This Day in History… December 18, 1918

Latvia's First Stamps Printed on Maps!

On December 18, 1918, war-torn and recently independent Latvia issued its first stamps, printed on the back of German military maps.

After centuries of fighting and invasions, Latvia became part of the Russian Empire in the 1700s. Discontent there and in other areas of the empire led to the Russian Revolution in 1905, though the imperial government ultimately won.

Then on August 1, 1914, Germany declared war on Russia, catapulting Russia and Latvia into World War I. In the coming years, German forces invaded most of Latvia. Latvian riflemen units were raised to fight the German invaders while Latvian leaders began making calls for independence.

Latvia #1 was printed on a German military map.

Over the course of the war, more than half of Latvia experienced war damages – over 87,000 buildings were destroyed and a quarter of the land ruined. A million people fled the country and never returned.

The war officially ended on November 11, 1918, and a week later, on November 18, Latvia declared its independence. During the war, Latvia used overprinted German stamps. As a new country, Latvia needed to create its own postage stamps, but the war had caused a severe paper shortage. However, there was one source of top-quality paper – Latvia's industrious government printed its first stamps on military maps left behind by Germany's Imperial Army! According to their records, they used 79 different German maps of Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland as well as 62 different maps of southern Latvia and northern Lithuania.

Map Stamp with Perforations

Just one month after declaring its independence, Latvia issued its first postage stamps on December 18, 1918. To save precious paper, stamps were printed in 12 rows of 19 stamps each for a total of 228 stamps per sheet. The back of these stamps have detailed German military maps showing sections of Latvia, complete with name, scale and map grid position.

A total of only 11,956 sheets were printed. And of those, only about 4,900 were perforated. Of those sheets printed, only 4,750 were delivered to Latvia's government in the period between 1918 and 1919. The shipment included imperforate gummed sheets (Latvia #1), and perforated gummed sheets (Latvia #2).

Latvian painter and graphic artist Ansis Cirulis designed the first stamps. The stamps' designs were based on the Latvian coat of arms. This design used a sun symbolizing statehood, with 17 rays representing the 17 Latvian districts. The design also includes three ears of grain and three stars, representing the three historic districts of the new country.

After the Latvia Post began operations, the Bolsheviks invaded the capital city of Riga. An unknown quantity of Latvia map stamps survived the destruction – precious postal souvenirs of this turbulent period in European history. Latvia was embroiled in a war of independence until 1920, and was once again invaded during World War II. During this time, Latvia used Soviet and then German stamps. The country remained under Soviet control until 1991, when Russia finally recognized its independence. And Latvia resumed issuing its own postage stamps.

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