

Handling undeliverable mail to killed and missing soldiers in the German feldpost system, 1939 – 1945

Purpose and scope: This exhibit is a preliminary postal historical study on how the German postal system, especially feldpost, dealt with undeliverable mail addressed to soldiers who were killed, deceased, or missing. The focus is to document the usage (time, unit, and location) and evolution of those markings, connecting them to official postal bulletins issued and events occurred throughout WWII, from 1939 to 1945. Relevant items from WWI (1914 – 1918) and post-WWII also included to complete the narrative, as a lot of the practices originated from WWI, and the fate of some of the correspondents are known from postwar letters or documents, if not found in official casualty records.

Historical Background: The feldpost was under Wehrmacht organization, but its operations were dependent on the Reichspost as the two inevitably worked closely together. The latter issued official bulletins regulating feldpost operations, including directives on treating undeliverable mail. Letters delivered to the military were typically handled by a non-commissioned officer, who applied the appropriate marking per the particular fate of the soldier. In this context, “*gefallen*” for killed in action, “*vermisst*” for missing in action, and “*verstorben*” for deceased.

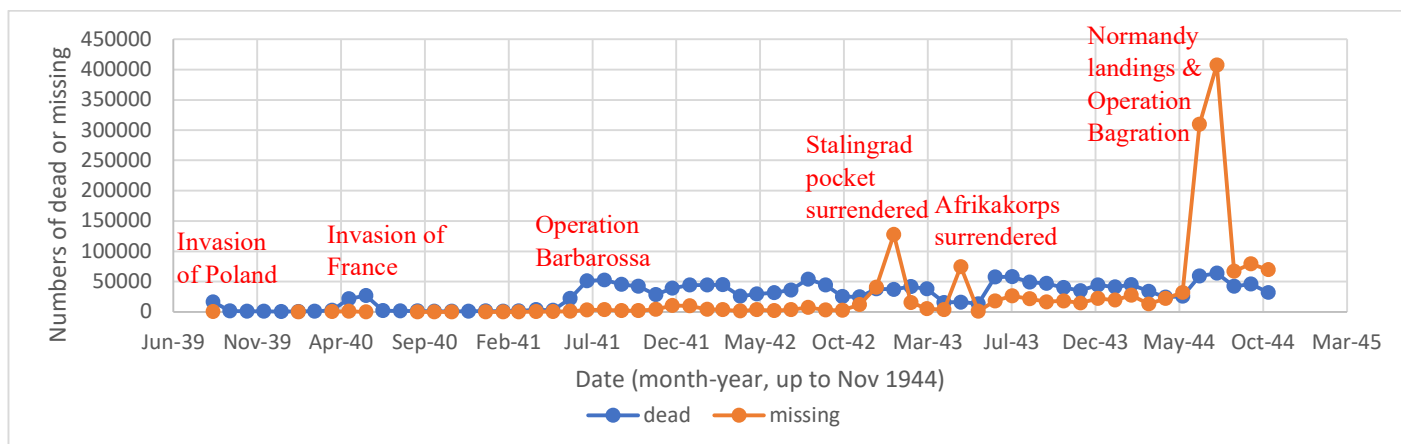
Interestingly, the directives evolved several times during the war. Only on 28 July 1942, almost three years after WWII started, did one finalize in detail on the appropriate marking under different scenarios, formalizing the slogan “*Gefallen für Grossdeutschland*” [*Fallen for Great Germany*], which first appeared in 1939, likely derived from WWI practice. Since these markings were not centrally procured, improvisation was common, resulting in a large number of varieties.

Germany suffered more than 5 million military casualties in WWII. Chronologically, the flux of casualties in different stages of the war is reflected through the occurrence of certain markings (see plot below).

Organization and development: the exhibit consists of four parts in chronological order, based on the timeline of relevant official bulletins: 1. The forerunners in WWI, and uses up to the first directive on 31 October 1939; 2. Uses since the first directive in October 1939; 3. Uses since the second directive in March 1941; 4. Uses since the third detailed directive in July 1942. Organization within each part is based on campaigns and battles. The last part is separated into subsections relating to different stages of the war.

Exhibit Plan

- I. Forerunners (WWI and 1 Sept – Oct 1939)
- II. First official guideline (31 Oct 1939 – Mar 1941)
- III. Second official guideline (3 Mar 1941 – Jul 1942)
- IV. Third official guideline (From 28 Jul 1942)
 - a. Battles in 1942 to Aug 1943
 - b. On the retreat: Aug 1943 to Jun 1944
 - c. The frontlines collapse: from Jun 1944



Significance: The vast timeline and expanse of the war resulted in a large variety of usages, requiring extensive personal research. To the exhibitor’s best knowledge, this specific part of the feldpost postal history has never been systematically studied. The evolution of those markings provides a perspective on the war’s heavy human cost. Items of significance are marked with red borders and explained in *italics underlined*.