Mafia Island Overprints

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Foreword
Marcel Zollinger’s “The Rogue’s Gallery” column covering Mafia Island overprints [13] elicited a correction and comments from me. Marcel and our editor requested I write this article.

Background
Mafia Island lies 22 miles off the coast of Africa at the mouth of the Rufiji River, about 100 miles south of Dar Es Salaam. The name Mafia probably derives from the Arabic morfiyeh, meaning “group” or “archipelago”, or from the Ki-Swahili mahali pa afya, meaning “a healthy dwelling place.” German East Africa established a post office on Mafia Island at Tschole in 1907.

The German cruiser S. M. S. Königsberg had been assigned to protect German interests in East Africa and arrived on 6 June 1914. After the start of WWI, the Königsberg captured the British freighter City of Winchester and a month later sank the British warship H. M. S. Pegasus off Zanzibar. The Königsberg suffered a failure in one of its engines and retreated to the Rufiji River delta where the British discovered it in October. As part of the campaign to sink the Königsberg, British forces captured Mafia Island on 12 Jan. 1915 from a force of 12 Europeans and 40 Askaris (native soldiers). The Königsberg was finally sunk by the British on 11 July 1915. In November 1915, German stamps were salvaged by the Germans from the Königsberg and Möve and distributed to a number of GEA post offices. These can be discriminated by the GEA cancels, that are often faint.

Mafia Island Overprints
Lt.-Col. J. D. Mackay, leader of the British Forces on Mafia Island and the first Military Governor, authorized the overprinting of German stamps found on the island with a locally made handstamp (not a typewriter as reported in [13]) reading ‘G. R. MAFIA’ in two lines. This was subsequently replaced by a series of handstamps obtained from Zanzibar. The Stanley Gibbons catalog gives status to five of the handstamps, with M1, M2 and M3 and M3+M4 used on German East Africa stamps, and M4 and M5 on ‘I.E.F.’ overprinted stamps of India. Actually, all of the handstamps and several combinations can be found on GEA postal and fiscal stamps, including a double ring ‘O.H.M.S. MAFIA’ along with M5 on the fiscal issue.
The Controversy

A series of articles or notes in the *Philatelic Journal of India* are the beginnings of the controversy surrounding the Mafia Island overprints. The prime protagonist at the time was Captain (later Major) A. E. Stewart, then A.D.C. to the Commander-in-Chief in British East Africa. Stewart, a regular contributor to the *Philatelic Journal of India*, wrote “It is obvious that, as there are no German stamps left, there will be no G.R.I. overprints for German East Africa.” [1]

On page 208 of the same issue [2], an extract from *Stamp Collecting* reported:

“Rumour, at any rate, says that some German fiscal stamps have been overprinted ‘I.E.F. Mafia’, while a valued Dublin correspondent tells us he has just received from Zanzibar … IEF stamps surcharged … G.R POST Mafia in dark green. Our Publisher recently paid the large sum of 1s. for the set for his ‘War’ collection! This Mafia, we believe is an ex-German island near Zanzibar, but why such labels should have been produced we cannot imagine.”

A 1917 issue [3] contained Major Stewart’s letter of 1 Jan. 1917, which read in part:

“This German Island was occupied by our troops and the ordinary I.E.F. stamps issued to the Military P.O. there. The officer in command, on his own I understand, had the word ‘Mafia’ and ‘G.R. Post’ printed on these stamps. The overprint was quite unofficial – in fact official permission was refused. Very few were printed and being quite unofficial are of no value.

“No special stamps, German or British, have been officially issued for Mafia; the only stamps in use there are the ordinary I.E.F. ones.”

In the 1919 issue [4], the editor summed up the controversy as follows:

“The charges against the overprints are (i) that they are postal cancellations and (ii) Major Stewarts statement that they were made although official permission was refused.”

Beginning in December 1967, *The London Philatelist* published a series of articles by Kenneth Pennyucuick entitled “The War in East Africa (1914-18)”. In the section on Mafia [6], he denigrates several of the issues, without clearly explaining his reasons.

“This outburst was followed by the manufacture of another handstamp reading

G R
POST
6 CENTS
MAFIA

“… It was used (correctly) on letters handed in at the military post office for which postage was paid in cash. … This handstamp was applied to a further cache of German East African stamps and to a few current Zanzibar issues … This episode produced nasty rare stamps … When all postage stamps within sight were used an attack was then made on revenue stamps. … These monstrosities were followed by a fairly reputable issue: I.E.F. stamps handstamped G R/POST/MAFIA as the last issue.”

Edward Proud [9] really does not add anything new. He claims the M1 overprint was a cancellation and receiving mark without showing any proof, but alleging its use on an item sent from Zanzibar that was already canceled in Zanzibar. He claims that the overprints were made to satisfy collectors and dealers who wrote requesting stamps with overprints and “no doubt enclosing money”. He fails to list all of the overprints even though they are shown in the Stanley Gibbons catalog and shows M3 + M4 as a single mark. Proud concludes “To sum up, by the end of 1915 there were ample supplies of I.E.F. stamp for the small literate civil population, the military personnel having the privilege of free postage”.

I suggest there are two tests to determine if the Mafia Island overprinted stamps are legitimate issues:

- Was there a need?
- Were they created under proper authority?
Need
The fact that German East Africa operated a post office at Tschole on Mafia Island should be sufficient evidence that there was a need for stamps and postal service beyond that for the British troops. It has been argued that the Germans present on the island would not be allowed to mail correspondence; this is most likely correct. There were Arabic and Zanzibar traders/merchants on the island who had legitimate correspondence requirements. Also, the free franking privileges of the troops did not include special services such as registration that required additional postage fees.

While no covers bearing the first issue have been recorded, most of the following issues have seen legitimate postal use. The bulk of the commercial covers known are to trading companies or merchants in Zanzibar.

The British force that captured Mafia Island came from Zanzibar. Zanzibar had its own postal administration, independent of the Crown Colonies, and its own postage stamps at that time. Thus bringing stamps from Zanzibar would not have been appropriate. The Indian Expeditionary Force was operating field post offices in captured portions of German East Africa using stamps of India overprinted ‘I.E.F.’, but these were not available in Zanzibar nor were members of the I.E.F. part of the British forces that took Mafia Island. Using German East African stamps, found on the island, without any overprint was both unthinkable to the British forces and impractical; mail franked such would presumably be denied service by postal administrations aligned with the Allies.

Thus the only short term solution would be to overprint the available German East Africa stamps.

Properly Authorized?
Did the Military Governor have the authority to order overprinting of the German East Africa stamps? It is interesting that this question only arises in regards to Mafia Island and not the other conquered German colonies where this occurred. Lt.-Col. J. D. Mackay was the leader of the British Forces and the first Military Governor, appointed by Lt.-General Wapshare, his commanding officer. Greenwood [5] extracts from a letter written by Lt.-General Wapshire, “[Col. J.D. Mackay] had the right to surcharge the German stamps … and they were used postally in the Island.”

Captain W. B. Brook succeeded Mackay as Military Governor. In a letter written in 1919 recounted that when he took over there were no more stamps and mail was being sent out unfranked. He says a “stock of German Fiscal stamps overprinted ‘O.H.B.M.S. Mafia’ were utilized for postage.” Brook also states that he “subsequently obtained IEF stamps at the cost of printing” and that they were “overprinted ‘G.R. POST MAFIA’ in order to secure the Postal Revenue to Mafia instead of the India Field Post Office.”

Gibbs [7] reports that Robson Lowe, a British stamp dealer and philatelist found a response from King George to Major Stewart thanking him for his advice not to waste good money on purchasing the Mafia overprints but that he was determined to have them because “they prove my troops were there.” While not an authorization for the overprints it is certainly an endorsement.

Mafia did not receive a circular date stamp until August 1915. In addition, in some cases the handstamp was applied in a haphazard manner, to stamps already affixed to covers, in such a manner that a portion of the handstamp was on the cover rather than the stamp. Together, these have led some to conclude the handstamp was a cancellation. The handstamps are reported to have been applied on demand or as time permitted. For example, there is a full sheet of the
‘I.E.F.’ overprinted ½ Anna stamp with the M4 handstamp, on which 12 of 16 stamps in the third row have the handstamp inverted, one stamp in row 6 is missing the handstamp and the handstamp bridges two stamps in row 5. In addition there are covers and loose pairs where the handstamp is only on one stamp and both have been marked by the Mafia circular date stamp.

Improprities
The overprints were handled in such a manner that complaints about the first issue, ‘G.R.MAFIA’, similar to those toward American Postmaster Farley, are appropriate. In addition the practice of leaving the handstamp in an area available for almost anyone one to use obviously led to its use on stamps and in ways not intended nor probably authorized. This is the probable cause of some of the overprint combinations and overprints on stamps of Zanzibar.

Forgeries
The crudeness of the overprints and the low value of the stamps without overprint made the Mafia Island overprints a tempting target for forgers. Because of the high value of the first three issues most of the forgeries of these issues seem to have been weeded out. Few of these stamps are now traded without a certificate from a reputable expertizing body. The last two issues, the overprinted ‘I.E.F.’ stamps are generally not of sufficient value to be expertized but are significantly more valuable than their un-overprinted counterparts and thus there remain many forgeries as Marcel found out the hard way. Detailed measurements of the characters, their spacing and vertical alignment will weed out most forgeries for the dedicated collector.

While Marcel has forgone collecting this area, I hope others will not despair. Just because a cover bearing the first issue has not been recorded yet does not mean one does not exist. A couple of years ago, I discovered a used stamp that was previously thought to have occurred only in a trial printing and that the Royal Collection had the only example, an unused copy. This was over 100 years after the issue date. I have a cover bearing a Zanzibar stamp with an error that was not listed in the catalogs or noted in the literature until more than 90 years after its issue date. Mackay and Brook said the stamps were used for franking mail – I see no reason not to believe them.

References: