

Albania: An Introduction to Her Complex Postal History

This year 550 years ago, the Albanian national hero Skanderbeg died. This event is widely celebrated in Albania and abroad. So some collectors might be curious how Albania looks like from the perspective of a philatelist. This exhibit tries to give a first answer and offers a short introduction into the rather complex postal history of Albania. It covers the time from Ottoman rule until the end of the Socialist Republic of Albania.

Looking into one of the major catalogues, be it Scott, Michel, or Stanley Gibbons, will not help a beginning collector to understand how things fit together philatelically in Albania. The only way to understand the stamps and obviously the postal history of Albania, is to look at her turbulent history and see how it was reflected by her stamps and postal history. As not in every phase of her recent history specific stamps were issued, only a postal history approach will allow to tell the story without major gaps.

Until being allowed to settle as a state after World War II, Albania saw more than a dozen of occupations. Most of these can be documented by mail, but not all. A country of 1 million inhabitants with an illiteracy rate of over 90 per cent at the time of independence and about 3 million inhabitants now, never produced plenty of mail, not to talk about some local places that had their own postal arrangements at times.

Before going through the phases of Albania's postal history it is worthwhile to understand another important concept. When during the first Balkan War, Ismail Qemali declared Albania's independence in 1912 his government only controlled a few places around Vlorë. Most of the country was under the control of different occupation regimes. Only from 1920 on Albania existed as the country we do think of today.



Content of the Exhibit

Albania as Part of the Ottoman Empire

Albanian Independence

The Short Reign of William of Wied

Albania During World War I

Regency and Kingdom

Albania During World War II

The Socialist Republic of Albania

Top left:

Classic postcard of the Fotostudio Marubbi showing the political map of Albania. The borders of Albania were decided upon at the London Ambassador's Conference in 1913 and are – with minor corrections – the borders of today.

Bottom far left:

Classic postcard of the Fotostudio Marubbi showing the national hero Skanderbeg as „King of Albania“. From the time of independence Skanderbeg was the figure of national identity. And even the socialists embraced him for their propaganda.

Bottom left:

Portrait postcard of Enver Hoxha, the father of the Socialist Republic of Albania.

Albania as Part of the Ottoman Empire



Left:
Piece with Ottoman postmark of **Kolonia** (قولونية) in Southern Albania. Once a cover with such a postmark existed. Its whereabouts have not been known for many years.

Right:
Loose stamp with Yıldızlı (Turkish for 'with stars') postmark of **Shëngjin** (Chinkin). Though not looking spectacular, this is a **unique** item. Many postmarks from Ottoman Albania do not exist on cover.



After Skanderbeg's death Albania could not defend her independence for long and it was finally incorporated into the Ottoman Empire after the siege of Shkodër in 1479. Therefore it is not surprising that the first post office to open in Albania was a Turkish one, which opened its doors in the biggest town of Shkodër in 1849. But any mail from Albania pre-dating 1890 is hardly ever seen.

The Ottoman Empire from the time of conquering Constantinople in 1453 signed contracts with Christian states, which are called capitulations. Austria was the first country to extend these capitulations to open post offices in coastal towns of the Ottoman Empire. Because of the good network of shipping lines in the Adriatic, Austria also served Albanian towns, namely San Giovanni di Medua (Shëngjin), as outlet for mail from inland Shkodër, Durazzo (Durrës), Valona (Vlorë) and Santi Quaranta (Sarandë). An inland post office in Shkodër could not be opened earlier than 1901.

Italy also wanted to gain influence in the Ottoman Empire and after having had a post office in Tripoli in Syria, extended her network of post offices firstly to Albania, where 1901 and 1902 she opened post offices in Scutari (Shkodër), Durazzo (Durrës) and Janina to be followed by a post office in Valona (Vlorë) in 1908.

So in coastal towns the postal customer generally had a choice between the Turkish, Austrian and Italian post office.



Entire sent from Valona/Vlorë (31.5.1866) to Constantinople, paid with 15 Soldi, as the Austrian post offices in the Levant used the Italian currency. Most mail of the Austrian post offices in Albania went to Austria, thus a special rate of 10 Soldi applied for it. But in the other direction the rate was 15 Soldi. The customer could use the **Austrian post office** as the entire went from a coastal town to a coastal town in Turkey.



Postcard sent with the Turkish post from **Durrës** (20.7.1907) to Italy. The Italian post office in Durrës was not opened at this date, but the postal customer had a choice between the Turkish and the Austrian post office.

Due to the relatively bad reputation of the Turkish post office, it had to be inventive to attract customers. So when bought in bulk, it sold stamps at a discount. Such stamps are marked with an Arabic **ب** "b for behle" (= discount). We can only speculate that this convinced the sender of this postcard to use the Turkish post office.



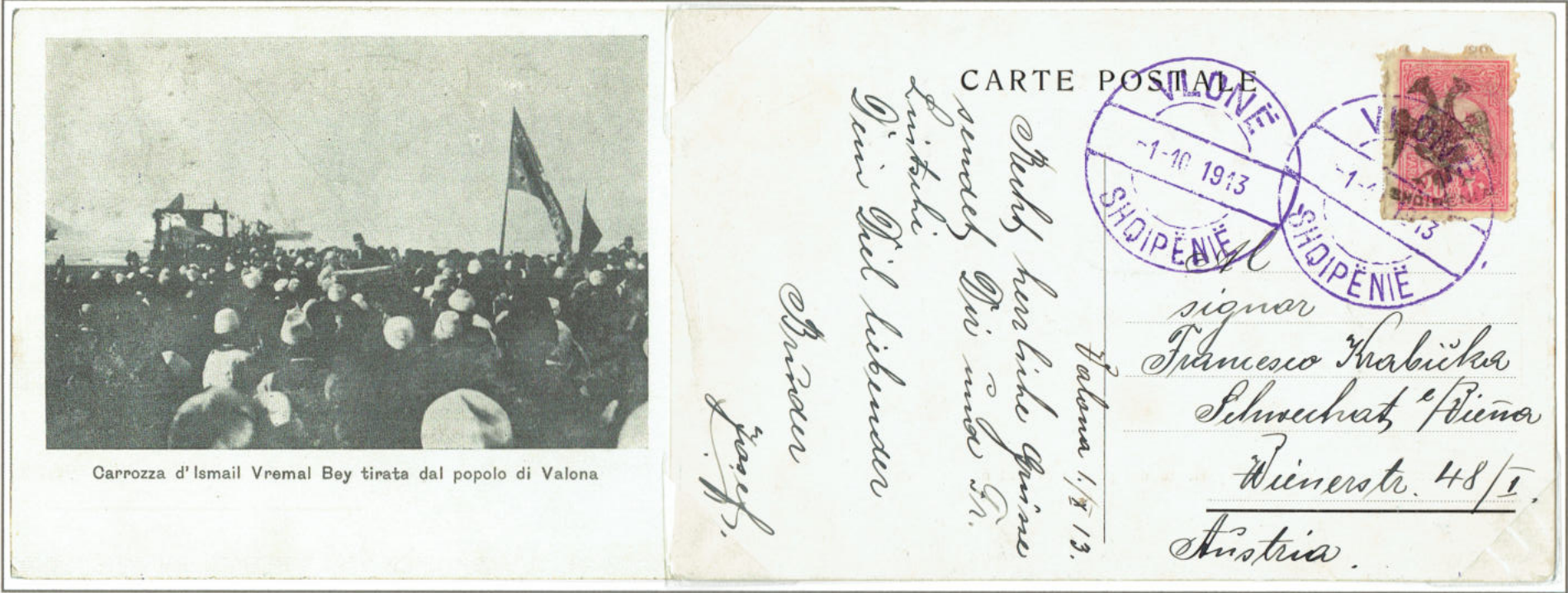
Italian postal card sent from Janina (20.12.1906) to Bavaria: Janina, although in Greece today, geographically was considered „Albania“ at the time. After complaints of the Greek merchants in Janina the Italian post office dropped the „Albania“ overprinted stamps and issued stamps overprinted individually for each post office.

Albanian Independence

Being considered part of the Turkish/Moslem millet (population group), Albanians did not do too bad during the times of the Ottoman Empire. But because of this status they were denied to use their own language and have schools in their own language. This led to the Rilindja (rebirth) movement. But still Albanians, with the exception of constant unrest in Kosova, did not revolt against the Ottoman rule.

Things changed during the First Balkan War, when it became evident, that Serbia and Greece wanted to divide the Ottoman Albanian lands amongst themselves. So Ismail Qemali decided it was time to declare Albanian independence on November 28, 1912 in his home town of Vlorë. However the independent Albania did not stretch far beyond this town. The North of Albania was occupied by Serbian and Montenegrin troops, the South of Albania by Greek troops.

So it sufficed to run the post office with left over Turkish stamps and postmarks for the very first time before emergency measures had to be taken. The seals of the new ministry of posts and post office were used to print postal stationery and stamps. Then all the rests of Ottoman-Turkish stamps were collected and overprinted with the Albanian double eagle. The famous double eagle overprints were born.



Above: Postcard sent from Vlorë (1.10.1913) to Austria, using a 20 Para **double eagle overprint** of the oily variety. The postcard shows the carriage of Ismail Qemali, pulled by the local population as a sign of reverence to the father of Albanian independence.
Right: Letter sent from Vlorë (22.11.1913) to the Italian Post Office in Constantinople, using a **locally produced 1 Grosh stamp**, made with the seal of the ministry of posts and a typewriter. Also a few left over sheets of **Ottoman paper** were used, visible by the **dry seal** embossed on the top left of the stamp. Very rare.
Below: Cover sent from Sarandë (5. OKT 1913) to Korfu. As Corfu is just 5 miles accross the Adriatic, the local rate of 5 Lepta applied. **Mail from the Greek occupation.**
Left: **Serbian propaganda postcard** celebrating the conquest of Durrës: „Durazzo. Vive la mer Serbe.“



The Short Reign of William of Wied

To settle the issues of the First Balkan War, the London Ambassadors' Conference was convened. One of its major tasks was to find a solution for the 'Albania question'. As form for the new Albanian state it was decided to establish a Principality. To this end a compromise candidate acceptable to muslims, orthodox, and catholic, as well as Austria, Italy, Great Britain, France, Russia had to be found. The choice was a German protestant, Prince William of Wied, of old German nobility without any connections to the Balkans, but as Germany had no interests in the Balkans, acceptable to everybody.

A lot of hope was put into him. His arrival in the new capital of Durrës on March 7, 1914 was widely celebrated. But the local chieftain, Essad Pasha, was not happy at all. He used the conservative Bosnian population, which had immigrated to neighbouring Shijak in the 1890s to stirr up a revolt. Finally Essad had to leave Albania for Italian exile. But when, after the assassination of the Austrian archduke by a Serbian terrorist in Sarajevo, World War I was around the corner, William of Wied lost all his backing by the Great Powers and finally had to leave Albania on September 3, 1914. This gave way to Essad Pasha to set up his regime in Central Albania. World War I was to come to Albania.



Left: Postcard sent from Durrës (24.8.1914) to Austria. Italy had printed stamps with the portrait of Skanderbeg as a gift for the new Albanian state. But the imprinted Frank currency did not circulate in the country. So the stamps had to be overprinted in Turkish currency to make them compatible with circulating money. The postcard shows the celebrations on the occasion of the arrival of William of Wied in Durrës. At this time the local muslim clergy was giving their honors to the Prince.



Top right: Shkodër was administered by British Colonel Phillips at the time, heading the international forces in the town with a mandate of the International Control Commission. The town did not get any of the commemorative overprints to celebrate the arrival of the Prince. Therefore on March 7, 1914 the current postmark was struck in golden color and not used anymore before being changed to another style. Rare commercial cover with golden cancellation of Shkodër (7.3.1914) celebrating the arrival of William of Wied.

Bottom right: When William of Wied left Albania on September 3, 1914, Essad Pasha immediately set up his second regime. To celebrate this event a special postmark with the date September 4, 1914, was made. Cover sent from Durrës (4.9.1914) to Austria using Skanderbeg stamps overprinted for Essad's posts in Central Albania.



Albania During World War I

When World War I started in Europe, William of Wied had the leave the country, the international arrangement in Shkodër fell apart. So all parties used their chances. Greece again occupied Southern Albania, Serbia organized the retreat of its troops through the country. Bulgaria started its campaign into Albania end of 1915. Then in February 1916 Austria occupied the major part of the country. In May 1916 Italy started to occupy the South of Albania, and France occupied Korçë in November 1916.

Besides Bulgaria all these occupations also made arrangements for civil mail. But under war conditions civil mail services were only rarely used. With occupation lines moving during the war, one place could see several occupations in a row.



Left:
Registered cover sent from Tirana (6.VII.18) with the civilian Austrian mail to Triest. The letter was censored by civilian censorship in Shkodër before it was forwarded to Triest.

Right:
Military postcard sent from Korçë by Tresor et Postes 508 (27.6.17) to Amiens, France. French military mail from Albania.

Left:
Letter from Tepelenë through the Epirote/Greek post office in Argyrokastron/Gjirokastrë (14 May 16) to the US. Routed through Patra and Bologna, Italy, where it was censored.
Mail from Greek occupied Southern Albania.



Left:
Greeting postcard sent from Santi Quaranta/Sarandë (11.9.17) through the civilian Italian post office to Modena. The postcard was censored in Argirocastro/Gjirokastrë before it went on to Italy.
Mail from a civil Italian post office during WW I.

Regency and Kingdom

When World War I ended, Albania saw herself fragmented in different occupations, Shkodër was occupied by allied forces, most of the central and southern part by Italy, Korçë was occupied by French troops and the North by Serbian troops.

With the Congress of Lushnjë in January 1920 the Albanians took their destiny into their own hands, which finally led to the War of Vlorë and the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

After a short democratic period, Ahmed Zogu became the strong man, first as President and later as King.

At the beginning of this phase, the transport of foreign mail depended on the goodwill of Italy. But in March 1922 Albania finally became member of the UPU and also postally fully independent.

Top left:

Registered civilian letter sent from Durrës through the Italian military post **Posta Militare 50** (2.4.21) to the US. At this time Italy had not given up its aspirations for Albania and offered mail services to the Albanian public. Registration label number 1.

Bottom left:

Letter sent from Tiranë (27.12.20) via Durrës (29.12.20) and PM 50 (7.1.21) to Austria. With 50 Qind the letter was fully paid for an international registered letter. But Albania had to forward mail through the services of Italy, which because of deteriorating relations did not accept the Albanian postage, removed the registration label and taxed the letter. An example of the „Italian postal war on Albania“.



Cover sent from Vlorë (12.4.25) to Brindisi, Italy. At this time domestic rates applied for Italy. Very rare commercial usage of a stamp celebrating the change of constitution to allow Ahmed Zogu to become President of Albania.



Mourning cover sent from Vlorë (15.10.29) to Torino, Italy. Through another change of Constitution in December 1928, Ahmed Zogu had become King of Albania, all stamps were overprinted with Mbretinija Shqiptare accordingly. Only the airmail stamps remained republican for a while. Republican/royal mix of stamps.

Albania During World War II

World War II began for Albania when Italian troops occupied the country on April 7, 1939. King Zogu fled the country and Victor Emmanuel III of Italy became King of Albania in personal union.

Then in October 1940 Italy attacked Greece from Albania. When Greek troops stood deep in Albania, Germany defeated Yugoslavia and Greece to the rescue of Italy.

To appease Albanians in this situation, the Albanian speaking territories of Yugoslavia, i.e. Kosova, parts of Macedonia and Montenegro were attached to Albania. So only from June 1941 until the withdrawal of German troops in November 1944 all Albanians lived in one state.

When Italy capitulated in September 1943 German troops occupied Albania until November 1944.

Obviously during this time there were military and occupation mail services.

Top left:
Printed matter sent from Borgo Costanzo Ciano (21.2.41) to Italy. Kuçovë was re-named after Mussolini's son-in-law during the Italian occupation.

Center left:
Postcard sent from Korçë (12.1.41) to Greece. Censored by Greek censor. Civil mail from the Greek occupation of Albania.

Bottom left:
Italian military mail sent from PM 16 (6.2.41; Dukaj) to Italy. From the Greco-Italian War.



POW mail sent from Suva Reka (11.6.41) to Germany. Suva Reka, a small town near Prizren, Kosova, belonged to Albania after the Greco-Italian War. **Very rare piece of mail from Great Albania.**



German military mail from unit 47116 sent by Feldpost (05.10.43) to Germany. Unit 4711 belonged to medical company 297, which was stationed in **South Albania.**



The Socialist Republic of Albania

After the withdrawal of German troops from Albania, the Communists under the leadership of Enver Hoxha took over government in Albania. Postal services were restored using up old material. But soon own stamps were printed.

Besides the stamps well known from the catalogues, there are quite few things to be explored. In the early socialist years Albania had a special military mail service 'Posta Ushtarake', which is little known outside the country.

There were also some stamp issues that did not make it into the catalogues. Even today the industry series of the 1970s is not listed in Scott (Michel does list it). These stamps were printed for postal purposes and not sold via the philatelic bureau in Tirana.

And even today discoveries can be made, like this aerogramme, which was printed around 1986, as can be seen by the imprinted stamp of „Mother Albania“. It was never issued and just recently discovered.

Top right:
Registered letter with return receipt from Tiranë (4.11.72) to Germany. **No less than three of the rare industry stamps were used.** Thanks to such letters these stamps found their way into the Michel catalogue.

Bottom right:
Newly discovered aerogramme, which is not yet listed in any catalogue. The reason it was not issued is simple. After the democratic transition of Albania, the Lek lost its value. And instead of overprinting old stationery, new stamps were printed. Very rare.



Registered airmail cover sent from Kuçovë (24.12.49) to the US. At this time not all post offices had received new postmarks. So the Kuçovë Mandat Poste (money order) postmark from the Italian period was used.



Military mail sent from Qyteti Stalin to Shkodër. Kuçovë had the fate of being renamed again in socialist times. In 1951 Albania was not yet an atheist state and it was possible to send Easter greetings.

