a label indicating: *Raison sociale n'existe pas* (Corporate name does not exist).

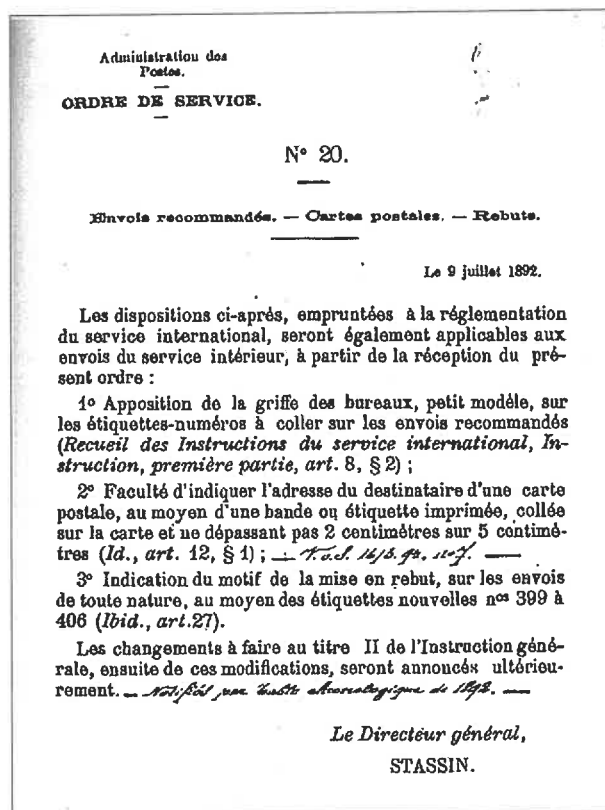


Figure 1. Belgian Postal Administration Order No. 20. The third paragraph refers to the numbering of the 1892 first generation labels.

Belgium and the instructional label

The following information results from research at the State Archives of Belgium, Brussels. The Belgian Postal Authority would not adopt the new recommendation until 9 July 1892, when in *Ordre de Service No. 20* (Figure 1) the policy was put in place requiring that all returned mail must contain an indication of the reason for its return. To facilitate this, the Belgian Postal Authority created a series of eight postal labels, numbered 399 to 406, that indicated the most common reasons for return. It is unclear why the numbers began at 399.



Figure 2. This 1896 cover correctly shows the information on the reverse. The upper manuscript indicates that the addressee was unknown at this address. Below this is the postman's signature and his single ring '10' mark.

When an item was found to be undeliverable, the postman was to write the reason for this determination on the reverse of the cover, either by signing it or stamping it with his carrier number as verification (Figure 2). Upon returning to the post office the proper label was to be affixed. The hope in implementing these new labels was to first standardise the language used in making returns and by doing so to decrease the amount of time necessary to accomplish the process.

On 10 July 1892, the new return process was extended in Belgium to cover domestic mail. That the Belgian Postal Authority was prepared to execute the directive nationwide is indicated by the use of the phrase 'new labels' in Instruction No. 20. This leads one to conclude that the labels must have been delivered to all post office no later than 9 July 1892.



Figure 3. Two 1892 first generation Belgian instructional labels.

The First Generation labels (1892)

The first generation of labels were printed in 1892 in red on ivory coloured paper. (Figure 3) This is the only time red print was used on Belgian postal labels, all further iterations were printed in blue on white paper. The 1892 labels were printed in sheets of 75 and the label number always appeared somewhere in the margin, most often on the upper right and side.

As we shall see, decisions made regarding the typeface were less rigid. One finds a remarkable lack of consistency throughout the history of the postal labels of each generation. The first three generations all placed the French language on the top, in the dominant position. The presence of the Flemish language was considered a mere 'translation' until 1910, when a law was passed officially recognising both languages. The arrangement of the two languages is where the consistency ends. Examples exist in which the French line is in capitals and the Flemish line in lower case italics, or where the two lines are in different typefaces, or where one line uses a serif font and the other line a sans-serif font, or where both lines both use serif text.

According to Neyt's study (2005), these labels were used from 1892 to 1894, but in fact they continued to make occasional appearances into the first decade of the twentieth century. I have been unable to find any instruction from the Belgian Postal Authority to suggest that the issue of a new series of labels

invalidated the previous series. Therefore, it seems likely that post offices were instructed to use up the previous labels that had been issued before employing the next generation. This fact is evident in the first generation labels where a number of interesting and unexpected late usages can be found.

The following types made up the original range of labels released in 1892:

No.	French / Flemish inscription and (translation)
399	<i>RÉFUSÉ</i> / <i>Geweigerd</i> (Refused)
400	<i>INCONNU</i> / <i>Onbekend</i> (Unknown)
401	<i>Non Reclamé</i> / <i>Niet afgehaald</i> (Not claimed)
402	<i>DÉCÉDÉ</i> / <i>Overleden</i> (Dead)
403	<i>Retour à l'envoyeur</i> / <i>Terug aan Afzender</i> (Return to sender)
404	<i>Adresse Insuffisante</i> / <i>Onvoldoende adres</i> (Address insufficient)
405	<i>Non admis au transport</i> / <i>Niet ten vervoer toegelaten</i> (Not admitted to the mail)
406	<i>Parti sans laisser d'adresse</i> / <i>Vertrokken zonder adres op te geven</i> ((Left with no forwarding address)

During the period when the first three generation of labels were issued the postal rates were unchanged:

Table 1. Postal rates during the period 1892-1914					
Up to 20g	Over 20g and up to 40g	Over 40g and up to 60g	Each additional 20g	Registration (national and international)	Express
10c	20c	30c	10c	25c	25c

An interesting spelling variety can be found on one of the first generations labels - 405 - where the second word in the Flemish text reads '*ter*' instead of '*ten*', yielding a label reading *Non admis au transport/ Niet ter vervoer toegelaten*. The fact that the Belgian government did not consider Flemish as an official language may have contributed to the reason it was not felt necessary to reprint the label, despite it being an error in copying the text of the Postal Authority's July 1892 instruction. The error on the label has not been previously noted, although a similar typo was found (Quine, 2022) on the contemporary instructional handstamp (Figure 4). This is the only spelling error on any other instructional label prior to 1932.

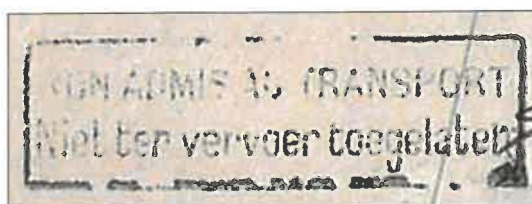


Figure 4. The typographical error, '*ter*' for '*ten*', on the handstamp, corresponding to the same error on the similarly worded first generation label number 405.

According to Neyt, each label's size was restricted to 5 x 2 cm, but they actually vary considerably, ranging from 2.6 x 1.4 cm for label 400, to 4 x 1.2cm for label 403. There also exist several size variations within a number of the labels, which seems to suggest that there may have been more than one printing, but this fact has not been substantiated. Likewise, the centring of most of the labels is far from precise, leading one to posit that the first generation labels were produced quickly, without much concern for quality or consistency.

Another interesting aspect of the labels is their perforation, which varies widely from label to label and even within the various types. While it has been suggested by a few scholars [Mead, Wawukiewicz] that they exist both perforate and imperforate, neither I nor any other specialists have seen any evidence of this. Why was the perforation inconsistent?

One reason may be that the labels were hastily produced to meet the 1 July deadline. Additionally, it was possible that production of the labels could not be scheduled at the Belgian Printing Works in Malines, because of the tight deadline. Instead, the labels may have been produced by a variety of regional printers who were able to fulfil the order quickly. This is only conjecture, as no production documentation exists to validate this hypothesis.

The vagaries of perforation scheme found on each label can be seen in Table 3. Three of the labels - 399, 400 and 403 - have two different recorded sets of perforations. This might further substantiate the possibility of a second printing for at least three of the labels listed (Table 2).

Table 2. First Generation Labels								
Label No.	French text	Capitalisation		Font style		Perf I	Perf II	
		French	Flemish	French	Flemish			
399	RÉFUSÉ	Capitals. Non-italicised	Mixed. Italics.	Serif	Sans-serif	13x13	12x13	
400	INCONNU					13x13	12x12	
401	Non Reclamé	Mixed. Non-italicised				12x13		
402	DÉCÉDÉ	Capitals. Non-italicised				12x12		
403	Retour á l'envoyeur	Mixed. Non-italicised				do. *2 lines of text	12x13	12x12.1
404	Adres Insuffisante						12x12	
405	Non admis au transport							
406	Parti sans laisser d'adresse							

It is interesting to note, in light of this evidently haphazard printing, that the 'Recommandé' (Registered) labels, which were produced at the Belgian Printing Works during the same time period as the instructional labels, all display consistent perforations within the respective types, namely, Type I (1892-1894): 11 x 11; Type II (1891-1894): 12 x 12; Type III (1892-1901): 11 x 11. This consistency in a contemporary label, produced at the national printing works, also adds evidence to the view that the 1892 labels were produced elsewhere. The placement of text on the labels is also somewhat more varied than Neyt suggests. French is always placed at the top and is in a non-italic, serif font. It is capitalised on labels 399, 400 and 402, and it appears in a mix of upper and lower case lettering on the remaining labels. By contrast, the Flemish is always in the lower (i.e. subservient) position and in a smaller sans-serif, italic font.



Figure 5. First generation label number 406 - amongst the rarest of the 1892 issues, possibly due to its infrequent specific requirement. The 1895 use is from the first-class post office in Charleroi, which received a high volume of mail and would certainly not have had any residual first generation labels left in 1895 if this was a high usage item.

While none of the first generation labels is easy to find, label 403, which deals with the return of mail, might be expected to be the most common of the 1892 labels, as each piece of returned mail required the placement of one of these. In over fifteen years of collecting I have only found 12 examples of label 403. Labels 399, 400 and 401 are next in order, with seven, nine and six copies of these labels found respectively in my collection. Last of all, labels 402 and 405 are represented by four copies and three copies respectively. Until recently, I had never seen a copy of either label 404 or 406, which are considered by experts to be extremely rare. However, I recently found a rare copy of label 406 online. (Figure 5, on previous page).

Let us now turn our attention to three examples of first generation Belgian postal labels. Figure 6 shows the earliest known use of a postal label on Belgian mail, in this case label 403. Figure 7 shows an 1895 use of labels 403 and 400, a full year after the introduction of the second generation labels (see below). This card also shows a direct contravention of authorised practice, as both the return label and the instructional label appear on the obverse of the card. Note the manuscript marking in the upper left corner which states, in Flemish, *Terug ann den afzender* (Return to sender). Figure 8 shows the latest known use of a first generation label, a 26 June 1914 cover mailed from Malines to Lier, a full twenty years after the use of the label was discontinued. What is interesting about this label having been used in Lier in 1914 is that, as a first class office, it would have processed a large amount of mail. This makes the fact that the label was still available for use in 1914 quite remarkable.



Figure 6. 13 September 1892 postal card, mailed from Berlin, Germany to Liege, the earliest known usage of a first generation Belgian return label. The addressee was unknown in Liege and the card was returned to Germany, as per the German grey boxed 'Retour' marking.

Figure 7. 27 August 1895. An example of a later usage of first generation labels, a full year after the issue of the 1894 second generation labels.



Figure 8. This 26 June 1914 cover to the post office at Lier and is the latest known usage of a first generation label (#400).



Figure 9. An example of an 1894, second generation label.

The Second Generation labels, 1894 (Table 3)

In 1894, the Belgian postal authority altered the labels from red on ivory paper, to blue on dull white paper (Figure 9). The two lines of text, with French on top and the Flemish below, are printed in two different typefaces. The French is in a larger font size than the Flemish and is in a serifed font. The Flemish is printed in an italic sans-serif font. Both typefaces have full stops at the end of their respective lines. The wording remains unframed on the new labels. There are no directives found in the Belgian Postal Bulletins and Instructions in 1893-94 to indicate when the change in style was approved. However, as we have seen, the replacement was not immediate, as the first-generation labels continued to be used well into the next century.

Table 3. Second Generation Labels						
Label No.	French Text	Capitalisation		Font style		Perf.
		French	Flemish	French	Flemish	
399	REFUSÉ					
400	INCONNU					
401	Non réclamé	Mixed. Non-italicised	Mixed. Italics	Serif	Sans-serif	11.5x11.5
402	DÉCÉDÉ	Capitals. Non-italicised	Mixed. Italics	Serif	Sans-serif	11.5x11.5
403	Retour à l'envoyeur					
404	Adres Insuffisante	Mixed. Non-italicised	Mixed. Non-italicised	Serif	Sans-serif	11.5x11.5
405	Non admis au transport		Mixed. Italics	Serif	Sans-serif	12x12
406	Parti sans laisser d'adresse		Mixed. Italics	Serif	Sans-serif	12x12

Why are the first two generations of Belgian instructional labels so scarce? Based on the fact that all Belgian post offices were supplied with all labels prior to the mandated beginning of their use on 8 July 1892, it seems odd that more examples do not exist. This is especially so when one considers the number of Belgian post offices in 1892, and the fact that every office got at least one sheet of each type of label, each of which contained 75 labels. Although no archive documentation appears to confirm the exact number of labels produced, we must assume that there had to be a minimum of 230,000 labels produced for each of the first two generations. So, what reasons might account for the scarcity of these labels?

While we cannot be certain, a number of possible answers do present themselves. Firstly, a substantial portion of the mail containing the first and second generation labels was returned internationally to other countries. In many cases the mail was marked *Rebut* (Not returnable) – because it did not bear a return address. Covers like this would have been sent to the Rebut Office (effectively the Dead Letter Office) – usually the country's central post office – where they would have been held for three months before eventually being destroyed. This of course would have also been the case with mail returned domestically without a return address, which was common at this time.

The second reason for the general scarcity of labels may be that returned mail was either disposed of as unnecessary or re-posted in a new envelope. In either case there would have been no reason to keep the returned envelope bearing the instructional label.

Interestingly, while the first generation labels are difficult to find, it is actually the second-generation labels which are the scarcest, despite their having been employed for three times as long as the earlier issue. Over the course of fifteen years of collecting, I have only found 6 examples of a second generation label on cover. As with the first-generation labels, the most common label appears to be the *Retour à l'envoyeur* label, number 403.

The decision to switch the second generation labels' ink colours from red to blue may have been necessitated by the fact that several countries, including Hungary and Yugoslavia, also printed their labels in red, and there may have been a desire to make the Belgian labels more distinctive. For this generation of labels, the text remained unframed, with French dominant at the top of the label.



Figure 10. 22 August 1905. A late use of the scarce label 406

Figure 10 shows an extremely late (22 August 1905), and rather scarce use of label 406a, a full five years after their replacement. It is interesting that while the indication is made that the party left no forwarding address, there is no return to sender label on this piece. The instructional mark present - *REBUT* - which had been used interchangeably with *RETOUR* through the 1860s, was by this time no longer employed to indicate a return to sender. Instead, it came to mean that a piece of returned mail could not be returned, most often because there was no return address.



Figure 11. An example of a 1900, third generation label.

The Third Generation labels, 1900

Issued in 1900, and in use until 1910, these are the first labels to bear a frame (Figure 11). Unlike later generations of these instructional labels, there is no dividing line separating the two languages. As with the second generation labels, they are printed in blue on white paper. All are perforated 11.5. Unlike the previous iterations, there is no consistency in the typeface used. Table 4 demonstrates this inconsistency.

The third generation labels are particularly interesting because of the varieties that exist for four of the issues. Unlike the first two generations, the third was reprinted at least twice, and there are significant differences between the printings. This makes the collecting of this generation of labels, while considerably easier to find, a true challenge.

The various labels, listed in order of their assignment, and the differences which exist between printings, are fully detailed in Table 4.

Table 4. Third Generation Labels							
Label No.	Printing	Capitalisation		Serif / Sans-serif		Ink Density	Notes
		French	Flemish	French	Flemish		
399	First	Capitalised	Mixed / italicised	Serif	Serif	Light	Figure 12a
	Second			Serif		Heavy	
	Third			Sans-serif		Medium	No full stop after Flemish - Figure 12b
400	First	Capitalised	Mixed / italicised	Serif	Serif	Light	Figure 13a.
	Second		Capitalised			Dark	Flemish & French same size - Figure 13b
401	First	Mixed	Mixed / italicised	Sans-serif	Sans-serif	Dark	Not widely used
402	First	Capitalised	Mixed / Italicised	Serif	Serif	Light	No evidence of a second printing
403	First	Mixed	Mixed / Italicised	Serif	Serif	Light	
	Second			Sans-serif	Sans-serif	Medium	Label measures 7 x 29 mm
	Third			Sans-serif	Sans-serif	Light	Label measures 8 x 30 mm
404	First	Mixed	Mixed / italicised	Serif	Sans-serif	Medium	Very rare
405	First	Mixed	Capitalised	Serif	Sans-serif	Light	Light ink colour
	Second					Medium	More defined print
406	First	Capitalised	Mixed / italicised	Sans-serif	Serif	Light	The rarest of these labels

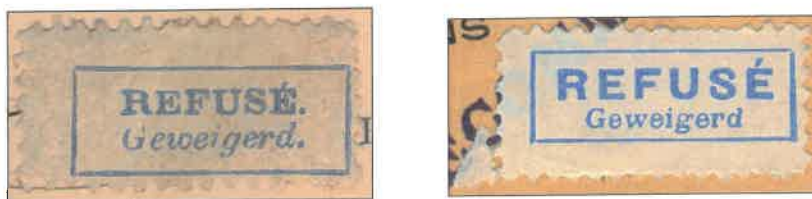


Figure 12. (a): Third generation label 399, first printing, and (b) a third printing of the same label.



Figure 13. (a): Third generation label 400, first printing, and (b) a second printing of the same label.

Without a doubt, as third generation labels continue to be discovered, the knowledge gained will no doubt expand our understanding of the various printings which took place over the respective labels' ten-year life span. Several things are worth noting prior to moving on to the fourth-generation of labels. First, there can be no doubt that these labels were all produced at the Belgian Printing Works in Malines. They demonstrate a standardisation of perforation, paper type, centring and ink colour which confirms that they were all produced by the same printer.

The Fourth Generation Labels, 1910

The fourth generation labels were ordered to be delivered in 1910, the same year that Belgium became an officially bilingual country. This law resulted in a change in the way the fourth generation labels were printed. For the first time, both languages were printed in the same font. In addition, the orientation of the labels changed, and French language was no longer placed above the Flemish. Instead, the two languages were placed side by side, with a dividing line between them. French always appears on the left and Flemish on the right (Figure 14, overleaf).



Figure 14. An example of a 1910 fourth generation label, demonstrating the new side-by-side placement of French and Flemish.

The fourth generation labels served until 19 September 1932, when the following series would be re-numbered and issued with additional labels added, designed to meet the growing postal specificity of the day. Because of their length of time in service, the fourth generation labels contain even more reprintings and varieties than the third-generation labels. However, the fact that their use was interrupted by the German occupation during World War One, makes this a complicated study to undertake and one beyond the chronological parameters of this study.

What is particularly interesting is that in addition to the original eight labels, which had served the Belgian Post Office for 28 years, in November 1910 eight new labels were put into production to be used in conjunction with the original eight. These labels included the following: 1. *Absent* (Absent); 2. *Refusé sans indication de motif* (Refused without reason); 3. *Refusé pour la taxe* (Refused because of the postage due); 4. *Décédé – héritiers inconnus* (Deceased – heirs unknown); 5. *Décédé – héritiers partis sans laisser d'adresse* (Deceased – heirs left without leaving an address); 6. *Pas d'accord* (Disagree); 7. *Payers au bureau* (Pay at the office); 8. *Pas de fonds* (No funds), and 9. *Parti pour* ____ (Departed to ____)

Despite being expected by 1910, the new labels were not delivered until June 1911. They indicate the increasingly precise demands being placed upon post offices to justify reasons for returning mail.



Figure 15. An example of one of the newly-issued 1910 subject-expansion labels – label number 5, *Décédé – héritiers partis sans laisser d'adresse* – which demonstrates that continuity was maintained in the fourth generation labels between the original labels and the newly issued subject areas.

Figure 15 shows an example of one of the new labels - number 6, *Décédé – héritiers partis sans laisser d'adresse* - and demonstrates that while the labels were new, they maintained stylistic continuity with the original fourth generation issue. Interestingly, these newly-issued labels are quite difficult to find in spite of their use for over 20 years. The question of whether this scarcity resulted from a lack of application, or a paucity of supply remains unanswered.

With the German invasion on 4 August 1914, the entirety of the Belgium postal operation was thrown into disarray. Belgian postmasters destroyed or damaged much of what was needed to operate the system, ensuring that the German Army could not make use of it. While examples of label use from this period can be found (Figure 16), the majority of returned mail was marked with handstamps (Figure 17). There is evidence supporting the fact that a somewhat concerted effort was made to destroy stocks of labels in larger city offices during the invasion.



Figure 16. 27 July 1915 example of the use of a fourth-generation label (400) on a German occupation postal card posted at Leuven.



Figure 17. 1 April 1916 card from Brussels to Liege, returned as the addressee had left without a forwarding address. An example of the substitution of handstamps for labels in large cities during WWI.

This is evidenced by most of the markings from cities like Antwerp, Brussels and Gent being in either manuscript or handstamp form. Certainly, labels are seen from larger municipalities, but they are the exception. In smaller towns, where communication between hamlets and villages may have been less rapid or easy, it may not have occurred to the postmasters to destroy ancillary items like labels. This may explain why labels from these smaller communities are more common, compared to larger cities. A formal study of this issue will eventually clarify this issue, but this is beyond the current scope of this article.

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