

Rare WW II censorship handstamp – used only at Batanagar

Piyush Khaitan FPCI, FRPSL

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Knowing a little bit about the history of the Bata Shoe Company in India, I have been on the lookout for a cover with this rare censorship handstamp for a while and was lucky to have finally got my hands on it last year. Before we go into what makes this cover interesting, it is important to know a little bit about the back story. The cover (*Fig. 1a & b*) is meter franked 21a 6p comprising the 3a 6p ordinary letter rate + 18a airmail fee to Italy.



*Fig. 1a -
Front side*



*Fig. 1b -
Reverse side*

About the Bata Shoe Company

The T. & A. Baťa Shoe Company was founded on 21 September 1894 in the Moravian town of Zlín, Austria-Hungary (today in the Czech Republic), by Tomáš Baťa, his brother Antonín and his sister Anna, whose family had been cobblers for generations. In 1932, at the age of 56, Tomáš Baťa died in a plane crash during take-off. Control of the company passed to his half-brother, Jan Antonín Baťa, and his son, Thomas John Baťa, who would go on to lead the company for much of the twentieth century and built it into a global enterprise.

Just before the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, Baťa helped re-post his Jewish employees to branches of his firm all over the world. Germany occupied the remaining part of pre-war Czechoslovakia on 15 March 1939; Jan Antonín Baťa then spent a short time in jail but was then able to leave the country with his family. Jan Antonín Baťa stayed in the United States from 1939–1940. He was put on British and US blacklists for doing business with the Axis powers, and in 1941 he emigrated to Brazil.

Batanagar & the 24 Parganas District

Bata was incorporated (in India) as Bata Shoe Company Pvt. Ltd in 1931. An industrial manufacturing facility called Batanagar (Bata township) was established near Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1934 to start the first shoe factory in the country. They employed nearly 7,500 persons during the late 1930s itself.



Fig. 2a - Tomáš Baťa
(daijiworld.com)



Fig. 2b - Vintage Bata India Advertisement
(Balaban et al., 2021)



Fig. 2c - Batanagar Factory photo c. 1960s

The 24 Parganas district lies within the delta of the mighty Ganga–Brahmaputra rivers. During medieval times, the territory of Greater 24 Parganas was under Mughal administration and later it was under post-Mughal Nawabi rule during the reign of Murshid Quli Khan. In 1757, after the Battle of Plassey, Nawab Mir Jafar conferred the Zamindari (hereditary land ownership) of 24 Parganas upon the British East India Company, and the district became a part of the Bengal Presidency

Treatment of enemy nationals and property during World War II in India

Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939 and consequentially all Empire countries including India were automatically drawn into war with Germany and other Axis powers. This meant that all German nationals as were nationals of German allies and enemy occupied countries were considered enemy nationals. They were all moved to specially set-up internment camps in India and restrictions were imposed on their activities and movement. All businesses owned by enemy nationals were seized by the Government and considered Enemy Property and ownership Vested with the Custodian of Enemy Property.

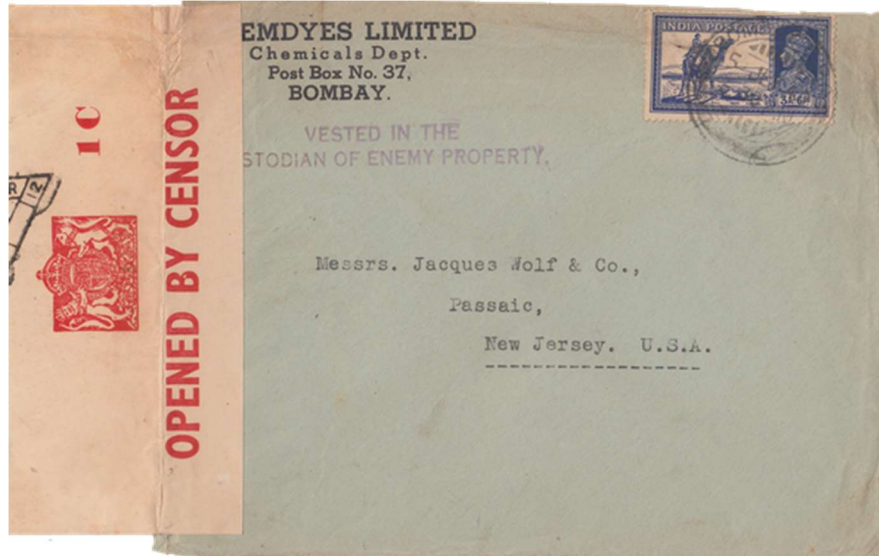


Fig 3 - Cover cancelled on 5 July 1940 censored at Bombay and with the violet handstamp VESTED IN THE CUSTODIAN OF ENEMY PROPERTY.

Bata India during World War II

The bulk of Czechoslovakia was annexed by Germany in 1938 and ceased to exist as a state between 1939 and 1945. Bata Shoe Company (India) was thus liable to Vesting with the Custodian of Enemy Property in India. However, some clever manoeuvring helped them escape this fate as they managed to find a trusted Indian lawyer to whom they transferred all their shareholding, and Bata Shoe Company was thus technically an Indian Company and Defence of India regulations for Enemy Property no longer applied. The company was placed under supervision as provided for under the Defence of India rules but was given a special exemption from the stricter provision of Vesting. This was also finally notified formally by the Government on 17 June 1940.



Fig. 4 - Press Communique issued by the Commerce Department, Government of India on 17 June 1940.

While the Government of India had to accept their failure to vest the Bata assets in the hands of their Custodian of Enemy Property, they remained suspicious of the loyalties of the company and its management. Accordingly, they set up a District Intelligence Branch or Bureau (D.I.B.) specifically to maintain surveillance on Bata activities. All mail was censored by this special team and a censorship handstamp was specially designed for this purpose. This handstamp is unique and no other enterprise in the country received this kind of attention and there is no other example of a wartime censorship handstamp specially designed for mail from a single corporation in India.



Fig 5 - Morenweiser 14A violet handstamp. visible on the front of the Bata cover (see Fig. 1)

This handstamp was recorded by Morenweiser (2020, p. 28-29) as used only in September 39 Batanagar (10 pts). He further speculates that 'D.I.B. 24 PARGS.' Could mean either 'District Intelligence Branch' or 'District Intelligence Bureau, 24 Parganas'. The example in Fig 1. is postally cancelled on 29 November 1939 and is hence much later usage.

Postscript: The Lloyd Triestino story

Lloyd Triestino was founded as Österreichischer Lloyd (also called Lloyd Austriaco or "Austrian Lloyd") as an insurance company in 1833. The company branched into shipping in 1836. It went on to become one of the world's biggest shipping companies by managing most of Austria-Hungary's overseas trade and passenger travel until 1918. It ran regular services from Trieste to the Near East, India, China and the Far East, Brazil, the US and Northern Europe and was one of the first companies to use steamships. Österreichischer Lloyd's name was changed to Lloyd Triestino in 1919, when Trieste became a part of Italy in the settlement after the First World War.

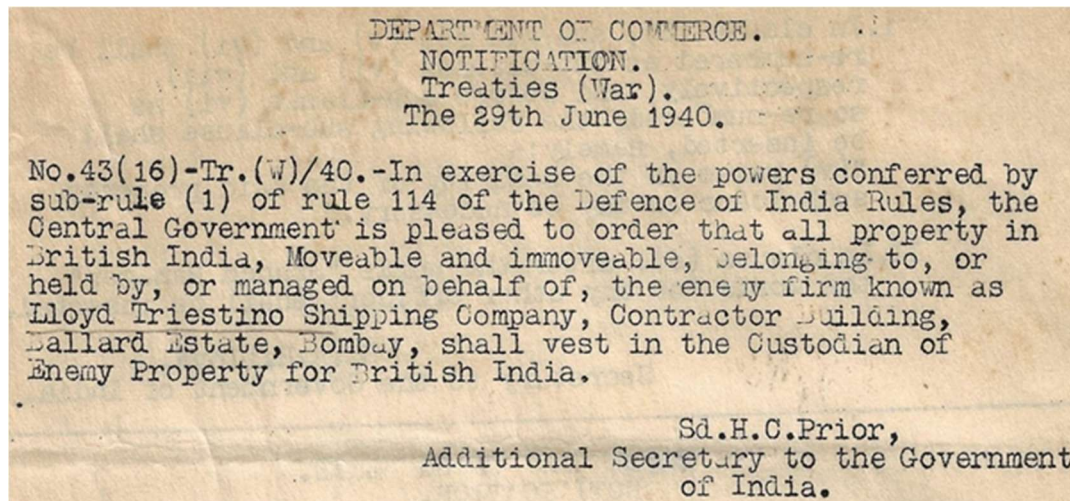


Fig 6 - Notification from the Government of India dated 29 June 1940 vesting all property of Lloyd Triestino in India with the Custodian of Enemy Property.

The cover in question is addressed to Messrs. Lloyd Triestino, Sezione Spedizioni (Shipping Section) Trieste, Italy. Italy joined Germany in the Second World War on 10 June 1940 as an Axis power and hence automatically became an enemy nation. All property belonging to Italian nationals now vested with the Government of India including Lloyd Triestino India.

A request to all readers: I maintain a census of all known covers with this handstamp and request anyone who has seen a cover or an image to send me scans of the front and reverse to pk@khaitan.in. All contributions will be duly acknowledged.

References:

- Balaban M., Herman Jan and Savic' Dalibor, 2021. The early decades of the Bata Shoe Company in India: From establishment to economic and social integration, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, Vol. 58(3), 297-332.
- Morenweiser Konrad, 2011. *British Empire Civil Censorship Devices/World War II/British Asia*, CCSG, Sixth and Revised Edition, 119 p.