

Die Schweizerischen Soldatenmarken (Swiss Soldier Stamps)

by David L Sampson

The last time Switzerland was invaded by a foreign army was 1799. The 1815 Treaty of Paris established its neutrality. The Swiss Army guarantee Swiss neutrality. Compulsory military service is required of all male citizens; women may serve voluntarily. Basic military training lasts 18 weeks (23 weeks for special forces).

Presently, after basic training, the soldier must take six, 3-week refresher courses in the next nine years. After nine years, under the current scheme, the soldier is discharged. During WW2, soldiers were not discharged until they were 60!

During training, a soldier would utilize the Feldpost (Military Post Office.) It was free, but subject to military censorship. Prior to 1940, soldiers were not compensated for loss of wages during their required military service. This placed a severe burden on some soldiers. As a result, Soldatenmarken (Soldier Stamps) were created. The stamps were created by the individual units and the money obtained from their sale was used to support a soldier welfare fund to aid the poorer soldiers. This problem was not solved until 1940 when an 'earning adjustment' was established.

Collector's Perspective

There are hundreds of stamps each with multiple variations; most of the variations are related to paper type and paper color. The regular issues are usually inexpensive; rare color variations, paper type and errors are very expensive. I am content to collect only the regular issues.

Wittwer's catalog has a grand total of 3111 Soldier Stamps. I estimate that if you consider all variants, the total is over 6000!



Almost all Soldier Stamps indicate the name of the issuing unit. These are sometimes challenging to decipher as they may be abbreviations of German, French or Italian words.

Speaking of decipherment, the stamp pictured here (an issue of the 159 Company, II Battalion), is overprinted with the word 'Abdrätte.' Even Google Translate could not tell me what this word meant! I spoke to a stamp dealer in Zurich who told me that 'Abdrätte' is a word in the dialect spoken in Basel. He said the word means 'we are finished,' but has the spirit of 'we're out of here!' I have not been able to clarify the date August 20, 1945. I may have been the date the Swiss Mobilization ended or it may have been the date that this unit was demobilized.

Values for the following varieties are valued in the [Wittwer catalog](#). The fact that the catalog is now twenty years old makes the absolute valuations well nigh worthless: Perforate; Imperforate; Souvenir sheet with 4 perforate stamps, but **without** printing on the sheet's border; Souvenir sheet of 4 imperforate stamps, but **without** printing on the sheet's border; Souvenir sheet with 4 perforate stamps, but **with** printing on the sheet's border; Souvenir sheet of 4 imperforate stamps, but **with** printing on the sheet's border; (Feld)postally used on cover.

Although not listed in the Wittwer catalog, there are other kinds of blocks, e.g., 2 x 3 blocks (two rows and three columns), cruciform blocks as well as souvenir sheets with a single stamp.

Swiss Army Regulations

During the First and Second World Wars, the Swiss Army was dominated by officers from the German-speaking cantons, although the Commanding Officer during the WW2 was General Guisan who came from the French-speaking canton of Vaud. Interestingly, during peacetime, there are no Generals, only Colonels (today, with 'rank inflation,' there are no Generals, only Lieutenant Generals in peacetime).

As to be expected from German-speaking officers, extensive regulations were developed for the issuance of Soldatenmarken. I do not know why, but German-speaking nations have a propensity towards 'laws and regulations.'

While on active duty, outgoing mail sent for official purposes was free, but could be 'decorated' using Soldatenmarken; mail of a non-official nature still required stamps issued by the Swiss Post.

The design of a Soldatenmarken could not contain the symbol of a Posthorn (whose use was reserved by the Swiss Post) or a monetary value, say '5 Rp.', as this would suggest it could be used for regular postage, which they could not.

Order 125 from 4/26/40: Soldatenmarken as well as the number to be printed had to be approved by the High Command. They could only be produced by larger military units; smaller units were specifically prohibited from producing them. Smaller units, however, could get together to obtain permission to produce Soldatenmarken.

Firms printing stamps had to ensure that only the authorized number were printed; all proofs, errors, etc., were to be immediately destroyed. Under no circumstances were stamps to be delivered to third parties.

After the production of a run of Soldatenmarken, the plates used in the printing of the stamp were to be destroyed under the supervision of the unit commander or given to the unit commander for his retention.

Public sale of Soldatenmarken was prohibited as was any written or spoken marketing. *This regulation was obviously not observed by the stamp collecting community. In contravention of Swiss Army regulations, during both the First and Second World Wars, the collecting of Soldatenmarken became very popular among military and civilian collectors.*

The Soldatenmarken of a unit may be sold (to soldiers of that unit) only so long as the unit is in existence.

Soldatenmarken which were purchased from the unit's Quartermaster (Fourier) were specifically prohibited from being sold for resale or for collecting purposes.

Here are some examples of the Swiss Soldier stamps:



11th Company, Mountain Combat Engineers. Interesting in that it shows an 'Active Service' Date of 1940 and not 1939, when the Swiss Army was first mobilized. This was the first and only issue for this unit. The coat of arms on the

left is for the Canton Valais; on the right, Canton Bern. The use of the Germanic Fraktur typeface is uncommon.



5th Company, Bakers. The stamp is issued in 1939 has been overprinted to strike out '1939' and replace it with '1940.' On most Soldatenmarken,

strike outs would not have been employed.



1st Supply Company. Being located in French-speaking Canton, 'CP. SUBS.1' is French for 1st Supply Company. Although doubtless activated in 1939, they did not issue a stamp until 1940.



I wish I knew the full background story for this issue (I have observed this problem in many types of collecting, that is, everybody knows 'what' exists, but information regarding 'why it exists' is often missing!

The stamp was clearly issued for a 'Telephone and Signal Detachment' for some unit. The next line of the stamp reads 'STAB INF. REG. 21.' In US Army parlance, this would be the 'Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC)' of the 21st Infantry Regiment. I speculate that the line 'STAB INF. REG. 21' is, in fact, an overprint. That is, the stamp, previously authorized for a 'Telephone and Signal Detachment' was overprinted and used by the 'STAB INF. REG. 21.' Note that the stamp has a red overprint as well that reads 'Remobilisierung 16.9.40' or 'Remobilization September 16, 1940. I would hazard to guess that the 'T' in the yellow square flag was used to indicate the location of the original signal detachment within the encampment.

My opinion is that the original detachment was called up in 1939 (as noted at the bottom of the stamp), then 'disbanded,' only to be reorganized and remobilized in 1940 as the HHC of the 21st (Infantry) Regiment. Rather than design their own stamp, the HHC just overprinted the Telephone and Signals Detachment's stamp. You have to admire those thrifty Swiss soldiers! As you have learned, these Soldatenmarken were not postage stamps, but 'tokens' to indicate that a donation had been made to that unit's 'charity fund' for the benefit of soldiers serving in that unit.

Where To Find Them

At stamp shows, Soldatenmarken are treated as 'Cinderellas;' rarely do Soldatenmarken collections appear in U.S. auctions. At the 2024 WESPEX Show, I asked every dealer and only one has a single piece of postal stationery and it was absurdly overpriced.

Surprisingly, there is a fair selection of Soldatenmarken available on eBay. A search on the Internet for 'schweizerischen Soldatenmarken zum Verkauf' will find European dealers selling them. A big downside here is Swiss dealers (who are more likely to have them than German dealers) either will often either not ship to the US or charge an exorbitant amount for postage!

David Sampson is a Nevada Stamp Study Society member. He collects pre-1944 Baltic States, Danzig, the Third Reich and now East Germany as it is a dead country. Interest in the hyperinflation era in Germany has driven him to collect Weimar Republic.