

In 1914, after the outbreak of World War One, the two sides tried to form alliances with the Balkan countries. Soon Serbia joined the Allied Forces of Great Britain, France and Italy, while Turkey and Bulgaria joined the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary). Pressure on Greece was high due to its crucial strategic position in the eastern Mediterranean but the country decided to remain neutral. That decision was the result of the complex political situation of the country.

Greece was a royal republic but the King's role was dominant and often he was in conflict with the Prime Minister. During that period, the King was Constantine I and the Prime Minister was Eleftherios Venizelos, a man with a strong personality. Under his inspired leadership during the two Balkan wars against Turkey (1912) and Bulgaria (1913) Greece had doubled its territory.

King Constantine was married to the German Kaiser's sister and by deciding to remain neutral was giving an advantage to the Central Powers. On the other hand, Venizelos wanted to join the Allied Forces having in mind more post-war territorial gains, mainly in Asia Minor populated by a large number of Greeks but still part of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore Venizelos suggested the participation of two battalions and of the entire Greek fleet in the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary. King Constantine refused and Venizelos resigned.

After a landslide victory in the new elections, Venizelos formed a new government and ordered a

Two very special Greek perfins

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In Eastern Europe the history of perfins frequently reflects the fragility of social and political agreements, and indeed the temporary nature of national boundaries.

Two perfins of the Greek Levant illustrate this notion. Behind these perfins lie the personal ambitions and animosities of important individuals as well as the geopolitical realities of Europe during and just after the First World War.

This article is titled *Two very special Greek perfins*.

I use the words *very special* for three reasons.

First: both perfins haven't been mentioned before in catalogs or publications about Greek perfins.

Second: both perfins exist in ordinary Greek stamps but these stamps have been used *outside* the Greek territory in Europe!

Third: the existence of both perfins is due to the political circumstances of Greece from 1914 until 1922.

general mobilization of the army. Constantine disagreed and Venizelos was forced to resign for the second time on September 24, 1915.

In June 1916 Germans and Bulgarians crossed the Greek-Bulgarian border in eastern Macedonia. The Greek government, wanting to remain neutral, handed over to the Bulgarians the largest fort and three major cities. All the Greek territorial gains of the second Balkan war were virtually lost to Bulgaria.

In July 1916 Greek army officers in Salonica started the movement of "National Defense" in order to defend eastern Macedonia. Venizelos joined the movement and soon formed a new revolutionary government. The Allies backed the rebels openly and they offered

funds and military equipment. Greece was virtually divided into two states.

Finally, in May 1917, Constantine abdicated and his son Alexandros became King. He agreed to cooperate with the Allies. Venizelos returned victorious to Athens and formed a new government. Greece officially joined the Allies against Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria and Turkey. By the end of the war in 1918, 250,000 Greeks had fought with the Allied troops in the northern Balkans driving enemy forces out of Eastern Europe.

The use of Levant perfins in Constantinople before 1914

Before the First World War had started, a large number of foreign postal agencies were in active operation in the Turkish Empire. In the city of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) there were postal

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Perfins reflect turbulent period in Turkish-Greek conflict

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agencies of Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Russia. With the exception of the Russian service, which was in the hands of a steamship company (ROPiT), these offices were under the direct control of the national postal administrations of their respective countries. The postal service was carried out by European officials and the mail was sent to all parts of the world, without once passing through the hands of the Turkish postal authorities.

In these foreign offices special 'Levant stamps' were used for mail addressed abroad. These were ordinary GB, German, French, etc. stamps, but for



Figure 1. Levant stamps of Great Britain, France and Germany, all with perfin BIO of the Imperial Ottoman Bank in Constantinople

use in the Ottoman Empire they were overprinted with values in Ottoman currency (*para* and *piaster*). Those stamps exist with perforated initials of firms located in Constantinople.

Figure 1 shows some examples of these Levant perfins used before 1914.

The foreign postal agencies enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the foreign correspondence of the Ottoman Empire, causing a loss to the Turkish revenue of nearly one million US dollars annually! It's obvious then that the Ottoman Empire wasn't disappointed at all when all foreign post offices in Constantinople were closed at the outbreak of the First World War.

The use of perfins in Constantinople after the First World War

On board 'H.M.S. Agamemnon' the Allies signed an armistice with Turkey on 30 October 1918. The Ottoman Empire was divided between the Allies of the Entente into spheres of influence, with Constantinople coming under International Control. The city of Constantinople was occupied by the Allied Forces of France, Great Britain and Italy on November 12th, 1918. These forces opened offices for military mail but soon these offices were opened to civilian mail as well. While special 'Levant stamps' weren't available, they first used ordinary stamps of the country concerned. These Levant stamps without overprint in Ottoman currency can only be rec-



Figure 2. Italian Levant stamps with perfin B.C.I. of the Constantinople branch of Banca Commerciale Italiana.

ognized by the perfin or by the postmark.

Let me give you an example of these ordinary (Levant) stamps of the Italian post office of Constantinople. Figure 2 shows an ordinary Italian stamp, with a very common perfin 'B.C.I.' of the

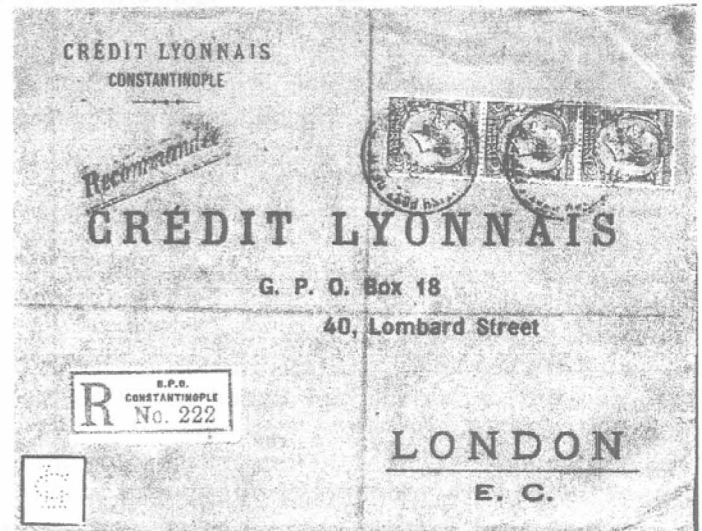


Figure 3. Cover with British Levant perfins CL.

Commercial Bank of Italy (Banca Commerciale Italiana). At least, so it seems! Experts on Levant philately, however, will recognize the postmark "POSTA MILITARE/15", which was used by the military post office in Constantinople! So this perfin is of the Constantinople branch of the Commercial Bank of Italy!

Figure 3 shows a cover of the French Bank 'Crédit Lyonnais' in Constantinople, sent through the British post office in Constantinople. It shows the use of ordinary British stamps with the well-known Levant perfin 'CL'-monogram.

The first Greek Levant perfin

As part of the Allied Forces, Hellenic warships were positioned in the lower Bosphorus, while a Hellenic military delegation was stationed in Con-

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A Greek Levant perfin: Greek stamp used in Constantinople

Constantinople. Soon the Hellenic army post office in Constantinople was opened for civilian mail and ordinary Greek postage stamps were used for mail sent to Greece! One can see why perfins would have been used at this time by Greek business interests and not discouraged by the government. They wanted the business that the larger sphere of influence gave them. They wanted to normalize their presence in the area, so they opened various communication and financial institutions such as post offices and banks. Normal mail was merely a part of everyday life, and perfins were a part of normal mail.

Up till now no perfin collector has reported Greek stamps with perfins from Constantinople. Nevertheless these 'Greek Levant' perfins do exist! Figure 4 (at right) shows a Greek stamp, used by the bank Crédit Lyonnais in Constantinople and perforated with the perfin 'CL'-monogram.

The Great Idea

Venizelos' project (known as "The Great Idea") was the expansion of Greece in Asia Minor, where a strong Greek minority was flourishing, and in all European Turkey to the Black sea ("The Greece of the two continents and the three Seas").

Greek troops served with distinction on the Allied side, but when the war ended in 1918, the promised land in Asia Minor was not forthcoming. Venizelos took matters into his own hands and landed troops in Smyrna (present-day Izmir) in May

and in a stamp of the Austrian Levant. Probably Geo Stameny sent his mail to Greece through the ships of the Austrian Lloyd which company also had offices in Salonica and in other Greek ports.

With a firm foothold in Smyrna, Venizelos now organized an invasion inland. The war-depleted Ottoman Empire must have appeared as a pushover to Venizelos, but this was not to be the case. In 1908 the young Turks movement had been formed and was pressing for Western-style reforms to bring Turkey into the 20th century. One of its members was a remarkable young general, Mustafa Kemal (later to become Atatürk), who believed that Turkey needed a modern government instead of the absolute sultanate. The Greek invasion was just the cause he needed to win public support. And in September 1922 Turkish troops forced the Greek to abandon Smyrna.

Greek troops occupied Smyrna on 15 May 1919. About a year later, under the Treaty of Sevres (10 August 1920) Greece was awarded Smyrna and the adjacent part of Asia Minor. After being forced by the Turks, the Greek authorities abandoned Smyrna on 8 September 1922.

Thus Smyrna was, from 15 May 1919 until 8 September 1922, a part of Greek territory. First a



Figure 4. Greek Levant perfin CL

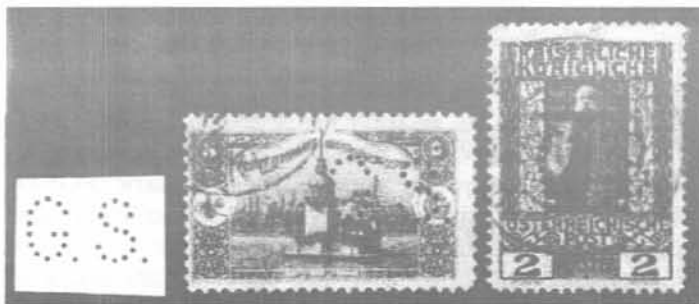


Figure 5. A Turkish stamp (inland mail) and an Austrian Levant stamp (mail abroad), both with perfin G.S. of Geo Stameny in Smyrna in Asia Minor.

1919 under the guise of protecting the half a million Greeks living in that city (just under half the population there). Among the firms in Smyrna using perfins in the period before the First World War, there also was a Greek firm owned by Geo Stameny, using stamps with the perforated initials 'G.S.'.

Figure 5 shows this perfin in a Turkish stamp



Figure 6. Greek stamps with perfin G.S. of Greek firm in Smyrna

de facto and after the Treaty of Sevres a *de jure* Greek city.

During this period ordinary Greek postage stamps were used for franking mail in Smyrna!

A long time I have asked myself if these Greek postage stamps from Smyrna would exist with perforated initials. I thought this could be the case because, from the period before 1914, Turkish and Austrian Levant stamps are known with a perfin of a Greek firm in Smyrna. That perfin shows the ini-

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It went from Great Idea to Great Catastrophe

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tials 'G.S.' of Geo Stameny in Smyrna.

The picture in Figure 6 proves that my guess was right. Geo Stameny in Smyrna also has perforated Greek postage stamps with his initials 'G.S.'

Are they Greek or Greek Levant perfins?

For the occupation period from 15 May 1919 until 10 August 1920, we can consider these perfins as 'Greek Levant perfins'. For the period from 11 August 1920 until 8 September 1922 these perfins have to be considered as 'Greek perfins.'

The Great Catastrophe

When the Turkish troops forced the Greeks to abandon Smyrna, Mustafa Kemal was a national hero, the sultanate was abolished, and Turkey became a republic. The outcome of the failed Greek invasion and the revolution in Turkey was the Treaty of Lausanne of July 1923.

The treaty called for a population exchange between Greece and Turkey to prevent any future disputes. The Great Idea was at last laid to rest. Almost 1.2 million Greeks left Turkey and almost 400,000 Turks left Greece. Many Greeks aban-

doned a privileged life in Asia Minor for one of penury in shantytowns in Greece. Today this period is remembered in Greece with only three words: "The Great Catastrophe."

So here's the end of my article about two very special Greek perfins. These perfins are a philatelic remembrance of a very important period in Greek history. In this case the perfin tells the story. Especially when the stamps don't show a clear postmark. It is a remarkable example of the additional value of perfins for postal history.

If you have additional information about Greek perfins or Greek perfins for trade, please drop a line to Dick Scheper, Hogeland 1, NL-2264 JX Leidschendam (The Netherlands).